



# the Roundt

A PANEL OF PRACTITIONERS AND EXPERTS  
DISCUSSES THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND MINEFIELDS  
OF INNOVATION.

2008  
America's  
Most  
Innovative  
Churches



**JONATHAN FALWELL:** senior pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va.

**D. MICHAEL LINDSAY:** author of *Faith in the Halls of Power* (Oxford) and Rice University professor

**TONY MORGAN:** pastor and chief strategic officer at NewSpring Church (No. 12) in Anderson, S.C. and author of multiple books on church innovation

**DAVE GIBBONS:** senior pastor of Irvine, Calif.-based NewSong Church (No. 18)

**KEM MEYER:** communications director at Granger Community Church (No. 3) in Granger, Ind.



**W**hile innovation may be a buzzword in culture today, as well as a general theme for numerous church conferences, it doesn't come easily. New methods to tell people about Christ are often scrutinized by church members, the community at large and other churches. And innovation does bring its own set of dangers—such as church cloning and losing the message of the Gospel in our attempts to be culturally relevant. At the 2007 National Outreach Convention in November, we assembled a panel of practitioners and experts moderated by Ed Stetzer, director of research for LifeWay, to discuss the potential risks and minefields of innovation. Listen in as they share insights and sometimes personal wounds resulting from their attempts to do something new.

**ED STETZER:** Michael, we're talking about innovation in the Church. Get us started by talking about innovation and creativity in a general context. How is creativity different from innovation, and why does that matter?

**MICHAEL LINDSAY:** Creativity is the building of new, useful ideas. Innovation is the implementation of those ideas. Creativity in and of itself doesn't get us anywhere. You actually have to innovate to bring about change. So it means that you've got to create a culture that allows for the implementation of new ideas and not just focus on the newest, greatest idea.

**STETZER:** Tony, you'll be focusing on innovation and creativity at your Unleash conference coming up this March. Why do you invite people to come in to learn the way you do church?

**TONY MORGAN:** We'll be sharing what's working for us. But I'd acknowledge that just because something is working in Anderson, S.C., does not necessarily mean it will work somewhere else. →

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I think that's the challenge. One of the things we as leaders need to be about is looking at how we reach the unique cultures we're in.

**STETZER:** Dave, how does your multicultural context in Los Angeles, as well as throughout the world where you're planting churches and sites, empower people to find God's unique vision for their church?

**DAVE GIBBONS:** I think a lot of it is understanding that as Western people, we tend to impose things on others. So we have to come with an understanding that we're called to flow with what God is already doing. We recognize in the Bible that God is about marginal people. He loves the misfits, the outsiders, and we have to adjust very creatively to reach the fringe.

**LINDSAY:** And some of the most creative people I know are misfits. I describe them as cosmopolitan. They're rubbing shoulders with different types of people, and because of their diverse experiences, they have an edge. That's what we've got to do in the Church—help people not be so inwardly focused, where we tend to all look the same, but actually help them engage in many different sectors.

**STETZER:** Jonathan, how are you seeking to innovate at Thomas Road Baptist?

**JONATHAN FALWELL:** We have a desire to reach this next generation—the people who carry iPods 24/7—while not leaving the last generation behind. For me, that means focusing on the fact that

creativity and innovation come from Christ. And when we go deep in our relationship with Christ, He opens our eyes to new things we can do, things we can use, to reach this culture.

**MEYER:** I'd add to that. I watch a lot of churches with hearts beating in the right place. They want to meet the culture where they're at. They want to reach the guy with the iPod, so they call it "Godpod" to be holy. You can be holy and still call it iPod. You don't have to put a Christian label on it.

**FALWELL:** I agree 100%. I just finished a series, and for it we had a working nine-foot iPod standing behind me. Many times, the Church tries to take something that's in the culture and make it ours. And that just makes us look cheesy and irrelevant.

**STETZER:** One of the dangers in innovation is losing the message of the Gospel in our methods. How do we make sure that doesn't happen in the process of innovating?

**GIBBONS:** For me, I think a lot of it has to be rooted in our motive, which comes from authentically understanding the need of people. If you really see the need, to me it's like the Nehemiah principle—once you see the destruction, the vision emerges. But if you don't really feel the need and the suffering deeply, I think it turns out very inauthentic. →



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*Jonathan Falwell  
Senior Pastor, Thomas Road  
Baptist Church*

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**STETZER:** What's the motive at your church for innovation, Dave?

**GIBBONS:** I think the greatest danger and impediment to the flow of the Gospel in our day is that we're doing a bait and switch—kind of like an Amway presentation. We love people and are nice to them—and then we take them to a sales presentation. People aren't stupid. The motivation for me is not simply winning people to Christ. That's there—it's always there. But it seems to me that my call is not to change a person. That's the Holy Spirit's role; my role is just to love people without any strings.

**STETZER:** The reality is that most of our churches are pretty resistant to these new methods. What is it about innovation that frightens so many churches? How do we overcome that?

**MEYER:** I think churches get stuck. It's scary to be innovative.

When you're innovating and engaging the culture, it's messy and you're out of your comfort zone. So it's easier to just stick with what you know.

**FALWELL:** Here's how you sell it to people who are resistant: When they see lives being changed, people affirm that.

**MORGAN:** You've not come to my church then. I trust that's the case in your ministry. But honestly, if you're pushing the edge of the culture, even if lives are being changed, people are still going to attack your method if it looks different than someone else's. It's just the reality.

In the Church, we look at other churches that do things differently than us, and we think it's wrong. I think we need to get to the place where we have lots of freedom in the methods that we use. I think we can trust a sovereign God to continue to guide our ministry as we rely on His Word and the Holy Spirit to direct us.

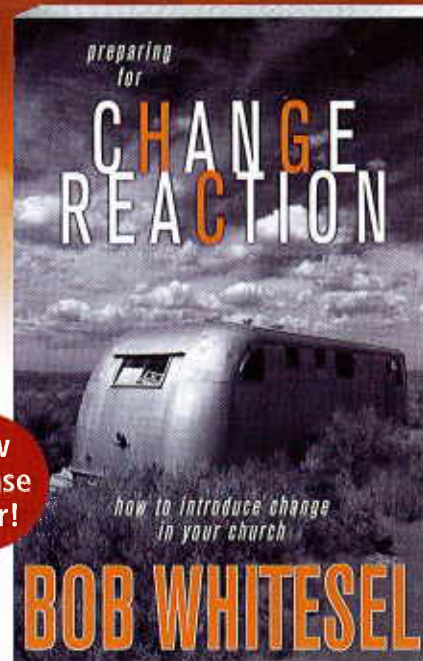
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