
IMPROVISATION AND THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

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Abstract: Scholars have observed that the practice of ministry is improvisational. While such claims may be accurate, more research is needed to understand better what improvisation looks like in ministry, and what factors constrain or promote it. This article draws on sociological literature about improvisation in music and theater, organizational development studies about improvisation in business settings, and ethnographic work conducted by the author, who contends that particular variables in religious organizations shape improvisational practice in ways that make it instrumental, time-bound, restricted in its collaborative potential, and not particularly innovative.

Improvisation and the Practice of Ministry

I've never met a minister who thinks her job is boring. Tedious, maybe. Relentless, to be sure. But boring, never. "No two days are ever the same," ministers say. Despite the routine imposed by the regularity of Sabbath schedules and liturgical seasons, life in congregations is unpredictable. People die; someone initiates a divorce; a child flunks out of school; a new baby is born; a parent announces that his job is taking the family to another city; the roof leaks; the new mayor shows up in a new-member class; staff members argue among themselves; a volunteer fails to appear when expected. These sorts of occurrences are not built into a minister's daily schedule, yet when they occur she has to engage them appropriately. Being effective in the face of surprises requires a minister to think on her feet;

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she does not always have time for leisurely planning.

Jackson Carroll suggests that the unpredictability of ministry makes it “at least partly improvisational.”¹ Effective leaders have the capacity to sense what is happening and respond faithfully to the moment, whether the moment is serendipitous, problematic, or highly ambiguous. Michael Jinkins agrees, and argues that the capacity to improvise is an essential component of effective leadership.² Personal experience and analytic observation lead me to concur with Carroll and Jinkins. Ministers and other religious leaders do think on their feet, and they are often interested in finding creative options for the challenges they face.

We do not, however, have a well-developed analysis of what constitutes this creativity; we lack rigorous studies of what improvisation looks like in ministry: how it is shaped, practiced, and encouraged. Key questions are still to be answered. What is improvisation and how does it take shape in religious contexts? What factors influence its practice, and how? What can we learn from looking at the practice of improvisation more deeply, which might instruct ministers or teachers of religious leadership?

With these questions in mind, in this article I define improvisation and examine the variables that shape its practice in ministry, by looking first at particular cases and then discussing the findings and their implications. I argue that although ministerial improvisation shares characteristics with improvisation in other settings, particular variables in religious organizations—such as organizational values and goals, program schedules, and a largely volunteer work force—restrict space for improvisation in ways that often limit its innovative potential. I conclude with suggestions for further

¹ Jackson W. Carroll, “Leadership and the Study of the Congregation,” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. N.T. Ammerman, J.W. Carroll, C.S. Dudley, and W. McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 167.

² Michael Jinkins, “A ‘Sense of Reality’ How Austin Theological Seminary Teaches Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 4(1/2) (Spring/Fall 2005): 81.

discussion and research about creativity and the practice of religious leadership.

Theory and Method

This analysis is sociological. It is based on literature about improvisation in jazz, theater, business, and ethnographic work conducted in three emergency feeding ministries, in which leaders improvise frequently. In spring 2007, I spent several weeks conducting participant observation in two soup kitchens and one food pantry. I visited each kitchen eight to ten times and observed the pantry operations twice. At each site, I talked extensively with the program supervisors and had numerous conversations with volunteers. I subsequently coded my observations using the software QSR NVivo 7.

The research was constructed to explore work in church kitchens. I wanted to know more about the backstage labor in churches—the everyday effort that men and women make behind the scenes to produce church programming and fellowship. I began with the emergency feeding programs of two, small mainline Protestant churches that are more than one hundred years old. The feeding programs serve approximately sixty adults every time they are open; the majority of the patrons are African-American men of varied age and employment status.

The three church programs have much in common. The congregations that house the programs, Southside and Lakeshore, are located in changing neighborhoods in a large city.³ Once (and perhaps future) middle-class neighborhoods, for the last several decades these areas have been characterized by poverty, dwindling populations, and disappearing businesses.⁴ For over twenty-five years both congregations have offered

³ These church names are pseudonyms.

