

CHAPTER NINE

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Let me introduce you to four individuals who typify many people in our congregations.

Gloria is a Sunday School teacher in the three-year old department. She loves the children, enjoys her teaching ministry and has continued in that department for over three years. Last fall, however, her positive attitude quickly changed. Her irritability and defensiveness coincided with the leadership team's decision to switch curriculum. Gloria would no longer be allowed to use her favorite materials. While Gloria continued teaching in the department, she made it clear that she didn't like the change.

Though Jeff had been teaching fourth-grade boys for over a year, the new children's director only recently became aware of trouble in his class. Whether his problem was discomfort with the teacher's manual, or that he simply did not prepare properly, Jeff repeatedly spent class time reviewing the books of the Bible or playing Bible baseball. At department training meetings he agreed to follow the quarterly, but after a few weeks he would again drift into doing his own thing. Jeff simply wanted to do what he was comfortable doing; he resisted change.

Nancy worked in the nursery for almost a decade and believed that all Christians should serve willingly. But when the nursery committee began to talk about employing a paid nursery attendant to work with the volunteers, she was furious. The chairman of the committee met with Nancy to explain that the paid worker's presence during all the services would ease the rotation schedule, but more importantly, familiarity with the "resident grandma" would reduce some anxiety within the children. Nancy wasn't convinced. In fact, she laid down the ultimatum that she would resign if someone were hired. Six weeks later, the day the new attendant arrived, was the last day Nancy served in the church.

Fred was charter member of his church, but eventually he didn't like how fast it was growing. When the deacons announced that the church would begin double services, and he learned that his Sunday School class was switched to 11:00 A.M., he started visiting other churches. Though he eventually came back, he never did return to his Bible class. Going to church at 9:30 A.M. and Sunday School afterwards was a change he could not handle.

These illustrations are not isolated incidents. Each of us could give dozens of examples where people have demonstrated a resistance to change. Sometimes the resistance is mild. Other times it comes in the form of blackmail (e.g., “If you change our room location, we’ll quit coming”). Variety may be the spice of life, but people are also creatures of habit. They resist things that cause them discomfort.

Resistance to change is not unique to the church, but the nature of ministry makes managing change especially difficult for a local congregation. First, we have an unchanging message, and implementing change may appear like we are tinkering with the message. Second, we work with volunteers, and therefore we do not have the clout that government, business or other institutions may have to implement change. Third, the church is a family, and we try not to offend anyone, especially the proverbial weaker brother.

Nevertheless resistance to change will paralyze a congregation if permitted. A church committed to evangelism and edification must use all means possible to point people to Christ and present them mature in him. While biblical purposes remain unmovable, the means of accomplishing these purposes must remain flexible. To state it in familiar terms, our commitment is to “function” rather than “form.”

While people’s resistance should not inhibit church leaders from moving ahead with changes they deem important, there are several practices that can encourage receptivity to change. Pastors can help their congregations by: creating an atmosphere where change is acceptable, building trust in leadership, making sure a specific change is the best alternative, communicating change early and thoroughly, implementing change carefully and keeping all lines of communication open during implementation.

Create an Atmosphere Where Change Is Acceptable

Change occurs more easily in a church with a positive and open atmosphere. A healthy atmosphere is one that keeps ministry, rather than methods, before people. It focuses on function, not form. It stresses the positive, not the negative. It holds up the unity of the body of Christ over individualism.

This does not mean that the individual is unimportant, that a time to express something negative is inappropriate or that all methods are equally good. Rather it is an intentional working together for a united purpose. Brothers and sisters are collaborating to present all people mature in Christ.

Focusing on ministry goals lifts people beyond particulars to see the overarching reason for ministry. Elders may get caught up in their own responsibility, while club workers primarily value Wednesday night. Sermons and Bible studies that review commitment to the great Commission (Matt. 28), the importance of education, fellowship, worship, and evangelism (Acts 2:42-27) or the necessity of leading people into maturity in Christ (Col. 1:28-29), remind congregants of the church’s unique mission.

Specialized ministries target subpopulations of a congregation. But whether it’s the traditional Sunday School or the new crisis pregnancy service, *representing programs as vehicles of ministry* encourages flexibility. Church activities as ends in themselves lose meaning. Singers are not musicians, but leaders of worship; teachers are not manager of instruction, but communicators of truth. Dynamic

churches frequently ask: “Are these programs *the best* vehicles for accomplishing ministries goals?”

