Towards an Integral Mission
# Social Innovation in Frontier Mission:
## Discerning New Ways Forward

*by Steven Spicer*

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What does creative innovation look like in frontier missiology? What kind of imaginative missiological discernment is required to overcome barriers to Jesus in frontier contexts? Ideally, that innovation should emerge among followers of Jesus in these very contexts. It is they who must daily navigate complex ethnolinguistic and socioreligious frontiers. And it is they who feel the barriers created by our current language, terminology, and models of mission. They know when our underlying mission paradigms do not resonate properly in frontier contexts. These barriers require a deeper reimagining of frontier mission.[1]

Since language both reflects and shapes the ways we see, our commonly used terms may restrict our missiological imagination and thereby hinder our discernment of new paradigms and models of mission. The innovative response needed here is not only new language and terms that better express the missiological nuances of frontier mission, but also new lenses for seeing, hearing, and discerning where the Spirit is leading. New language and new lenses will be much more perceptive if derived from national believers, themselves members of emerging Jesus movements.

Our team in the Winter Launch Lab prefers to speak of "walking alongside" followers of Jesus in frontier contexts. From the outset we must maintain a posture of humility and deference, working with experienced field practitioners who already have long-standing relationships of trust with new movements. As alongsiders we are then able to introduce a participatory process for discerning innovative ways of overcoming barriers to Jesus. By innovation in mission we mean, "the creation of sustainable new solutions to the problems faced in discerning, proclaiming, and living out God's good news for individual persons, societies, and creation."[2] Applied to frontier contexts, that means we are seeking sustainable transformation in the ways we speak, think, imagine, and act with God in order to better express Jesus' gospel in the world. Our goal

through this effort is to encourage sustainable innovation in mission praxis among Jesus movements as they follow the Holy Spirit and cross barriers to Jesus. My intention is to help us explore the ways we might both listen and learn from frontier movements who are discerning the Spirit's leading within altogether different linguistic, social, and theological imaginations. In the following sections, I will detail our emerging model of social innovation in mission, share some of the benefits and challenges of intercultural approaches to discerning mission innovation, and point us toward possibilities for catalyzing innovative discernment by coming alongside movements to Jesus.

While particular attention is given to the potential contributions of incarnational believers who choose to remain as socioreligious insiders, I do not intend to limit the scope of God's blessing to any one type of movement to Jesus.[3] This is not only a theological commitment to encourage what God may choose to bless, but a recognition that the socioreligious fabric of a given context may have significant ramifications for the particular expression of movement dynamics.[4] I am presenting an approach to missiological innovation that embraces this complexity and values the contributions of diverse perspectives. This is fitting as we seek to discern innovative ways forward to overcome barriers to Jesus in frontier mission.

## A Participatory Model for Missiological Innovation

The emerging field of social innovation is replete with various methods and tools for addressing complex social problems. From those options, we have chosen the U-process, developed over time by C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and others, and theologically adapted it for use in missiologically generative gatherings.[5] This U-process, as presented in *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, is designed to lead a group of stakeholders—those with a compelling interest in the outcome—through a change process using tools from systems thinking and design thinking to prototype sustainable social innovation.

This U-process is named for the "U-shaped movement" it leads participants through. First, in the "co-initiation" phase, participants gather shared intentions and understandings around a complex problem. Then, moving down the left-hand side of the U, the "co-sensing" phase focuses on letting go of the urge to jump to solutions. Instead, participants focus on observing the complexities of the system through research and learning experiences aimed at deep understanding of the problem. Then, a picture of the complex whole develops once the group reaches the bottom of the U. It is here that the

practice of "presencing" is introduced—a transitional space where a sense of purpose and vision for future initiatives can emerge. Finally, the movement up the right side of the U happens through a process of "co-creating" new ways forward, using tools of design thinking such as ideation and iterative prototyping. The entire process is designed to help groups of people inductively process together and shift the ways they listen and converse. When successful, we have found disparate groups moving away from patterns of listening with confirmation bias toward a posture of openness to the perspectives of many different participants and stakeholders.[6] This shift can have dramatic results in even a few days with generative dialogue taking place around emerging possibilities. It changes the relational patterns of the system.

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### Complexity, Social Innovation, and Mission:

Complex social problems such as global sex and labor trafficking result from the interplay of many actors in a given social system. In this social context, the overall behavior of the complex system is emergent and cannot be understood simply by looking at its individual parts. This means there are no best practices or go-to answers that fully address these problems. You cannot simply take apart the engine and fix the malfunctioning part—the causes and effects are all interconnected. Instead, progress on a complex social problem is a matter of helping the whole system to function in healthier ways.[7]

Social innovation is an approach to making progress on complex social problems by "getting the system in the room" in the form of a diverse set of stakeholders. By seeing the system from many angles and beginning to alter the relationships between different parts of the system, there is possibility for new ways forward to emerge. Then, instead of traditional modes of strategic planning, a better approach for addressing a complex problem is to develop a portfolio of prototype initiatives aimed at leveraging specific parts of the system for maximum influence.

In the context of mission, many of the intractable problems and barriers to Jesus we face are also complex social problems, created by patterns of relationships that are established in the paradigms and practices of the Western missions enterprise. Other problems are barriers in frontier contexts which also arise from complex social dynamics, rooted deep in the histories of peoples, places, and cultures. Where current approaches are not working, or worse yet, are causing harm due to unhealthy Western models, social innovation methods may help us discern new ways forward.

