

Praise For *Edison Churches*

“Church innovation is hyper-local.” I love this insight by my friend Josh Broward. And he is right. The church of Jesus begins by seeing the neighborhood through the eyes of Jesus, not by an entrepreneur who hijacks a people to fulfill her or his lust for doing something different. These stories give me hope for the church in North America. In my current role, I observe about 1,600 churches in their annual report gatherings. Some of the churches in this book are among these. I admire the pastors who love the people of their communities more than they love the novelty of their ideas. I vote yes for more *Edison Churches*.

Dan Boone
President, Eastern Nazarene College
President, Trevecca Nazarene University

Finally! A book about churches that embrace the counterintuitive truth of the kingdom of God: failure. Ours is a movement built on the most epic failure of all time—a crucified Messiah. Only those courageous communities who follow in this way will discover the breakthroughs of resurrection. It will take *Edison Churches* to light the way.

J.D. Walt
Vice President, Seedbed
Asbury Theological Seminary

Good news: God still works through the agency of the church to proclaim in word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is painfully apparent that the forms and structures that have served the church in the West so well for the past couple centuries are, in many cases, faltering. Most of us are aware that we need new expressions of the church that are true to the gospel as well as relevant to the cultural context. We need new wineskins! That’s why I’m so impressed with *Edison Churches*, which is a well-written, timely, and urgently needed book that offers examples of innovative expressions of the church in a variety of contexts. I highly recommend *Edison Churches* to pastors and lay leaders who are willing to think creatively as they consider the life and witness of the church in new ways.

Ron Benefiel
Center for Pastoral Leadership
Point Loma Nazarene University

You may be offended when you read *Edison Churches*—and that’s not bad. It approaches the very personal experience of longing to do something big and frequently failing. But the authors help us recast our illusionary love affair with success. This book will open your eyes to see the fullness of truly leaning into a radical, risk-taking, edgy posture of being kingdom churches in meaningful and impactful ways.

Kevin Mannoia
Professor of Ministry and Chaplain, Azusa Pacific University
Founder and Chair, Wesleyan Holiness Consortium

In the twenty-first century—and particularly in increasingly post-Christian environments—the church must face the need for innovation. With innovation comes the risk and reality of failure. Simply put, life together as followers of Christ is risky business because of the scandal of a crucified Savior, yet we too often strive in the church for security, strength, and stability. These adjectives do not coincide with the volatile situations in which the gospel is birthed and expressed. *Edison Churches* challenges the church back to its roots—that is, the great risk that following in faith requires. In new times and places, the church as a living organism must break out of stable molds to be a movement that expresses the kingdom anew. This book offers lived examples of how communities of Christ followers are doing just that.

Nell Becker Sweeden
Director, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries
Global Ministry Center for the Church of the Nazarene

If you only take one thought from *Edison Churches*, it should be that failure can be a good thing! The freedom to fail is a vital and necessary ingredient of innovation. Read about the fascinating churches the book describes and see how the willingness to dream, experiment, dare, and—sometimes—fail can be the process God uses to help us discover beautiful new ways of being the church. I will buy *Edison Churches* for every pastor on our district.

Rick Power
District Superintendent
Hawaii-Pacific District, Church of the Nazarene

God is doing a new thing—actually, new *things*. The prime exhibits of this divine novelty are the diverse, provocative, and sometimes plain *weird* new churches that are emerging. *Edison Churches* inspires us to explore fresh and zesty ways to live as Jesus communities in our time.

Thomas Jay Oord
Co-author, *Relational Holiness*
Co-editor, *Renovating Holiness*

It's probably been a while since you read any kind of book that begins with these words: "We need to fail more. Churches need to fail more. Leaders need to fail more." But this one does, and for good reason. We focus too much on leadership and not enough on followership. Followers learn from failure. They grow from it, and they are better for it. But it requires that they follow the right things—or, rather, the right Person. *Edison Churches* is about churches that seek to imitate Christ in all of his servanthood, all of his going to the margins, all of his suffering—in other words, all of the things the world considers *failure*—and, in doing so, proves once again that the call of Christ leads our churches to the true kingdom.

Bruce Barnard
Lead Pastor, Mission New York
Director of Operations, Metro NY District, Church of the Nazarene

Here at last is a book of fundamental information on innovative churches that have risked getting out of their comfort zones with the Edison-like commitment to advance the kingdom of God in their surrounding communities and beyond. In *Edison Churches*, you will find the essence of missional churches and, most importantly, be inspired to participate in God's mission in proactive and innovative ways.