⁴ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). This book describes well the processes of depletion and transformation undergone by the neighborhoods in this study.

emergency feeding programs to help alleviate the very real need in the neighborhoods. Lakeshore serves lunch every weekday and after church on Sunday; Southside has a Tuesday soup kitchen and a food pantry on Thursdays. Patrons count on these programs, and they know what to expect. They know they will be served bean soup at noon at Lakeshore; and they are equally confident that on Tuesdays at 1 p.m. folks at Southside will serve a meal of “red food,” the defining ingredient being tomato sauce; many patrons return to Southside at 10 a.m. on Thursdays to pick up a bag of groceries that holds enough food to feed a family for a week. These programs are steady, reliable, predictable and trustworthy. All are expressions of the congregations’ dedication to their neighborhoods and their commitment to alleviate human suffering.

These emergency feeding programs are frugal. They do their best to stretch money as far as possible, salvage food and avoid waste, and work with a minimal staff. In each setting there is, at most, one hired staff person; all the other work is done by volunteers, some steady and many more occasional. The pastors of the churches back-up the programs with support, supervision, connecting with other congregations that help to support the work, and, when needed, rolling up their sleeves and doing the kitchen work.

The program supervisors and pastors whom I observed worked hard in the kitchens. Much of what they did was carefully planned. Yet, in the midst of their routines there was also considerable unpredictability. Food supplies disappeared because another program had used them; volunteers were scarce one week and over-abundant the next. Leaders in the kitchen, I discovered, made constant adjustments and reconfigured their work to adjust to the surprises they encountered. In a word, they improvised. Frankly, I had not expected to study improvisation in these kitchens, and I was taken aback by its frequency. My discovery of improvisation in the kitchen led me to do further research.

Literature Review

Improvisation is a potent concept that describes varied forms of cooperation in music, theater, and other organizational settings.⁵ Improvisation is inherently emergent and collaborative; it is extemporaneous group behavior.⁶ It is one of many types of innovative action. What makes improvisation distinct from other forms of creative cooperation, however, is that it occurs when planning and action converge and function synergistically, making it difficult to determine where planning leaves off and action begins. The two occur simultaneously.⁷ Improvisation thus has several markers: it is collaborative, innovative, and characterized by the confluence of planning and action.

Artistic Improvisation

When people hear the word *improvisation*, many think first of jazz or theater. Musical improvisation relies on norms, patterned interactions, skill, and a knowledgeable audience. Howard S. Becker describes the dynamics of jazz improvisation as practiced spontaneity that is based on unwritten yet commonly understood rules, a sense of etiquette that players follow closely, and years of listening and performance. He observes that jazz has an egalitarian etiquette; performers regard each other's contributions as equal, even when some musicians play better than others; such egalitarianism requires that individual performers listen to what is happening and work together as a group to produce a common musical direction. "Attentiveness, care, and willingness to give ground and take direction from each other" is what is involved in "improvisation at

⁵ Howard S. Becker, "Example and Generalizations," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 7(3) (2000): 198.

⁶ R. Keith Sawyer, "Improvisational Cultures: Collaborative Emergence and Creativity in Improvisation," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 7(3) (2000): 183.

⁷ Anne S. Miner, Paula Bassoff, and Christine Moorman, "Organizational Improvisation and Learning: A Field Study," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46 (2001): 314-315.

its best,” says Becker.⁸ Collective, innovative music-making occurs when the group of musicians agrees to keep some things fixed and to vary others. Improvisation also benefits from a knowledgeable audience that can appreciate the music.⁹

Robert Faulkner emphasizes experience as a factor in improvisation. He describes jazz improvisation as the work of a “disciplined imagination,” which he argues is built simultaneously on performers’ practiced, well-known musical repertoire and the spontaneous, creative use of their skills and knowledge.¹⁰

The improvisation in comedy that Mary Scruggs and Michael J. Gellman describe is similar to jazz in its dependence on rules, etiquette, practiced skills, and audience interaction. Improvisational rules in theater and comedy demand that actors be open to the moment, resist planning or assuming a role, avoid conscious choices, and allow themselves to react to discoveries as they let the process unfold. Paying attention is essential to successful improvisation; to be effective actors need to focus their awareness on the action and people around them. The process of improvisation is more important than the product, and it is practiced by staying in the moment, discovery, and using basic skills.¹¹

In both jazz and theater improvisation is a process in which creativity and action are simultaneous and synergistic. This process works best when ensemble members are highly skilled and practiced, attentive and

⁸ Howard S. Becker, “The Etiquette of Improvisation,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 7(3) (2000): 173. Becker also discusses improvisational sessions in which other rules apply, in which musicians become their own audiences and a recognized hierarchy of performers or musical performance operates. The rules of etiquette shift in these situations, but nonetheless, the commonly recognized rules apply.