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There are three key postures for making this shift toward emerging possibilities: an open mind, an open heart, and an open will. These postures of humility enable deeper understanding and empathy, and they allow participants together to embrace alternative ways forward. Briefly summarized, an *open mind* will suspend patterns of judgment and remain open to observing new and contradictory data. An *open heart* refers to a posture of empathy that redirects our perspectives from ourselves to other stakeholders impacted by the complex problem being addressed. Finally, an *open will* enables us to let go of control and begin to identify how our own deeper sense of vocation connects us to emerging inspiration for the future.[8] When combined, these three postures help participants access the kind of creativity found only through deeper authenticity and connection with themselves, and with one another, as they face a complex social problem.

Read through a missiological lens, we have adapted the U-process to function as a process of creative spiritual discernment. We acknowledge that Theory U presents a Western process that could run the danger of reducing what should be inherently relational to a linear process aimed at efficient results. However, while the U-process still forms the backbone, we have drawn significantly from Ruth Haley Barton's model of group spiritual discernment to form a contemplative and Spirit-sensitive approach to decision-making.[9] For us, discernment of innovative ways forward in mission is about the process of transformation as God shifts our ministry paradigms, focuses our vision, and calls us into new expressions of his kingdom we might not have imagined before. In other words, we are not only seeking new ideas, but expect that God will reshape us in the process. God's transformative work in our individual and communal lives is rarely linear and it does not fit Western standards of efficiency. Instead, our "success" looks like healthy relationships and faithfulness to where the collaborative community feels God is calling them. This happens in the context of worshipping and praying communities that are committed to walking together with God and one another.

To better reflect our approach, we have eschewed the original corporate language of the U-process and renamed the three phases: seeking understanding (co-sensing), prayerful reflection (presencing), and discerning new ways forward (co-creating). Additionally, at each stage of the process, the three key postures (open mind, open heart, and open will) contribute toward a further openness to hear the voice of God together and faithfully follow the leading of Jesus.

For us, an open mind is about suspending preconceived ideas to make space for God to show us something new. It is reflected in prayer for God to give us grace to see, hear, and understand afresh what he is doing in our midst.[10] An open heart is about empathy, not only for other human perspectives, but also to consider God's perspective through prayer and reflection on scripture. We encourage discernment through both affective sensing and cognitive theological reflection, allowing us to embrace many spiritual streams and ways that people experience God's direction.[11] Both an open mind and open heart play an important role in shaping the seeking understanding (co-sensing) phase of the U-process. They help participants seek understanding of many perspectives as they draw together insights from research, theological reflection, and prayer.

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Then, particularly in the "prayerful reflection (presencing) phase,"—that turning point at the bottom part of the U— an open will is reflected in honestly coming before God, asking him to lead us toward new expressions of his blessing in the world. This means *choosing* faithfulness and trust when there are personal or organizational costs involved in seeking systemic change. Finally, the "discerning new ways forward (co-creation) phase" focuses on participants creatively imagining fresh possibilities to explore through the inspiration of the Spirit. All three postures remain vital as participants brainstorm and prayerfully discern the most promising initiatives to pursue together. Open minds, hearts, and wills help generate both the space for creativity and the relational trust necessary to pursue disruptive change— whether this change be shifts within Western missions, or new approaches to address barriers to Jesus in frontier contexts. This theoretical process has been applied in various situations, and we've gained some compelling insights about social innovation in mission.

### *Learning through Iteration: Exploring Categories of Social Innovation in Mission*

This Theory U approach to creating new and sustainable innovations coupled with prayerful discernment can be applied in many different formats and to a range of complex problems and barriers to following Jesus. To begin, the Winter Launch Lab formed innovation discernment gatherings. These initiatives were aimed at developing a portfolio of

innovative prototypes around particular problems in mission. These collaborative gatherings, aimed at ongoing feedback, learning, and improvement, were themselves a prototype that provided us further insight into the dynamics of group discernment and intercultural innovation. Throughout this process, we have identified a couple of broad categories of social innovation in mission (which I suggest below), each of which has been further defined by the stakeholders and all the contextual complexity of this process.[12] Each category brings its own challenges and potential for addressing complex problems. Each one also presents opportunities for highlighting new language, images, and paradigms to help address barriers to Jesus in frontier contexts. I will outline these categories, share some things we have learned, and point toward an approach for walking alongside Jesus movements as they explore and catalyze innovation in mission.

