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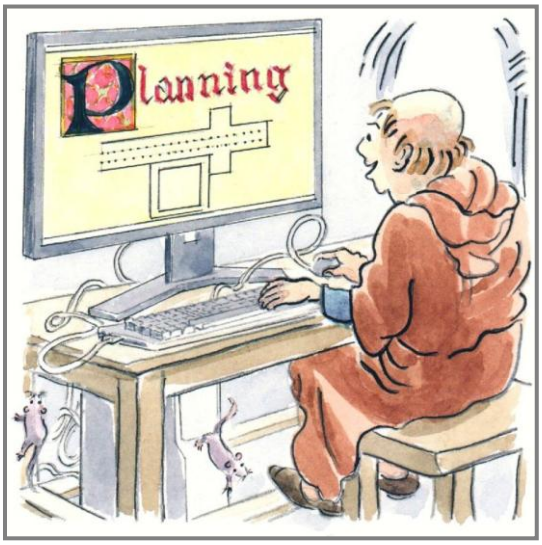

How to encourage creative thinking

TN103 Training Notes series: Planning

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Christians serve God the Creator. The openings of both Genesis and St John's Gospel stretch our minds to their limits as we contemplate what this means.

We are disciples of Jesus whose teaching was so different from the Scribes and Pharisees because of his authority but also because of his inventiveness.

We seek the filling of the Holy Spirit who breathes new life into our earthly bodies and minds. So why can we Christians be so predictable?

Perhaps we are too busy to make the time to be creative. Perhaps we are lazy, risk-averse or prefer to follow well-worn tracks. But if we are made in the image of God, follow Jesus Christ and are filled by his Spirit, might we not seek some sparks of creativity and flexibility in the ways we:

- teach Scripture;
- use liturgy;
- organise events;
- share the gospel;
- run our churches;

and much more?

I write as a practitioner conscious that the concept of creativity in administration is not something that is widely recognised. But I call myself a 'champion of creative organisation in churches'. These notes come as a heartfelt plea for churches to rediscover what I term 'God's gift of creativity'.

Creativity is simply approaching a problem or task in a different way. So, if you are planning for the future or preparing for any task, here are 21 ideas to get you in the right frame of mind.

Nine key principles

First, here are fundamental actions you can take to encourage a creative mindset. Most of them work with most people, but select two or three you feel might be right for you at this moment.

1 Work in a mixed group

It's better to attempt creative thinking in a group than on your own, but it is vital that the group is made up of different and even clashing personalities. Different gifts, experience, ages and genders too, but it's personality that matters most. It may not be the group you would want to be part of, but clones won't help you.

2 Change the location

Don't sit at your desk (if alone). Don't gather where you normally get together (if a group). Don't stay in the same formation in a meeting if you need to switch to creative mode. You need a fresh environment if you are to have fresh ideas. Researchers say that a coffee shop creates the right background noise level – though that would not work for me.

3 Seek beauty

For me that means getting out into God's creation. A meeting of up to four people can walk together in the countryside and work as they go. I've recently had a week in Scotland with stunning autumn colours; even the memory stimulates my mind. For you it might be your garden, a running stream, the sea-shore, or possibly beauty in great art, architecture or music. I am told that Mozart is the best composer for creative thinkers. But even just a lighted candle or flower arrangement in the room can have an impact.

4 Focus on the end result

Ask 'Why?' and 'Where to?' questions – not 'How?' ones. Define your desired outcomes well before you consider routes to get you there. You are planning an annual event: why are you holding it? You are leading the intercessions on Sunday: where do you want people to be as a result? Keep coming back to this. Keep asking and answering questions rather than making statements.

5 Take out the restraints

Don't worry at the outset about finance or people or resources. To start with, dream dreams without the costs of change coming to the surface. Try not to concern yourself with people's negative reactions or apathy. Don't let your prophets of doom crowd onto this group. Realism will follow.

6 Seek external stimuli

Welcome newcomers with recent experience of other churches onto your group rather than fill it with long-standing worthies. Open your mind to how others operate: visit other churches, get external speakers in, read widely, access lists of ice-breaker exercises, open yourself up to different traditions.

7 Study Bezalel and Oholiab

Bezalel is, surely, the patron saint of creativity. Oholiab was his sidekick. Read up about them in Exodus 31:1-11 and 35:30 – 36:7. Ponder these passages and consider what they say to encourage you in God's view of craft and creative design. You might also look up Matthew 6:25-34 and meditate on nature. Listen to Haydn's 'The Creation' if you are into such things and study Psalms 8, 19 and others.

8 Recognise the spiritual gift

Search out your congregation for those with the spiritual gift of creativity. Then draw them into any process where their gift can be put to great use for the benefit of the whole body of Christ. No, it's not specifically listed in the various (and, merely sample) scriptural gifts lists but it ticks all the boxes for inclusion. Recognise it as a gift and then find the people who have it.

