

Crossing Barriers at the Winter Launch Lab

How Spiritual Discernment Fuels Global Innovation

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Innovation Through Community Collaboration

You probably recognize iconic artists like Picasso, E.M. Forster, Georgia O'Keefe, Jackson Pollock, or Andy Warhol. Maybe you know scientists like Robert Oppenheimer, Marie Curie, John Bardeen, or Francis Crick. All these people are both accomplished and famous, but they also owe a good deal of their success to the communities that surrounded them.¹ They are kind of like actors who give Oscar acceptance speeches. They have a community of people to thank.

The same is true of innovators. That is why, in the Winter Launch Lab, we strive to be a community of innovators. There are nine of us, each working in a different area. And even though we live in multiple countries, we encourage one another and help each other to innovate in our unique ministry contexts.


Fostering a Collaborative Innovation Ecosystem

In innovation, this is one part of what is called an innovation ecosystem. In a *Forbes* magazine article, Kalina Terzieva defines an innovation ecosystem as “a collaborative approach where a network of individuals, organizations and institutions work together to generate new ideas, technologies, and business models.” She says that “This approach fosters creativity and allows companies to explore new opportunities while minimizing risks.”² In this same edition of *Mission Frontiers*, you can see an illustration of this in Nate Scholz’s article on page 38.

The current efforts of the Winter Launch Lab involve a wide range of initiatives. They include things like partnering with non-Westerners to share Jesus with unreached people groups, supporting health professionals in underserved communities, and ministering to people serving nomads in Africa. Because of the innovators in the Launch Lab and those with whom we collaborate, we are constructing an innovation ecosystem. Currently, our nine Launch

1 Picasso - School of Paris, E.M. Forster - Bloomsbury Group, Jackson Pollock - Abstract Expressionism NY City, Andy Warhol - The Factory, Robert Oppenheimer - Manhattan Project, John Bardeen - Bell Labs, or Francis Crick - RNA Tie Club

2 Terzieva, Kalina. 2022. “How To Create An Innovation Ecosystem That Drives Business Growth.” November 15, 2022. forbes.com/councils/forbescoachescouncil/2023/05/03/how-to-create-an-innovation-ecosystem-that-drives-business-growth.



Lab members collaborate with over 14 organizations/businesses and more than 35 individuals outside of Frontier Ventures.

Infusing Spiritual Discernment into Innovation

In these efforts, we use or explore two key concepts. The first is the spiritual application of innovative problem-solving. We want spiritual discernment to be at the heart of what we do. Spiritual discernment, in a general sense, can be described as “the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of our lives.”³ Connecting with God in those ways help us address the second concept. We want our work to bring a holistic gospel for everyone, especially those beyond the traditional borders of world Christianity.

Putting together sensitivity to the Holy Spirit with innovation practices starts with a deep connection with the Scriptures. We root our approach to innovation in Scripture by listening to God’s Spirit. We see Scripture being vital in relationship to the way innovation is approached. We use the gospel of Mark to describe how a team should approach innovation: Mark 8:14–21 Open Mind, Mark 9:2–8 Prayerful Reflection, Mark 14:32–42 Open Will, and then Acts 10 and 15 to Discern New Ways Forward. That spiritual approach to innovation involves “tools and practices of design thinking and systems thinking, but we insist on adding to them group thinking, spiritual discernment, theological grounding, and a missiological focus.”⁴ I like the way Steven Spicer said it, we seek “sustainable transformation in the ways we speak, think, imagine, and act with God to better express Jesus’ gospel in the world. Our goal through this effort is to encourage sustainable innovation in mission praxis among Jesus movements as they follow the Holy Spirit and cross barriers to Jesus.”⁵

³ Barton, Ruth Haley. 2012. *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*. First Ed 1st Printing Edition. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books.

⁴ Paul Dzubinski and Steven Spicer. 2021. “Innovation Grounded in the Spirituality of Frontier Mission.” *Mission Frontiers*, July 1, 2021. missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/innovation-grounded-in-the-spirituality-of-frontier-mission.

⁵ Spicer, Steven. 2020. “Social Innovation in Frontier Mission:” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 37 (2): 81–91.

Pioneering Spiritual Innovation in Buddhist Contexts

An example of this is our long-term innovation project with a team in Buddhist countries. Despite over 200 years of gospel presence there, Christian communities remain small. Why is that? The people taking the gospel to these countries are godly, Spirit-filled, and backed by church and prayer communities. Is it that people in those countries are unreceptive to the gospel? Could it be that the translation of Christian ideas and presentations of them are poorly done? Could it be that workers don't stay long enough to have an impact? Or could it be that workers do not integrate well into society? It is a complex problem.