## Category 1: Problems in Western Missions

The presenting problems in Western missions will include issues of church discipleship, mobilization, training, financing, sending, collaboration, organizational culture, the formation of humble, self-aware mission practitioners, and models of missionary

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### *"Transcending Mission" Innovation Gathering*

In our first iteration of the innovation discernment process, we partnered with Mike Stroope, author of *Transcending Mission* (IVP Academic, 2017) whose argument addresses the present global challenge of using modern mission terminology and identity. We gathered a network of fifteen colleagues and friends representing a wide swath of roles within churches and Western missions organizations. These participants met to discuss the question, "How can we work together in specific and tangible ways to facilitate a transformation of the assumptions and practices of the Western missions industry so to better engage in healthy global witness?"[13]

To begin the co-sensing phase, participants interviewed each other and then drew symbolic pictures to represent how they viewed the system of Western missions. From these first drawings it was clear that participants perceived something was amiss. One drawing that stuck with me portrayed money driving the "mission bus," with power and control among other notable passengers that perpetuated and justified the existing system. The artist questioned if we should abandon this bus altogether. Another image showed the missions industry as a large ship, representing large organizations that are quite organized, but inflexible in their direction. It could send out small ships and rafts, but was it enough to respond to the rapid change needed? Yet another showed missions as a machine that receives humanity as input and produces "holy" Christian people that leave people of other socioreligious backgrounds scratching their heads. It appeared the "missions machine" produces something altogether foreign and disconnected from society. These imaginative drawings captured in simple form much of the insight that would emerge in richer detail through the rest of the innovation discernment process.

After presenting their drawings, participants called and interviewed an outside stakeholder and leader in the Western missions enterprise to gather broader perspectives on the current functions of the system. These interviews were developed into personas that reflected perceived commonalities among stakeholders in similar roles. Next, participants listened to recorded interviews of Majority world voices and reflected on how those perspectives compared with the Western perspectives they already heard. Then, through a process of prayer and reflection on scripture, they listened to what God might be saying to the Western missions industry: what might God be celebrating, mourning, or calling us to repent of, in identification with Western missions as a whole? Finally, the co-sensing phase was wrapped up after a group analysis of emerging problems in Western missions (power and money, the influence of theology, the church and discipleship, need for Majority world voices, and the shaping and guiding power of strategy and tradition).

The "presencing" phase began at a second gathering with a time of personal journaling and reflection on the ways their own vocations intersected with the group's emerging understanding of the problem. Then, we asked participants to imagine new ways forward through a creative and prayerful process. This culminated in another set of drawings, this time picturing an ideal future of missions that expresses God's kingdom. This prayerful pause served as a launchpad for co-creating and together brainstorming new ways forward in several areas of mission innovation. The best ideas were presented by the group as possible prototypes. The primary prototype from this innovation discernment process was the encapsulation of our themes and suggestions into a "confession and invitation" that addressed several problematic areas of Western missions.[14] Two of these themes were: (1) the need to fully empower, honor, and learn from Majority world voices at every level and space of Western missions, and (2) a corollary need to address the culture and power of Western missions agencies and cross-cultural workers. Plans were made to propagate the ideas of the confession through grassroots word of mouth, conference presentations, and online invitations to sign the confession. As a proper prototype, these steps will yield feedback from which the gathering participants can continue to learn and take next steps.

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witness, disciple making, and church planting. In this broad category, it is the dysfunctional patterns and systemic habits of Western missions that have created Christian barriers to Jesus.[15] Accordingly, Westerners have the station and authority to begin addressing these problems, but the contributions of Majority world voices are essential to identifying issues and providing correctives.[16] Additionally, this emerging missiological insight from frontier contexts will point toward new innovative initiatives to address further implications in Western models of mission training and mobilization.[17]

## Category 2: Majority World Partnership

As a method for addressing complex problems, social innovation emphasizes learning from the perspectives of a diverse set of stakeholders. Accordingly, there is clear potential for using this approach to address problems in world mission in partnership with the Majority world, whether that is with established churches in Latin America, Africa, or Asia, or in partnership with emerging movements, whether church planting, disciple multiplication, or "insider" in orientation.[18] In each of these collaborative contexts, it is vital that Westerners embrace a humble posture to learn from the creative expression and discernment of Majority world Christians and followers of Jesus.

Witness a conversation from one of our intercultural gatherings that exemplifies this need for Westerners to humbly learn from the Majority world. At one point in the innovation discernment process, while several small groups were discussing possible prototype initiatives they could pursue together, one participant from East Africa spoke up and said, "You Westerners talk about including Majority world people until it comes time to make a decision. Then you don't listen to us." While he and a few other Majority world participants had expressed the need for a more *relational* focus to any new initiatives, a couple Westerners in the group continued their *programmatic* course of action without any real discernment or self-awareness. This is certainly not an isolated incident. It demonstrated the significant need for humble, self-aware practitioners who are able to listen and make space for the full participation of voices from the Majority world.

The formation of self-aware practitioners is especially crucial for empowering new followers of Jesus who seek to maintain their socioreligious identity. In particular, there is a need for humble "alongsiders," mature believers from another people or culture who are able to walk alongside emerging movements to Jesus. They neither control the new believers, nor direct the movement's leaders as they navigate appropriate ways of following Jesus inside their socioreligious contexts.[19] Accordingly, for the purposes of learning in partnership with frontier voices, we have begun working on facilitating social

innovation in mission by bringing together experienced Christian alongsiders with the leadership of followers of Jesus who are still socioreligious insiders. Catalyzing innovation *under* insider leadership does present many new challenges; but, there is the possibility of drawing out new language, images, and paradigms as Western alongsiders learn from insiders' alternative perspectives, their current cultural practices, and their inclinations. While insiders offer greater understanding of the theological and social imagination of their people—and, therefore, drive the discernment process—Western alongsiders can reciprocate and contribute prototypes related to the formation of cross-cultural witnesses (be they Westerners or not) as fresh missiological insights emerge in the group.

