

Beyond the Machine: Traditioned Innovation for Congregations in Transition

Metaphors

Every congregation carries a picture of itself, and most of us never chose the picture. It was handed to us.

Andrew Hogue and L. Gregory Jones name this directly in *Navigating the Future* (2021). “Our mental models shape the meaning we give to the world and, in turn, the ways we approach our ‘working forward’ toward the future,” they write. “Often, our mental models are hereditary, in the sense that they’re passed down from the people who came before us.” They cite time-as-money as an example. None of us invented that idea, yet it governs how we speak about our days: we spend, save, waste, and run out of time.

Then they name the metaphor they want the church to set down: the machine.

“One set of metaphors or mental models that has proven to have far-reaching effect, and which we’d like to suggest dispensing with, is the prevalent imagery of machines as a guiding metaphor for human endeavors,” they write. “We too frequently use mechanistic images to describe complex entities, such as societies and institutions. This is something we have inherited from French Enlightenment thought, which suggested that these complex human interactions were things to be built, taken apart, and reengineered—things that comply, in other words, with the predictable laws of physics.”¹

I want to sit with that, because I hear machine language in our churches constantly, and I have used it myself.

We say a congregation is running smoothly or has broken down. We talk about fixing a church, restructuring a council, retooling a program, jump-starting stewardship, and finding the right person to fill that position. We describe a pastoral vacancy as a hole that must be filled before the machine can operate again. When something fails, we look for the defective part.

None of that language is evil. Some of it is useful shorthand. But a metaphor is never only a metaphor. If a congregation is a machine, its future becomes a maintenance question, its people are components, its problems have technicians, and its decline means it is obsolete. That is a bleak gospel, and it is not ours.

What traditioned innovation actually is

Jones coined the phrase “traditioned innovation” out of frustration, as he has explained, with “the wars between people who wanted to change nothing and those who wanted to change everything.”² Most of us have attended that meeting. One group says the church must return to what worked in 1985. Another says nothing from 1985 should survive. Both sides believe they are defending the church, and the argument generates enormous heat and very little discernment.

¹ Hogue and Jones, *Navigating the Future*, 179–80.

² L. Gregory Jones, “L. Gregory Jones on Traditioned Innovation in Worship,” Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, accessed September 22, 2026, <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/articles/l-gregory-jones-traditioned-innovation-worship>.

Traditioned innovation rejects that false choice. It holds tradition and change together rather than in opposition.

The distinction beneath it comes from the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan, whose line Jones brought into this work: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”³ Tradition is not the enemy of the new. Traditionalism is. Tradition is a living inheritance that can generate something; traditionalism is an inheritance we have stopped believing in and now merely protect.

Jones also draws on Ronald Heifetz’s observation from evolutionary biology that as much as 97 to 99 percent of an organism may remain the same while only one to three percent changes—and that if it is the right one to three percent, the result is transformation.⁴ Notice the shape of that claim. Faithful change is not wholesale replacement. It is deep continuity with precise, courageous adaptation at the point where it matters.

That insight is unavailable to us as long as we think mechanically. Machines do not adapt; they are adapted by someone else. Machines do not grow; they are assembled. Machines have no history that matters, no memory, no grief, no capacity to surprise the engineer. But an organism grows from a root. An organism can lose a limb and survive. An organism can appear dormant through an entire winter and leaf out in spring.

Congregations are not machines. They are bodies, vines, households, fields, and people. Scripture never describes the people of God as a mechanism.

“There’s something in Scripture about that”

The Spirit sets Ezekiel down in a valley full of bones, and the bones are very dry. This is not a congregation in a rough patch. This is the aftermath of catastrophe—exile, the loss of the temple, land, monarchy, and every institutional form Israel had trusted. God asks the prophet a question no strategic planning process can answer: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Ezekiel’s reply is the most honest line in the passage. “O Lord God, you know.”

Then watch what happens because the sequence is the whole point.

First, there is assembly. Bone meets bone with a rattling noise. Sinews, then flesh, then skin. Ezekiel watches a body come together, piece by piece, and if the story ended there, we would have a machine—correctly built, properly connected, structurally complete.

“But there was no breath in them.”

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 65; quoted in Jones, “Traditioned Innovation in Worship.”

