

Change in Congregational Settings

by

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1 INTRODUCTION

She came to my office and immediately unloaded. Joanna had been serving as pastor of Florida Avenue Baptist for six years, and she just felt like everything at the church was coming apart. When she came to the church as pastor, the church leaders made it clear that they wanted to change whatever it would take at the church so that the church could grow and reach young families. Church attendance had dwindled to 20 people on Sunday morning at their church building. And almost everyone was over 70 years old. The church leaders knew she had specialized in her seminary education in worship and creating new opportunities in ministry.

One of the first things Joanna did was create a second worship service that would reach a different group of people. The service was more informal and was held on Wednesday evening instead of Sunday morning. By starting on Wednesday night, she knew this new service would reach a different group of people and not create worship wars in her church. And she was right! Within three years, 45 people were coming on Wednesday night to an alternative service. And the Sunday morning service even increased in attendance to 35.

The new growth and new opportunities soon led to strife and division. Joanna was shocked. A few weeks ago, she performed a baptism on Wednesday night for a young man who came to know Christ in this new ministry. Rather than celebrate, the church leaders steamed. How could she perform a baptism on Wednesday night rather than Sunday morning? Now she had gone too far.

She had done exactly what the leaders had asked. She brought in new people and created more energy in the church, but now the church was ready to come apart. The church leaders told her they wanted her to bring in new people, but now they were frustrated because someone was baptized on Wednesday night. What had happened?

Two days later, Randall came to see me. Randall is the pastor at First Baptist Church in Omega. His story sounded somewhat similar as he began. He came to First Baptist when the average Sunday morning church attendance was down to 40. Church leaders also asked him to come and help them recover some energy and find new ways to minister in their community. Randall listened to their stories and made the commitment that he would come. He asked that after he came to the church as pastor, he wanted to put together a small group of leaders to think about the future direction of the ministry of the congregation.

Following six months of small changes in worship to create more energetic, winsome service, Randall asked 5 key leaders to join him for a conversation about future planning. As they gathered, the team talked about how they could continue to encourage the positive spirit and direction that they had experienced over the last six months. Randall introduced an idea to create Share and Prayer Triplets that would allow them to continue to seek God's direction in the months ahead. He asked each of them to find two other people – people that they did not know very well – and meet with them 10 times over 14 weeks and do two things:

- 1- Share their hopes and dreams for the congregation.
- 2- Have each person pray for the congregation and ask God to reveal his direction for their future.

Following this 14 week period, all of the people involved in these triplets then came together to share their hopes and dreams for the congregation. Randall had a coach come into the church and lead the church in a conversation about these dreams. When the coach finished with the meeting, the leaders committed to pulling together a future story of the congregation that would dream what they church would be like by December 31, 2025.

Randall shared by the time they finished with this future story, the church's energy continued to increase. God was up to something. New ministries were being created. People were finding ways to be innovative and faithful to the story that they had built. They had a genuine sense of excitement about their future story.

When I asked Randall, what did he credit with this surge of energy? He quickly pointed out that the people were ready for the transition and change. The time they had spent in sharing and praying and in the development of their future story had made all the difference. This story was something that the people were excited about. They had found God's vision for their community and knew the changes were not just for the sake of change, but for the sake of the community.

Innovation and new ministries had come to this congregation as they realized the strengths and resources that God would provide for their congregation. They heard the story and responded. It was not just the pastor's vision or the pastor's story. The story belonged to them.

Unlike Florida Avenue Church, the expectation was not placed just on the pastor to somehow change the church. Instead, the pastor and the church collaborated to find their way. Joanna was very good at what she did as pastor. She did an excellent job of creating a new form of worship and reaching new people, but as hard as she tried, the vision was still just her vision for the congregation.

So what can learn from the stories of these two churches that helps us as we lead our communities of faith toward creating new opportunities of ministry?

2 NEW OPPORTUNITIES HAPPEN WHEN CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITIES SENSE AN URGENT NEED TO INNOVATE AND CHANGE

John Kotter, author of *Leading Change*, shares in his work that a beginning point for change and innovation to occur in an organization is an urgency for change. He shares one of the key elements in any organizational transition process begins with an environment for change and transition. Without a perceived need or readiness for change, rarely does effective innovation happen.

