

>> **The Creative  
Leader**

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***Andy Stanley***

North Point Ministries  
and Best-selling Author

# >>The Creative Leader

Unleashing the  
Power of Your  
Creative Potential }

ED <<  
YOUNG



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& HOLMAN  
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*To Dr. Ed Young . . .*

Dad, mentor, and friend.

Thank you for being the kind of leader who inspired me  
to dream big and invest my life  
into the greatest thing going and growing,  
the local church.

I am eternally grateful for all you have done  
and continue to do for me.

This book could not have been written  
without the wisdom, encouragement, and  
creative leadership you've imparted to me  
throughout my life.

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## INTRODUCTION

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# A Call for Change

In 1990, a core group of Christ followers in Irving, Texas, came together and asked one simple question: How can we reach people *today* with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ? We didn't know where that question would take us, but we knew for sure that we had to be willing to do things differently than what we had experienced in the past.

As the newly appointed leader of this fledgling church, I wanted to approach that question from the perspective that culture is always changing. We could not rely on the methods of the past to reach the emerging generation. A changing culture demands that we too must change to meet our culture head-on.

Fellowship Church was essentially a mission church birthed from a traditional church. But I was not looking to duplicate the mother church by creating another traditional church for traditional church-going people. I wanted an environment that would communicate God's unchanging truth in such creative and compelling ways that it would connect with anyone, regardless of their church background or lack thereof. I wanted to reach all people, whether they had attended church all their lives or had never darkened the door of a church before.

I was not content to feed the already-fed. There were enough churches doing that, especially in the Dallas–Fort Worth area. That was neither my passion nor the thrust of this core group of believers.

Out of that desire emerged another question: How can we keep God's unchanging truth the same while communicating it

## The Creative Leader

in a radically different style? It would take a mammoth effort to keep the church relevant within a constantly changing culture, while remaining anchored to the fundamentals of our ancient faith. To be quite candid, that is the never-ending challenge of the church.

Stepping up to this challenge would require a massive infusion of something missing in many churches today: *creativity*. In fact, this fundamental element of leadership is hard to find in many organizations, whether church, parachurch, or business. Yet this one quality separates extraordinary organizations from the mundane and ineffective ones.

Cutting-edge creativity also marks the lives of the men and women who are true difference-makers in these organizations and the world around them. These leaders don't try to keep pace with cultural change; they set the pace. *Creative leaders are trendsetters for creative change, anticipating people's changing needs within their dynamic environments.*

This book is for the person who wants to be that kind of leader, especially in the local church. If you are a leader in business, education, medicine, law, government, the arts, or any other sector of society, this book will be helpful in your particular calling. If you're looking for a book that will help you maintain the status quo, this is not it. If you are looking for a few buzzwords or shortcuts, you won't find them here either. But if you're looking for a book that can help bring a sense of vitality and excitement to both your life and your organization, keep reading.

I will be writing from the vantage point of a pastor, and most of my insights and illustrations come out of my experiences in the church. I have been in the ministry for more than twenty years—fifteen of those at Fellowship Church—and my heart beats loudly for the mission and mandate of the church. If you are a pastor struggling in the trenches of leadership, this book is definitely for you. I wrote this with you in mind. Whether you pastor

## There Has to Be a Better Way

a church of 50 or 50,000, my prayer is that this will help you fulfill the unique ministry vision God has given you.

As we begin this discovery of creative leadership, we will take a deeper look at some of the benefits of being a creative leader. Keeping creativity at the forefront of your leadership portfolio will stretch you in ways you never thought possible. Thinking creatively is one of the most exhausting exercises you will ever encounter. And taking those creative thoughts and implementing them into creative solutions will take everything you have and more. The benefits, though, are well worth the expended effort.

Being a creatively driven leader within a creatively driven organization is an exciting ride. This approach to leadership will not only change your outlook on life, your ministry, and your work; it will also infuse those around you with the same passion for creativity and innovation.

In the first section of the book I offer some of the payoffs of creativity in leadership. I answer some questions that are beginning to surface in your brain: “If I begin to implement creativity into my life and my organization, what will happen? How will creativity positively impact my ministry, my business, my department, my school, or my practice?” If you are going to sign on to any approach to leadership, you need to know the potential payoff. Unless the payoff is worth it, the effort is wasted.

