



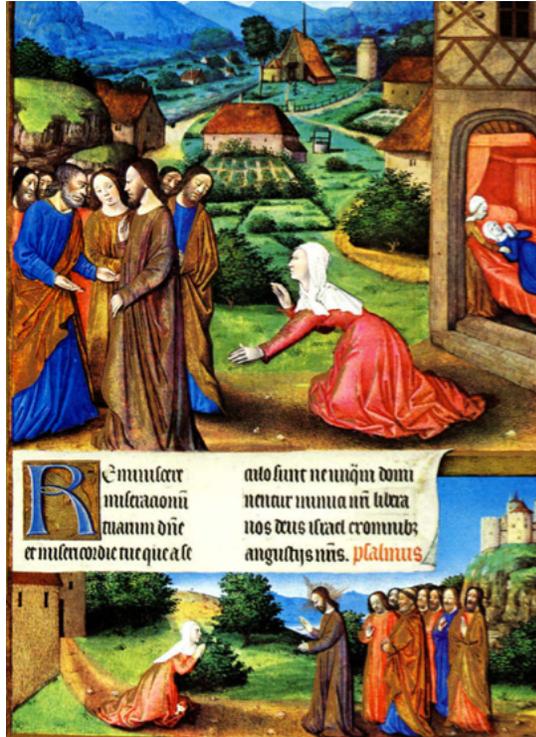
Stolle Creative
empathy • strategy • design

Design thinking is an empathy-driven, human-centered approach to addressing complex problems. When ministry leaders embrace empathy, we encounter others in new ways that can shape ministry.

Theology and Design

Jesus & Empathy

In Matthew 15, Jesus and his disciples are traveling in Phoenicia, where they encounter a Syro-Phoenician woman. Her child is sick, and she begs Jesus for help. Jesus ignores her and tells the disciples he was sent for the people of Israel—not foreign Gentiles like this woman.



"Christ and the Canaanite Woman" by Jean Colombe, 1485-89. Located at Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

In an act of desperation, the woman throws herself in Jesus' way and begs him for help. And Jesus? He uses a racial slur for the day, calling her a dog.

Undeterred or desperate (or both), this woman responds that even the dogs get crumbs that fall from the master's table. And in response to these words, something changes.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The child is healed immediately.

When he calls her woman instead of a dog, Jesus recognizes her humanity. As Matthew's Gospel continues, we see that Jesus leaves this encounter changed. His ministry expands beyond the people of

Israel to include foreigners—not only this Syro-Phoenician woman, but other Gentiles too.

Jesus is susceptible to empathy, which is demonstrated in this story and seen in his miracles, in his grief, in his exhaustion, in his death, and through the resurrection.

Jesus' encounters with others impact the direction of his ministry—and of the church that follows.

Design Cycle

For many years, the focus of design was aesthetics, styling, and form. While those are important, design goes deeper than aesthetics:

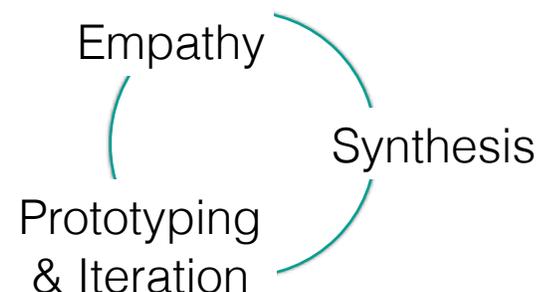
"Design is not about styling. It's not about technology. It's about radical change in meaning. These are things that people were not asking for, but when they saw them, they fell in love."

- Roberto Verganti

Today, under the banner of "design thinking," the world of design has expanded. Designers consider function, user experience, and meaning when making something.

Most design thinking models include these basic parts:

1. Empathy
When trying to create a product or service for someone else to use, it makes sense to start with them, where they're at right now.
2. Synthesis
After observing and hearing stories from real people's lives, it's critical to spend time sense-making and generating ideas for what to do next.
3. Prototyping & Iteration
Sketching, building low-fidelity prototypes, and testing them with users helps designers quickly figure out what does and doesn't work and find opportunities for improvement.





The Embrace Infant Warmer, embraceglobal.org

From the Swiffer to bank savings programs to infant incubators designed for rural communities in developing nations, design thinking is changing the world in small and large ways.

"We are moving from the design of categories of 'products' to designing for peoples' purposes."
- Liz Sanders

Wicked Problems

Increasingly, design is being used to address complex social and cultural problems, sometimes referred to as "wicked problems." The term was originally coined by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber in the context of social planning and has been applied to other fields. Ritter and Webber identified 10 characteristics of a wicked problem:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation"; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

"Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning" by Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber. *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155-169. Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Amsterdam. http://www.uctc.net/mwebber/Rittel+Webber+Dilemmas+General_Theory_of_Planning.pdf

Wicked problems are particularly challenging because the requirements for a solution are incomplete, contradictory, and changing. There's no easy answer.

But wicked problems are just the type of problems that have been an important part of Christian ministry over the centuries.

Design Research and Empathy

A critical first step to addressing wicked problems is developing empathy for people who are affected by the problem.

Designers often do this through *generative research*, using methods inspired by anthropologists and ethnographers to observe people, empathize with them, and better understand their behaviors, motivations, and needs.