While Kotter shares his thoughts in the business environment, both of the churches described in our introduction show a readiness for change at least in their thought patterns. Attendance has been dwindling to a small measure of who the churches used to be. Therefore at least some version of readiness seems to be present. In the church environment, though, more than just negative factors need to be in play for a church to innovate and change. Otherwise, the church leaders will look for just the next “fix” or the next “right leader that will help us to go back and recover our glory days. Florida Avenue leaders were under the impression that change would occur if the new pastor would just create a better Sunday morning experience. The idea of reaching a whole different clientele on a different day with a different type of worship just did not compute.

In the biblical texts, we are reminded of the constant need to evaluate all kings based on the reign of David. In some ways, the Israelite people continually depended on the next king to be measured against the status of King David, the glorious King who led them to their greatest victories. Even the Messiah was seen as the next King David, who would lead the people to great victory and help them fulfill all the dreams of being God’s people. This readiness for the new king, though, seduced them into missing the message and life of Jesus when he came. Jesus of Nazareth just did not fit the mode.

As I have worked with churches, I have used the work of Dr. George Bullard to help me think through the readiness factors for a congregation to truly be ready to innovate and change for the sake of the Kingdom. Dr. Bullard suggests there are four readiness factors:

- 1- **Spiritual readiness** – Change is an emotional roller coaster of an experience. In fact, the work of William Bridges suggests that the most difficult part of change is not the event of change, but the emotions or transition that change brings to our personal journeys. In order for a congregation of people to be “ready for change,” there needs to be some spiritual movement in their life as a congregation. In Baptist churches, we have often emphasized spiritual revivals are borne out of a culture of prayer and spiritual awakening. The same is true for times of innovation and change. Reverend Billy Graham, the great evangelist, thought the success of his crusades were often predicated on the spiritual preparation done before the meeting. The same principle resides in a congregation’s life. First Baptist Church of Omega intentionally designed a “Share and Prayer” process that allowed people to listen to the voice of God and spiritually prepare for hearing their future story. Pastors and spiritual leaders of the congregation will help the congregation move toward innovation as they lead people to spiritually prepare. Bible studies, sermon series, prayer emphases, covenant groups, and other spiritually focused processes develop a climate for innovation and change.
- 2- **Leadership readiness** – The leaders of a congregation also should be ready for this spirit of innovation and change. This spirit beings in the heart of the pastoral leadership of a

congregation. If the pastor is not ready to lead this change process, rarely will it succeed. The pastor must be praying and looking forward to how God is going to work in his or her life and in the life of the people. Change begins in the heart of the pastoral staff. The pastor and staff must model how this innovation process is changing them. Many times, the movement of change and transition may even call for a pastor or staff to stretch beyond their comfort zone.

Also, for effective leadership readiness, there must also be a small group of people who have a strong passion for the future of what God can do and how they can innovate in their community. We will talk about the numerology of change and transition in the next section, but most studies show that churches need about 7% of their regular attending adults excited about a positive future for their congregation. They help provide the impetus along with the pastoral leadership for innovative efforts.

And then also those people of leadership in the congregation must be willing to wrestle with this innovative and change spirit. When this culture of change happens, leaders must be willing to “give up” some of their perceived power to all fresh approaches to be attempted. These leaders can be serving in formal or informal positions of power. At Florida Avenue, Joanna thought she had the support of the leaders to create this great change effort. What she did not know was that there were two families in the church who were not on the Search Committee when she was called as pastor, who really “ran the church.” They controlled the money and leadership strings in the church. She did not have them onboard as she attempted this Wednesday night worship experience, and she continually ran into challenges with getting permission from this group. If these leaders are not willing to collaborate with the pastoral leadership and the people who have a passion for the future of the church, innovation and change can easily be snuffed out.

Kotter reminds us that change efforts need an Enduring Leadership Community of about 20% of the organization to lead change. These three groups of leadership can form that type of community in the church.

- 3- **Strategic readiness** – for effective innovation and change to take place, the church must be ready to make some strategic moves to open themselves up to these new ways of reaching people. Again, part of this journey is through the collaboration of the Enduring Leadership Community. Also, the Leadership Community must be willing to invest in innovative approaches, and not just trying to fix the old programs. Key strategic thinking through assessment and opportunities are very important. Leadership must also find the key small wins that will continue to grow this culture of innovation and change. Pastoral leadership should look for those wins and celebrate them in positive ways in the congregation.
- 4- **Passionate readiness** – As stated above, the congregation must find enough positive passion in its journey to encourage risk-taking and innovation. If the environment of the church is one of “the best years are behind us,” leadership should invest in growing the spiritual readiness and finding those key passionate people in the congregation who see hope for the future. If the church has been in a downward spiral, sometimes a strategy of renewal and reimagining takes a couple of years for fruitful innovation and change. Patience is the key for key leaders.

