

Cross Current



Real help for real life

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Digging Below the Surface

Alfred Ely Beach had tunnel vision, but not in the usual sense.

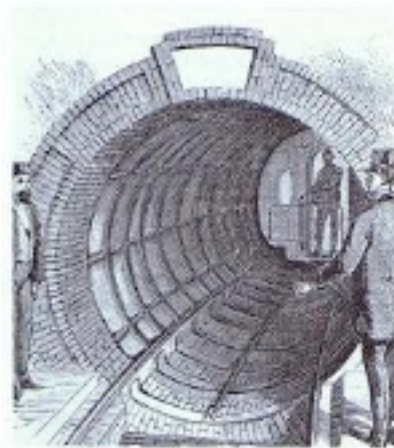
Lawyer, inventor and publisher of *Scientific American* magazine, the *New Yorker* wanted to build America's first underground subway but got nothing but resistance from city authorities who wanted a more conventional elevated railway. So early in 1868, the entrepreneur made a secret deal with the owner of Devlin's Clothing Store in Lower Manhattan and set to work with a team of volunteers.

Under cover of night, the visionaries met for 58 days in the basement of the shop and used picks, shovels and a specially-made boring device to gouge out a tunnel nine feet around and a city block long. Rocks and dirt were bagged and spirited away in wagons with muffled wheels to cut down on noise.

Beach figured if he could just show the critics his concept worked, the authorities would give him the necessary approvals to build an entire subway. So, in pieces, the track and a luxurious rail car were taken through the store basement and assembled in the tunnel.

But Beach's didn't use a steam engine to power his underground railway, like other projects. Instead, he designed the Western Tornado, a steam-driven, 100-horsepower wind machine that blew the rail car along the track, then sucked it back. Top speed was 10 miles an hour.

On February 26, 1870, the inventor threw a big party and invited New York's movers and shakers who giddily rode the 22-passenger car underneath Broadway. Everyone gushed over the new technology



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love keeps
anything from
coming between us!*

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and Beach was sure both City Hall and the state would fund his dream of a clean, sophisticated and efficient system that would carry 20,000 passengers a day along five miles of track.

But they didn't. Financial giants like John Jacob Astor III worked against him, worried an underground system would destabilize the buildings they owned above ground, and collapse Trinity Church, the city's highest structure at the time. In the end, Beach had to give up his dream. Steam-powered, elevated subways became the standard.

Ironically, workers building New York's first commercial underground subway in 1912 accidentally broke through the wall of Beach's earlier tunnel where the badly deteriorated train was still on the track. They took pictures and put up a plaque, then progress moved on. But not without vindicating Beach and his vision.

In the church, too, new methods and approaches are often met with scepticism, suspicion and outright opposition from those anxious to maintain tradition or protect the status quo. Sometimes there are legitimate fears of violating scriptural principles. Sometimes people on both sides of the divide just want their own way.

But true spiritual visionaries know the best way to answer the critics is by demonstrating that godly, biblical innovation works. They quietly set about their business and let time and spiritual fruit speak for themselves. For all the in-one-era-and-out-the-other fads that have come and gone in church circles, there are other prevalent and profound evolutions that have resonated with the faithful and changed both opinions and lives.

A good example is the newly-resurgent house church movement where believers find strength and community in small groups who meet in homes, or the continuing development of contemporary Christian worship that resonates because of its more modern and emotional heart language. Despite their success, these innovations are still feared by some who worry they'll destabilize the traditional and perhaps even lead to the collapse of the church. In many congregations, wonderful innovations are stifled by those who feel they have something to lose.

But we must be open to the vision and the power of the Wind who's well able to push along the church when progress is biblical and necessary. In our personal lives, and in the church, we must never be afraid to go below the surface. Dig. Dig deep. *Rick Gamble*