

Ideas Festival

Are two heads better than one? Are 40 heads better than two? In the Ideas Festival experiment, TryTank put this theory to the test.

The Adjacent Possible

Imagine sitting alone in a room with four doors. Each door leads to a new place, but because you're alone, you can only move in one direction at a time. Moreover, once you reach the next room, you're spent, and you have to rest before moving forward again.

This analogy helps to explain the adjacent possible, a theory used in innovation, entrepreneurship, and the sciences. In the context of innovation, the adjacent possible suggests that humans can only make improvements in ideas, products, and services one step at a time.

But it's possible to hurry those steps. And the Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, equal parts entrepreneur and pastor, is on a mission to find out how. As the founding director of *TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory for Church Growth and Innovation*, Father Lorenzo is on a quest to innovate how we participate in and interact with church.

Father Lorenzo has run dozens of experiments at TryTank. Many of them, like the Alexa Skill, Latinx Ministry in a Box, and Facebook Masterclass, have worked. Some haven't, but that's the nature of experimentation. Most of the experiments are based on internal ideas, but as TryTank expands in scope, they seek to incorporate the ideas of other innovators.

"The thing about the adjacent possible," said Father Lorenzo, "is that if one person walks through one room and another person walks through a different room, they may be able to put their heads together and jump three or four rooms, speeding up innovation."

Innovation for what? Well, we don't know exactly, and we'll leave it to the innovators to find out. Essentially, Father Lorenzo wants to find the best way to deliver church in a modern package that appeals to both young and old Episcopalians.

"What would happen if we thought about the church as an innovative start-up in a 150-year-old building?" asked Father Lorenzo. "Who could we reach then? That's the type of work that excites me."

The Formation of the Ideas Festival

Let's return to the room we referenced—the one with four doors. Except, in this instance, you're not alone. Instead, there are 40 other people next to you. Now, you can open each of the four doors. And once you and the 40 other people reach the adjacent rooms, you have enough physical and mental energy to continue opening doors. That idea was the basis for the Ideas Festival.

The Ideas Festival, per Father Lorenzo, was to be a primordial soup of innovation. There, innovators would piece together their thoughts and ideas, harnessing their unique strengths and perspectives to empower one another and the church.

“We hoped to find some people with the yin and others with the yang,” said Father Lorenzo, “and see what happened when their thoughts connected.”

Father Lorenzo had initially planned for the Ideas Festival to be a standalone event. His plan changed with the announcement of *Rooted in Jesus*, a large Episcopal conference in Atlanta.

Rooted in Jesus comprised eight tracks, which referred to the concentrations of the sub-conferences that made up the event. These eight tracks were Evangelism, Formation, Mission, Leadership, Communications, Preaching, and Stewardship. Choosing a track wasn't mandatory—many attendees mixed and matched different events, selecting the most exciting or appropriate sub-conference to attend each day of the conference.

Father Lorenzo saw the endless opportunity at Rooted in Jesus. The conference would bring hundreds of leaders that each could add vital ideas to the primordial soup of innovation. Among them was the Rev. Dr. Rachel Nyback, the rector of St. Cross Episcopal Church in Hermosa Beach, California.

Rev. Rachel is no stranger to TryTank: “I'm a huge TryTank fan,” said Nyback. “Their innovation labs fascinate me to no end. I've had the pleasure of participating in their experiments, and I have nothing but good feelings toward what they're doing.”

Nyback has worked with TryTank since its inception, and she knew Father Lorenzo well before he began the Episcopal action think tank. They've evolved to have a connection that's useful in innovation: Where Father Lorenzo provides the ideas, Nyback provides the feedback. “Lorenzo can muster 150 ideas in ten minutes, and I don't have that capacity,” said Nyback. “Where I come into play is listening to his ideas and confidently telling him that idea 23, 78, and 122 will work and that the rest may not.”

Innovation requires many minds to operate effectively, and the relationship between Rev. Rachel and Father Lorenzo is a small example of what can happen when two forward-thinkers collaborate. Add in 39 other innovators, and you get the Ideas Festival.

The Ideas Festival

Father Lorenzo, wearing a hat that aptly said “Thinking Cap,” welcomed 40 participants to the Ideas Festival. He had hoped for more people, but 40 was no small number. And he knew that the small crowd had a lot of potential.

“We began with a reception to meet the participants and allow them to become more acquainted with one another,” said Father Lorenzo, “and we gave them some wine and other drinks to get the juices flowing, which worked nicely.”

Rev. Rachel showed up to the event with several friends and acquaintances in tow. Not all of them knew about TryTank or the Ideas Festival, and Nyback wasn’t willing to let that continue. “I wanted people to understand that innovation was taking place in the church,” explained Nyback, “and allow them the opportunity to play a part in that process.”

After the reception, Father Lorenzo explained the event: There would be six idea prompters, each beginning with the words “How can we innovate in…” Some of the prompters asked that question concerning stewardship, worship, evangelism, and care of creation.

Each participant in the Ideas Festival would be able to write down their idea with a post-it note below the prompt. Then, other innovators would have the chance to submit their ideas or to add to another person’s idea.

After explaining the structure of the event, Father Lorenzo yielded to the audience. His intention wasn’t to guide the discussion but to facilitate it. He wanted to leave the thinking to the many other innovators that are active in the Episcopal church.