⁴ Jones, “Traditioned Innovation in Worship.” See also Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 14–17.

Everything was in place, and nothing was alive. The organizational chart was complete. The bylaws were ratified. The parts fit. And it was still a corpse.

Only then does God send Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath—*ruach*, the same word for wind, Spirit, and the breath that hovered over the waters at creation and filled the nostrils of the first human. “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” And they live and stand, a vast multitude.

This scripture is for congregations tempted by the machine. Structure matters; God does not skip the bones. Yet structure is never sufficient, nor is it the source of life. A congregation can complete every technical task on its list and still be waiting for breath.

There is a second gift in this text. God does not build these people a new body from scratch. God works with *their* bones. The material of the new thing is the remains of the old. That is traditioned innovation in its most vivid form: neither the abandonment of a congregation’s history nor its preservation under glass, but the raising of that very history into a form that can stand and move again.

The bones do not reassemble themselves, but Ezekiel is no bystander. He prophesies. He speaks. He participates. God’s initiative and human agency are not in competition here. The Spirit gives life; the prophet shows up and opens his mouth.

What this changes for a congregation in transition

If we trade the machine for the body, several things shift immediately.

The diagnostic question changes. A machine question asks, “What is broken and who can fix it?” An organic question asks, “Where is life already appearing, and what is it rooted in?” The second question is harder and far more generative. It sends a council to look for the small green shoot in a Tuesday morning food pantry or a new midweek gathering of six people, rather than only auditing what has failed.

A pastoral vacancy is no longer a missing part. In machine logic, a church without a settled pastor is inoperative until the component is replaced. In the logic of the body, an interim season is a period of formation in which dormant gifts become visible. Lay leaders who step into worship, care, and administration are not placeholders keeping the machine idling. They are the church discovering its own capacities.

Grief becomes intelligible. Machines do not mourn, so machine language gives congregations no vocabulary for loss—which is precisely why change so often gets fought out through budget disputes and personality conflicts rather than being named. Living things grieve. When a congregation releases a program, a building, a service time, or a role someone held for thirty years, that is a real loss and deserves lament, not a change-management seminar. Traditioned innovation makes room for weeping, as Ezra 3 does, without letting the weeping stop the building.

Continuity gets specific. The Heifetz principle asks a congregation to name what belongs to the 97 percent and what to the three. In my experience, the irreducible core is smaller and more beautiful than we expect: the worship of God, the table, the welcome of the stranger, the care of one another, the pursuit of justice, and the love of neighbor. Almost everything else—service times, staffing models, program

structures, room usage, meeting schedules, even buildings—is form rather than essence. Congregations exhaust themselves defending form because no one has helped them distinguish between the two.

Experiments become faithful rather than threatening. You do not beta-test a machine; you either repair it or replace it. But living things try things. A congregation can try something for six months, learn from it, and stop without that constituting failure. Some of the most hopeful work I see in the Florida Conference looks exactly like this: fellowship halls hosting recovery meetings, congregations sharing staff or space with neighbors, small churches forming intentional partnerships across language and culture, and retired members leading pastoral care teams.

Questions for your council or leadership team

These are worth an unhurried hour, not a five-minute agenda item.

- What metaphors do we actually use to describe ourselves? For one month, listen for machine language in your own minutes and announcements. What does it reveal about our expectations of one another?
- Who handed us our picture of what a “real church” looks like, and does that picture still serve the mission God has given us?
- What is our 97 percent—the inheritance we would defend at all costs because it embodies our deepest faith?
- What is our three percent—the specific, courageous change that could make a real difference?
- Where are the bones already assembled among us, waiting only for breath? And where have we mistaken a completed structure for a living body?
- What loss do we need to name before we can move?

A word of encouragement

The church has never been a machine, nor has it ever depended on our engineering. Israel did not reconstruct itself in Babylon; God worked with its bones. The first Christians did not innovate by discarding Scripture, Sabbath, table, or psalm; they carried them into circumstances their ancestors never imagined.

To congregations in the Florida Conference who are living in an in-between season, I want to say plainly: you are not obsolete. You are not a broken mechanism awaiting a technician. You are a living body with roots, memory, gifts, grief, and a future belonging to God.

The question before us is not whether we can restore the machine. It is whether we will prophesy to the breath.