

When Churches See Change as a Crisis: Motivation as Helping People Through the Stages of Change

Introduction

For leaders dealing with a congregation undergoing change, it is very helpful to have some kind of model of change. Change is a frustrating thing for leaders because it is seldom clear what is going on or what the appropriate response should be. Models provide a perspective for sorting these uncertainties out.

Much of the literature concerning congregational change fails to recognize how difficult and painful it really can be. The programs and process for change they promote often are based on the assumption that everyone in a church appreciates the need to change and are willing to work together to affect it, given the right tools.

This model for change is for a different setting. This is applicable for a congregation which is hesitant (or even antagonistic) to change. It provides a framework for understanding the stages such a congregation can go through as it grapples with the need for change. The following is rooted in a model first suggested back in 1971. The Alban Institute subsequently came across it and found that it had a very real application in the life of both congregations and whole denominations.

The following framework is a broad generalization. It may not fit the reader's situation perfectly, nor may everyone in your congregation be in the same phase of the changes. This framework is simply to provide "a new set of glasses" through which to observe your church. If it clarifies things for you, then the framework will serve you.

It should be stated initially that, more often than not, organizations such as churches engage in change only when they feel some sort of threat. A very common threat today tends to be environmental change. For example, a congregation may have been formed in a booming rural community 100 years ago. Since then, however, the steady urbanization of Canada may have resulted in the slow decline in the town's population and the enticement of young adults to move to the "big city" seeking jobs. This slow but real change for the town will have a subsequent impact on the life of the church, which may find itself aging and declining like the town. As the town's change has a growing impact on the church, there will be a growing sense of "crisis" among the members as they see their future threatened. Let's use this example to explore the phases of change in this model.

This framework is laid out in a sequential series of phases, which point out the different reactions of a congregation as it comes to deeper and deeper appreciation of the "crisis" upon it. The phases of this model, in order, are: Pre-Crisis, Shock, Defensive Retreat, Acknowledgement, Adaptation and Change.

Pre-Crisis

Changes in a congregation's environment are often slow and subtle. Typically the environmental change has been underway for some time before it's even noticed (such as the decline of the Canadian rural population). Then, when it is noticed, the changes may not be dramatic enough to foster a sense of "crisis" of any description. People can downplay what is happening around them and assume they can ride it out. Others may think "nothing's happening at all". Some people simply need more evidence than others to see that there is a concern. This can be a time of conflict as different people in a church have different views of what is going on.

The danger at this stage is not recognizing soon enough that something is happening around the church. The longer it takes to acknowledge that the environment is changing,

- the more time passes,
- the more the environment changes,
- the greater the gulf between "what is" in a church and "what needs to be".

The declining town church we've imagined may not be too concerned about changes in the town. But as the congregation declines in membership it is also losing resources in people and money needed to grapple with the issue.

Leaders at this stage need to be the early warning sentries to help church members appreciate the changes going on around them. By appreciating the situation sooner rather than later, the church gains:

- the advantage of having not as big a hurdle to cross,
- more resources at hand to deal with the situation.

Leaders can help at this point by presenting evidence drawn from the current reality which disconfirms members' perspectives that "everything is just fine". Using our example, the church leader can point out the decline in membership, the loss of grown children to the city, the subsequent aging of the church, how every year means pinching the budget just a little bit harder here and there, and point to the evidence of change in the town (empty storefronts, closed schools, fewer family farms, etc). The sooner the leader helps the congregation appreciate what is happening the smaller the sense of crisis and shock the church will feel.

Shock

Let's say our small church has slowly declined with the town. Some members have been worried but the majority has not become too concerned yet. The decline in membership continues slowly to the point where the church's revenue will now no longer meet expenses. All of a sudden there is dramatic, incontestable evidence that something is wrong. The situation is now generally acknowledged as real and a sense of "crisis" comes on. When a congregation comes to perceive that it's future is threatened somehow, it can enter into a state of shock. This is an initial, numbing

reaction to the situation. The challenge before the church can push the usual business off the agenda. Anxiety can confuse communications. Combined, these things can bring on a sense of chaos. The focus is the immediate problem (the lack of funds) rather than its root causes (environmental change and the congregation's assumptions about its life). Concern is focused on the question "what will happen to us?" The energy going into people's feelings about the situation can lead to people withdrawing the energy they typically contribute to the church.

The danger in this phase is paralysis. Shock can lead to problems not being handled and regular planning and administration being overlooked. This is the phase of the "deer being caught in the car headlights".

Leaders in this phase have to ensure that "business as usual" carries on. People need a sense of security in the day-to-day life of the church and a conviction that something can be done to respond to the crisis (either by way of change or acceptance). Leaders may have to provide what Ronald Heifetz calls an "emotional holding environment". People need to sense that "we are OK for today and tomorrow, so let's keep on being our church while we sort out this crisis". But by providing this sense of security, leaders can experience an increased sense of personal stress.