In the second section, I demonstrate why your environment is crucial to creative leadership. What does the creative church culture look like? How do worship and communication flow from and contribute to that creative environment?

The third section deals with where and how to place your team players. Learn to leverage your committed teammates for a bigger and better future.

The fourth and final section of the book looks at the obstacles to creative leadership. I share candidly how God has shown me

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great ways (often by trial and error) to overcome these obstacles and use them for success.

This book offers real answers to real questions that leaders like you face in the trenches. To that end, check out the Q & A after each major section of the book. Compiled from the most common questions I've been asked over the years, these Q & A provide some very practical insight from my own leadership struggles.

But first, why creativity? Of all of the other qualities of leadership, why fill an entire book focusing on this one quality? You may have read books or attended seminars on time management, principled leadership, participatory management, goal-setting, or other leadership topics. To the question, Do we really need another approach to leadership? the short answer is Yes. Stay tuned for the long answer.

Over the next few pages, I share the basis for my emphasis on creativity in leadership. As a Christian pastor, this passion for creativity comes from the many years I've invested studying and teaching God's Word. This book was born from my team and me working on the front lines to make a lasting impact for Christ within the framework of a creative and dynamic church. My understanding of Scripture as it relates to the character of God and the fundamental needs of people drives my creative pursuits as a leader in the church.

And while I write primarily from my perspective as a church leader, the concepts presented in this book can be applied in many areas of leadership within any organization or institution. With that in mind, the first chapter answers an important question, Why creativity? After that, we dive into the next important question in chapter two, What is the payoff of creative leadership?

## Section 1

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# *Forming a Creative Foundation*

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## *A Case Study in Creative Leadership*

# **WALT DISNEY**

FOLLOWING HIS STINT IN WORLD WAR I, Walt Disney stepped into the American entertainment business with dreams of becoming a cartoonist and animator. Despite setback after setback, Disney persisted with his vision to produce groundbreaking entertainment through the creative medium of animation.

After years of perseverance, he was the first animator to produce a “talkie” cartoon feature or a Technicolor release of a moving cartoon. Disney turned down deals to work for big-name entertainment firms because they would involve sacrificing his vision, his pursuit of excellence, his attention to meticulous detail, and his creative rights. He recognized that film studio committees would stifle the creative process and vowed early on that he would not work for anyone else, insisting instead that he would maintain control of his own work.

Disney embodies the creative ideal. He worked harder than his competition, fought diligently for his dreams, aggressively protected his work, and would not let anyone dissuade him from his vision. He was constantly thinking of ways to stay ahead of the trend. He inspired creative potential in others around him and continues to inspire many today. Above all, he never, ever gave up. Eventually, his vision propelled the Disney Corporation into a multi-billion-dollar entertainment company. There is nothing easy about being creative. Walt Disney worked hard, giving his life to animating talking animals on celluloid to make people laugh. One question, though, begs to be asked: How much harder should we work at giving our lives to building the creative church, a spir-

*A Case Study in Creative Leadership*

itual enterprise that connects people to the living Lord?

It is not easy to stay ahead of the cultural curve in reaching people for Christ. But the nature of our calling compels us, our creative potential demands it, and hungry people cry out for it. We can and should do no less as Christian leaders. We should work no less vigorously, pay no less attention to detail, be no less inspiring, and dream no less than Walt Disney himself.

His greatest claim to fame in my opinion is not the world-wide enterprise, but that he was an ordinary man with the guts and foresight to forge ahead with his creative vision and achieve it—against all odds.

*So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.*

GENESIS 1:27

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Why Creativity?

**T**he young student was lonely, frustrated, and homesick. A thousand miles from home, he found himself drowning in the fast and furious tide of college life. Sex, drinking, and drug binges were the norm. He thought he knew a lot about the world, but in reality, he had grown up in a sheltered environment. The girls, the parties, and the Mardi-Gras lifestyle provided many temptations and distractions, but by the grace of God, he remained faithful to Christ and resisted the pressure to roll with the college tide.