⁹ Becker, “The Etiquette of Improvisation,” 174.

¹⁰ Robert R. Faulkner, “Shedding Culture,” in *Art from Start to Finish: Jazz, Painting, Writing, and Other Improvisations*, eds. H.S. Becker, R.R. Faulkner, and B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 96.

¹¹ Mary Scruggs and Michael J. Gellman, *Process: An Improviser’s Journey*, with a foreword by Anne Libera (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

responsive to one another, willing to share time and spotlight, attentive and responsive to the moment, open to the unknown, and interested in heightening variability or creating something new.¹² Good improvisation involves the subtle play of the ensemble between the performers' practiced repertoire, the rules of engagement, and the context of action.¹³

Effective improvisation also requires a willingness to take a chance and get something wrong. Writing about jazz, Ken Peplowski states that improvisation happens when performers paint themselves into musical corners and then try to play their way out of them. To do this well, he argues, musicians need to give their best, listen, and think independently—practices learned only “by climbing up on the bandstand and failing and learning how to deal with your failures.”¹⁴ In other words, “You have to risk sounding stupid in order to learn.”¹⁵ One could substitute the word *improvise* in place of *learn* in the previous sentence. One has to risk sounding or looking stupid in order to improvise and discover something new.

The fact that one's willingness to risk fosters improvisation and creativity is true at every level of analysis. To improvise effectively, not only do individuals need to be willing to look or sound silly, but groups and organizations must be willing to tolerate this and regard mistakes as an opportunity for learning. To nurture improvisation, groups and organizations must foster what Karl Weick calls the “aesthetics of imperfection.”¹⁶

¹² Faulkner characterizes improvisation as action that explores the new and increases variation, 92.

¹³ Jean-Charles Francois, “Improvisation Today: Between Orality and Writing,” *Contemporary Music Review* 25(5/6) (2006): 624.

¹⁴ Ken Peplowski, “The Process of Improvisation,” *Organization Science* 9(5) (Sept-Oct 1998): 561.

¹⁵ Quoted by Peplowski, 560.

¹⁶ Karl E. Weick, “Creativity and the Aesthetics of Imperfection,” in *Creative Action in Organizations: Ivory Tower Visions and Real World Voices*, eds. C.M. Ford and D. A. Gioia (London: Sage Publications, 1995), quoted in Kim Kamoche and Miguel Pina e Cunha, “Minimal Structures: From Jazz Improvisation to Product Innovation,” *Organization Studies* 22(5) (2001): 747.

Some settings foster imperfection more than others. Jazz clubs and improvisational theaters open up space for people to take chances; in fact, they encourage performers to take risks. These settings have what Kim Kamoche and Miguel Pina e Cunha call wide “zones of maneuvering”—physical, temporal, and/or psychic space in which people have room to discover and create something new.¹⁷ They are settings in which attitudes, processes, practices, networks, and communities provide some sort of space where people feel safe enough to take a chance on being creative.

Organizational Improvisation

Several characteristics of organizational improvisation are similar to those found in artistic settings. Factors such as collaboration, attentiveness to the moment and other workers, communication, relevant skills and experience, openness to discovery and failure, and organizational cultures with wide zones of maneuvering are central to effective improvisation in businesses and other organizational settings. In contexts like these, improvisation is likely to be a bottom-up process rather than something that is top-down; it is workers themselves, in the local context of their work, who do the improvising.¹⁸

Improvisation is a collaborative process of social construction. In an article that examines improvisation among repair workers who service office machines, Brown and Duguid demonstrate the cooperative nature of improvisation and the salience of contextualized communication in making it happen. The authors recount how a repair team worked to fix a broken machine; collaborating with the office staff and a supervisor, the team eventually put together a narrative that explained how the machine worked effectively in that specific

¹⁷ Kamoche and Cunha, 748.

¹⁸ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, “Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation,” *Organization Science* 2(1) (February 1991): 43-47.

setting, what seemed to be wrong with it and when, and then fashioned a frugal but effective repair. Shared stories, listening, sensitivity to context, collaboration and trust, and reliance on local knowledge—rather than knowledge ossified in a repair manual—were essential to the successful improvisation. The authors identify the salience of collaboration, shared local knowledge, and a socially constructed interpretation in this and other improvisational processes.¹⁹

Brown and Duguid emphasize that communities of workers effectively improvise, and they argue for the importance of community-based learning and knowledge. In such contexts people not only learn from one another, they also defer to each other as different people take the lead in providing information or offering an idea.²⁰ Becker and Scruggs and Gellman see a similar egalitarian practice in artistic improvisation.²¹ Musicians and actors often trade leadership, following first one person's directions and then another's. Roles can be interchangeable, to some extent, and improvisational groups work as teams of musicians or actors.

