

# The Imaginative Church

**The power of imagination is too often overlooked in management and leadership circles and is typically the least active in churches and teams.**

by  
**TOM THATCHER**

## WHY IS IMAGINATION SO IMPORTANT TO THE CHURCH?

Imagination—the ability to creatively adapt to the changing world around us—is a critical element in any successful church.

The Church's ministry and message are timeless. But people experience both in a world that's constantly changing. And we as individuals are constantly changing—physically, emotionally, and relationally. Things don't stay the same.

Of course, we could sit back and wait for people to come to us. But they probably won't. God hasn't called the world to reach out to Christians. Christ charged his followers to “compel *them*—those people out there—to come in” (Luke 14:23). Failure to do so is unacceptable, not only because God has commissioned us to reach the lost but also because any organization that doesn't stay relevant will eventually cease to exist.

It is essential that churches

- maintain a clear commitment to core values while continually developing new methods;
- encourage and reward creative thinking;
- allow individuals at all levels of the organization to participate in problem-solving.

**Q. Is your church generally open to change, or do new ideas meet resistance?**

## CONSERVATION AND CHAOS

Many churches that excel in integrity, passion, and/or servanthood fail in the area of Imagination. In fact, in our experience, churches consistently rate themselves lowest in this area. They care deeply, serve well, and maintain sound systems. But they find it very hard to change.

Not only do most churches find it hard to change; they tend to think this is a unique problem. Many church leaders assume that other churches that are growing must not be resistant to change. But size doesn't matter.

Churches are naturally resistant to change. Much more so than other organizations. Religion is the ultimate conservative force in any society. "Conservative" doesn't refer here to theological or political positions. "Conservative" means that religion tends to have a regulating effect. It's tied to, and helps maintain, the larger rhythm of life.

Some say religion is dead in our culture. Traditional forms of faith may be dying, but religion is alive and well at the core of our social fabric. Google calendar's seven-day week is based on the biblical account of creation. We number years in reference to the birth of an ancient Jewish rabbi that most people in the world don't believe in. The American economy is built on the Christian "holiday season," which now begins with Halloween and runs through Christmas. Couples are married by clergy in churches. Children are born and baptized. Our parents die and priests lay them to rest. Religion still creates the cadence of the circle of life.

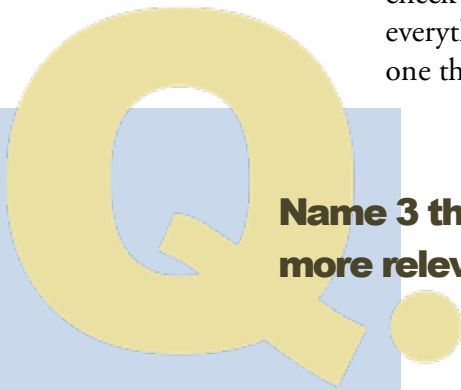
Of course, the conservative force of religion is most obvious to those who are most invested in it. For many Christians, church may seem like the *only* conservative force in daily life—the only place we can be confident that "some things will never change."

Companies close, merge, and downsize, forcing us to change jobs. Stores and restaurants open and close and change their product lines and menus. Marriages end. Children grow up and move away. Our bodies age, often not well. We have to learn complex new technologies to turn on the TV or make a cup of coffee. If the only certain things in life are death and taxes, we certainly don't die and pay the way our grandparents did. But even people who only go to church on Christmas and Easter pretty much assume that some church somewhere will be doing Christmas and Easter services next year.

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to change**

In a fast-paced culture, it's comforting to know that church meets the same time every week, that the same people will be there, that the same Bible that Christians have read for centuries will be discussed, that beliefs I have held since childhood will be explored. Why would I want any of that to change?

This conservative tendency keeps people in our fold but it also creates one of the primary challenges churches face in remaining relevant and solvent. People are naturally resistant to change, and Christians who are highly adaptive in their professional lives often check their imagination at the door of the church. When everything around me is in motion, it's nice to know that at least one thing will stay in place.



