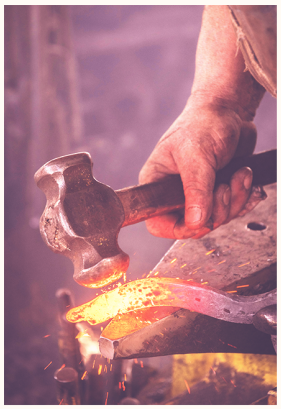
RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS TECHNOLOGISTS



SUE PHILLIPS

Summer 2025

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PRESENTED BY

WESLEYAN IMPACT PARTNERS
IGNITING IMAGINATION

TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION
STEWARDING POTENTIAL

I went to divinity school months after graduating from college and honestly I had no business being there. I had only been to church a handful of times, had no religious affiliation, and had never heard a sermon as an adult. What I did have was an intense desire to tend an unnameable longing inside me, and zero language to describe it. I applied to a progressive Episcopal divinity school because I wanted to study liberation theology and write fabulous books. I got in despite this astonishing hubris, and so it was that I arrived to mandatory chapel on the first day of school.

Two things about this service. First, the celebrant was Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward, a celebrity in the (then) burgeoning world of feminist theology since she and several other women were ordained "irregularly" by a renegade Episcopal bishop. I revered her for her keen writing and defiant gayness, of which I shared only the latter. Second, our school practiced an "open table," inviting anyone who felt called to partake in the Eucharist regardless of baptism. John Wesley and his followers extended this generosity 300+ years before, but it was not yet a given at many Episcopal seminaries.

As I settled into the pint-sized Gothic chapel on that first day, I was overcome by the resonant silence, formal clerical vestments — all those robes and stoles! — and by the soft warmth of the worn wooden pews. When the time came for communion, I followed behind my pew neighbors and slowly approached the two celebrants. I stepped in front of Carter, whom I had met very briefly the night before. She looked me in the eyes, held out the wafer, gently leaned toward me, and said, "Sue, the gifts of God for the people of God."

Stunned. That's what I was: just stunned. Standing there for what felt like ages, I was absolutely transfixed by the startling intimacy of the invitation, the profound belonging-ness of it, and the radical recognition that I, too, might be a person of God.

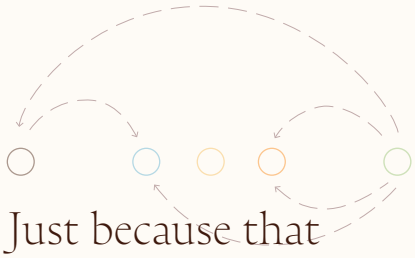
Perhaps this was a full-on Holy Spirit moment, which, considering my non-theistic beliefs then and now, would be kind of shocking — to me anyway. But whatever else was presenced in that moment, it was a transmission of ancient wisdom and practice,

some kind of transmutation of material and spirit passed through a particular person, ritual, place, and time, and was received by a longing heart.

Something ancient happened, and something very, very, new.

There was presence, mine and Carter's, and the other congregants, and all the people who had worshiped in that space before, the ancestors too. Whatever mystery was flowing then, whatever action of unmerited grace, there was also craft—the interaction design, the manipulation of physical objects. The cup, the wine, the wafer, the napkin for the cup, the robe, stole, altar, and building itself: all were made for this purpose. The music, pews, stained glass, the organ, choir loft, sacristy, and pulpit were built by humans using human tools, all these individual elements taking magical shape together, form and function in sync to create an experience of transformation.

This moment was constructed. It was *technology*: the intentional use of tools by skilled people to create a solution to a problem, on purpose. Just because that transformation was a mystery doesn't mean the materials, tools, and practices were. Calling communion a technology needn't diminish what else it is or might be. It can be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace and a real presence of Christ, and yet still be an intentional manipulation by humans of matter and energy to address human needs.



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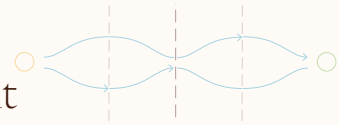
Technology is more than computer stuff. When we think of it only as silicon and software, we overlook that humans have always used tools to shape experience and meaning. Even the rhythm of liturgy itself is a kind of technology, a designed sequence that creates space to support specific outcomes. Technologists specialize in understanding, developing, testing, and implementing technology. Carter was a technologist that day.