Musung Jung
Assistant Professor of Missiology
Korea Nazarene University

If you have ever pastored a church, then you are more than likely familiar with the phrase "We've never done it like that before." It's the mantra that keeps the status quo strong and those who want to change it at bay. Sadly, innovation in churches can be difficult. Innovation faces opposition from both leaders and followers. *Edison Churches* refreshingly encourages new ways of embracing Christ in an ever-changing world. I was empowered reading the stories of churches that faced the tired mantra and offered something different, something new, something courageous.

Padraic Ingle
Lead Pastor
Faith Community Church of the Nazarene

While guarding the gospel *message*, John Wesley dared to experiment with the *method* in order to reach the neglected and forgotten of eighteenth-century England. The same kind of holy boldness shines through *Edison Churches* in ten compelling, twenty-first-century stories. The lessons these Spirit-led innovators learned will spark fruitful discussion and action in any church that hungers to move from the status quo to God's something better.

Gregory Crofford, PhD
Dean, School of Religion and Christian Ministry
Africa Nazarene University

At a time when there is much evidence of church decline in the West, the authors of *Edison Churches* have pulled together inspiring stories of innovation and breakthrough from churches across the U.S. and Europe. They identify key principles and practices that allow churches to thrive and multiply in ways that defy cultural expectations. This book will encourage, inspire, and motivate you to take risks as you seek to follow Jesus into kingdom breakthrough.

Paul Maconochie
Global Leader, 3D Movements
Former Pastor, St. Thomas Crookes Anglican Church

Edison Churches

Experiments in
Innovation and
Breakthrough

Jesse C. Middendorf
Megan M. Pardue

Greg Arthur
Josh Broward



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Foreword

A NUMBER of years ago I was walking through the ruins of Ephesus, listening to the guide tell us of the remarkable Greek and Roman cultures. The engineering accomplishments were simply amazing—some of their secrets have yet to be unlocked. In a moment of admiration, the guide took a deep breath and said, “If only they had discovered electricity!” The reality is that electricity would have elevated ancient culture to levels unknown.

Throughout history, there are moments and events that will define the future. Thomas Edison spent much of his life exploring electricity and its uses, which ushered in a new era in which everything we had previously taken for granted suddenly changed. Thomas Friedman’s book *Thank You for Being Late* challenges us to think critically about the ever-changing and dynamic world in which we live. Much of the change in our world has to do with the way technology has become a vital link to all of our lives. Technological advances have always had a profound effect upon society. Specifically, Edison’s advances with electricity completely transformed society as we knew it.

In 2017, we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Christian Reformation. Many would ask whether the Reformation would have been possible if not for the invention of the printing press. Suddenly, the Bible could be printed and placed into the hands of many people—and everything changed. Theological treatises and documents spread throughout the land. Even though the printing press brought great change, the pace at which these changes were absorbed into society was actually

rather slow and steady. The printing press was improved and enhanced throughout the centuries, but it was not completely transformed until the digital age. Only in the past fifteen years have printed books, newspapers, and magazines been slowly replaced by digital reading devices. For 500 years, we were able to slowly adapt. Times of change were often followed by a static state in which everyone could adjust and relax until the next change occurred.

We no longer live in that world. According to Friedman, “The rate of technological change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes. Many of us cannot keep pace anymore.” He goes on to say, “Indeed, there is a mismatch between the change in the pace of change and our ability to develop the learning systems, training systems, management systems, social safety nets, and government regulations that would enable citizens to get the most out of these accelerations and cushion their worst impacts.”¹ This is, in effect, the contemporary world of Edison: a new world, rapid change, and ideas that need to interface with the complexities of transformation.

All of these changes have an impact on the church and how we will plant churches and minister in the future. These changes are also why we can’t spend too much time looking back but must keep looking forward. While we used to be able to take time to adjust to change and enjoy the static state, we now must acknowledge and accept that we will remain constantly in motion. Life, work, and ministry will be dynamic, and we must become accustomed to doing our work while we are on the move. Hence, *Edison Churches*.

We are told that enhancing our ability to adapt is “90 percent about ‘optimizing for learning’—applying features that drive technological innovation to our culture and social structures. Every institution, whether it is the patent office, which has improved a lot in recent years, or any other major government regulatory body, has to keep getting more agile—it has to be willing to experiment quickly and learn from mistakes.”² Friedman also tells us, “Universities are now experimenting with turning over their curriculum much faster and more often to keep up with the change in the pace of change—putting a ‘use-by date’ on certain courses.”³ For the church, this means we need to be adaptable in terms of our methodologies, but we also need to remain grounded in eternal truths.