At the same time, improvisation in organizational settings can significantly differ from that found in various art forms: (1) Improvisation in organizations is often instrumental rather than aesthetic in purpose; that is, it is performed not for its own sake or to create new art, but to reach an organizational goal unrelated to art.²² (2) Zones of maneuvering in organizations can range from narrow to wide, and affect the degree to which leaders and workers are free to take risks or experience

¹⁹ Brown and Duguid, 44-47.

²⁰ Brown and Duguid, 47-49.

²¹ Becker "The Etiquette of Improvisation," 172; Scruggs and Gellman, 36-37.

²² Miner, Bassoff, and Moorman, 316n. Of course, the instrumental and aesthetic are not intrinsically different. Instrumental improvisation can have aesthetic qualities, and probably does in many instances. The distinction I wish to make here regards the goal of improvised action.

failure.²³ (3) Organizational improvisation is often occasioned by unexpected circumstances (positive or negative) that are time-limited; the pressure to solve a problem quickly or address a ripe opportunity can frequently drive improvisation in organizations. Time pressure is often exacerbated by environmental turbulence.²⁴ (4) Teams of workers who improvise are not always as egalitarian as ensembles of actors found in artistic improvisation; leadership roles are not necessarily interchangeable in organizational improvisation, and the role of the leader can be pivotal.²⁵

Improvisation in Emergency Feeding Programs

I observed all the characteristics unique to organizational improvisation in the inventiveness I witnessed in emergency feeding programs. I stumbled across organizational improvisation as I was coding my observations about workers in the soup kitchens and food pantry. Again and again, workers in the kitchen had to think on their feet as they improvised new recipes, made exceptions to the food pantry rules, or reconfigured the work in response to surprises from volunteers. Originally I used the dynamics of jazz improvisation to analyze the work, but over time I realized that improvisation at the church kitchens was different from artistic improvisation, in which action furthers variation.²⁶ In the kitchens, improvisation was employed by workers to lessen rather than increase variation. Leaders improvised in the face of the unexpected, so that they could produce something predictable and on-time, in these cases meals or pantry bags. In these programs

²³ Kamoche and Cunha argue that improvisation is more likely in organizations that have wide zones, 748.

²⁴ Miner, Bassoff, and Moorman, 329.

²⁵ This insight derives from my observation of workers in the kitchen, who had quite varied levels of skills and experience. Later in this paper I describe the centrality of the kitchen supervisors and suggest that the dynamics of volunteer workers may limit the collaborative potential of improvisation in settings like the soup kitchen, which are not egalitarian workplaces.

²⁶ Faulkner, 92.

improvisation was instrumental, goal-oriented, time-bound, practiced exclusively by leaders, and not particularly innovative. The process was creative, yes, but the creativity began and ended with the process—the end-product was completely predictable and held no surprises.

Improvisation is shaped in part by the organizational space accorded to practitioners—be they musicians, comedians, organizational leaders, or ministers. This space, a zone of maneuvering, is cultural as well as physical, and it is shaped by context, organizational culture and values, the nature of the work community, and schedules. In the cases of these emergency feeding programs, the zones of maneuvering are narrow, thus restricting the potential for improvisation to craft something new.

Organizational Goals and Values

Earlier I described the context of food instability, in which these feeding programs function. Meeting the need for food is the primary goal of the soup kitchens and pantry, and all the workers share it. In some organizational settings, the presence of shared and internalized organizational goals can be a moderating influence to improvisation.²⁷ In the feeding programs, shared goals both stimulate and moderate improvisation.

On the one hand, the shared commitment to feeding stimulates the inventiveness that solves problems, meets deadlines, and discovers new ways to serve predictable, timely meals to people who need them. The pantry supervisor, for example, had to make a quick decision when they ran out of meat one week—apparently less had come in from the food bank than the pantry had anticipated. Fortunately he had some other meat in the freezer that he was able to substitute to ensure all the pantry bags were full. Another week he had to cobble together a random group of volunteers to unload the food bank delivery truck, because the volunteers who had

²⁷ Miner, Bassoff, and Moorman, 325.

promised to help had not arrived. Week after week he readjusted food supplies or workers in order to get one hundred twenty pantry bags filled on time.