It's helpful to remember the original, broader meaning and usage derived from the Greek *technē* — a word that originally encompassed what we now split between "art," "craft," and "technology" — but it was much richer than any of these modern terms.

Technē means skilled knowledge-in-action. It isn't just knowing facts (*episteme*) or having opinions (*doxa*), but the practical wisdom of how to make something that works. A carpenter possesses the *technē* of woodworking - not just theoretical knowledge about wood, but the embodied ability to transform raw material into useful objects through practiced technique. *Technē* describes a blacksmith forging tools, a physician healing bodies, a rhetorician crafting persuasive speeches, and a politician governing cities. Ancient Greeks knew that all these required a similar capacity: understanding materials (whether iron, human bodies, words, or citizens) and having the skill to shape them toward desired ends.



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Communion is just one example of the countless ancient technologies that fuel religious and spiritual worlds, and have since the first humans first interacted with their environments. "Ancient technology" is a powerful way to understand the rituals, contemplative practices, and ethical frameworks that help people deal with existence and cultivate specific states of being.

Why does it help us to think of religious leaders, lay and ordained, as technologists? Because it invites us to stop thinking only about the ends and start thinking about the means of what we do.

Yes, the blacksmith cares about making an axe handle, but what makes her a blacksmith is the marriage of fire, bellows, training, raw material, anvil, hammer, know-how, muscle, technique, and will. She manipulates raw ingredients, using specific processes, to get the outcome of an axe handle. Religious leaders use ritual, spiritual practices, sacred texts, and pastoral instincts. We forge contemplative environments, conversations about meaning, and group dynamics, blending words, silence, music, movement, and symbols to create specific spiritual effects. This is not a tortured metaphor. This is literally what we do.

When we think of these skills and methods as technology, and ourselves as technologists, perhaps we might think less about the mysteries we steward, for which we cannot truly

account, and begin to think more about making new things from our pantheon of raw materials. I mean, how many people still use axes? When we start thinking about ministry more like a blacksmith thinks about his craft, we see the tools at our disposal and look for old ways to make new things. And when we do, radical new options open for us to deliver the gifts of God to the people of God.

John Wesley was called to extend the practice of communion to unbaptized hearts. His example can help us now, once again, to understand how access protocols can fuel a revolution in faith. But first, it helps to understand how opening up access to proprietary routines revolutionized technology and ushered in the computer age.

Engineers have always known that breaking down large tasks into smaller, repeatable ones is key to successful computing. Until the 1960s, computers were custom-made with non-transferable code and components. But the need for standardization became acute as the machines grew in complexity. So manufacturers began to develop plug 'n play functionality, with modular architecture that allowed customers to choose different configurations. Software, too, was developed with modules and replicable subroutines, with each part performing a specific, logically discrete function and then interacting with others through well-defined interfaces.

The true explosion of modularity came via the IBM PC, which designed "open architecture" that allowed developers to access the computing power of the machines without giving away proprietary information about how the machines worked. In other words, IBM told its partners how to open the door and come in without giving them the complete blueprints to the house. This allowed other companies to create compatible hardware and software that could be integrated easily, which in turn fueled an enormous tech ecosystem that could specialize and dream up new applications. Suddenly, other companies could come into the IBM house and lay down gorgeous rugs, build new cabinets, and put up fabulous wallpaper. Innovation exploded.

In just 25 years, computers went from huge custom-coded, single-use machines to modular systems accessible to anyone who could afford a desktop computer. Key to this revolutionary expansion of computing power was creating interfaces that allowed other

people to safely and securely come in the front door. Just like John Wesley did 300 years ago – the open table and the open access protocols. That's the power of ancient technology.

I don't pretend to know what John Wesley was thinking, or what exactly he believed he was doing, and I'm not about to wade into the finer points of Wesleyan theology or polity. But I can say that expanding access to the gifts of God is essential in this bruising secular age.

That's why I work at a tech startup, which, after years of religious and denominational leadership, has been, shall we say, a disruption to my core operating system. There's lots about my new world that surprises me (the micronutrient snacks! the 30-minute meetings! the primacy of engineers!), but oh boy, do I know religious leaders like us can learn from the way technologists work and think about things.