**Name 3 things your church could do to become more relevant.**

## **THE “CREATIVES”**

Oxygen and imagination are alike in two ways. Both are invisible yet essential to life, and with each, the less you have, the harder it is to move.

Churches with a healthy spirit of imagination live in the middle of time. One hand clings to an ancient faith that will always be true while the other reaches out to embrace the world of tomorrow. Driven by a profound curiosity about what could be and an unshakeable confidence in Jesus' promise that he will be with us wherever and whenever we go (Matthew 27:16-20), imaginative churches encourage and reward dreaming. Their leaders do not feel threatened by new ideas.

No church will be completely devoid of imagination, simply because even small churches will be home to creative people. The challenge lies in creating an environment where imagination is celebrated. Even very innovative churches may limit imagination through the use of labels, specifically the label “creative.”

We tend to think of “The Creatives” as people who are skilled in music, drama, and technologies that support the church’s weekend worship and communications programs. Without question, no church can thrive without vibrant worship and effective communications.

But these are only the tip of the imagination iceberg. Churches must imagine ways to be more effective in every area of operations, including behind-the-scenes strategies and systems. The label “creative” will be unhelpful if it encourages creativity in web design or video bumpers but fails to reward improvements to the nursery schedule or the budgetary system.

Because we are made in the image of God, all human beings have an innate capacity to imagine, dream, and create. This imaginative capacity is enhanced by the Holy Spirit, who gifts each person to make a difference. For the church, the real challenge is less with recruiting and managing “Creatives” and more with eliminating organizational barriers that might stop *anyone* from dreaming and acting boldly.



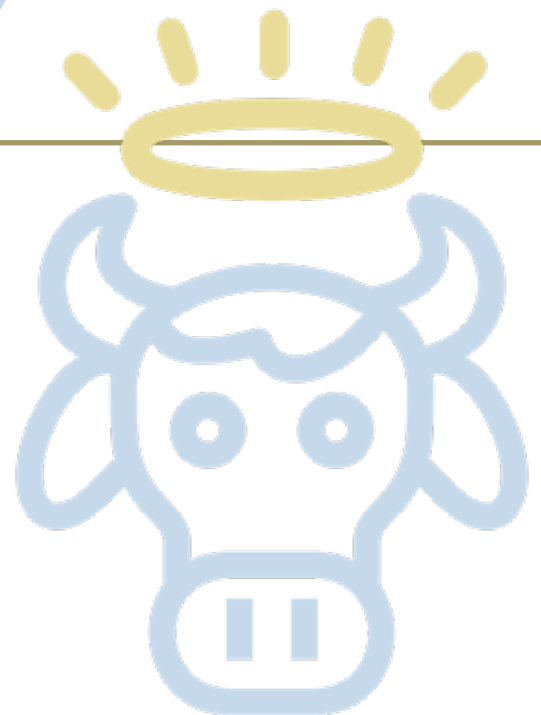
**What barriers to creativity and innovation are present in your church?**

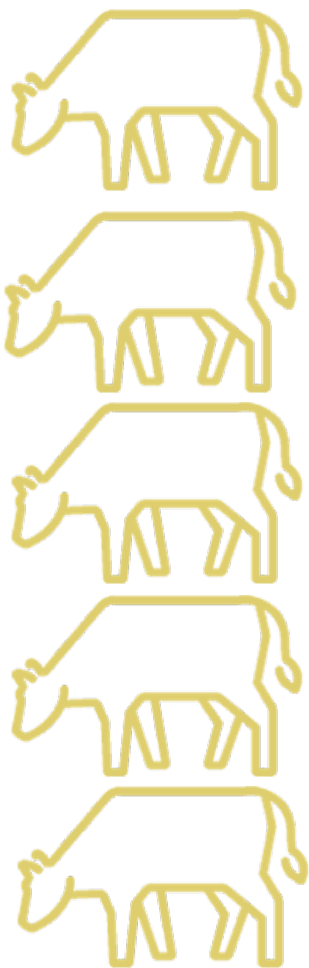
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### **GRILLING UP SACRED COWS**

Churches are very good at pasturing sacred cows. In fact, sacred cows are the major obstacles to innovation and change in most churches.

