

PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS
TERRI MARTINSON ELTON

EXPERIMENTING

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and the
possibility of
failure

*Journeying in the
Wilderness, 151*



What comes to mind when you hear the word **experiment?** An image from chemistry lab? Trying new recipes? Testing a new drug? No matter the environment, experimenting involves risk and the possibility of failure. Learning from the future and following Jesus both involve risk. But what kind of risk? **Risk** can be *behavioral*, such as firemen putting their safety on the line to save others; *conditional*, such as chemotherapy making a person vulnerable to getting sick; or *probable*, such as investing in markets or projecting the likelihood of something happening. Each is managed in a different way. The first is managed by decisions related to action, the second by controlling systems or environments, and the third by making judgments about the future. Seeing risk from different angles reminds us **risk is already part of life**, so dealing with risk requires learning when and how. Experimenting invites others into a shared experience of doing something new or different with the expectation of learning. *Experimenting becomes a spiritual practice when we trust the Spirit with the risk of trying something new for the sake of God's promised future.*

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*Journeying in the
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that encouraged experiments. Our experiments focused on communicating the gospel in various ways and were understood as a great way to learn from and with the congregation. Over time, experimenting taught us the value of taking risks and reframed our understanding of failure.

The high probability of failure makes experimentation feel risky, so seeing risk and failure as part of learning is crucial. I witnessed a great example of learning from failure in the men’s quarterfinals of the 2018 Wimbledon tennis tournament. Four highly ranked players competed against four lesser-ranked players in highly competitive matching. Each match lasted several hours and went to four or five sets. Three top seeds made it through, but the number one seed lost to Kevin Anderson, the eighth seed. The number one seed was Roger Federer, one of the most decorated tennis players in history. In Roger’s post-match interview he congratulated Kevin and credited his “big serve and his effective return” for the win. He also shared how losing hurts, while at the same time motivating him to do better next time. Roger Federer’s drive to win is accompanied by his understanding that losing provides lessons winning never does. Used well, failure can exponentially advance our learning.

Our congregation had the opportunity to rethink failure when a speaker shared that the biggest difference between thriving and struggling is the ability to see **failure as a learning opportunity**. From that lesson, our leadership worked to create a culture that viewed failure as a learning moment. We named failure as “oh, fascinating” moments and talked through such experiences with colleagues to mine our learnings. As the phrase became a part of the culture, the shame around failure subsided. Taking risks and learning from failure requires a supportive environment.

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*Journeying in the
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As an iterative process, experimenting involves putting our ideas out in the world and learning from others' engagement with them. When trusted colleagues offer honest, critical feedback, a rich learning environment is created.

Playing is a common global activity; it is time or space set aside to imagine and explore (physically or mentally). Experimentation draws on play as it creates an environment where real-world demands are temporarily suspended and risk-taking is encouraged. With boundaries, an objective, and a few rules, play provides freedom to think differently, problem-solve, mimic others, collaborate, and release energy. As a fusion of creation and imitation, play places actions in context and transcends reality. Play can be highly structured or free form; it can reinforce existing rules and subvert injustice at the same time. As the church navigates disruptions and learns from the future, *play is a great vehicle for growing its capacity to experiment, learn from failure, and trust the movement of the Spirit.*

For experiments to change the course of an organization, perseverance is necessary. Being clear about the goal is critical, especially when results fall short of expectations. Let's go back to our initial understanding of the word *experiment* and think about lab researchers. Such researchers amaze me with their discipline and perseverance; many dedicate their whole career to experimenting around one idea. Jim Allison is one example. Committed to fighting cancer, he used an unconventional approach to studying enzymes. Driven by the loss of many family members, he made “the first tenuous steps toward a generational breakthrough in the war against cancer.” But it took years before his work actually saved lives. All his days in the lab paid off in 2018 when Allison won a Nobel Prize. His lifetime of work ultimately changed the direction of cancer research that now saves hundreds of lives, yet much of his life was learning from failed experiments and disappointing results.

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Experiments matter most when engaging our most important work. Experiments that have staying power must be able to withstand failure, go through many iterations, and keep us engaged. Roger Federer and Jim Allison are examples of people who know this well. Along with their commitment and drive, they knew the power of learning from failure. Experimenting as a spiritual practice not only opens us to the Spirit; it also is a way to listen to and collaborate with our neighbors. Forming faith and witnessing to the gospel are endeavors worthy of our best energy, creative imagination, and experimenting.

Doing so can unleash unexpected results. Take the example of pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson, who loved Scripture. While serving a congregation, he experimented with communicating the Bible. His hope was to ignite a passion for Scripture within the people in that community. Twenty years later, his experiment turned into *The Message Bible*. *The Message* has now sold millions of copies and touched countless lives around the world.

Learning from the future involves risk and failure. **Experimenting requires stepping out of our comfort zone.** A supportive learning environment helps us take the necessary risks as we experiment with today's complex challenges. Forming faith in the twenty-first century is an endeavor worthy of bold experiments; playing it safe will not do. The world is in desperate need of holy experimentation so faith can come alive in the hearts and lives of each generation.

TRY THIS:

If forming faith and witnessing to the gospel are endeavors worthy of our best energy, creative imagination, and experimenting, what experiments might you engage? Where can you create space to "play"? Get 5 leaders in your ministry to each try one small experiment this week and then share what they learned.