

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Leadership

Navigating Change

“Life is flux,” wrote the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. *“The only constant is change!”* In the local church we are talking a lot about the paradigm shifts necessary for 21st Century vitality. A paradigm shift, as identified by American physicist Thomas Kuhn, is a fundamental change in the basic concepts and practices. It’s a transformation or a metamorphosis from one way of thinking to another. Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership without Easy Answers* distinguishes between “technical changes” (when we tinker around the edges – such as modifying a budget or fixing a boiler) and “adaptive changes” (such as launching a new worship experience or partnering in a new community ministry). The Church is often very content with technical tweaking, but it will take courageous adaptive thinking to equip us for future ministry. Most importantly it takes change agents – people who think innovatively and put their energy out in front of the curve.

In his work on change, Everett M. Rogers suggests there are five categories of people in every organization.

- The smallest, but most important catalysts for change are the **Innovators** (only about 3% of our congregations). Also referred to as the “brave,” innovators are idea generators. Sometimes they drive us nuts because every time we turn around they present some wacky new proposal! But they are critically important to the future of Christ’s Church. While pastors often fit in this category, it’s generally best if we pass those newfangled, crazy ideas to others (who are willing to bring them forth) so that we can continue to be the pastoral presence for the entire congregation and resist getting pigeonholed “for” or “against.”
- The **Early Adopters**, also known as the “respectable,” represent about 13% of most organizations. They tend to assess outcomes quickly and lend their support for change early on. They are often revered in the organization as key leaders.
- Rogers refers to the middle group (approximately 34%) is as the **Early Majority** (or the “thoughtful”), and they are the thinkers and reasoners who need to do some evaluation but soon thereafter become supportive.
- The **Late Majority** (or “skeptics”) represents another 34% of the congregation. They need serious convincing before eventually signing on to something new.
- Finally, Rogers refers to the most reluctant category as the **Laggards** or “traditionalists” (16%) who are predictably going to resist any and every change.

Strategically, it’s wise to bring proposals to a vote once we have secured many of the Early Majority (thoughtful) and some of the Late Majority (skeptics); otherwise it’s almost certain there won’t be sufficient support to enact the change. The movement toward becoming an Open & Affirming congregation is a fitting example. If we push a vote too soon, often times the result is an angry, divided church. If we delay too long, we frustrate the Early Adopters and we feel our prophetic voice has sold out to fear rather than stepped up in faith.

Timing is everything. Our faith encourages us to wait and pray for the “right” moment to make key decisions. Prayer is so essential in this discerning process. The Spirit will provide the signs and God will surely give us the nudges . . . when the time is right! In chess, when we aren’t sure about making a big, bold move, we simply push the pawns forward, until the right opportunity comes. Then we engage the rooks and bishops! In congregational leadership,

forcing decisions hastily invites significant anxiety and fails to capture sufficient buy in. Delaying too long risks the loss of momentum and prompts us to obsess too much over the angst of naysayers.

One often underestimated emotion around change is grief. Change is ultimately about loss – the things we have to give up. Imagine the early Jewish followers of Jesus who had to adjust to the notion that Gentiles could belong to the “Way” without observing all the religious ordinances and dietary customs of their tradition. Remember even further back, when the Hebrews returned from captivity in Babylon only to realize Jerusalem had changed. The Temple would not look the same. Sometimes working through a process of grief and letting go can be a healthy way to move forward.

Change – it’s what we least want and most need. Careful strategizing and prayerful discerning are essential. Timing is everything!

I’d love to hear your thoughts and ideas about navigating change! What has worked for you? What insights do you have about guiding your congregation through an adaptive journey? Please go to the [**blog site**](#) and join the conversation.

Shalom,

Franz

You can also find the first blog post “Good Governance” [here](#).