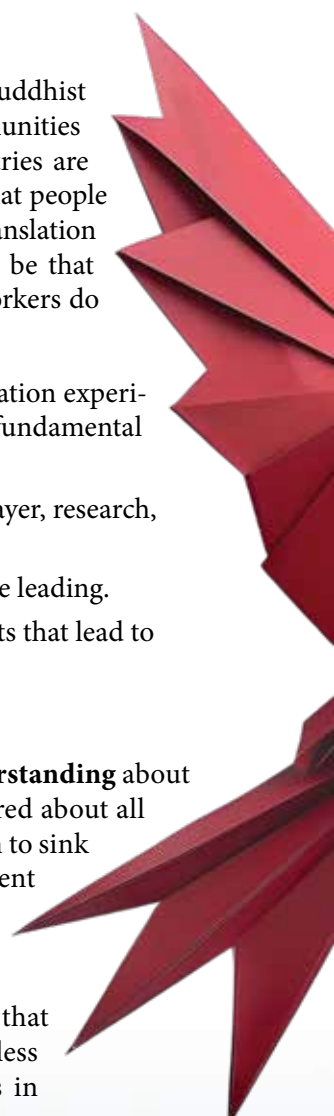
A small group of experienced expats and locals began our in-depth innovation experience. We call it a Transformation Collaborative (tcolab). There are three fundamental elements to a tcolab:

1. **Seek understanding** around your complex gospel problem through prayer, research, and experiential learning.
2. **Prayerfully reflect** on emerging insights and sense where God might be leading.
3. **Discern new ways forward** by designing creative prototype experiments that lead to further innovative insights and breakthroughs.

Barriers in gospel Acceptance

The group began meeting every other week. As they started to **seek understanding** about the issue, it was important to reflect on their own experiences. They shared about all the barriers to gospel acceptance they have seen. Those experiences began to sink deeply into their hearts and minds, yet there was no immediate agreement on how to address those barriers. In fact, the group was divided on ways to move forward. Some wanted to focus on translation issues. This is because the way in which Western Christians have explained the gospel does not connect with Buddhist culture. Others in the group thought that workers and local believers were perceived by their Buddhist friends as less honorable than good Buddhists. They thought that helping Christians in that area was a path forward.

At that point, we moved from their experiences to examine the Jesus movements that have happened among Buddhists. These movements have seen hundreds come to faith. We hoped to discover a way forward by comparing those movements to local established churches that were not growing. They discovered that the established churches had dispositions reflected in their practices, opinions, and/or teachings that actually hinder relationships with Buddhist neighbors and relatives. For example, "The dispositions of the ideal Buddhist monk are noticeably different from those of the ideal Christian leader. Christian leaders learn to confidently and zealously persuade others to put their faith in Christ. They preach and lead with passion. They often use loud voices, work with entrepreneurial energy, dress in Western clothing that reflects the business world of Southeast Asia, and use technology



in a way that projects the power of consumerism.”⁶ When we got to that point, I remember how painful that realization was. We encourage the opposite of the ways Buddhists communicate virtue.

Spiritual Reflection and Innovation

During the Seeking Understanding phase, we always spent some time in prayer and Scripture reading. It was now time to focus on hearing from God. For the **Prayerful Reflection** phase, we did a virtual spiritual retreat. It was too difficult to gather the group from the five countries where they lived. So, for three days, we met over Zoom for prayer, Bible discussions, and sharing about how each of the group was hearing from God. We focused on spiritual practices like listening prayer, Lectio Divina, prayer journaling, and others.

Discerning New Ways Forward

It was time to **Discern New Ways Forward**. They decided to address Christian dispositions toward Buddhists. They then created learning journeys to help Christians see how their dispositions were understood by Buddhist friends and neighbors. The journeys started with discussions in Scripture. Then Buddhist monks were invited to the group. They explained their spiritual practices but also told the Christians the ways Christians have treated them. It was eye opening for the Christians to see how their behaviors sometimes negatively impacted the monks. If you are interested in a thorough analysis of some ideas behind this, please read Stephen Bailey’s excellent article published in *The Asbury Journal*, “Dispositions for Christian Witness Among Theravada Buddhists.”⁷

⁶ Bailey, Stephen. 2023. “Dispositions for Christian Witness Among Theravada Buddhists.” *The Asbury Journal* 78 (2). place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol78/iss2/3, 268

⁷ Bailey, Stephen. 2023. “Dispositions for Christian Witness Among Theravada Buddhists.” *The Asbury Journal* 78 (2). place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol78/iss2/3.

The learning journeys ended with discussions among the Christians about the Scriptures and how the learning journey impacted them.

Now that that program has been successful in a couple of contexts, some people would like to take it further. They would like to translate the learning journey, modify it for their local context, and see if it can catch on. We are all excited about that possibility.

Everyone in the tcolab spent considerable time engaging spiritually with this topic. They affirmed the need to have clear Bible translations, unambiguous expression of the gospel message, and understandable terms to communicate Jesus with Buddhist friends and neighbors. But the group discerned that there was a deeper, more holistic need to address the dispositions Christians had toward Buddhists. That is why they built the learning journeys.

Spirituality in Innovation and an Innovation Ecosystem

This tcolab illustrates the Winter Launch Lab’s exploration into bringing together spiritual practices and innovative practices to yield more holistic gospel outcomes. As facilitators of this innovative process, we did not need to be experts in Buddhism. The experts and the outcomes came out of the hearts, minds, and spirits of the tcolab team. Our focus was to bring together innovative practices with spiritual practices and lead the tcolab team through them. It was an honor and a blessing to facilitate the lab for them.

As we continue to develop an innovation ecosystem with collaborators and partners, we will endeavor to explore this mixture of spiritual discernment, Scripture rootedness, innovative systems, innovative practices, and holistic gospel outcomes. 📌