It's evident that this collaboration of insiders and alongsiders around a common goal might help frontier peoples follow Jesus while avoiding the harm caused by inappropriate Western models of mission. This partnership can generate a portfolio of prototypes as they deliberate and coordinate their response to different issues. But, while there are these collaborative possibilities that build on the strengths of insider leadership, there are also real challenges to be faced by having such a mixed group. Some of these challenges emerged in an innovation discernment gathering focused on the Hindu context.

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### Strengths and Challenges of Intercultural Social Innovation:

*Reflections on a Hindu-focused Innovation Gathering*
We convened a Hindu-focused gathering around the shared desire to discern new ways forward that might result in more *savarna* (or forward caste) Hindus following Jesus. The primary concern was to discern how this could be realized while causing minimal harm to the socioreligious context. The complexity of this challenge seemed to warrant the process we had constructed through the use of Theory U. Again, our objective required that we focus on a Western mission problem (our assumptions about a Hindu context of ministry) and that we include voices from that socioreligious

world. Therefore, the group represented three constituencies: a majority of Americans with experience and formation as alongsiders, a few Indian "Christians" from established Indian churches, and some "Hindu followers of Jesus." The leaders who guided the entire experience were two Hindu (insider) followers of Jesus and one American alongsider, weighting decisions towards an insider sensibility.

The initial format of the innovation discernment process included a panel of four Hindu followers of Jesus who shared their own stories of coming to Christ. This included the responses of their families, how they navigated Hindu and Christian identities over time, and ways they each experienced social dysfunction and inappropriate harm from missionaries, Indian churches, and the application of Western models of evangelism and discipleship.[20] In the group activity that followed, we asked participants to reflect on these stories and identify positive examples of applied wisdom or the negative reinforcement of barriers to Jesus. Their responses included advice about how to behave as an alongsider in Hindu contexts, and, conversely, how systemic thinking, training, and support methods perpetuate values and goals that result in inappropriate harm for Hindus who choose to follow Jesus.[21]

In particular, the (insider) Hindu followers of Jesus expressed deep concern with the harm caused by agenda-based relationships, duplicitous missionary identities, and styles of personal evangelism. Instead of methods focusing on witnessing to individuals, they pointed to the need to think of God's transformative love for the whole village. It is their conviction that by living rightly in sight of the broader community, the whole community will be blessed. As part of the co-sensing phase of the U-process, these stories personified the need for new paradigms in mission. The following phases of our innovation process then moved toward prayerful reflection, to a presencing phase in which we began to discern new ways forward, and then together into a co-creation phase. This included an engaging series of conversations revealing ways that the perspectives and practices of incarnational believers could help shape group discernment.

## Strengths of Discerning with Insiders

The primary aim for this approach to alongsider/insider partnership was not merely to surface new language, images, and terms, but that alongsiders might begin to discern God's leading through the linguistic, cultural and theological lenses of their insider partners. While this Hindu oriented gathering was

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not focused specifically on developing new language or images, it did surface an alternative missiological lens—a certain methodological approach—for discerning new ways forward.[22]

This alternative lens, shaped by insider approaches to following Jesus, was most clearly represented in a rephrasing of the original problem statement developed during the process. The group reframed their shared focus as, "encouraging and living out *bhakti* (devotion) toward *Muktinath* (the Lord of salvation)."[23] Bhakti, defined most simplistically as "devotion" in English, carries a deeper set of sensibilities and imaginative content in this socioreligious context. It draws from a different set of practices, narratives, images, and paradigms for understanding and following Jesus. Specifically, it draws on a Hindu social and theological imagination for what it means to be devoted to a Hindu god, or for those following Jesus as *Yesu bhaktas,* as devotees of Jesus.
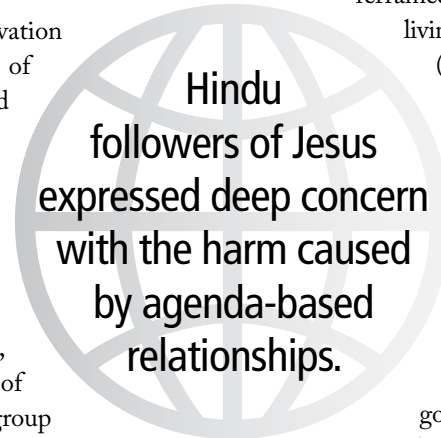
### A Short Excursus into Charles Taylor and James K. A. Smith

Allow me to step out of this Hindu context for a moment and draw on Charles Taylor's study of our Western secular society. I believe his conceptualization of what he terms a "social imaginary" is helpful in understanding the way bhakti was discussed in this Hindu-focused gathering. Taylor wants to explain how a shared social imagination carries precognitive understandings (like bhakti in our case). Since a social imaginary is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in *images, stories, legends,* etc."[24] Furthermore, "the social imaginary is that *common understanding which makes possible common practices,* and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[25] In the Hindu context, common understandings of bhakti are expressed in stories and songs that give background and context for shared practices of devotion that then resonate within this shared social imaginary. But this relationship between shared imagination and practices goes both ways: "If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice which largely carries the understanding.[26] That is, without any theoretical articulation, without actually thinking about it, practices draw us as participants into shared images, stories, and legends.

