**Module 8: Innovation and Change**

“And he who was seated on the throne said, “behold, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:5)

**Devotion**

We are all familiar with the last seven words of the church: “we never did it that way before.” But we need to keep in mind that resources in a rural setting aren’t always plentiful. I was raised in a congregation where Bach and Buxtehude organ preludes were the norm. In contrast, the organist of my first rural parish hadn’t grown up with organ lessons or even piano lessons. She had transitioned to organ from the “squeeze box,” the accordion. I was grateful for just about any prelude—or hymn—that she was able to offer.

New doesn’t always mean a specific or tangible new reality. Often it can mean a new spin on something already done. I’ll never forget my confirmation pastor telling a woman who apologized for her poor singing voice: “I understand that you don’t feel that you are a good singer. But keep in mind that the scripture tells us to make a joyful *noise* to the Lord; it doesn’t say anything about whether or not it must be in tune.” That said, innovation sometimes means trying completely new things, matters outside our comfort zone. One of the parishes I served was in the North Woods of Wisconsin. Attendance increased in the summer months due to an influx of vacationers. One year, we started a “Christmas in July” Sunday with carols, a tree, a bizarre, and a turkey meal with all the trimmings. Not surprisingly, attendance at this event doubled the summer average attendance (which was already quite good for a rural congregation in the summer). Naturally parishioners have to want to innovate, and there is no magic wand that guarantees that.

Christians do not seek change for change’s sake. Innovation is always done with an eye to respecting those traditions that secure us, preserves community from chaos. Communitarian thinker Amitai Etzioni (born 1929) once pointed out that every society is negotiating just how much order it needs in relation to how much freedom it needs. If only order is emphasized, then the society fails to have the freedom it needs for adaptation. But if only freedom is emphasized, it faces chaos and a lack of appropriate or safe boundaries.

Pastors can help their congregations navigate these quests for both preservation and innovation.

**Prayer**

*Give me patience, God, when I deal with parishioners so slow to change. Help me to be a gentile shepherd to them and be optimistic that when the time is right change will happen. Ever make me mindful that my congregation first of all belongs to you and not me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*