Nonetheless, he felt like his relationship with God was on pause. He wasn't doing anything bad, but he wasn't doing much good either. His spiritual passion was flaming out.

One lonely night, he knelt in his dorm room, rested his elbows on his rickety air-conditioning unit, looked out over the darkened parking lot, and began to pray. But for some strange reason, he didn't pray for himself. Instead, he found himself praying for a friend named Scott.

*The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational  
mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society  
that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

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Scott was handsome, tall, and athletic—full of natural ability and potential. Unfortunately, he also carried around a lot of baggage from his past. His parents' marriage was shaky at best. His relationship with his dad was distant, partially due to his father's heavy travel schedule as a college basketball coach. At an early age, Scott began his downward spiral, experimenting with drugs and shoplifting. His experimentation inevitably led to harder drugs. His rebellion continued to escalate when the high he received from shoplifting was replaced with the rush of burglarizing homes. He didn't need the money; it was just something to do. Because of his influential family and his status as a star athlete, he was never arrested or made to pay for his crimes.

One afternoon, Scott was walking to class with this college friend who had been praying for him. Scott suddenly turned and said, "Something is different about you. You have something that I don't have. What is it?"

Scott's statement stopped this young man in his tracks because he had been praying for just such an opportunity. That evening in Scott's dorm room, Scott's friend led him in a prayer to enter into a new relationship with Christ.

I was that college student. More than two decades ago, I prayed with Scott in his dorm room—an event that has changed both our lives. Scott began his journey as a Christian that day, but my own journey into the pastorate also began that very same day. Through my interaction with Scott, I sensed God leading my life into the pastorate. My call to ministry and my vision for the local church began thanks to my interaction with Scott and others like him in college.

Trying to influence my friends for Christ helped me see the need for doing church in a radically different way. Scores and scores of Scotts out there need not only a radical Savior but a radical church to meet them where they are.

After Scott bowed the knee to Christ, I invited him to the church I was attending. And for the first time, I began to see the

## Why Creativity?

church through someone else's eyes. The terminology was confusing. The music was tired. The overall feeling was lifeless and just plain boring. *If I ever go into church work, I thought, I will do whatever it takes to provide a biblically driven, compelling, and creative experience that someone like my friend Scott could understand.*

I wish I could tell you that Scott is doing well, but the last time I heard from him, he was still floundering. Though he isn't struggling quite as much as when I first met him in college, he remains disconnected from the local church. That breaks my heart.

What if a creative and compelling church had been there for Scott when he first came to know Christ? What if there had been a place where Scott could have connected with others like himself and developed a relationship with his Creator? I'm convinced he would be a different man today.

I am fortunate to pastor a church like that—to put into practice the vision God gave me years ago. Our vision for Fellowship is simple. We bring people into the church by *reaching out* (that's evangelism) in creative ways that relate to real life and contemporary culture. Then we work hard to provide an exciting and God-honoring environment for *reaching up* (that's worship) to connect with God. Finally, we teach our people to grow up into full-court followers of Christ by *reaching in* (that's discipleship) and moving our people from spectators in the stands to the game of active service.

If we want to reach the Scotts out there, we have to get involved up to our elbows in the subject of this book: creative leadership. This requires a tag-team effort. I'm a team member and you're a team member. Together, we must work tirelessly in cooperation with the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's bold mission for the church. We cannot let the Scotts of this world fall by the wayside, because of laziness, apathy, or an affinity for the status quo.

The status quo should never, ever describe the dynamic reality that is the Bride of Christ. If the local church is not the most cre-

## The Creative Leader

ative, innovative, and alive place on the planet, we are failing as its leaders. My prayer is to avoid this failure by realizing the incredible potential of creative leadership within ourselves and our churches to help unleash the power of the gospel to a needy world.

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### **Realizing Our Creative Potential**

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I love the local church. I cut my teeth on the pews of Southern Baptist churches where my father served as pastor (across the South and now in Texas). The first time I remember spelling my name was with stale macaroni in vacation Bible school. As a pastor's kid, I really never did anything wild or crazy growing up—except maybe getting drunk on Kool-Aid and smoking a couple of crayons. That was the extent of my rebellious lifestyle. After attending Florida State for a couple of years, I graduated from a Christian college in Texas and headed off to seminary. After seminary, I served on my father's church staff in Houston then came to Dallas to start Fellowship Church.

