

tradition and innovation

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

My wife, Kim, and our daughter, Lauren (especially Lauren) have taught me to appreciate, and even enjoy, theater – particularly musical theater. We like newer shows as well as the classics. A favorite is *Fiddler on the Roof*, set in Russia in 1905. It is the story of Tevye, the father of five daughters, and his effort to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as a changing world envelops their lives. He describes this struggle in the show's opening number:

*Tradition, tradition! Tradition!
Tradition, tradition! Tradition!
Who, day and night, must scramble for a living,
Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers?
And who has the right, as master of the house,
To have the final word at home?
The Papa, the Papa! Tradition!
The Papa, the Papa! Tradition!*

Though Tevye was a Jew, he might as well have been a Baptist! Baptists, who were birthed out of a reaction to what we perceived to be empty traditions, now four hundred years later are as devoted to our traditions as any other group.

Is tradition a bad thing? Absolutely not. As 2 Thessalonians 2:15 charges, “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.”

It's important to distinguish between “tradition” and “traditionalism.” In “The Vindication of Tradition,” Jaroslav Pelikan notes, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

Does that mean we should never make any changes? Absolutely not. I know of few churches that eschew the Internet as a ministry tool, much less shun electricity in their meetinghouse. The history of the church is one of innovation. The challenge is for us to discern the core of our identity and mission (Big T Tradition) and innovate the ways we live out of that core.

Greg Jones, Senior fellow of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity (and former dean of the Duke Divinity School), has coined a term that gets to the heart of this tension: “traditioned innovation.” Jones explains,

In our thinking as well as our living, we are oriented toward our end, our *telos*: bearing witness to the reign of God. That is what compels innovation. But our end is also our beginning, because we are called to bear witness to the redemptive work of Christ who is the Word that created the world. We are the carriers of that which has gone before us so we can bear witness faithfully to the future” (in “Traditioned Innovation,” www.FaithandLeadership.com).

Baptists are well suited to practice traditioned innovation. We are very clear about our core principles: the Lordship of Jesus Christ; the authority of the Scriptures; the priesthood of all believers; the freedom of the local church; religious freedom for all people; cooperation in pursuing God's mission in the world. As free churches, we voluntarily submit to the God who gives these principles, yet we are free from the stale traditionalism of any earthly organization or institution.

This year, CBFNC is exploring the various dimensions of church health. Surely innovation rooted in tradition is one of those dimensions. What might that look like today?

Examples are legion, but let me provide one. First, Ahsoskie, has a long tradition of educated, capable, devoted, professional pastors. For many years, the shape of that kind of pastoral ministry has been full-time and living in the church community. First, Ahsoskie, recently called Trey Gilliam as their pastor. Trey is also a professor at Chowan University in Murfreesboro. Though his class load has been reduced, Trey has not given up teaching in order to assume the pastorate, nor will he move his family from Murfreesboro to Ahsoskie. First, Ahsoskie, for decades one of the leading churches in our state, is being served by a part-time pastor who does not live in Ahsoskie.

To me, this is a great example of traditioned innovation. First's tradition is to be served by an educated, capable, devoted, professional pastor. They are getting that kind of pastor in Trey. But he will also serve God in the world as a university professor. There are some church tasks he will not be able to fulfill, but they can be performed by other staff and laity, illustrating another core value – the priesthood of all believers. As a professor who regularly interfaces with both young people and other scholars, he will bring to his pastoral ministry an array of perspectives and experiences that will enrich his congregation in ways not available to a “traditional” full-time pastor.

We often joke that the seven last words of the church are, “We've never done it that way before.” Maybe we should replace those seven words with these thirteen: “We've done that before but we are learning new ways to do it.” Tevye would have been well served by that shift in thinking. So will North Carolina Cooperative Baptists.

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