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## HELPING CHURCH LEADERS TRANSITION FROM THE PRESENT TO THE FUTURE

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### The Diffusion of Innovation and Effective Churches

Why do some innovations succeed and others fail? Is there a recognizable pattern as to how an innovation is dispersed in a system or organization? What are the communication patterns associated with the adoption of an innovation? What are the implications of understanding the diffusion of innovation for effective churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? These and other questions were addressed by church leaders who participated in a special Leadership Network forum on the *Diffusion of Innovation* held May 17-18, 1999 in Colorado Springs. Everett Rogers, recognized world wide for his work on the diffusion of innovation and development of the innovation curve, was the principle resource for the forum. For further reading on this topic, see his book, *The Diffusion of Innovations*, published by The Free Press.

Because *diffusion* is "a process by which an innovation is communicated among the members of a social system," identifying and understanding the communication networks among a set of individuals is crucial. Two types of personal communication networks are *radial* and *interlocking*. In *radial* networks, the individual is connected to others who share different attributes; while in *interlocking* networks, people are connected to others who share similar attributes to themselves. *Radial* networks are more open and information seeking and best used by people who are change agents. *Interlocking* networks are best used for social support and consensus and are generally not a source of innovation. One participant noted that "churches effectively diffusing innovation will need to balance and nurture both types of networks. Either one or the other will not be enough. This can also be translated to ministries that foster both types of networks."

Perceptions concerning an innovation are crucial to the diffusion process. Five characteristics that influence the adoption or rejection of an innovation include its (1) *relative advantage*, the degree to which it is perceived as being better than the idea it supercedes; (2) *compatibility*, or the perception that it is consistent with existing values, past experiences and the needs of potential adopters, "being able to connect it to a previous tradition or way of doing things is important and provides an anchor to people's meanings"; (3) *complexity*, or the degree to which it is perceived as difficult to understand and use; (4) *triability*, or the degree to which it may be experimented with on a limited basis, "think of the trial as a way to gradually internalize the innovation"; and (5) *observability*, which is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. Church leaders seeking to diffuse a particular innovation within a congregation would be wise to evaluate it using these five characteristics. "Perceived reality is the basis for much of the innovation and diffusion scale. There are few firm, objective measurements. Therefore, spiritual and skill-based insight confirmed in a faith community is probably the basis for future evaluation of what is innovative and effective," observed on of the participants.

Another important learning from the forum was the length of time it takes for an innovation to reach critical mass, the point at which enough individuals have adopted it so that its further rate of adoption is self-sustaining. Several participants noted that "reaching critical mass will usually take longer than most congregations are willing to commit. Resistance may be strongest right before critical mass is achieved." "Innovation, to be diffused, takes time and resources; are we committed to do this?" Also, "the wise investment of resources requires an emphasis on the journey to achieve critical mass. After that; less time, energy and money should be invested." Finally, "innovators need to think through the ramifications of arriving at critical mass, making sure the church or organization is able to sustain the inevitable changes, some which may be unanticipated, that will result from the innovation."

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