Throughout that time, I rubbed shoulders with a lot of Christian leaders and saw the collective creative potential in the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, I also watched far too many leaders falter with their creative potential. Too many churches get stuck in a rut, doing the same routine, day after day, week after week, month after month. In the name of tradition and old-time religion, these churches are content to follow the same well-worn path, unaware that the reason the path is so worn is because it is a vast but predictable circle.

### **Excuses, Excuses—I Hear Them Every Day**

One of the reasons we ignore our creative potential is a gnawing sense of inadequacy in the creative realm. Rather than giving God our best creative efforts within the church, we often give Him excuses. We compare ourselves to others, convinced that we can't

## Why Creativity?

possibly do it as well as this or that person. We say to God, “I’m not creative. I can’t sing, dance, or act. I don’t have an original bone in my body.” Creativity, we think, is reserved for those extraordinary speakers, actors, writers, and artists who have captured international attention because of their talents and abilities. You know, people like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, T. D. Jakes, John Maxwell, Thomas Kinkade, Michael W. Smith, the Newsboys, Max Lucado, and John Grisham. Surely, God cannot expect that output from us.

But these excuses ring hollow in the ears of our creative Creator. We are made in His image and, because of that, He desires and expects our participation in the creative process. He wants us to make His nature and character known through our lives by impacting those in our sphere of influence. Intuitively, we are all aware of this basic truth. We understand, as Christians, that God created us and that we are made in His image. We also understand the concept of stewardship. Unfortunately, we often neglect to live out this reality when it comes to realizing our creative potential.

Our creativity is linked to our uniqueness. Our external uniqueness is evident in each person’s voice, fingerprints, retinas, and so on. Let’s not stop with physical distinctions. Consider the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual distinctions of each individual. No two people have the same intellectual capacity, emotional makeup, prior experiences, gifts, passions, or interests. Because God has endowed each of us with a unique combination of attributes and talents, our creative response will also be unique.

### **Creative Cramps**

Most people have trouble realizing their creative potential, because at some point along life’s journey their creativity was beaten out of them. Most of us suffer from a creative cramp somewhere during the course of our lives. Early on in life, creativity is natural and even encouraged as we develop. In our childhood years, our lives are filled with creative thought and potential.

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Studies reveal that children in the one-to-six-year-old age group score in the ninetieth percentile of creative ability. Those same studies also show that once these children hit age seven, they experience creative cramping that drastically lowers their creative score.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, these creative cramps continue to squeeze the creative potential of these children as they move into adulthood.

Let's process this hard data to understand why so many of us have lost the unique creative edge God intended for us. What happens to children between the ages of six and seven that causes them to plummet in creative potential? One word: school. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for education. However, there is something about the educational system that beats creativity out of us.

Somewhere along life's journey, at about seven, eight, and nine years of age—when the rigors of education start to heat up—we begin to trade our creative thought for other things we are told are more important for our development as productive people in society. At a crucial time in our creative development, we trade the artistic for the analytical. We trade our imaginations for memorization. And we trade laughter for logic. Pretty soon we find ourselves in prison cells of predictability. We want our life to have meaning and purpose and power. We want things to happen. We want to have adventure and excitement. But when we take a long look at our lives, they seem mundane and boring. After creativity is driven out of us, we realize how stale life can be without the Technicolor excitement that creativity affords.

Obviously, I'm not saying that we need to go back to preschool or kindergarten and start playing with finger paints and Play-Doh. What I am saying is that we need to rediscover something that we lost in childhood. We need to rediscover the joy of trying new things simply to shake up the status quo. We need courage to push the boundaries of tradition from time to time. We need to spend time in reflection and imagination to awaken our dormant creativity.