Fostering healthy discontent also creates an atmosphere where change is acceptable. Advertising companies recognize that people will not move to a different product unless there is some displeasure with their current product. The same is true for the church. For example, Pastor Jahns worked several months with the Discipleship Team to delineate the limitations of their Sunday School structure. When they finally presented an alternative format to the board, the church’s leadership was already one step closer to adopting it.

Painting a vision of possibilities also keeps the soil of change fertile. “Years from now we may find it necessary to worship on a Saturday evening,” Dr. Smith announced to his congregation. The morning sermon was on worship, and his comment was made to illustrate that worship is not restricted by location or time. But by using this illustration, and many others like it, Roy Smith was subtly opening his people to varieties of ministry possibilities. Some of these ideas, after much lead time, he hope to implement.

Focusing on ministry goals, representing programs as vehicles of ministry, fostering healthy discontent, and painting a vision of possibilities creates an atmosphere where change is acceptable.

Build Trust in Leadership

People are more willing to follow a leader with demonstrated integrity. Therefore, establishing credibility in those guiding the congregation is imperative. When pastors or program leader make changes too early in a ministry, they have not given the congregation sufficient time to trust them. The people don’t know if they are really “for them,” or if they are just driving a personal agenda.

For example, in one town a pastor promised: “Build a church that will seat a thousand and I’ll pack it out every Sunday.” Shortly after the facility was completed, the pastor left. Except for an occasional interdenominational rally, the building is never filled. Each Sunday that congregation enters a visible reminder that pastors can’t be trusted. A congregation “burned” by a pastor, is slow to welcome the ideas of a new minister.

The admonition against placing a “novice” in office underscores the importance of credibility. Pastors are better off building trust levels first, then fighting for innovations later. Demonstrating credibility now fosters receptivity for later recommendations. The magnitude of any change is related to the magnitude of the leadership’s credibility. The more unsettling a change (like renaming the church, or modifying its constitution), the greater the credibility needed on the part of the leader. The pastor’s affirmation of staff members and elders also builds trust, and makes a congregation more willing to follow the recommendations of these leaders.

Credibility is also related to the visibility of leadership. *Assuring availability* enhances trust. When Pastor Gardner arrived at Westside Church he preached from Ephesians on the believer’s wealth in Christ. After a year of study, parishioners were heard talking about their position in Christ, and many understood the pastor’s task as equipping that saints for the work of service.

While Pastor Gardner’s preaching contributed to a healthy church environment, his personal involvement with people was even more motivational. It was often in

off-campus settings that he learned the needs of his people. Members began to feel that the pastor was really concerned for them. In a similar way he encouraged deacon involvement with their "little flocks." Their personal contact, and especially acts of kindness during illnesses and times of bereavement drew them closer to the congregation.

Communicating motives helps the congregation understand why specific changes are forthcoming. In less formal settings pastors are able to share their vision for dynamic, relevant ministry. In committee meetings, home settings, and during luncheons, they can affirm the church's unchanging purpose, while encouraging innovative methods.

Word of Life Church, located in the Sunbelt, had an ongoing problem with winter attendance increases. The church already had identical worship services at 9:45 A.M. and 11:00 A.M. In the winter months, when many retired folk vacationed in the south, the church would add an 8:15 worship service to its schedule. Unfortunately, the 8:15 service drew very few people, and consequently the attendance bulge at the 9:45 service was not relieved.

To deal with its local situation, the church council decided to schedule the normal church programming at 8:45 and 10:00, adding an 11:15 service in the winter. The rationale was that more people would likely come at the 11:15 time than would come at an earlier 8:15 service. After a six-month trial the unsuccessful new arrangement was dropped, and the old schedule reinstated. Interestingly, throughout that period of change, the church did not seem to suffer in either spirit or attendance.

Why could Word of Life survive that major worship change, while other churches cannot even change their bulletin covers? Several people said it was because they trusted Pastor Dennis, and believed that the staff was trying its best to solve the church's growth problem. Some churches would have mutiny in the pews if the council changed the morning worship service to 10:00 A.M. This church moved into an experiment, and then moved out, without repercussion, because of high trust in its leadership.

Establishing credibility, assuring availability, and communicating motives builds trust in leadership.

Make Sure a Specific Change Is the Best Alternative

The psychologist John B. Watson demonstrated the reality of "one-trial learning." For example, if you enter a classroom and sit on the left, the next time you enter the room, you are more likely to sit in that same general location. Over time, these responses deepen and become embedded. Whether or not a given church practice is the best form for accomplishing a biblical function is irrelevant to people biased by habit. To them the form has meaning because of its association with their worship of God. Therefore, before changes are implemented, leadership must have good assurance that a new suggestion is the best alternative.