While the world becomes weary from change, the church can become a place of respite. It may be for this very reason that traditional worship

is attractive for some individuals. There is an anchor here that ties us to the past and doesn't feel as if it is ready to spin off the flywheel. We may be surprised to learn that older forms of worship have become appealing to younger people who feel overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change. At the same time, Edison churches take a number of approaches when it comes to contextualizing ministry. Everyone needs to begin thinking like a missionary and adapting to the changing world so the good news of the gospel can continue to transform lives.

Before we jump in and decide we want to adopt a particular model for change, I would suggest a word of caution. We will always have to be talking about change. We have entered a new, dynamic era in which we will no longer be looking to arrive at *the* answer for the church. Instead, we look to our guiding principles to keep us on a path in which we remain faithful as we work within this fluid and dynamic environment. There is something spiritual to be found here. Edison churches must be open to the continual and ongoing movement of God's Holy Spirit. There must be space for the wind to blow. The beauty is that, when everything feels so out of control, we may just discover the peace and comfort that are found in radically trusting God.

Carla Sunberg
General Superintendent
Church of the Nazarene

1

Embracing Failure

WE NEED TO FAIL. Churches need to fail more. Leaders need to fail more. Pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly has, since the 1990s, been hosting what he calls failure parties for scrapped research projects.¹ Edgy design company 5Crowd has a failure party every month—complete with failure high-fives and often wrapping up with a celebratory failure cake!² When venture capitalists assess whether to invest in a new idea, one of the key characteristics they look for is a previous failed startup. They prefer to invest in a leader who has already run a company into the ground.³

Entrepreneurs in one of America's most embattled cities have gathered under the unlikely banner of Fail Detroit. They convene monthly to share their stories of failures and missteps for mutual edification and encouragement.⁴ Fail Faire is a movement of conferences dedicated to cultivating space for people to share their greatest failures. Started by nonprofit Mobile Active and promoted by World Bank, the idea is such a hit that it has been duplicated around the world in places as far flung as Singapore, Kenya, Canada, and California. The simple appeal is a place “where it's okay to talk about failing.”⁵

Best of all, there's an entire publication specifically dedicated to documenting “humankind's boldest missteps.” *Failure* magazine shares stories of spectacular bombs from sports, arts, science, and business. The

editors cheekily explain: “Failure: It’s an option.”⁶ Consulting company Fail Forward boasts their ability to help their clients “fail intelligently,” and they define intelligent failure as “the practice of smart risk taking and maximizing learning.”⁷

Why All the Fuss about Failure?

“Not all failures are created equal,” argues Harvard professor Amy Edmondson. She goes on to explain that there are failures of performance, failures of context, and failures of experiment.⁸ We can learn from all of them, but the third category—failures of experiment—is the gold mine.

“Failure can actually be a huge engine of innovation for an individual or an organization,” explains Baba Shiv of the Stanford Graduate School of Business. “The trick lies in approaching it with the right attitude and harnessing it as a blessing, not a curse.”⁹



**Let’s remove the stigma we’ve attached to
failure and talk about it openly. We can learn
and grow from our failings—but only if
we’re not constantly hiding them.**



Failure is absolutely crucial to breakthrough success. Overcoming longstanding barriers requires creativity, innovation, and experimentation. The key for organizations is to develop cultures that encourage the broad experimentation that is necessary to fumble forward toward successful new models, ideas, and practices.

We are in an era of rapid and discontinuous change. The rapid explosion of technological innovation has caused a chain reaction of exponential change in every facet of human existence. We live in the Disruptive Century, according to *Fortune* magazine editor Alan Murray: “The question for the 21st century is, Who will allow the social and economic disruption that innovation brings? . . . Creative destruction threatens to clear away the business world we are familiar with to make way for one we aren’t. The 21st century will belong to those who embrace that disruption rather than fight it.”¹⁰ In the midst of this shifting landscape of

“creative destruction,” the same old ways of operation are glaringly ineffective. Businesses that don’t innovate are being swept into the dustbins of history. Churches that don’t innovate are not far behind. And yet, innovation involves the nasty reality of failure.

Why Is Failure So Hard?

In 2011, *Harvard Business Review* dedicated an entire issue to failure. The editors explain: “Failure. We’re hypocrites about it. Go online, and you’ll find scores of pleasant aphorisms celebrating the inevitability of failure and the importance of learning from it. But in real life . . . failure is anathema. We’re afraid of it. We avoid it. We penalize it. It’s time for managers to get past platitudes and confront the F-word taboo.”¹¹

Let’s be honest. Most of us hate failure. We hate to see our projects bite the dust. It cuts deep into our self-esteem and sense of identity. It can weaken our leadership capital and even threaten our careers. But the reality is that failure is inevitable. Everybody fails sometimes. For lots of reasons, in lots of ways, in many contexts, with and without fault, sometimes our best efforts just aren’t enough. Let’s remove the stigma we’ve attached to failure and talk about it openly. We can learn and grow from our failings—but only if we’re not constantly hiding them.