Allow me one more step away from our Hindu consideration to cite James K. A. Smith, who in his *Desiring the Kingdom* builds on Taylor's conception of the social imaginary. Smith, like Taylor, is speaking to our Western socioreligious orientations, identifying the significance of our precognitive and pre-reflective understandings of the world and how

they operate below levels of thinking and believing. Our imaginaries shape how we "imagine the world before we even think about it."[27] Importantly, this affective level of the imaginary includes our vision of the good life and consequently shapes what we love—what we are devoted to. So, Smith is suggesting that our imaginary, embodied in shared practices, has greater influence than our theoretical worldview in forming us into particular kinds of people.

Smith turns to the practices and messaging of a shopping mall to capture this reciprocal influence of worldview and practice in a social imaginary. He asks, "What story is embedded in its practices? What does it envision as the good life? What is the shape of the mall's worship? What kind of people does it want us to become? What does the mall want us to love?"[28] Smith then turns to how Christian practices of worship form us differently into who we are becoming and what we love. Likewise, in this Hindu context, the participants reflected on *Yesu bhakta* (insider) devotion to Jesus and vision for the good life.[29] We were discussing a social imaginary, one that needed to be appreciated for how it nuanced the formation of followers of Jesus and how they will see and love God.

This recognition is critical for any social innovation in mission. In this Hindu-focused setting, we understood that a particular kind of people is being formed by biblical and cultural narratives of love and devotion to God. Initially, we did not want to limit the social imaginaries and thereby reduce our creativity. We expected God's surprising leadership, that he may draw us out of our current missiological paradigms. So, the devotional understanding of bhakti was identified and explored, and we allowed this particular imaginary to shape our discernment and the potential limits of what we could imagine as possible.

As part of the innovative discernment process, the group wanted to invoke the deeper social imaginary of bhakti by participating in some of the practices that carry and embody this imaginary. We opened the Hindu-focused gathering with a *satsang* (group devotional event) and then each day with *bhajans*—devotional worship songs from the Hindu tradition that are dedicated to Jesus. The narratives, images, and deeper connotations associated with bhakti are not the same as Christian expressions of discipleship—especially not American evangelical ones. Consequently, worshiping Jesus together through these Hindu devotional practices helps to decentralize Western Christian paradigms of missiological thought from their place of assumed normativity. As is true of social imaginaries, it is not only the worship forms that are different. The practices also recall, at the level of the imagination, differing lenses for loving Jesus. To the extent that participants have been shaped by or resonate with Hindu

bhakti toward Muktinath (the Lord of salvation), they will be more open to discerning God's leading through that alternative imaginary. Thus, while the gathering participants were primarily alongsiders, the innovation discernment process was aimed at drawing out the theological and social imagination of the participating Hindu devotees of Jesus, specifically as this devotional prayer helped us imagine emergent paradigms—and the transformation of current mission practice required within Hindu contexts. Restated, this gathering's aim was missiological discernment through the use of the social imaginary, and the application of that imaginative lens to Hindu Yesu bhakta storying and leadership. Several potential ways forward emerged through the participants' discussions, prayerful reflection, and brainstorming. The group considered Hindu forms of social space for practicing bhakti toward Jesus in ways that might avoid extraction evangelism. Some participants explored possibilities for improving training of Westerners while others advocated the need for quality bhajans and poetry for Jesus devotees. Finally, one subgroup made plans for the curation of resources appropriate for Hindu devotees of Jesus, resulting in the creation and release of a phone app.

## Challenges in Intercultural Social Innovation

Through the particular Hindu gathering, we also discovered some of the unique challenges involved in social innovation when attempted by a mixed group of alongsiders and insiders. One intercultural dynamic that can emerge is felt pain or sensitivity around any topic.[30] Since the Hindu gathering was partially focused on understanding the unnecessary harm caused among Hindu followers of Jesus by Western expressions of Christianity, there was a greater need from the start to build trust between the Hindu background and Christian background participants. This trust was required as we faced the tension of culturally different values, leadership, group dynamics, and communication styles. There is no doubt we need to grow in understanding how this kind of innovative gathering can face cultural differences and generative social innovation in mission.

On top of the normal challenges of group innovation in a limited time frame, making creative space for ideas to emerge in an intercultural group requires a strong cultural intelligence. It's a skill needed in navigating intercultural communication, ideation, decision-making, and discernment. One starting point for conceptualizing the different aspects which challenge a culturally diverse group are Hofstede's six dimensions of organizational culture. Briefly listed, these dimensions are power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint.[31] While Hofstede's approach has drawn some criticism, these categories have

shaped further research around the relationship between culture and innovation.[32] For example, studies have consistently found that greater power distance and uncertainty avoidance have a negative effect on innovation, while individualism has a positive effect. In other words, innovation is hindered by management styles emphasizing hierarchy and unequal power, as well as organizational cultures that focus on standardization and resist change, whereas greater freedom for individual expression fosters innovation.[33] However, these cultural dimensions are expressed differently through political institutions, societal norms, group dynamics, and individual behavior.[34]

In particular, for this kind of innovation discernment process, we are interested in the ways that differences in these cultural dimensions shape small group dynamics and impact any brainstorming techniques. Studies around individualism and collectivism in idea generation point toward enhanced creativity when individuals in the group value collective goals over personal ones, but, conversely, construe their personal identities as more independent than interdependent.[35] Furthermore, in mixed groups, individuals from a collectivist background are more likely to be aware of contextual clues and will adapt to other group members' low-context style of communication.[36] Thus, it is simplistic to say that individualism generates greater creativity. The reality is that collectivist tendencies toward group goals and the maintaining of relationships also play an integral role in group creativity alongside individual expression and divergent thinking.[37] This nuanced relationship between collectivism and individualism in group dynamics suggests that it is similarly worthwhile to explore the interplay of other cultural dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance in the group ideation process. The design of social innovation and discernment processes for Majority world contexts will benefit from a fuller understanding of these intercultural dynamics.

