

Missions Innovators Gather to Reflect on the Spirituality of Innovation

By **NATE SCHOLZ**

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This year, the Ralph Winter Launch Lab at Frontier Ventures hosted an unusual three-day gathering in Scottsdale, Arizona. Thirty prominent missions innovators representing 18 organizations participated by designing our event “on the fly.” We practiced a new model for gathering, known as a “*nonference*,” to draw out relevant topics and organize breakout sessions into a collaborative agenda. We called the event *Inno+Faith 2024*.

Introduction and Background

The Ralph Winter Launch Lab at Frontier Ventures is a hub for pioneering new approaches in missions. Named after Dr. Ralph Winter, a visionary in the field of missiology, the Launch Lab seeks to cultivate innovative strategies that address the ever-evolving challenges of spreading the gospel. Innovation in missions is crucial as it enables us to adapt to cultural shifts, technological advancements, and emerging global trends, ensuring that the message of Christ remains relevant and impactful.

Participant Experiences and Insights

The Inno+Faith 2024 gathering brought together a remarkable group of missions innovators, each with their own insights and perspectives that combined to inspire powerful conversations, unleashed by the gathering format. Kim Kargbo, CEO and Founder of Accessible Hope International, said “I went into this event not knowing exactly what to expect, but once the concept was explained and we found a rhythm, there was great synergy and camaraderie among the participants as we co-created the ideas and conversations for our time together under the direction of the Holy Spirit.” Liam Savage of OneHope shared, “I love how the carefully curated group was given freedom to explore and how the exploration was both so fun, surprisingly focused, and productive with the right people in the room. The relationship time was surprisingly rewarding!” Samuel Chiang from the World Evangelical Alliance remarked, “There was mutual respect in the room and many who are highly experienced did not push their agenda.”

Outcomes and Next Steps

The Inno+Faith 2024 event yielded several tangible outcomes. One of the most significant was the formation of new collaborative networks among participants. The promise of these networks is to work on joint projects, leveraging their combined expertise to tackle complex challenges in missions. Of course, success is not guaranteed, and progress depends on the continued margin and incentive of the participants despite their already stretched work capacity.

For instance, a partnership has been formed to develop an online community of practice for missions innovators. This platform will provide a space for ongoing dialogue, resource

sharing, and mutual support. This group is exploring how to take the next step and build a communal sense of church family within the environment. The event also sparked the creation of project teams focused on rethinking value creation in missions, developing new financial models, and providing models for ending outdated missions structures with dignity.

Reflection on Spiritual Discernment and Innovation

One of the central themes of Inno+Faith 2024 was the integration of spiritual discernment with innovation. As missions innovators, it's easy to become enamored with new technologies and strategies. However, without grounding our work in spiritual discernment, we risk pursuing innovations that are misaligned with God's purposes. During the event, we emphasized the importance of prayer, reflection, and seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in all stages of the innovation process. This approach not only ensures that our efforts are in line with God's will but also brings a deeper sense of purpose and direction to our work.

Paul Dzubinski of Frontier Ventures led a discussion group that made plans to host a symposium on the topic for the broader missions community, "I was encouraged at how strongly my colleagues wanted spiritual discernment to be an integrated part of their missions innovation practice."

Personal reflection has been a crucial part of my own spiritual and vocational journey. Through my work with the Ralph Winter Launch Lab, I have seen how the Holy Spirit can inspire breakthrough ideas and guide us through complex challenges. The Launch Lab attempts to foster a culture of spiritual discernment in the decision-making process of the ministry leaders we engage. We create innovations that are not only effective but also deeply transformative.

An Innovative Approach to Gathering

Many of the innovation specialists who attended Inno+Faith 2024 are exploring the advent of *technical* innovations, like the impact of artificial intelligence on Bible translation. As conveners, the Winter Launch Lab team practiced *social* innovation by designing a different meeting experience. What better way to stimulate ideas among missions innovators than to innovate a new way of gathering them? We're pleased to share the model that we call the *nonference*.