Entrepreneurship is a probability game, and the rate of success isn’t always exceptionally high. Successful innovators are those who are willing to try again and again until they find success. With 40 innovators, though, the probability of finding an idea worth implementing is relatively high. And, sure enough, Father Lorenzo found something that might work.

“I was looking at the ‘How can we innovate in evangelism’ prompt when I saw that somebody wrote tailgate church,” said Father Lorenzo. “Soon after, somebody added to that note, proposing, ‘What if we get a van that travels to little league games and hosts prayer before the games begin?’”

Father Lorenzo was thrilled. These two ideas confirmed his hypothesis that the adjacent possible could be accelerated by innovators who willingly collaborate. Plus, the idea spoke to Father Lorenzo: Taking religion outside of church is one of the significant trends of TryTank.

The Many Forms of Church

Church attendance rates are declining, but that doesn't mean that people are necessarily less religious than in years past. It may just indicate that they're busy and distracted. But Father Lorenzo believes that people would participate more if their church were made more accessible.

Father Lorenzo finds evidence of his suspicion in the ratings of a recent Church of England service television broadcast: "I was astonished to find that 33% of the people who watched the church service were under 34 years old. This number proves that young people are religious, but given the disparity between these numbers and in-person statistics, it suggests that we're not very high on young people's agendas on Sunday morning."

These statistics provide hope, but they ask a big question. "What do we do with that knowledge?" wondered Father Lorenzo. "People are clearly willing to consume religious content, but they're not necessarily going out of their way to go to church. So how can we go to them?"

The answers would come. Alongside the Ideas Festival at the *Rooted in Jesus* conference, Father Lorenzo ran a similar event called Pitch Tank, which furthered his theory. "At Pitch Tank," explained Father Lorenzo, "we invited people to present ideas on church innovation, and a panel of three judges rated their ideas. It was like Shark Tank, but our judges were far kinder."

Just like Shark Tank, some of the ideas were very good. And just like Father Lorenzo's suspicion that the church must expand in non-traditional ways, so thought the two people whose ideas impressed the Pitch Tank judges the most.

"Somebody came up to the judging panel," said Father Lorenzo, "suggesting an event called mall church. The plan would be to rent a space in a mall during a busy shopping season and turn that space into a church, and hold space for people to pray."

The other notable idea at Pitch Tank was to create a YouTube channel that focused on religious content that catered to younger people who consume YouTube on a regular basis. Religious services can be too complicated for a young child to grasp. But what about putting the same essence into a digestible and entertaining three-minute YouTube video?

Aftermath

Several good ideas fruited at the Ideas Festival and Pitch Tank. Some of them, like the tailgate church, may make an appearance as a TryTank experiment. But for Father Lorenzo, the experiment focused as much on the potential of group innovation as the ideas themselves. “What we wanted to prove,” began Father Lorenzo, “was the accelerated speed of innovation when you put a lot of open-minded and innovative thinkers in the same room.”

Father Lorenzo never hesitates to look forward. Nor does he hesitate to unite modern technology with the church tradition: “I’m currently planning to invite innovators to a Zoom call to brainstorm about what the church may look like in the future. I bet we can come up with some excellent ideas if we get a dozen or so people on the call.”

Sometimes, though, Father Lorenzo prefers making adjustments in the institutions and technologies that the church already has. “The biggest takeaway from this experience,” said Father Lorenzo, “is that we want to teach vestries to focus on innovation, and to build on each other’s ideas. I think it would be fascinating for vestries to work among themselves and create little primordial soups among their congregations.”

Many details of the Ideas Festival were executed well. Father Lorenzo enjoyed being in a room with dozens of innovators, and he found value in many of the ideas that came out of the reception. But there were details that he wished were different: “I wish more people came to our innovation workshops. The Rooted in Jesus conference was the merging of many of Episcopal conferences, each with a unique purpose. And not too many of those people are regularly focused on innovation.”

Yet, Father Lorenzo admits the value of diverse interests. “The focus of most people wasn’t on innovation, and that’s okay,” said Father Lorenzo. “We need somebody who cares about innovation and another person who cares about evangelism. We each operate as separate but necessary parts of the process; one body, many parts.”

The Rev. Dr. Rachel Nyback found a lot of value in the experiment. “The part that intrigued me most,” she said, “was reading the ideas of other people. I’m better at looking at others’ ideas and analyzing which of them may work in my community. And there were many useful ideas worth implementing.”

Rev. Rachel found that the Ideas Festival matched well with another workshop at Rooted in Jesus, which focused on Asset-Based Community Development, or ABCD. This framework suggests that, to develop countries, organizations, and people, one should focus on what they *do* have rather than what they’re missing.

“When we each list our assets, there are no stupid ideas. And that’s why I loved the Ideas Festival. It’s only when we dream big that we allow ourselves to hear God speaking to us in new ways and calling us into new ways of being in church and being the people of God. And I’m grateful that TryTank gave us that space.”

What the future holds for innovation in the church, we don’t yet know. But we can make a good guess as to who will be behind it. And, as TryTank gains momentum among the Episcopal church community, we can make a fair guess that innovation is only going to accelerate in the coming years.