It is also important in this intercultural social innovation that we define valuable creativity. Simply generating more ideas does not ensure they are better ideas. In fact, in one study comparing the cultural contribution of Canadian (individualist) and Taiwanese (collectivist) participants, the Canadians generated far more ideas in individual and group brainstorming sessions, while the Taiwanese participants generated a higher quality in their ideas (demonstrating greater originality).[38] More important than quantity of ideas is the ability of a group to think in divergent ways and avoid what is called fixation—that "inability of people to break out of a routinized mental set by being fixated on preexisting knowledge."[39] Valuable creativity in mission should be defined in terms of the group's ability to generate divergent ideas for many possible ways forward without getting stuck or fixated on current paradigms and practices in mission.

This kind of divergent thinking is aided by the perspectives of diverse participants in this process of intercultural social innovation. However, as suggested above, cultural differences do complicate group processes. One summary of two studies suggests that, "While deep diversity may improve divergent processes in groups, it may also hamper groups' ability to converge around creative ideas."[40] It is more difficult for diverse groups to flesh out and integrate their ideas, so if they are forced to choose one outcome, this focus may counteract the benefit of more divergent thinking.[41] That said, in the context of social innovation in mission, what matters most is faithful discernment of God's guidance and wisdom. In this case, any added difficulty in arriving at shared understanding due to diverse perspectives is worth the hindrance if it helps us act wisely.

In true alongsider fashion, where there is disagreement between Majority world Christians, incarnational believers (insiders), and Westerners, it will generally be best to pause, listen, and learn from the wisdom of others who may be discerning new ways forward. These may be disruptive forms of innovation that significantly shift our missiology, organizational structures, and practices. This type of innovation in mission, and particularly frontier mission, emerges through learning to see things differently—by expanding our imaginations through an interface with other social imaginaries. To help us imagine fresh possibilities in mission, we may benefit from further exploration into another category of social innovation.

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### Alongsiding Innovation: Possibilities for Learning with Movements

Alongsiding innovation is the process of designing, together with incarnational believers, a completely recontextualized innovation discernment process, which they will later facilitate in gatherings composed entirely of their own movement or network.[42] To arrive at that intended outcome, there must be clear buy-in from movement leadership to shape the process for their context. If we, as the Winter Launch Lab, were to arrive with a prepackaged process that did not seem helpful, they would certainly not use it. Worse still, if they did use

a process based on our outside reading of their context, it could easily do harm to the movement—particularly in sensitive and religiously restrictive locations. Since we are not those who will bear the consequences, we should exercise caution and cultivate a reticence. Consequently, we should enter the scene with open hands to allow leadership of these movements to Jesus to define the language and the terms: for describing this entire discernment process; for the goals and problems they wish to prayerfully address; and for how the innovation process is shaped to better fit their context. Our desire is to develop a very malleable and reproducible approach to social innovation aimed at overcoming barriers to Christward movements in frontier contexts.

Our gatherings in these alongsider settings introduce a basic outline of the innovation discernment process, and then proceed to the study of scripture, a reflection on the actual context, and then a contextualization of helpful practices. Let's look at these four elements more closely. First, we introduce the basic steps and postures of the U-process (co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, and co-creating) using appropriate language (which has been discussed and translated with movement leadership ahead of any gathering). Next, and for each step (or new posture), we read scripture inductively with insider movement leadership, studying large sections of the Gospels and Acts, and facilitate a reciprocity between these passages and the innovation discernment process. We do have some suggestions for scriptural connections, such as the posture of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as an example of what we call an "open will." But, we also desire to surface insiders' *scriptural imaginations* and see how they interpret these passages in relationship to the process. Then, in each step of the U-process, we also use the local movement's context—the social and cultural system—as a case study to think more concretely about issues. This means they pick a real barrier or challenge the movement would like to research, understand, and possibly address through new initiatives. This gives us insight into insider understandings of barriers and how they feel these challenges should be addressed. One example might be picking another people group in the movement's region and asking God for the wisdom to understand the particular barriers or boundaries keeping that people group from understanding the gospel. This would then lead to the next question: How can the existing movement to Jesus extend into that people group?

Finally, for each step we ask how they would organize activities or processes to reach the desired ends. For example, when we reach the presencing phase we ask participants to reflect on their own cultural and religious practices and how they make significant personal and leadership decisions in the movement. By encouraging storytelling, and by asking them to reflect on their own cultural and religious practices, we hope to exegete the significance of those practices and surface deeper narratives, images, and associated terms.