A nonference is a different way to hold a meeting that equalizes power, enables the addressing of real-time needs, and unleashes collaborative creativity. Done correctly, nonferences can even birth crucially needed networks.

We view a nonference as simply a gathering that is not a conference. As the name suggests it is an alternative to holding conferences. We aren't suggesting there is anything inherently bad about conferences, but they do have a specific use-case scenario. So, what is the difference?

A conference is a great thing to attend if you are embarking on a field of interest and need to absorb resources and information that is offered to you on that topic. Generally, you will be participating in the activity of consuming information that others have prepared for you, but you'll likely find it challenging to discover the other people at the event who share your interests. Where do you go for a more interactive gathering format?

A nonference is designed to minimize prepared presentations and maximize the facilitation of convening the right discussions between the right people. Nonference planners pay less attention to content. Instead, they cultivate serendipity by focusing on carefully convening the space and time for the meeting and providing the optimal level of structure. One thing that nonferences all have in common is the simple layout of chairs in a circle. Each event will also have a core theme stated, to attract the attendance of a specifically interested group of attendees. The primary ingredient for this kind of gathering is an activity called "Open Space Technology (OST)."

Open Space Technology is a dynamic and flexible method for organizing discussions, developed by Harrison Owen.¹ OST is designed to harness the collective creativity and wisdom of participants. Unlike traditional conferences with predetermined agendas, OST begins with a blank slate, allowing attendees to co-create the schedule based on their interests and expertise.

The process starts with participants seated in a circle. The facilitator announces that the agenda has not yet been planned and invites attendees to propose topics


¹ Owen, Harrison. 2008. *Open Space Technology: A Users Guide* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

for discussion. Each person who wishes to convene a topic writes their topic on a sticky note, announces it to the group, and places it on a schedule grid that designates times and meeting spaces. During a 7-minute “marketplace,” anyone who wants to rearrange or combine similar topics can work together to negotiate changes. After that, the delegates choose the first topic they’d like to discuss and head to the assigned space. This “just in time” approach ensures that the most relevant and pressing issues are addressed by capturing the most pertinent concerns of the specific people in the room.

Does Your Spirit Resonate with These Ideas?

Are you a missions innovator looking to engage with these topics and contribute to ongoing discussions? We invite you to join us in this journey of integrating innovation and faith. To get involved, email winterlaunchlab@frontierventures.org with your expressed interest.

For readers who are ministering among Muslim diaspora in North America, and who would like to experience the nonconference way of gathering, Vision 5:9 is hosting Merge 2025 in January. There is room for 200 to register. Contact the organizers to learn more at medinafocus@vision59.com.

We trust that God will continue to attract the right people with the necessary puzzle pieces to reveal his kingdom among the nations in new and creative ways. Nonconferences are one effective tool to empower missions. Pausing for spiritual discernment is crucial. 

Mission Frontiers Magazine

Casting Vision for Breakthroughs in All Peoples

By **RICK WOOD**, Assistant Editor for *Mission Frontiers*

Rick Wood started as Managing Editor for *Mission Frontiers* in 1990 under Dr. Ralph Winter. Rick took over for Dr. Winter as Editor of *MF* in 2009. In 2024, Rick took on the position of Assistant Editor.

What difference do words make? We are inundated with words every minute of every day. It is hard to separate out the truly significant from just noise. It can be exhausting, but when we do make that distinction, the results can be earth-shaking and life-changing. When the apostle John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” it changed everything. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, it started a revolution of faith. And for 46 years, we have published *Mission Frontiers* magazine in the hope that the words we publish will likewise change the course of world evangelization—catalyzing kingdom breakthrough in every people group so that every person may have access to the gospel.

In every issue of *MF*, we seek to inspire, encourage, and equip every faithful follower of Jesus to effective action on behalf of the unreached peoples so that kingdom movements will emerge in every people group on earth. We seek to provide the best strategies and insights so that we can work with the Holy Spirit to overcome obstacles and see increased progress in reaching the unreached. Following are some examples of how our many words made a difference.