Frugality is another shared goal that stimulates creativity in these feeding programs. One week at Lakeshore an opportunity for improvisation arrived in the form of cactus, a bit of fresh produce delivered with the more familiar green peppers, onions, and cabbage. An ingredient like cactus doesn't ordinarily lend itself to bean soup, but the cook was determined to figure out a way to avoid food waste and serve the meal people expected. Although the cactus was unusual, the supervisor's commitment to using food and preventing waste was routine.

Shared goals and values stimulate improvisation in the feeding programs; again and again, the same shared goals moderate innovation because all innovation is directed toward meeting common, ordinary expectations. Like the soup kitchen that Courtney Bender examines in *Heaven's Kitchen*, the ultimate goals are to get the meals out and give clients what they need.²⁸ Thus, Lakeshore serves bean soup at noon; Southside serves red food on Tuesdays at 1 p.m.; and pantry bags are ready for pick up at 10 a.m. on Thursdays. The goal of feeding people shapes the routines and the work, and is, in the end, the mother of convention.

The Work Community

Improvisation occurs in the intersection of structure and uncertainty. Weick and Quinn suggest that improvisation in organizations is built on strong institutional memory and repertoires of action, which operate in the context of organizational instability.²⁹ One of the biggest contributors to organizational instability in the three emergency feeding programs is the volunteer

²⁸ Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 42-44.

²⁹ Karl Weick and Robert Quinn, "Organizational Change and Development," *Annual Review of Psychology* 50 (1999): 375-381.

labor, which is never the same from one day to the next. Although there is a group of reliable and regular volunteers at each program, other volunteers participate more erratically. On most days the kitchens or pantry work teams include a combination of regular, occasional, and one-time volunteers; the latter are usually connected to other churches or agencies (such as schools or ecumenical mission projects). Help sometimes come from the patrons themselves. On some days there are more than enough workers; on other days there are too few. Until they arrive in the morning, supervisors do not know with whom they will be working or what skills or maturity volunteers will have.

The unpredictability of workers, like the presence of shared goals, stimulates and moderates improvisation. Figuring out how to put people to work productively and organize work teams effectively is an exercise of improvisation that kitchen and pantry supervisors perform on the spot in consultation with experienced volunteers. The kitchen supervisor in Lakeshore's pantry knows he can assign one-time volunteers to help his salad coordinators, older women who find ways to put even the newest volunteer to work and make her feel at home. The unpredictability of volunteer workers demands an improvisational response almost every day.

Having an unpredictable work force, especially one in which experience varies widely, limits the egalitarian, collaborative potential of the kitchen work. Although the regular workers in all three feeding programs are respectful of each other and understand each other's work, with rare exceptions divisions of labor are respected and a kitchen hierarchy prevails. The supervisor coordinates the work and takes responsibility for the main dish; salad supervisors coordinate their part of the work; table setters set the tables. People confer and understand what others are doing, but everyone stays in role, and the role of the kitchen supervisor is central. His expertise, focus, and non-anxious presence (qualities displayed by supervisors in all three settings) set the tone and anchor the work. Work in these programs is

structured hierarchically, and improvisation is practiced primarily by regulars—especially the supervisors who daily need to adjust for the unpredictability of workers and food supplies.

The nature of the working community in these programs thus stimulates and limits improvisation. The unpredictability of workers forces supervisors to improvise new working combinations of people every day, yet, at the same time, having inexperienced strangers in the kitchen for two or three hours does not lend itself to the kind of egalitarian, collaborative work described by artists or organizational improvisers in other settings. Collaborative improvisation requires a base of shared experience and a mutual understanding of the rules. That experience and understanding is not present among all the volunteers in these emergency feeding programs. The regular volunteers and supervisors may have it, but the one-timers or the infrequent volunteers do not. Consequently, the randomness and inexperience of the volunteer work force limit the zone of maneuvering for improvisation in these programs and restrict it to the leaders.

Schedules

Program schedules also stimulate and contain improvisation in these programs. Basically, each program operates on a daily schedule, with little preparation being done prior to the day in question. That is, pantry bags are packed beginning at 8:00 on Thursday mornings, and food is prepared or delivered for serving on the day it is eaten. When problems arise, they need to be dealt with immediately.