In the immediate context, the benefit of this reflection is primarily for insider leadership to find helpful language and ways of recontextualizing the process. However, it can simultaneously provide us as alongsiders with insight into these practices and their corollary social imaginary, that precognitive imagining of theological and social reality. As James K. A. Smith suggests, "By focusing on social imaginaries, the radar of cultural critique is calibrated to focus on exegeting practices, not just waiting for the blips of ideas to show up on the screen."[43] Since affective shifts of allegiance and behavior in movements to Jesus may often precede their ability to formulate belief at a cognitive level, a shift toward focusing on the precognitive interplay of shared imagination and practices provides the unique lenses through which insider movements discern their missiological vision.[44] Specifically, it is precisely because insider movements have alternative socioreligious practices (and associated imaginaries) that they may bring fresh missiological insight—certainly for their own contexts—but also to reveal the missing nuances in our language and imagination as Christians. These alternative ways of speaking and seeing could open up new avenues for imagining models and structures in frontier mission.

## Conclusion

Our hope, as we "alongside" innovation in frontier contexts, is that those in Jesus movements will discern the movement of the Spirit in fresh and theologically imaginative ways that lead toward wisdom to overcome boundaries and challenges as they see them. In the process, fresh language, terms, and images may emerge that express Jesus' gospel in ways that more deeply resonate in frontier contexts. And where our own missiological imaginations are limited, followers of Jesus remaining inside Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other socioreligious contexts may offer creative ways forward for faithfully following Jesus. As we humbly come alongside and under their leadership, share in their socioreligious practices, and begin to catch a glimpse of God's activity in the world through missiological lenses shaped by their imaginations, those of us from the West might start to see frontier mission from a new perspective. In short, we will best reimagine frontier mission by learning from frontier voices and prayerfully discerning new ways forward with them. Toward these ends, participatory social innovation and discernment methods will help foster the creative and collaborative space needed to listen, learn, and reimagine current paradigms and models for overcoming barriers to Jesus in frontier mission. **IJFM**

## *Endnotes*

1 Brad Gill, "Reimagining Frontier Mission: When Terminology Dulls the Imagination," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 111-118.

2 Paul Dzubinski, "Innovation and Startup Mentality in Mission," *Lausanne Movement* (blog), August 17, 2017, https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2017-09/innovation-startup-mentality-mission.

3 I use the term "socioreligious insider" to specify those believers in Jesus who have turned to Christ and have maintained their socioreligious identity among their original community, whether it be Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or other religious worlds, and have resisted any automatic identification that binds them to a Christian community that stands in socioreligious opposition. While the term "insider" unfortunately highlights the social identity and location of believers over any faith commitments, I use it to highlight ways that the social location of believers inside their original communities forms them to follow and love Jesus in particular ways that may be illuminating.

4 Christian J. Anderson, "Navigating the Constraints of the Ummah: A Comparison of Christ Movements in Iran and Bangladesh," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 117-125.

5 C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges : The Social Technology of Presencing,* Second edition (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016).

6 Scharmer, *Theory U,* 10–13.

7 For an introduction to systems thinking and modeling of social problems, see David Peter Stroh, *Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015).

8 Scharmer, *Theory U,* 40–44.

9 Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). Barton first describes the formation of communities for discernment; then she walks readers through the steps of a group discernment process in chapters 9–11.

10 In Mark 8:14–21 Jesus emphasizes the need for his disciples to properly see and understand. For our theological adaptation of the U-process these verses highlight that familiarity with a topic, particularly a complex one, does not mean we have properly seen or discerned what God is saying or doing in that context.

11 We draw upon the spiritual streams outlined by Richard Foster's organization Renovaré ("The Six Streams," https://renovare.org/about/ideas/the-six-streams) as well as Gary L. Thomas' identification of nine pathways for people to love God in *Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

12 Another way to frame categories of innovation in mission is into products, services, processes, and organizations (Paul Dzubinski, "Innovation and Startup Mentality in Mission."). More specific areas for practical innovation in mission are also identified in James W. Reapsome, *Innovation in Mission: Insights into Practical Innovations Creating Kingdom Impact* (Tyrone, GA : Authentic Pub., 2007).

13 Stroope's work in *Transcending Mission* served as a conversation starter, highlighting the need for humble "pilgrim witnesses." Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 355–385.

14 Michael W. Stroope, "Confession and Invitation," (March 6, 2019), https://medium.com/@mikestroope/confession-and-invitation-a7db8f5b88b3.

15 Paul Pennington, in *Christian Barriers to Jesus,* highlights many of the ways that Christianity, the church, and its associated practices and theology of mission are functionally barriers to Hindus following Jesus. *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishers, 2017).

16 Majority world voices that are highly influenced by Western Christianity or are otherwise culturally separate from their surrounding context may not offer as insightful correctives as those who are following Jesus in highly contextual ways.

17 Where new paradigms and models of mission begin to emerge in the frontiers there will be significant implications for changing Western approaches to mission mobilization, training, ministry, etc.

18 In addition to partnership with the West, Majority world leaders could also implement these social innovation and discernment methods in their own contexts or with a globally diverse team.

19 For an in-depth description of alongsiders and their roles, see John Travis and Anna Travis, "Roles of 'Alongsiders' in Insider Movements: Contemporary Examples and Biblical Reflections," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2013); and H. L. Richard, "Cultivating Reticence: The Supportive Role of the Alongsider in Hindu Ministry," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2015).

20 To describe harm, the Hindu insider participants referred to several common experiences. First, they felt used by agenda-driven missionaries who valued missional task over authentic relationships. They also experienced the pain of disrupted relationships with their families and communities as they were led into Western expressions of Christian discipleship. Finally, exacerbating the situation, they found that churches were unwilling or unable to fulfill the deep Hindu cultural role of community to care for one another.

