

This Is How Churches Can Empower Startups

The faith-work movement has had great success in helping Christians connect daily work with spiritual calling, leading many to shift their approach to economic stewardship.

For some, that will translate into a more basic shift in attitude, with continued service at an existing company or a long-standing industry. For others, however, it may manifest in sheer economic disruption.

Indeed, from Appalachia to Minnesota, churches are increasing their focus not only on the glories of work in general, but of innovation, entrepreneurship and capital investment, calling on congregants not just to serve and create where they already are, but to disrupt old systems, contribute new ideas and start new enterprises.

At Crossroads, an evangelical church in Cincinnati, Ohio, such efforts have grown to tremendous scale, resulting in an annual conference, an intensive start-up competition and various off-shoot investment firms. In an extended profile at Bloomberg, Mya Frazier highlights the church's unique history, as well as its plans for fueling new businesses.

The church began in 1990 as a Bible study among some key business leaders at Procter & Gamble Co., the massive consumer goods conglomerate (which is headquartered in downtown Cincinnati). The group soon grew to 100 people, and by 1996, the church held its first official service. Today, with roughly 30,000 congregants and an annual operating budget of \$33 million, the church has managed to retained its heartbeat for entrepreneurship and calling to business.

"A business endeavor is close to the heart of God and every bit as important as anything else on God's green earth," says

Brian Tome, Crossroads' senior pastor. "God's placed a seed in you," he explains elsewhere, "and he wants to see it come to fruitfulness. ... the right seed that will bring forth the right fruit at the right time in every business."

That basic theological orientation is carried through a range of teachings, church activities and institutional enterprises. Through its annual Unpolished conference, the church aims to offer a "home base for faith and business" and to "engage, energize and inspire the entrepreneurial spirit." In addition to hosting speakers and training sessions, the conference includes a highly funded pitch contest, in which entrepreneurs compete for investor capital, as well as a spot in the church's business accelerator program.

The program consists of Ocean Capital, a "for-profit angel-investment wing," and Ocean Accelerator Inc., a non-profit designed to equip entrepreneurs to "increase God's presence in the marketplace." Led by Scott Weiss, a retired CEO who now volunteers his time, Ocean offers entrepreneurs a training ground for ministry through innovation, weaving business mentorship with Bible-based discipleship.

"Our core approach is developing the capability and training them to raise money," says Weiss. "If you are a Christian and you want to produce in your faith, Ocean teaches you how to raise money in a Christian way, and that there's got to be an ethical standard to doing that. We teach them to pick your investors with care and to be very careful, because you are going to be married a very long time."

Crossroads is not alone among churches in its prioritization of entrepreneurship, but they do stand apart in their more open advocacy of business in general. While many churches put a specific emphasis on so-called "social entrepreneurship," Crossroads recognizes the social value of any business that meets a human need.

Further, amid the church's energetic emphasis on financial fundraising and investment, their underlying theology has not diluted into a false gospel of mere material prosperity. Instead, they've kept a careful focus on business as creative service for the love of neighbor and the glory of God.

For Todd Henry, one of the church's longtime members and start-up advisors, the Christian call to innovation is not ultimately about wealth, or even the services or gadgets they develop along the way. At a more fundamental level, it's about co-creation with the Father:

We have this ability, Henry says, "to co-create new things, to partner with God in transforming creation." He points out that pattern recognition is crucial for a successful startup, as is understanding what he terms the law of the harvest: "Many of us, especially as entrepreneurs, we live in perpetual harvest mode, constantly trying to reap gain, and some of that is because our investors are telling us, 'We want to see a return,' " he says. "The problem is when you are living in perpetual harvest mode, you aren't taking the time to go back and plant seeds and cultivate seeds." He calls on the entrepreneurs to see God as the source of wisdom and Jesus as a brilliant thinker with a "deep systematic understanding of life," skilled in the practice of pattern recognition.

Rather than pursuing business as a path to material comfort, Crossroads promotes an approach that embraces constant risk-taking, active obedience and vulnerability. Indeed, at a very basic level and in so many ways, the life of the entrepreneur reflects much of what the Christian life is all about: discerning and responding, serving and creating, building and exploring.

"I feel like now, even more so than before, I'm having to submit to God's will, because it's getting bigger and bigger," says Lyden Foust, a 2015 Crossroads finalist, whose business

idea is finally coming to fruition. “You think when you raise a bunch of money, you’d become more confident, but that’s not the case. It gets harder.”

The difficult path of entrepreneurship serves as a strong buffer against the idols of convenience and comfortability that increasingly dominate modern life, and the underlying drivers ought to serve as a basic orientation and inspiration for all that we do, whether in our churches, “steadier” jobs, families, political witness or in the deeper workings of our spiritual lives.

As Charlie Self puts it in his book *Flourishing Churches and Communities*, “Local churches are ‘base camps’ for launching ‘cultural entrepreneurs,’ who are connective tissue between faith and economics, charity and outreach, evangelization and improvement of the world.” This is the opportunity we have.

Those of us working in more “stable” businesses or industries can surely wield our own variety of risk-taking and creative activity, but in its own unique way, Crossroads offers a bold challenge on the types of frontiers the church has yet to pursue.

As we survey the untapped avenues in our own churches and communities, we’d do well to ask ourselves, as Frazier does, “What might Jesus disrupt?” {eoa}

Joseph Sunde is a writer and project coordinator for the Acton Institute, serving as editor of the *Letters to the Exiles* blog and content manager of the *Oikonomia* channel at [acton.org](#). He is the founder of Remnant Culture and was a longtime contributor to AEI’s *Values & Capitalism* project.

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