Most churches are open to new ideas, at least to some degree. If nothing else, people realize they need to do something to attract the next generation. So it’s generally not too hard to start something brand new that adds to what your church is already doing.





Adding a new cow to your current herd of programs is easy. People like to see the herd growing. And their grandchildren probably like to look at cows that color. People don't like to hear that there's not enough hay for both the old cows and the new ones. They especially don't like to hear that it's time to send the old ones to the slaughterhouse so the new ones can have something to eat.

New people come along with big ideas and want to try a new program? Great. They can do the work. Add it to the calendar. That new thing they want to try means you'll have to stop doing something else? Or move an existing program to a new space? Or cut the budget for something you've always done? That gets people screaming.

The fact that we cannot afford to feed all the old cows and all the new ones means that we must make choices about where our resources go. Many times we make those choices on the basis of personal beliefs and preferences that don't actually align with our church's current goals. It's helpful to do a self-check every now and then to see what feels untouchable, and to reflect on why it feels that way.

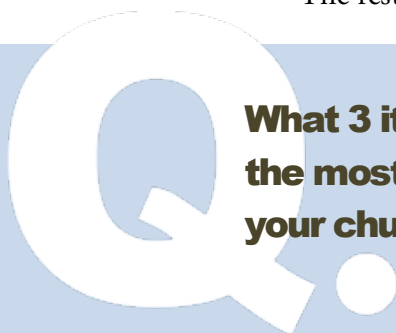
Here's one way to do a self-check. Aside from your church's core theological beliefs, make a list of things that are "untouchable" for you. These are things you feel like your church can't live without. Sacred cows you can't stand to kill.

Once you've made your list, pretend your church is facing a major resource crisis. This crisis makes it impossible to keep feeding all the sacred cows. So to save any of them, you can only afford to feed half. Cut your list in half.

Once your list is cut in half, think about what's still there. The half of your programs that are so sacred you can't let them go. But now another crisis is coming, so you have to get rid of half of those as well. Cut your list of sacred cows in half again.

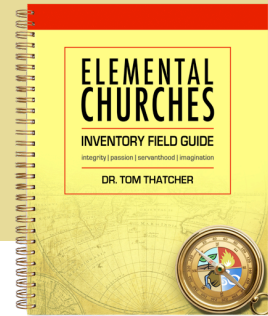
The list you come up with the second time are the true essentials. These are things that you can't lose without losing your core mission. The hills you have to die on.

The rest you could probably live without to make room for innovation.



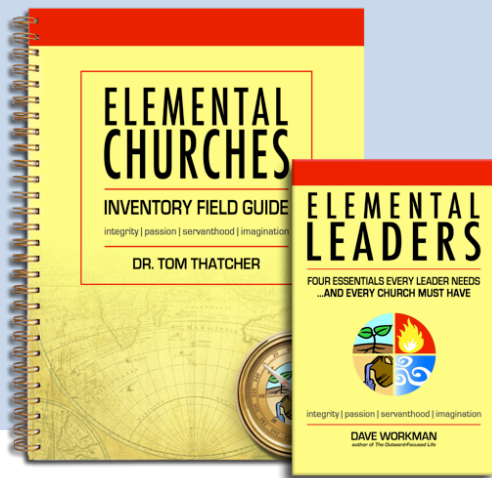
**What 3 items on your final list of "untouchables" are the most untouchable? Why are those essential to your church's existence?**

*Excerpted from the **Elemental Churches Field Guide** by Tom Thatcher. Tom is Co-Founder and Chief Analyst at Elemental Churches, a consulting group devoted to developing tools to help churches become healthier and more effective. The **Field Guide** is part of an inventory to measure church health and effectiveness through a comprehensive team-based audit. For a free 12-page summary of the **Elemental Leaders** book the **Field Guide** is based on, visit [www.elementalchurches.com](http://www.elementalchurches.com)*



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