

Shifting landscape calls for new religious leaders' skill stack

By SANDY HONG

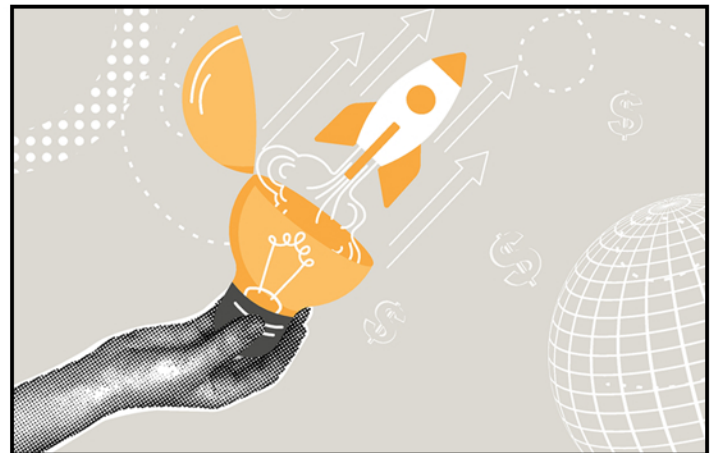
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

The American religious landscape is rapidly shifting, reshaping how communities engage faith, spirituality, and public life. As traditional institutional models lose traction, religious leaders face growing misalignment between the realities of their work and the systems that have historically formed them. This piece explores how changes in congregational engagement intersect with the systems that have historically shaped religious leadership, highlighting emerging approaches and skills suited to today's context.

Drawing on examples from the [Mapping Spiritual Innovation Project](#), a national field study of spiritually innovative leaders and initiatives, this piece highlights the distinct combinations of skills shaping new approaches to faith, spiritual life, and community service. It concludes by inviting theological educators, institutions, and innovators into deeper partnership to steward diverse spiritual ecosystems that support resilient, thriving communities.

New efforts emerge amid traditional institutional shifts

For centuries, religious institutions held near-monopoly power over meaning-making, community care, and spiritual guidance. Today, the sacred appears in unexpected places, guided by leaders who are “stacking” all new combinations of distinct and complementary skills to serve their communities.

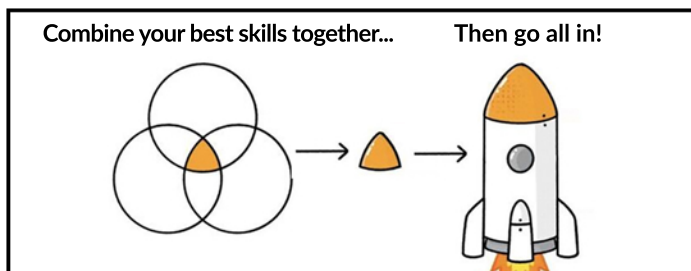


Picture a city on a Saturday morning. In one corner, residents of an intentional household chop vegetables side by side, exchanging stories and preparing a meal rooted in their shared commitments and rhythms. A few blocks away, a once-silent church now hums with life as families pick up fresh produce, children play near the garden plots, and a seniors' art class fills the sanctuary with hearty laughter. Across the city, a small group of young adults gathers in the park to honor the passing season through a journaling ritual and shared witness. Downtown, in a community center, people in recovery move barefoot to the beat of house music, using dance as an embodied release and reflection. And on a quiet residential street, a group of high schoolers step into a Buddhist temple, curious and eager to learn about the spiritual community quietly thriving in their own backyard.

These examples reflect [emergent practices](#) documented in the Mapping Spiritual Innovation Project, illustrating how individuals and groups are nurturing spiritual life amid broader changes in traditional congregational participation.

A blueprint for human flourishing

Over the past 20 years, regular attendance at religious services among US adults has fallen by nearly 30 percent. During that same period, national surveys from the



Pew Research Center show that the religiously unaffiliated—the so-called “Nones”— have grown from a small minority to nearly one-third of the population.

Institutional decline is well-documented: shrinking budgets, church closures, dwindling membership. What is less studied are the grassroots responses. Across the country, people are creatively reimagining the role and form of faith and spirituality to meet the complexities of our moment, while addressing the enduring human needs that religion has historically been well-positioned to meet.