## Why Creativity?

Reviving creativity may be as simple as savoring the excitement of seeing something for the first time or in experiencing something we've seen a thousand times before in a completely different way. We need to find new pleasure in the beauty and diversity of creation, the arts and the worship of God. Regular time each day in creative activities will help us rekindle our creative flare and rediscover an aspect of our humanity that has been severed since childhood. I'm not alking about going back to crayons and fingerpaints (necessarily), but I am suggesting that you find those things that get your creative juices flowing. Perhaps it's journaling or listening to music. Maybe it's simply staring at a tree for an hour. It might just be fingerpainting for you. I don't know. But whatever they are for you, these exercises will not only enhance your personal and spiritual life; they will enhance your ability to lead others more effectively.

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## The Creative Trinity

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At this point in the discussion, it's important to delve into a theology of creativity within the framework of something I call the "creative trinity." When we observe how creativity flows directly from the character of God, we are compelled to mimic God's creative character in our own lives. God alone—not cultural expectations, the educational system, or even church tradition—then becomes the benchmark for creative thought and action. I love J. B. Phillips's paraphrase of Romans 12:2—"Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould." When you get squeezed into the world's "mould," something inevitably gets squeezed out. For many of us, that is our God-given and God-driven creativity.

### **God Invented It**

The first part of the creative trinity is that you and I should be creative because *God invented creativity*. God thought it up; it

## The Creative Leader

was His idea. Creativity is woven into the very fabric and framework of who God is. Look at the fifth word in the Bible in Genesis 1:1—“created,” as in “In the beginning God created.” God started the creative ball rolling, and it has been rolling ever since.

If creativity is so central to the character of God, how can we claim to be connected to the God of the universe and still be so boring? Ephesians 5:1 tells us to be imitators of God. We are to mimic God by being people of love, compassion, hope, vision, and, yes, creativity.

Consider the diversity and innovation all around us. When was the last time you took a good, hard look at the beauty, wonder, and diversity of God’s creation? Does the natural world wow you like it did when you were a child? When was the last time a thunderstorm made you feel helpless? Have you ever stood at the mouth of an endless body of water and felt really small? Let me challenge you to allow experiences like these to drive you to worship God and to stimulate your creative potential. Sadly, our manmade homes of bricks and mortar, mechanical engines, miles of asphalt, and offices of concrete and steel can tend to distract us from appreciating the sheer brilliance and wonder of God’s creation.

Think for a moment about human beings. God didn’t make one human and then clone him six billion times. Wouldn’t it be boring if everyone else looked exactly like you, talked exactly like you, and thought exactly like you? For some of us in the ministry, we may think we want more clones (especially on our leadership staff), but such a world would be unthinkably predictable and dull.

What about other aspects of creation? He didn’t create one type of flower and spread that same seed all over the earth. He didn’t stop creating animals with one species of mammal, reptile, or bird. God’s creation is unique and unpredictable; just when we think we have it all figured out, we are confounded again.

If God wasn’t content to make a bland, predictable world, why are we content to make church that way? Why do we come up with

## Why Creativity?

one way of doing things and become content to do that same thing over and over again? Why do we not challenge our thinking and move to greater heights of innovation?

### **Jesus Modeled It**

The second part of the creative trinity is *Jesus modeled creativity*. Matthew records that Christ “did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matt. 13:34). Jesus was the most creative leader and teacher that ever walked the planet. He spoke from hillsides, boat bows, and beaches. He drew in the sand, used a Roman coin, cursed a fig tree, and picked up a piece of bread. He divided fish, turned over tables, and put a child on His knee—all to illustrate important lessons. Jesus was all about delivering His life-changing message in dynamic and creative ways to meet to His listeners’ needs and backgrounds.

When we analyze all of the words of Christ recorded in the Gospels, we find that 72 percent of them were based on application. They were words of cultural relevancy that answered the “so what?” question (that is, “What difference does this teaching make in my life?”). If we communicate biblical truth without addressing the specific difference it should make in the lives of our audience, we are not modeling the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Jesus understood something 2,000 years ago that we are just coming to realize—we are visual and even multisensory learners. He constantly used visuals and never used the same approach twice. Everything He did was unique. Every approach was different, based on the type of people and circumstances around Him at the time. It is not hard to make the connection between Jesus, the master communicator, and Jesus, the master of creativity. Being a good teacher and a creative person go hand-in-hand. As church leaders, we need to continually look to Him as a practical model to emulate in creative leadership.