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First and foremost, technologists build things, preferably new things that people want to use. There are layers upon layers of specialized technical talent in the building functions: frontend, backend, and full-stack engineers, system architects, database administrators. There are more specialized layers in the "new things" zone: user interface and user experience specialists, product managers, interaction designers. And there are still more people who focus on the "that people want to use" part, with user researchers, brand strategists, go-to-market people, copywriters, content creators. Unlike in a program-oriented congregational world, technologists prototype things, throw them out, make new things, research, refine, and test them in an endless process of iteration and improvement fueled by rigor and well-integrated specialization.

What would our religious worlds look like if rigor and specialization fueled ours? Imagine teams of lay ancient technologists who specialize in interviewing community members about their religious longings, and bringing back insights to generate loads

of new ideas. Imagine people who design platforms for non-religious people to access group singing, small groups, pastoral care, casserole-making for neighbors, and other traditional Wesleyan practices. How about special teams that address a single need in their communities and design ten prototypes that result in one pop-up experiment? What goodness would we unleash if we spent as much time thinking about how to spread the word about what we have built as we do about building it?

And what if we stopped defining innovation as a great idea and innovators as the people who have them? We need to stop this nonsense. Innovation is the messy middle ground between ideation and widespread adoption. It's about understanding and overcoming obstacles, building systems and processes that work in the real world, adapting to feedback, and navigating complex dynamics. Most potentially transformative ideas never become innovations because it is really, really hard to actually make stuff work. Skillful technologists know that innovation is implementation, and innovators are the people who develop the skills and persistence to turn ideas into reality. How might we retool our lay leader and seminary training to nurture these skills?

It helps to think of Carter Heyward, and John Wesley, and yes, YOU as a technologist. Thinking of religious leaders as vocationally-fueled technologists invites us to consider new ways of making old things, in which we focus more on building, adapting, and opening access, and less on maintaining proprietary systems. We need more of us to focus on distributing our traditional approaches to living a good, faithful life and less on protecting them. We need to nurture the next generation of ancient technologists for qualities of building and innovating rather than safeguarding and skimping, to look beyond legacy systems like congregations to reach people where they actually are. And we need to train them to build and distribute new stuff that people actually want.

Thinking of religious leaders as vocationally-fueled technologists invites us to consider new ways of making old things.

Without the open table of my seminary all those years ago, this agnostic, not-spiritual, and barely-religious human was welcomed into the family of God by a revolutionary

technologist who extended the gifts of God to this longing, lonely heart. Stricter access protocols would have kept me on the other side of that door.

When we build new doors using the old wisdom, we give countless people access to our most awesome content. Each religious community can choose the size and shape of its door. They can adapt the protocols for more or less safety and security. They can decide the length of the curtains in there. And then of course, people on the outside can choose to come in, or not. We can still nurture what is uniquely ours, but we have to give more people the chance to plug in to what we are playing.

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Needless to say, the people who build tech products work in a consumer-driven, transactional world. As religious leaders, we channel ineffable powers to help people navigate the struggles and joys of being human. Saving souls and selling products are very, very different ends with different means, too. But to disregard what we can learn from the transactional world about how to build things people want is to consign what we care most about to irrelevance. What we have been doing simply isn't working.

It helps to remember that calling religious leaders technologists is not a metaphor, but recognition that whatever else we are, we are builders of human things, working in a human world, with human tools. I have engaged hundreds of congregations and leaders, and I say with genuine love in my heart that when we over-rely on the power of the Spirit to make a case for the human work we do, for its value in the world, we avoid work that is actually ours.

The good news is that we have excellent examples before us to study and learn from. Modularity, open access, integrated specialization, experimentation, building, prototyping, and pushing, all the while protecting the legacy wisdom that makes us, us.

But we must also come to terms with the fact that our work is failing. We are, in fact, not building new things that people want to use. Spirit alone cannot make us relevant. We need technologies for that, and we need to start thinking more like technologists if we want our wisdom to survive in the wild of this world.

Author Bio

Sue Phillips is on the founding team of the Workshop for Emotional and Spiritual Technology (West Co.), a tech startup working to help people live more meaningful lives. After serving as a denominational executive for the Unitarian Universalist Association, she co-founded Sacred Design Lab, a nonprofit that interprets innovation to the religious world and ancient wisdom to the world of innovation. Clients and partners have included Pinterest, IDEO, Google, Logitech, the Obama Foundation, and the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General.