These initiatives offer one way of understanding how ministry might evolve when approached as stewardship of the sacred and support for human flourishing across diverse contexts.

The new skill stack for religious leaders

The Mapping Spiritual Innovation Project surveyed more than 200 groups and interviewed more than 70 leaders of spiritually innovative projects. Their work reveals both the deep lineages and long-standing traditions that ground them and the emerging skill sets leaders need to prepare them for the road ahead:

- **Community fluency** – Discovering the gifts, lived experiences, needs, and strengths of a community and taking action that creates meaningful impact in a place.
- **Systems thinking** – Understanding the bigger picture, the historical, racial, economic, and spiritual architectures shaping a community’s needs and possibilities, and how these forces interact to influence behavior and outcomes.
- **Cross-sector collaboration** – Building relationships and collaborating across sectors, from social services to cultural organizations to faith institutions, to meet holistic human needs.
- **Cultural and interspiritual competence** – Navigating pluralistic communities and relationships with humility, curiosity, and respect, recognizing that the sacred manifests similarly and differently across traditions and cultures.
- **Entrepreneurship** – Experimenting, building, and run-

ning initiatives grounded in mission and reality, leveraging existing structures while innovating beyond conventional models.

- **Network literacy** – Using digital and relational tools to illuminate and activate the connections within an ecosystem. Building, mapping, and strengthening the web of relationships that enable care, meaning, and collaboration to flow.
- **Bold imagination** – Seeing beyond the boundaries and walls of traditional ministry to where meaning, justice, care, and belonging are already being nurtured and finding creative ways to support and amplify them.

Together, these skills reflect the capacities reported by leaders in the study, highlighting how they engage communities and support meaningful forms of spiritual life.

Participants in the study noted concerns about how meaning making and spiritual support may shift in environments shaped by technological and economic systems, emphasizing the importance of infrastructural support for religious leaders.

Legacy institutions as supporting protagonists

Instead of reacting to decline, legacy religious institutions and theological educators can act as builders and catalysts of the spiritual innovation rather than bystanders. They carry invaluable assets: wisdom traditions, trusted networks, and abundant resources that can support, amplify, and steward this work.

The research suggests several areas where institutions may play a constructive role, including:

- **Nurture the grassroots** – Recognize, resource, and partner with local innovators already experimenting with rituals, networks of care, and community-centered spiritual practices.
- **Equip new leaders** – Form leaders with skill-building that blends theological depth, community fluency, systems thinking, bold imagination, and the competencies that enable this work. Seminaries can prepare leaders to step directly into the emergent spaces and gaps.

- **Amplify flourishing** – Support initiatives that cultivate community resilience, social cohesion, shared meaning, and equitable care, moving beyond metrics like congregational membership growth.

Religious and spiritual third spaces such as [Glean Network](#), [Sacred Design Lab](#), [innoFaith](#), [Faith Matters Network](#), and the [Chaplaincy Innovation Lab](#) are already doing this work at the organizational level. They are incubating and equipping the next generation of spiritually innovative leaders, making the case for spiritual innovation as a critical field of practice.

A call to action for institutions

Ministry is no longer confined to pulpits or denominational structures. Yet, legacy institutions and theological educators have a pivotal role to play. They can serve as enablers and stewards, supporting grassroots creativity, equipping leaders to navigate complex social, political, cultural, and technological landscapes, and providing platforms where sacred life can flourish. They can offer places of rest and replenishment for leaders, providing abundant access points for spiritual growth and development.

The findings highlight a trend toward embracing collaboration over control, experimentation over rigidity, and values-driven sustainability over bureaucratic models. Seminars can expand curricula or strategically partner with other institutions to include the new skill stack, preparing leaders not only with theological grounding, but with systems leadership, networked thinking, agile adaptation, and operational resilience.

Toward a sacred living ecosystem

How institutions respond and how they nurture the next generation of spiritual innovators will shape meaning, belonging, and human flourishing for decades to come. This is a moment to move from preservation to courageous partnership, from hierarchy to co-creation, and from reaction to visionary leadership. Based on Mapping Spiritual Innovation Project study results, a good first step could be embracing this new skill stack and supporting the innovators already doing this work on the ground. In this way, the sacred becomes a living ecosystem, guided and sustained so that many diverse pathways of healing, belonging, and purpose can unfold for a world in urgent need of change.



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