Involving those who will be affected by anticipated changes is more than common courtesy. It allows "stakeholders" who feel ownership early input in the process. At times they could shed light on the history that led up to the present structures. Some may also have insights pertinent to a good decision.

But not everybody affected by a change should be part of the implementations process. *Working through a small change team* is more effective. Key leaders related to an issue are best able to strategize, communicate and implement a change. Coordination and promotion is best accomplished through a representative, yet select smaller group.

Utilizing problem-solving techniques minimizes poor changes. Good problem solving moves from identifying possible solutions, to selecting the best solution. Short cutting this process may limit the best solution from being discovered. Let me illustrate. Midland Bible Fellowship had a multiple-board system. While seven boards provided a good check and balance, it was sometimes difficult for the deacon board to give leadership to the church. For example, on one occasion the deacon board recommended expanding the church staff. They hoped that a new associate pastor would not only assist the senior minister, but give special attention to the youth program. The board unanimously approved a recommendation for the expansion, but the trustee board refused to recommend the needed funds to support the position. The trustees' conviction was that the church could not raise the new amount of money.

After a lot of blood, sweat and tears, Midland Fellowship appointed a constitution revision committee and eventually moved to a one-board system. Its desire was to have one official board (a deacon board) giving oversight to several appointed subcommittees. The only elected officials in the new constitution were the deacons themselves. Now, five years later, the leadership wishes they had more elected officials, and more representation in decision-making. They have seen the organizational structure of other churches in their denomination that use a church council, comprised of ministry (committee) heads. In their haste to move away from a multiple board system, they chose a one-board system that had little congregational representation. Now, although they would prefer a broader, yet still unified structure, they are afraid to make another change.

Involving those affected by anticipated changes, working through a small change group, and utilizing problem-solving techniques, will assure a specific change is the best alternative.

Communicate Change Early and Thoroughly

One Fortune 500 company has as its employee relations motto, "No surprises." They want all of their workers to feel in on what's happening in the business.

Conveying ideas in familiar terms is an essential part of the change process. While many people are offended by a surprise change, they are equally upset by misinformation. Clarity is essential from verbal presentations to articles in church publications.

Communicating personally the rationale and implementation strategy for a change goes a long way. A congregational letter may accurately describe a constitution revision, but a personal phone call to clarify questions tells members that the leadership is personally interested in them. In fact, many personal contacts *prior* to a business meeting, will alleviate much of the "venting" that takes place when people feel they have not other opportunities for voicing their concerns.

Sometimes leaders are in a hurry to make a change and cannot understand why members are dragging their heels. In an attempt to show the value of an innovation,

the present situation is sometimes devalued. While fostering healthy discontent does help open people to change, *accepting the feelings of present owners* is a realistic counterbalance. People's feelings are real to them, and leadership must recognize their legitimacy. Giving thanks for what the current form has accomplished in the past, and painting a vision of what the new form could do in the future, wins more allegiance than putting down the former vehicle.

The communication process is also enhanced by *associating innovations with traditional values*. When Valley Community Church wanted to change versions of its pew Bibles, leaders promoted the importance of using a translation that present members as well as visitors could best understand. "We want people seeking Christ to be able to follow along as the word is taught," said Pastor Donaldson. While some folks were still unhappy with the change, the transition was relatively smooth because it was linked to the value of more clearly understanding the Bible.

Some leaders err by trying to squelch opposition, but *allowing for disagreement* is a better long term strategy for assuring acceptance. While people's *views* are challenged by proposed changes, their sense of *worth* is devalued when not allowed to voice displeasure.

By conveying ideas in familiar terms, communicating personally, accepting feelings of the present owners, associating innovations with traditional values and allowing for disagreement, leadership maintains integrity and the change gains validity.

Implement Change Carefully

The old expression is true: "People can adjust to almost anything if it stands still long enough." The problem arises when we make many changes in a short amount of time.

The more I study congregational life the more I view change as a process that requires time. People are not upset by a new pastor who makes some changes even during the "honeymoon." But they do not want change to overwhelm them. The final step in implementing change may move swiftly, but the overall process—planning, ownership, communication and implementation—needs adequate time.

Recognizing that people are different is basic to implementation of change. In every congregation there are "innovators," those creative leaders way ahead of the pack. At the opposite end there are "resisters" who want everything status quo. But the majority of the people fall on a continuum somewhere in between. Some are "early adopters" while others are "later adopters," but as a whole this larger middle group will accept the change.¹

While allowing resisters to express their feelings, large investments of personal time with them are rarely productive. *Winning the support of "legitimatizers,"* however, is critical. These are the people a congregation follows. They might be a part of the formal leadership or a part of the informal structure. Either way congregants want to know what they think of the change. Convincing a congregation that a change is legitimate is more easily accomplished when respected, key people support the move.