The emergence of a time-bound problem or opportunity often generates improvisation in business organizations. In such circumstances, improvisation is a process that allows people to work with the materials at hand within a short period of time.³⁰ The improvisation I observed in the kitchens and pantry is similarly generated.

³⁰ Miner, Bassoff, and Moorman, 316-18, 329.

Improvisation occurs when a problem needs to be solved in order to get the meal served on time, or when an opportunity arises. Problems include food contributions that need to be seasoned or repackaged for use, a shortage of supplies, or volunteers failing to show up when they are expected.

The same time-boundedness also constrains improvisation, because it gives strict boundaries to it. People only have a morning to get pantry bags filled or one hundred twenty servings of a meal prepared (the kitchens always cook for second helpings). Supervisors and volunteers do not have time to waste, so what creativity can be exercised needs to be exercised on the spot and in a short time frame. There is no rehearsal time, and there is not much room for big mistakes.

Zones of Maneuvering

The zones of maneuvering in these feeding programs are relatively narrow, but not so narrow as to prevent improvisation. These zones are shaped by the reality of people's hunger or need for supplemental food, a commitment to the shared goal of meeting emergency need frugally and serving predictable meals on time, the complications of working with an inconsistent group of workers of varied experience, and time-pressure to figure everything out in a given morning. In each feeding program zone there is room for improvisation, to be sure, but all the improvisation is focused in one direction: the production of a predictable pantry bag or meal served on time. The purpose of improvisational work in these settings is to limit variation—not increase it. Supervisors and volunteers are creative in these programs; they solve one problem after another; but creativity is not their purpose. Unlike the jazz musicians described by Peplowski, these folks do not paint themselves into a corner and then improvise their way out for the joy of it; instead they serve food to hungry people for the joy of it, and improvisation is one of the practices that gets them there. The zone of maneuvering in which kitchen supervisors and volunteers work is wide enough to allow

them to practice improvisation as a means to an end, but it is too narrow to give people space to practice improvisational creativity as an end in itself.

Discussion: Improvisation in Religious Organizations

Religious leaders improvise frequently. Kitchen and pantry supervisors devise new recipes, reconfigure workers, juggle food supplies, and solve problems to meet neighborhood need. Church school teachers adapt lessons, respond on the spot to surprising questions or revelations, and work creatively with limited supplies. Choir directors adjust the morning anthem when none of the tenors shows up to sing. Ministers devise fresh prayers from a jumble of joys and concerns, ad lib a section in a sermon, respond faithfully to pastoral care issues, share in a conversation, negotiate with neighborhood leaders, and address challenges, such as leaking roofs or broken boilers, which are far outside their areas of expertise. Ministry is full of surprises and challenges, and adept practitioners are skilled at thinking on their feet.

Skilled as they are, ministers and other religious leaders do not necessarily have wide zones in which to maneuver when they improvise. Erving Goffman once commented that the “guarantee is high” that nothing risky or momentous will occur in churches.³¹ His point was that there is not much action in churches, not much opportunity for people to take big chances or test themselves as they put their lives and livelihoods on the line. Although many readers could imagine exceptions to this contention, it is arguable that churches are often pretty predictable and safe. People know what to expect from the routines of worship, education, fellowship, and outreach; and this steadiness is a positive experience for many.

The predictability of church life is one of several factors that limit the zone of maneuvering in which

³¹ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 268.

leaders can improvise. Other factors that can make these zones narrow include the pervasiveness of shared goals and values, the limited time frame of many church programs like worship or a daily soup kitchen, the presence of both experienced and inexperienced participants and, in some cases like those described earlier, urgent needs or concerns in the neighborhood that focus mission efforts. In many churches, worship services or educational programs may have particularly narrow zones of maneuvering for leaders because these programs are laden with expectations, strictly time bound, and peopled by folks with a wide range of experience. Improvisation can and does happen in these settings, but it is likely the sort of improvisation I witnessed in the feeding programs—instrumental improvisation practiced by experienced leaders and oriented toward producing the recognizable, reliable outcome that people expect.

Zones may be even more constrained in settings whose cultures do not nurture the aesthetics of imperfection. Churches and organizations with high standards and a low tolerance for mistakes do not provide much space for improvisation. Their values instead nurture well-planned and executed programs that are practiced and predictable.

