



Six keys for leaders to make changes without waves

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When shifts are necessary, church leaders, families and decision makers should work through issues with intentionality.

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During the host of seminars, webinars and workshops we've had the privilege of doing over the last year, conference attendees and readers have surfaced a number of issues that we are giving serious attention to for other writing and seminar directions. Some issues include:

- What do you do when baby boomers become barriers to church growth?
- How do you build support for new ideas?
- How do you make needed shifts in the church without making waves of turmoil?
- How do you arrive at a mutual understanding of generationally distinctive values?
- What's involved in building bridges instead of barriers between generations?

How can church leaders make needed shifts without making waves in the church family? When it comes to introducing and managing change most clergy are inexperienced, uninformed and/or unwilling to introduce change in the church. After all, some of those key church families and leaders write the check that the clergy's family depends on. Many pastors do not have the gifts or the calling to be a leader. They usually come to a church under job descriptions that are particularly crafted by church leaders so the pastor would care for them, and teach, shepherd and manage programs for them.

Rarely does a pastoral ministry description focus on leadership in addition to introducing and managing change. But often it is the skill set the church needs most in order to move forward. In today's rapidly changing culture there is deteriorating interest in churches.

Systemic and radical change

Some people can deal with incremental change and survive and maybe even thrive. Most of our churches are in situations calling for systemic and radical change. Many of our churches are filled with dedicated senior adults who staff programs, give tithes and design ministries. Increasingly the younger generation, particularly those who haven't grown up in church families, are not even thinking about church in their weekly activities.

How are pastors and churches to respond to the growing apathy of the culture while preserving those who are in the current membership and leadership pool? How can a church make shifts without creating unnecessary waves of discontent?

Much of the last decade of my professional and personal life has been unlearning and relearning so my ministry would be more effective in this rapidly shifting, primarily unchurched culture. Suffice it to say a major shift is leading from a "telling posture" to that of an "asking posture."

Building ownership and clarity is critical for change to take place. This takes time, patience and

skill along with determination, prayer and focus. All are equally critical to this change process and preserving wholeness in the family of faith while accomplishing the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Toolkit for church leaders

The toolkit for change is found in the timeliness of working through several key questions with leaders, families and decision makers. This must be done in a methodical, intentional and prayerful manner, being sensitive to feelings (transition) while being clear about needed change.

Research tells us that if you can get about 25-30 percent of your existing attending adults to buy into a new idea they can lead a culture shift in the church. So often the easiest groups to engage are those who are newcomers to the church, those who have children or grandchildren and those who are still in the community at large but mostly inactive in the church. These folks are looking for something meaningful that works to reach their loved ones. The newcomers can help create a new value and leadership model from the time they enter the fellowship.

Consider the following powerful coaching questions as tools for finding and following clarity, focus, building ownership and understanding among all key decision makers.

Key 1: What are the needed shifts? This question opens up great conversations that immediately reveal what people value and what works for them or those they love and what doesn't. Discovering together what shifts are needed for a church to be more effective is essential.

Key 2: What are the shifts about anyway? Once the needed shifts are listed by key persons, prioritize them by inviting the group to vote on the top five that would make the most difference and impact in reaching persons they currently find unreached. After the five are identified list all the reasons these are needed. Invite the group into this dialogue and write the reasons for all to see on newsprint. This opens the door for additional considerations.

Key 3: Who needs to know? Hopefully, you already have most of the key leaders, decision makers and family members in the loop of dialogue. Ask that group who else needs to know about this? Invite those persons who mention the names of others if they will approach them prayerfully and intentionally to raise their awareness of these issues and to get their feedback. Often those in the initial dialogue legitimize the change for others.

Key 4: What do the dissenters need to know in order to buy-in to the proposed shift? It is very unlikely that everyone in a group or in your church will agree with all the proposed changes. Do not let this stop you — so many churches that are dying let the fragile feelings of a few stop the forward progress for many. Give the dissenters an opportunity to voice their concerns. Ask them what they need to know to buy-in. Give them your full hearing one time and then tell them you are not going to listen anymore and you will be sure their opinions are shared with the entire decision making groups. This is tough but essential.

Key 5: What timing is needed? Timing is everything in change and transition. Change, in most cases, does not need to happen overnight. However, if the utilities and mortgages cannot be paid due to lack of participation it may require radical change — otherwise patience, prayer and intentionality is sufficient. Craft a realistic timeline for making change happen and invite others to respond to this with their insights and concerns. People often have ideas many others have missed.

Key 6: Who can help move us forward? Change and transition will not happen if it all depends on the clergy. The more people in the pew that buy into this and have ownership of the new dream, the more effective and efficient the new wave will emerge. This system sounds simple in some ways, but it works. Follow the keys, use more questions than declarations and build ownership based on relationships people have with those disappointed or disenfranchised from the church or the faith.

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