In this era of immense change, we in the church need to get over our failure complex and begin to experiment more freely. We seem to have reached the limits of the church-growth attractational model. Bigger, better churches will still win some, but they will increasingly leave uninterested millions on the outside not even looking in. We must explore new ways to be the church in our new world. Jesus calls us out into deeper waters to fish for people in new ways, to plant the seeds of the kingdom in new soil, and to work for redemption while juggling both risk and opportunity.



In this era of immense change, we in the church need to get over our failure complex and begin to experiment more freely.



Our World Needs a New Church

Our world is radically different from the world our parents and grandparents grew up in, and it's becoming more different all the time. Our new world needs a new kind of church—but we don't know exactly what kind of church our world needs or how to become that kind of church. Our world has changed so dramatically that we must become missiologists within our own culture. Like missionaries encountering a brand-new people group, we must learn to study the language, customs, and thought patterns that structure our society. As we begin to understand our context anew, we can begin to imagine what a healthy, indigenous church will look like here in this place, with these people. But learning a culture takes time—decades, really—and we can't wait that long to start making changes. Our world needs a new church now, and we're the only church available.

Some brave pioneers have begun experimenting around the edges of church, spinning off different variations of Christian communities, birthing unique expressions of gospel-bearing, kingdom people. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. But with each success and failure, we inch closer to a universal church that communicates and embodies the gospel in a way that is good news for our neighbors.

Edison Churches

One of the most easily recognizable examples of failure that leads to innovation may very well be glowing above your head as you read this. Few innovations have had the effect of changing our world quite like the spread of electricity and the commercial viability of the light bulb. The man primarily responsible for both of these innovations was, of course, Thomas Edison. Edison built an engineering empire that changed the way we live in fundamental ways. As a great inventor, he created a company that specialized in experimentation and failure.

Edison wasn't the only person to invent a light bulb. His company, however, was the first to create a commercially viable, reproducible, affordable bulb. He also pioneered the creation of an electric grid that would support his light bulb. No one, including Edison himself, really knew how many experiments and failures it took to create his light bulb. In an interview with *Harper's Monthly* magazine, Edison once explained: "I speak without exaggeration when I say that I have constructed three thousand different theories in connection with the electric light, each

one of them reasonable and apparently true. Yet only in two cases did my experiments prove the truth of my theory.”¹²

The simple light bulb—this world-changing innovation—required a radical commitment to thinking, experimenting, and learning from failure. We never know how long breakthrough will take or how many failures will come before success. Yet, without a commitment to innovation, we will certainly never experience breakthrough.

The crisis of the church in North America requires an Edison-like commitment. We need innovators who are unafraid of failure and will help us pioneer new ways of being the church in the twenty-first century. In this book, we’ll look at ten innovative, future-leaning *Edison Churches*. These churches are wonderful examples of pioneers whose refusal to be afraid to fail led to innovation and breakthrough. They have paid the price of failure in pursuit of birthing a new future for the church. They are a diverse collection of churches from several theological tribes, multiple countries, and vastly differing contexts. We will share stories of church plants, historic churches, mega-churches, and everything in between.

These are stories of men and women, pastors and laypeople, who have bravely invested in the future of the church. We hope their stories will inspire a new generation of innovators who are willing to fail for the kingdom of God. You may not sell everything, or start a stripper ministry, or host potlucks for refugees. There is a good chance none of those ministry concepts will work in your particular context. Nonetheless, may we all be spurred to action by these adventurers who have allowed God’s Spirit to birth something unique and beautiful in their own contexts. May we discover, together, a radical rebirth of the twenty-first-century church through this process of failure, innovation, and breakthrough.

In order to innovate, however, we must first understand where innovators come from and how God has hardwired innovation into the very DNA of the church. The church as we know it—spread across the globe, dominated by complicated infrastructures, birthed from empires, and having a seat at tables of power—is not the church that began in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. From the very beginning, God built the church as an ever-growing organism spreading out to the ends of the earth. From the very beginning, the mission was to move out from Jerusalem, planting the kingdom in new places. This work was led by innovators who were empowered by the Spirit of God. Somewhere along the way, as the church gained power, money, buildings, and institutions,

EMBRACING FAILURE

we lost most of our pioneers and innovators. To go forward, we must first go backward and understand who God created us to be.