9 Utilise lists, mind-maps, flowcharts and other tools

If you are problem solving, giving time to listing all possible solutions, however zany, often leads to something new that could work. Some people use tools such as mind-maps and other creative aids now available online. But having asked all the right questions (as above), once you do turn to 'How?' questions the idea is to produce as many ideas as you can.

Nine more ideas

This is my second league. You may want to promote some to my premier division as the distinction is not a major one.

1 Use all your senses

Most of us pay a lot more attention to what our eyes and ears tell us than what we can discover through our noses, tongues and hands. Take time to consider the smells of nature (a local farmyard may help!), the taste of different foods, and the feel of various substances. Then let your imagination loose on the issue under investigation and see where this leads you.

2 Value lo-tech aids

Rather than reach for your keyboard try writing questions, ideas and thoughts onto old-fashioned paper using old-fashioned implements. I find a fountain pen helps me more than a biro. In a group the humble flipchart is a wonderful tool for trying out ideas and producing lists. These days you then use your hi-tech phone to photograph your lo-tech sheets.

3 Banish distraction

Keep your emails and social media far from any creative session. Try to put aside your current concerns. You need to focus on what matters.

4 Avoid words

Most of us are word-based thinkers, but the more creative of us are more likely to think visually. So try drawing the issue without words, or get small groups to mime the

problem, or use craft modelling in some way. Liken the issue to different colours or other associations. Use role play. Use any non-print means to help your creative people.

5 Tell stories

Read books on lateral thinking, do cryptic crosswords, train yourself to think outside boxes. But above all, tell stories about the issue in question. This can be a powerful means of communication and releases all kinds of creative ideas.

6 Bring quieter members in

If you are working in a group it is likely that your more creative ideas will come from quieter members who may not speak in a plenary session. So break into buzz groups and get a representative to report back from each. Changes of dynamic are helpful.

7 Keep fit

You are more likely to ***be*** creative if you ***feel*** creative. So ensure your mind and body are in good order, and you are in good spiritual health if you want God to speak to you. But there is a school of thought that says you are more creative when drowsy, and fasting might be a discipline worth considering to prepare you for a creative session.

8 Go blue

Not something I have tried but the experts tell us that our brains function better in creative mode when they see shades of blue in the background.

9 Continue the process

Many people have their best creative ideas six, 12 or 24 hours after any exercise in creative thinking. So don't close the process down after one session – let people (or yourself) sleep on it, and return to it the next day. Several short sessions are often better than one longer one. Keep a notebook or digital equivalent ready for those sudden ideas at unexpected moments.

Three fundamental examples

1 Brainstorming session

This can be very effective in a meeting, but you have to obey the rules or the impact is greatly reduced. You need a flipchart and scribe. The leader needs to define the problem succinctly and everyone needs to understand what they are doing. The idea is to generate lots of ideas for a solution – the more the better. The rules are:

- Everyone takes part with no sense of hierarchy – you cannot afford passengers and the best ideas may come from your less vocal (or less intelligent) members.
- Anything can be suggested however offbeat it may seem at the time. It is often the craziest ideas that prompt someone else to come up with something that could work.

- No criticism or comment is allowed at all while the session is in motion – whoever is in charge must instantly stop any such feedback. This is a key point.
- After the session you then analyse what has come in.

2 Church staff working out of one office

The traditional pattern has been Ministers and then lay staff appointed all working from their homes other than Administrators who work from the church office. But it is becoming increasingly common in larger churches for all the staff, including the Minister (a vital point), to work out of one back-office base. This can even be an open-plan office and/or an area with hot-desking.

This works best when staff are not all hidden away behind shut doors, and where there is a central point (coffee machine, water cooler) because it is here that your creative interplay will take place.

This new scenario is greatly to be preferred to the old model because it: (1) builds teamwork, (2) enhances communication, and (3) promotes creativity as people from different areas of church life continually interact with each other.

3 Exercises that engage the 'right brain'

Research has shown that our brains have two distinct sides which complement each other. The left side focuses on order, tidiness and logic; the right on imagination.

There is a view around that we need to train the right side of our brains and we can do this by engaging in creative exercises. In my lists above I have included several ideas for this but others include imagination exercises (eg. 'list as many viable uses as you can come up with for a tube of toothpaste') or 'reverse visioning' (eg. 'it's five years from now and we have succeeded – what do you see or hear?').

So the argument is that even if we do not have the spiritual gift of creativity, we can train our brains to be more creative. If such thinking then impacts the culture of the church, you engage in a creative process that can have profound results.

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN103. See also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan,* plus Training Notes TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?,* TN66, *A daily office for church staff*, TN94, *Becoming self-aware,* and TN155, *The value of the 'Blob pictures' tool.*

For examples of creative thinking see A3, A9, A32, A40/41 A49 and TN8, TN29, TN45, TN47, TN69, TN93, TN95, TN104, TN108, TN115, TN128, TN136, TN142, TN145, TN154.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN103 under Planning.

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