Some changes are relatively minor and require little effort to implement. Others need careful study and refinement. *Adopting a trial form first* is one way of

maintaining leader integrity, while allowing a congregation to see the merits of the suggestion. For example, one church experimenting with double services decided to implement the change in the spring. The March 1st start-up coincided with their peak attendance, but also allowed them a three-month trial, since the church would be back to one service during the summer. Knowing that things would be “back to normal” by June helped some people to accept the trial period. The new double arrangement was so successful however, that plans were made to begin the new format on a permanent basis the following September.

In the above example, Williamstown Church practiced another important implementation principle. *Evaluating the innovation* was assured because of the trial period. On the first Sunday in May the congregation was surveyed on the new arrangement. Based on the responses and the feedback from the Christian Education and Worship Committees, the elders were able to make an objective assessment leading to their final recommendation.

People *can* adjust to almost anything that comes their way if it arrives in manageable phases. By recognizing that people are different, winning the support of influencers, adopting a trial from first and evaluating the innovation, careful change assures good change.

Keep All Lines of Communication Open during Implementation

Good communication helped Heritage Church change one of its long traditions. For more than twenty years its evening service had been at 7:00 P.M. At one of the board meetings Pastor Stubbs asked the deacons to give consideration to the pros and cons of moving the evening service an hour earlier. The initial reason for his suggestion was that a 6:00 P.M. service would benefit the weekly youth fellowship that met after the evening service. The earlier hour would allow the teens to meet in homes and still conclude by 9:30 P.M.

As the board discussed the possible change, they also saw its value for seniors who preferred not to drive after dark, and for families who wanted their school age children in bed early. Though they anticipated some resistance, the board decided to change the hour. The board's decision was made in the winter, but implementation was scheduled for spring, the first Sunday of Daylight Savings Time.

The good lead time between decision and implementation allowed successive issues of the church newsletter to present the rationale for a 6:00 P.M. service. As opportunities arose to talk about the change, the board promoted in enthusiastically. When people expressed their disagreement, the deacons remained cordial, yet reaffirmed the benefits of the earlier hour. The motive for change (a better time for younger families, teens, and seniors) was always kept before the people.

During the first month of change, several families were vocal in their preference for the later hour. For some, it meant the change of dinner scheduling. Others preferred a longer afternoon. As questions came up, the leaders would deal with the issues, avoiding any put-down of the critic. Showing understanding, yet gently pointing to the value of the new hour, they encouraged acceptance. Within a year, people seemed to forget they had ever had a 7:00 P.M. service.

This illustration reveals three principles that Heritage Church handled well. *Anticipating resistance* helped them formalize their rationale and provide enough lead time for acceptance to grow.

Depersonalizing dissent focused disagreement on the issues not the people. Providing an open ear to those with criticism kept the lines of communication open for clarification and further promotion of the idea.

Affirming the value of the innovation elevated the discussions above traditions and personal preferences to what was best for the families, teens, and seniors in the congregation. Their decision to change, their careful implementation, and their open communication made possible a smooth transition.

Conclusion

Almost everyone believes that change is important. We would rather drive our cars to work than walk. We would rather watch the news on television than wait for a messenger to herald word by foot. And we would rather use our indoor plumbing than an outhouse. Change is not bad; rather it is helpful.

Too much change, coming too fast, can be problematic. But a blind conservatism is equally detrimental. The Lord's ministers are entrusted with the unchanging Gospel of reconciliation. Their goal is to present all people mature in Christ, and this prioritizes the tasks of evangelism and edification. While these purposes are timeless, changes within our culture continually make possible new ways of accomplishing these goals with greater relevance.

"Is this change really necessary?" That's the question people will ask when a new idea is presented. If a congregation is confident in its leadership, and understands the reasons behind a change, it will likely offer less resistance to a new form that will help the church carry out its biblical functions.

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¹ These terms are used by Merton Strommen of the Search Institute, but are similar to other writings in the field.

A Checklist for Change

Do our leaders. . .

- ? Create an Atmosphere Where Change Is Acceptable
- ? Build Trust in Church Leadership
- ? Make Sure a Specific Change Is the Best Alternative
- ? Communicate Change Early and Thoroughly
- ? Implement Change Carefully
- ? Keep All Lines of Communication Open during Implementation