Generative research is problem-seeking rather than problem-solving and an acknowledgement that the designer may not *actually* know what problem to try to solve—yet.

Later in the design process, after generating a number of ideas and prototyping them, designers conduct *evaluative research*. Methods can range from getting feedback from users on rough sketches, to piloting a version of the project, to anything in between. This form of research reveals whether the design meets users' needs and has a positive emotional impact. Evaluative research is still empathy-driven and qualitative in nature, but the focus shifts toward solutions for future revisions.

Whether generative or evaluative, design research can be fun. It's a great opportunity to learn how others see the world, listen deeply into another person's experiences, and discover opportunities to serve or improve their lives in small and sometimes big ways.

On the flip side, design research can be challenging when it approaches painful topics. The participant might cry, get angry, or express guilt over an experience. And the researcher needs to be vulnerable and open to change.

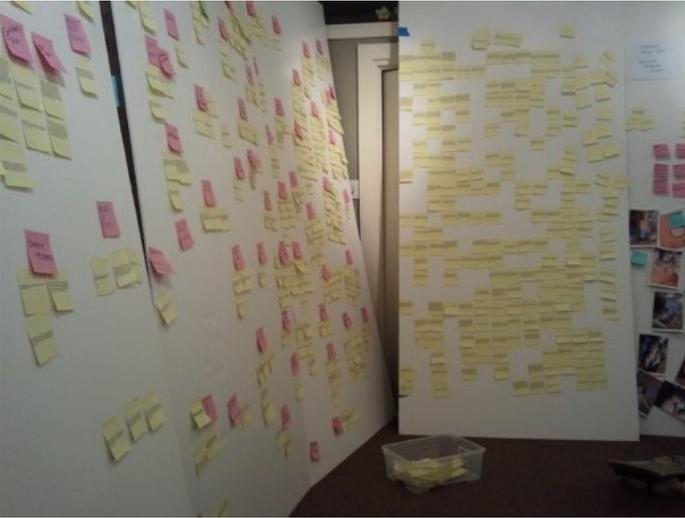
"Empathy is no utopia. It is not idealistic but nevertheless unveils something new, something transformative. It reveals personhood and moves us to share in it, to build our very lives around sharing in our persons."

- Andrew Root

Making Assumptions Visible

Empathy-driven research is powerful not only because it invites people into the creative process, but also because it exposes the designer's assumptions and biases. Bias isn't necessarily bad—a person must have a

point of view in order to create something. However, acknowledging those implicit biases reduces the chance of the product, service, or system negatively impacting the intended audience.



Foam boards containing quotes and photos from design research.

One way to do this is to visually display the research stories where the design work will happen. Take pictures and hang them on the walls. Pin key quotes and stories to bulletin boards. Saturate the workspace with reminders of the people who shared their experiences, and use this for inspiration through the rest of the design process—from synthesis, to ideation, to prototyping, to production.

The Power of Design

If you are looking at this handout, you most likely create and design stuff, whether ministries, programs, learning environments, or something else.

You are a designer.

With that opportunity comes a risk: as a creator, you have a disproportionate amount of power over others. The design choices you make impacts how others relate to one another, what they learn, and how they behave.

This is why empathy and design thinking are valuable to ministry leaders. These practices foster a shift in power: the leader changes to a facilitator and translator. Instead of designing *for*, you can design *with*. The designer sets aside some power and privilege in favor of inviting people to participate. To co-create. To be part of the ongoing creative work of God.

May you experience the beauty, power, and vulnerability of the incarnation. As you hear others' stories, take note of your assumptions and biases. And then go out and create something beautiful, for and with others.

Design Challenge

Want to put design thinking into practice? Start here!

- 1. Identify what “problem space” to address.**
What domain or context interests you? Who do you want to learn from?
- 2. Step back. Take a breath.**
Don't think of solutions. Don't start talking to people who are part of that world—at least not yet!
- 3. Discover your biases.**
Get out a stack of sticky notes and a marker. Write out your assumptions about what is happening in that problem space, one per note. (Bonus: Go to a place that exemplifies the domain, and jot down your assumptions as you observe what's happening.)
- 4. Exorcise your assumptions.**
Find a big, empty wall. Fill it with your sticky notes. Take it all in. Acknowledge your biases. Give yourself permission to question and let go of them.

Designing with others? Externalize your assumptions individually or as a group. Then review the sticky notes together, and discuss what to leave behind as you seek empathy with others.

Next Steps

Check out the next session at stollecreeative.com/resources to learn several methods for generative research. Keep your sticky notes handy because you'll reflect on your biases as you develop your research questions and conduct interviews!

Learn More

For more on design thinking, check out these resources:

Articles & Books

- “[Design Thinking 101](#)” by Sarah Gibbons
- “[Design Thinking Comes of Age](#)” by Jon Kolko
- [101 Design Methods](#) by Vijay Kumar
- [Creative Confidence](#) by Tom & David Kelley
- [Wicked Problems](#) by Jon Kolko

Toolkits

- Austin Center for Design resource library library.ac4d.com
- frog design Collection Action Toolkit frogdesign.com/work/frog-collective-action-toolkit
- IDEO's Design Kits designkit.org/resources
- Stanford d.school resources dschool.stanford.edu/resources