Are zones of maneuvering, then, inevitably narrow in religious organizations, especially churches? No. Although the cases examined in this article exhibit factors that limit the space in which leaders can improvise, these factors are not reified in all religious life; and many organizations display characteristics that nurture wider zones of maneuvering. In particular, organizations that support improvisation and other forms of innovation are ones that nurture reflective practitioners, tolerate mistakes and welcome creativity, communicate effectively, and support collaborative teams.

In *As One With Authority* Jackson Carroll argues that the concept of the reflective practitioner is useful for the practice of ministry. The concept itself, which Carroll adapts from the work of Donald Schon, is a

“hermeneutic of practice,” in which leaders interpret situations and draw on their repertoire of skills and knowledge to respond—often inventively—in ways appropriate to the moment and setting.³² Carroll suggests that reflective practice is often experimental; in the face of unpredictability, leaders put together new combinations of skills and approaches from a larger repertoire, receive and reflect on feedback from those ventures, conceive yet another approach, and so on, until a satisfactory resolution is found. The cycle of framing, experimentation, learning, and reframing is a continuous one for reflective practitioners.³³ Such leaders frequently innovate, and, when planning and innovation converge, they improvise.

When introduced to Carroll’s approach, many Doctor of Ministry students tell me they are not free to be reflective practitioners, because their congregations will not tolerate experimentation or mistakes. I have no reliable data that allow me to evaluate the accuracy of their perceptions, but their statements certainly indicate that they do not perceive the aesthetics of imperfection to be embraced by their work settings.

If scholarship about improvisation makes anything clear, it is the correlation between wide zones of maneuvering and organizational cultures that tolerate mistakes, welcome risk, value practical learning, and are change-friendly. Several scholars emphasize the centrality of practical learning in improvisation and innovation.³⁴ In order to create something new, people need to be able to learn from both their mistakes and successes.

Willow Creek Community Church is an example of a church that tolerates risk and promotes practical learning in its nurture of lay ministry initiatives. At Willow Creek people are encouraged to dream up new ministries and

³² Jackson W. Carroll. *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 122.

³³ Carroll, 128-130.

³⁴ See, for example, Weick and Quinn, 376-378; Brown and Duguid, 47-50; Peplowski, 560-561; and Faulkner, 98-99.

recruit volunteers; sometimes these ministries flourish, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes they are long-lived, and sometimes they are short-term. Willow Creek is an unusually successful church; it is arguable that its organizational capacity to allow experimentation—and failure—is part of its genius.³⁵

Having a mindset that considers change as a constant rather than an episodic adjustment also supports creativity. Organizations that foster this attitude recognize the turbulence of the environment and its effect on their setting. They accept that the world is in constant flux, and adapt to that reality by their openness to incremental change and adjustment.³⁶

Organizations and groups that have well-developed systems for communication also open up room for improvisation, especially if communication systems promote information exchanges that are relevant and timely. Effective improvisation requires the capacity to listen and incorporate the insights and work of others.³⁷ Being regularly able to communicate across roles and responsibilities promotes innovation, because it creates an environment in which people can collaborate with, learn from, and motivate each other.³⁸

³⁵ Brown and Eisenhardt argue that a factor that promotes innovation in organizations is a structure that balances order and disorder. The structure is neither too tight and controlling, nor too loose and chaotic. It seems to me that Willow Creek has found a good balance that combines a consistency of leadership and vision with flexibility and creativity at the grass-roots level. Shona L. Brown and Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "The Art of Continuous Change: Linking Complexity Theory and Time-Paced Evolution in Relentlessly Shifting Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 42 (1997): 7-16.

³⁶ Weick and Quinn, 375-376; Christine Moorman and Anne S. Miner, "The Convergence of Planning and Execution: Improvisation in New Product Development," *Journal of Marketing* 62 (July 1998): 5-8, 12; Mary M. Crossan, Henry W. Lane, Roderick E. White, and Leo Klus, "The Improvising Organization: Where Planning Meets Opportunity," *Organizational Dynamics* 24 (Spring 1996): 23.

³⁷ Faulkner, 105.

³⁸ Brown and Eisenhardt, 10-15.