21 While all believers must count the cost of carrying their cross and following Jesus, the sometimes irreparable harm that comes from having to become Western is truly not a requirement for following Jesus in the Hindu world.

22 New language was not the focus, but it was clear that Western missionaries' continued use of Christian and evangelical language, which carries with it syncretistic assumptions, is problematic. Also, due to prior experience and conversations, basic concepts and terminology were already held in common between Hindus and alongsiders.

23 The group's complete focus statement also included these subpoints: 1) leading to humility and selflessness in us and others, 2) enabling restored and strengthened relationships in *savarna* Hindu families and societies, all while, 3) doing minimal harm.

24 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 1st Edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 171–172.

25 Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 172.

26 Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 173.

27 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation,* vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 66.

28 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 95.

29 To be clear, I am applying the concept of a social imaginary in hindsight to the Hindu gathering to clarify how the group's discussions of *bhakti* and experience of related worship practices functioned to shape the group's discernment together and suggestions for possible ways forward. We did not directly ask Smith's questions, but the group's reflections surfaced an understanding of bhakti that provides insights that would correspond to several of those listed.

30 In any Majority world and Western intercultural gathering there may also be frustration from past experiences where Westerners assumed control and power or valued information and task over relationships.

31 Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind,* Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2010).

32 Busse discusses scholarly dismissal of Hofstede's fifth category (short-term orientation) and criticism of Hofstede's equation of cultures and nations ("Is Culture Driving Innovation? A Multi-National Quantitative Analysis," *Human Systems Management* 33 [January 2014]: 91–98.) Kumar provides a broad literature review and categorizes studies around innovation and culture into six areas: innovation characteristics, adoption of/propensity to adopt innovations, geographical innovations (region-specific variations and cross-national differences of the diffusion process), market characteristics, learning effect, and organizational functions. Kumar notes that Hofstede's dimensions of cultural values have shaped further research in several of these fields (propensity to adopt innovations, market characteristics, and organizational functions are specifically mentioned). V. Kumar, "Understanding Cultural Differences in Innovation: A Conceptual Framework and Future Research Directions," *Journal of International Marketing* 22, no. 3 (2014): 1–29.

33 Carsten Deckert and Rahel M. Schomaker, "Cultural Impacts on National Innovativeness: Not Every Cultural Dimension Is Equal," *Cross-Cultural Research* 53, no. 2 (April 1, 2019): 192–194.

34 Deckert and Schomaker, "Cultural Impacts on National Innovativeness," 207–208. It may be worth exploring how these cultural dimensions of innovation are expressed in social movements, with implications for movements to Jesus.

35 Hoon-Seok Choi et al., "Collectivistic Independence Promotes Group Creativity by Reducing Idea Fixation," *Small Group Research* 50, no. 3 (June 1, 2019): 381–407; Hoon-Seok Choi and Young-Jae Yoon, "Collectivistic Values and an Independent Mindset Jointly Promote Group Creativity: Further Evidence for a Synergy Model," *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 22, no. 4 (December 2018): 236–248; Hoon-Seok Choi et al., "The Joint Impact of Collectivistic Value Orientation and Independent Self-Representation on Group Creativity," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 37–56. Complicating matters further, while individualistic expression as a group norm engenders creativity, group pressure to conform to that norm has only been found to increase divergent thinking among less creative people. Jack Goncalo and Michelle Duguid, "Follow the Crowd in a New Direction: When Conformity Pressure Facilitates Group Creativity (And When It Does Not)," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 118 (May 2012), electronic version.

36 The contextual malleability of communication style is seen in one study where individuals from Chinese high-context communication cultures were found more likely to be aware of contextual cues and conform to low-context styles of communication. Hao-Chuan Wang, Susan R. Fussell, and Leslie D. Setlock, "Cultural Difference and Adaptation of Communication Styles in Computer-Mediated Group Brainstorming," Proceedings of CHI 2009 (New York: ACM press, 2009): 669–678.

37 Individual expression alone can easily disrupt a group brainstorming process through even a few individuals who are not attentive to the group goal or honoring relationships at the table.

38 Gad Saad, Mark Cleveland, and Louis Ho, "Individualism-Collectivism and the Quantity Versus Quality Dimensions of Individual and Group Creative Performance," *Journal of Business Research* 68, no. 3 (March 2015): 578-586.

39 Choi et al., "Collectivistic Independence Promotes Group Creativity by Reducing Idea Fixation," 383.

40 Sarah Harvey, "A Different Perspective: The Multiple Effects of Deep Level Diversity on Group Creativity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 5 (September 2013), abstract, 822.

41 Harvey, "A Different Perspective," 823.

42 In this section I primarily discuss the particular benefits of alongsiding innovation with insider movements to unpack their social imaginaries which are connected with non-Christian religious practices, but many of the same benefits will apply to learning from the imaginative missiological lenses of other highly contextual frontier Jesus movements.

43 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 133.

44 John Jay Travis, "Insider Movements among Muslims: A Focus on Asia," in *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Communities,* eds. Harley Tallman and John Jay Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 138. Travis suggests that heart allegiance and demonstrated behavior may be a valid expression of the maturity of a movement to Jesus.