### **The Spirit Empowers It**

The third part of the creative trinity is that the *Spirit of God empowers creativity*. He is the One who gives supernatural abilities to the church (and its leaders) to truly be the magnetic bride of Christ. He empowers creativity in the life of the believer because people have been designed to respond to this creative element. People are wired for and yearn for creativity. Why do you think the entertainment industry is so successful and popular? Actors, musicians, and entertainers of all varieties capture the imaginations of all ages with their creative gifts. Hollywood, Nashville, and New York are meeting the deep-seated need that people have for creativity, adventure, and excitement in their lives—a need the church should be filling through the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

Spend some time reflecting on the way God creatively communicated truth through the men and women of Scripture. For example, God used a piece of fruit to communicate through Adam and Eve. He used an ark to communicate through Noah. He used a ram to communicate through Abraham, a rod with Moses, the carcass of a lion with Sampson, five smooth stones with David, a big fish with Jonah, and fire with the apostle Paul. Ultimately, He used a despised crucifix to communicate His amazing grace to the world.

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### **The Church's Mandate**

So why should we implement creativity in leadership? God invented it. Jesus modeled it. The Holy Spirit empowers it because people need it. If we church leaders are going to live out the challenging mission that God has laid out for the local church, we must unleash the creative potential available to us, develop it, and use it to communicate the most compelling message ever given to mankind. Creativity is not an option for the church; it is a biblical mandate that flows from the very character of the Creator.

## Why Creativity?

As we begin this journey toward creative leadership, let me challenge you to start doing things uniquely and unpredictably. Do it in a way that is both biblically driven and communicated with excellence. Then sit back and watch the results. Watch the body language of the people you teach. Watch your staff. Watch your lay leadership team. They will be riveted as your God-given creativity is used to connect their hunger for creativity with their hunger for the truth of God.

We could talk about a lot of different areas where creativity can and should take place—in your marriage, your relationship with your children, your recreational pursuits, or in the corporate world and other professional arenas. And many of the concepts we'll discuss translate to these other arenas of life. However, we are going to talk about creativity in the local church, that entity which is dear to the heart of God, that colossal collection of Christ followers known as the Body of Christ.

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### **They Sure Know How to Say It**

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Several years ago, a man walking through the lobby of Fellowship Church stopped me and said, “Ed, I know you like sports a lot. Have you ever been to a professional boxing match before?”

“No, I haven’t,” I answered. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” he said, “there’s going to be a huge prize fight in Las Vegas and I’ll get us some tickets.”

I thought he was just saying that. You know how people say “Let’s do lunch” or “Let’s play golf one day,” and it never happens? Well, this actually happened.

Several weeks later he told me, “I got us tickets.” I don’t remember the exact date, but it was when Mike Tyson was fighting Evander Holyfield for the World Heavyweight Championship. Sure enough, he secured plane tickets for us and we flew to Las Vegas to watch this fight. I have been to a lot of sporting events

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in my life, but they all pale in comparison to the feverish level of excitement and energy at this professional prizefight.

The boxing match, however, was not the only thing that caught my attention during that once-in-a-lifetime experience. As we were walking the streets of Las Vegas before the boxing bout, I was overwhelmed by the signage. The massive billboards, the neon lights, the flashing marquees—everywhere I looked in every possible marketable space was a sign of some shape, form or fashion. If you want to see people that know how to do signage, go to Las Vegas, Nevada. *Man, I thought, these people here in Vegas don't have very much to say, but they sure know how to say it!*

And then another sobering thought flashed across my mind: *The local church has everything to say, but we don't know how to say it.* How tragic. The church has the greatest, most hopeful message known to humankind; yet too often, that message fails to connect with the masses of humanity passing by your church and mine.

That's why creativity should grace everything that touches our leadership and ministry. When the church meets together, the creative juices should be flowing, the ideas shaking and baking. People should say, "Wow, when these Christians get together, it is phenomenal. I've never seen such creativity!" When is the last time someone said that about your church? But it should be that way, because we are connected to the Father, we have the perfect model in Jesus Christ, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Christians should be leading the charge on creativity, because we alone are given the task of spreading the life-changing message of Jesus Christ. We need to get serious about unleashing our God-given creativity for His glory to the people who so desperately need it.