Improvisation is less an individual gift than it is a collaborative enterprise. It thrives in cultures that afford space for individuals and groups to experiment, communicate, and work together. Improvisation takes place in teams: jazz combos, ensembles of actors, and formal and informal groups of folks who work together. Effective improvisation is furthered when individuals can alternate roles and function in a number of capacities; it also develops best when people pool their knowledge and build on it together.³⁹

As I stated in my analysis of work teams in soup kitchens and the food pantry, team work is a challenge in religious organizations, because the combination of occasional volunteers, regular volunteers, and professional staff does not always result in collaborative teams. The disparity of knowledge and experience that people bring to ministry makes it difficult for people to interchange roles; an occasional volunteer, for example, would not be likely to step in for the kitchen supervisor, nor would the occasional aide in the church nursery normally take over for the church school superintendent on Sunday morning. In these cases, a lack of familiarity with people and systems would make it difficult for occasional volunteers to assume a leadership role.

Additionally a lack of professional knowledge might prevent someone from assuming another's role. In any congregation or religious organization there tends to be a fairly wide gap between religious elites, who have professional training or extensive experience, and the laity, who have fewer religious "goods."⁴⁰ Lay persons, of course, have their own practical, "noncanonical" knowledge, which is often pertinent and informed, but it is not always appreciated by religious professionals.⁴¹ The

³⁹ Crossan et. al., 25-30. Most scholars of improvisation emphasize the interactive nature of creativity.

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," in *Comparative Social Research*, vol. 13, ed. C. Calhoun (Stamford: JAI Press, 1991), 9-13.

⁴¹ I borrow the term *noncanonical* from Brown and Duguid, 49.

hierarchies imposed by inequities in experience, knowledge, and skill make it difficult to establish ministry teams that can collaborate and improvise as musicians or actors do.

To make the observation that ministry is not always egalitarian is not to argue that hierarchical structures are inevitable in ministry. Religious leaders and organizations who wish to further collaboration in ministry will, however, need to devise strategies to mitigate the hierarchical tendencies of work communities that include both volunteers and professionals.

Improvisation is not beyond the reach of religious organizations. William Passmore suggests that organizations that wish to reconfigure themselves to promote improvisation can take three steps: (1) help practitioners or team members gain appropriate knowledge; (2) encourage reflective practice that employs experimentation and learning; and (3) adapt or design organizational structures that support new approaches.⁴² I would add to this list a fourth step—develop a deeper appreciation for the noncanonical knowledge that lay people bring to religious life.

Passmore suggests that the place to begin refitting an organization for improvisation is with helping people collectively to expand their repertoire of skills, especially their capacity for reflexivity. Putting effective communication systems in place is also important, because good communication will provide the feedback and opportunities for ordered reflection likely to enhance collective and individual learning.⁴³

Conclusion

I have argued that in some settings, notably those with narrow zones of maneuvering, the improvisation practiced by religious leaders is instrumental, goal-oriented, and directed toward producing a predictable

⁴² William Passmore, "Organizing for Jazz," *Organization Science* 9(5) (Sept-Oct 1998): 563.

⁴³ Passmore, 563-564.

outcome. Such improvisation lessens variation rather than increases it, making it distinctly different from the kind of improvisation with which we are familiar in jazz or theater. In addition, I have identified particular variables that shape narrow zones of maneuvering in many religious settings.

I have also attempted to outline what factors religious organizations might enhance, in order to promote improvisation in their setting. My analysis suggests that organizations that nurture reflective practice, foster an environment that tolerates risk and mistakes, communicate well, and support egalitarian teamwork will be more successful as they seek to inspire creative ministry.

This analysis, however, only tells part of a much more complicated story, and it invites further research and conversation. Three directions for further exploration seem especially fertile: (1) **Collaborative ministry.** Improvisation is collaborative, and investigating cooperative practice in other circumstances may identify and illumine ways in which ministers and other leaders can successfully work together toward innovation. Further research can also expand or perhaps challenge my contention that space for improvisation is limited in some volunteer settings. (2) **Other styles of innovative ministry.** Improvisation is not the only way to innovate. What other styles and approaches do religious leaders use to effect change and improvement in their settings of ministry? Where does one kind of innovation leave off and improvisation begin? (3) **Organizational culture and the aesthetics of imperfection.** In what kinds of religious organizations do we find organizational cultures that welcome improvisation and continuous change? What practices and attitudes can organizations adopt, which will allow them to be more risk-friendly and tolerant of mistakes? What theological frameworks could support such a culture?

Carroll and Jinkins are correct in their claims that ministry is improvisational. I believe it needs to be. In our rapidly changing world, in which churches and

religious organizations are pressed to adapt and face new challenges, ministries that are imaginative and bold have important contributions to make to the health of the body of Christ. The better we understand the contours of such creative efforts, the more likely we are as religious leaders and teachers to be able to support such faithful work.