Defensive Retreat

Leaders at this point may have what they think is the perfect vision for what needs to happen, but the change may represent a significant departure from how things are now. In our example, some of the leaders may envision an amalgamation of all three churches in this three-point charge. The majority of members, however, may see this solution as far too extreme. Instead, they may be determined to try to rectify the situation by using traditional fixes used by the church in its past. This phase is called Defensive Retreat. Since grown children taking their place in the church and having children themselves has maintained this congregation over the decades, the members may try to convince their grown children to continue the family tradition of making this their church and to return to the country every Sunday. In the past financial trouble was dealt with through fund-raisers, so the members may commit themselves to having four per year instead of the traditional two.

In this phase there are actually different dangers present for the church as well as for the leader. This can be a frustrating time for leaders who may view these responses as inadequate. Yet leaders should remember that the shock of the crisis has produced insecurity and so the first response tends to be the application of the "tried and true" (that is, solutions people feel comfortable with). This typical reaction makes this a phase in which the congregation must improve its sense about what is going on by realizing that the old fixes indeed no longer work. Many people need to experience the failed fix before they can be prepared to consider different options for addressing the situation.

For many members this is "circle the wagons" time. It is hard to talk about what is really going on and to consider new responses. It can seem like people are putting more effort into blaming something or someone for their situation rather than putting this energy into working reasonable solutions. It is also a time when people can naturally look towards

their leaders for direction. This too creates a serious situation for leaders. By expecting leaders to do the work of change members can set up a win/win situation for themselves. If the leaders succeed in rectifying the situation, the church has survived the challenge. If the leaders fail, the church has someone to blame.

It can also be a time of expediency where real problems can be by-passed rather than dealt with. People in this small church of ours can pin all their hopes on the local gossip that John Deere is considering building a new plant outside town. "We don't have to worry," they may say, "when the plant comes there will be lots of young families again".

Leaders at this stage need to help the congregation take on a learning perspective. People need to be helped to see that the old fixes aren't working. This, then, provides further evidence that a different kind of response is needed. Leaders need to be pastoral at this point as they help members appreciate that their grown children are making their homes in the city. Leaders need to help members earlier rather than later appreciate that the declining membership has created a smaller volunteer pool (of older people) to run fund-raisers. The members need to see that doubling the number of fund-raisers will be very taxing on them, and that they may be setting themselves up for failure.

Acknowledgement

This is the period of growing realization that the situation remains unchanged and the traditional fixes have not turned it around. It is the point where members know that they really have a serious situation and serious, new responses are called for. This is the point where people see that something fundamental has to change and then begin to look cautiously for alternatives.

There are several real dangers at this point:

- That members will look at their failed attempts to change their situation using their traditional tools and then give up.
- If the members lack the creativity to imagine new responses to their situation, danger ensues if they do not consider asking for outside resources to help them conceive the new thing.
- Conflict can occur in this phase if different members come up with quite different ideas about solutions to which they already hold a great deal of commitment.
- People getting stuck on "possibility thinking" and never actually getting down to setting and accomplishing new plans.

The leader at this point needs to help people shift their thinking from the symptoms to the root causes. In our case, members need to appreciate that the community has changed, to begin to anticipate what the future of their town might look like, and begin to consider how they might evolve as a congregation in this new setting. This phase is the perfect time to consider our Gospel calling and to ask, "how do we live this life of faith now in this context?" This is the time to acknowledge the current reality of the congregation, why things are as they are, and to name what the congregation will aspire to be. It is at this point that members may be able to consider seriously the idea of amalgamating with other churches to pool resources to serve a larger region better. As a general rule, the wider the participation of members the better will be the convergence

on final direction for the congregation. Significant changes in the life of the church require a significant proportion of the congregation agreeing with the direction. Leaders need to remember that this is the second phase in which members will feel uncertainty and anxiety for they are now considering moving into uncharted waters. The leadership may need to bear some of the anxiety of the members. The degree of trust members have for leaders is crucial at this point.

Adaptation and Change

This is the phase of renewal and growth and change – the congregation is finally moving ahead in a healthy, if cautious, way. It has found and taken new aspects to its culture. Anxiety declines as positive experience with the new way bears fruit. While things are finally moving ahead, still there will be some people who will not like the new direction. Some conflict and some loss of membership may occur even in this late phase in the change.

Leaders in this phase need to point to the gains and learnings along the way, as well as reinforce the new culture and practices. While new ways of being church need to be embedded in the life of the church, still the congregation needs to remember from this whole experience that gradual adaptation is easier than substantial change.

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