3 THE NUMEROLOGY OF CHANGE AND INNOVATION

In most of the Baptist world, we believe that if a majority of the people are in favor of the change and innovation than we will have change. Of course, rarely is it so simple. Bringing innovation and change in a community of faith rarely takes a full majority.

Change and innovation experts have used various numbers to describe what is needed to bring about change in a community.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*, shares sociologically when something reaches the 6% point in a community usually that something will move in it to fruition. He uses the illustration of the flu virus. When the flu infects 6% of a community, the flu usually becomes an epidemic in that community.

As stated earlier, John Kotter in his book, *Leading Change*, states change and innovation will begin to move into an organization when you get the right 20% of the people championing the change.

Everett Rogers, in his historic book, *The Diffusion of Innovation*, states that in any community there are five types of people in a community that is affected by change:

- Innovators – 2.5%
- Early Adopters – 13.5%
- Early Majority – 34%
- Late Majority – 34%
- Laggards – 16%

Rogers suggests the key to moving forward the innovation is to focus on the early adopters and early majority. As they accept the work of the innovators, change begins to filter through the community and organization.

As mentioned earlier, Dr. George Bullard suggests a numerology for church participation and its connection to change and innovation in his book, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*. Dr. Bullard shares the following groups in a congregation and their connection to change and transition:

- People of Pastoral Leadership – 1% of average active attending adults (QUAD A's)
- People of Passion -- 6% of QUAD A's
- People of Position – 14% of QUAD A's
- People of Participation – 42% of QUAD A's
- People of Passivity – 37% of QUAD A's
- People of Perpetual Care – rarely come – Christmas and Easter Only people

Dr. Bullard suggests the key for innovation and change are the first three groups collaborating together. These 20 to 21% will lead the other groups forward. People of Participation will follow their lead. People of Passivity will rarely give enough energy to oppose or stand in the way of the innovation.

Gary Nelson and Peter Dickens in their new book, *Leading in Disorienting Times: Navigating Church and Organizational Change*, give the following numerology for the change and innovation process. They suggest that four groups will appear when an innovation is being considered:

- The “Yes” people – @ 10% - These are the early adopters in a church setting. These people immediately respond to innovation and change with, “Yes, we love it.”
- The “Yes, if ...” People – @15% - These people need a little more clarification and communication to understand how they might be affected by the change.
- The “No, because” People -- @15% -- These people are the real resisters and tend to drain the leader’s emotional energy.
- The “Whatever” People -- @50 to 60% -- These people just go along, and they can be swayed either direction.

In whatever way you look at the process of innovation and change, there are numbers involved. As these experts share, rarely does it take 50% of the people to get on board with the change. Good communication and collaboration are key elements to the innovation process. I believe when the right 25 to 30% of the people are involved in the innovation process, positive things can take place in the missional innovation planned by the congregation. The pastor of First Baptist, Omega, took the time to get his leaders and key people involved in the planning process for the innovative ministries the church were introducing. Because of this involvement, the people were more accepting of the new opportunities.

4 THE EMOTION OF THE INNOVATION AND CHANGE PROCESS

No matter how we look at changing congregations, we must recognize the emotional process that the people of a church go through when a new idea is introduced. The hardest part of the change for many church members is the emotional transition they must undergo as they experience the event of change. Just think about what people experience when something is changed in the bulletin or in their Bible study class or when their pastor leaves and no one comes. Emotions are raw.

Chip and Dan Heath, two American writers, published a book called *SWITCH: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. They identified three significant parts of the change process that are built into our brains from a study of psychologist Jonathon Haidt:

- The Path – the environment for the change or innovation that is being planned.
- The Rider – the rational side of the change process. The rider rides atop the Elephant and holds the reins. He/she seems to be the one in control and leader of the journey.
- The Elephant – the emotional side of the change process. Emotion is the turf of the elephant. The strength of the elephant is in love, compassion, sympathy, loyalty, etc. The elephant has a fierce instinct to protect. And the animal is so much bigger than the rider.

The key element in a change process is to Direct the Rider, Motivate the Elephant, and Shape the Path. Notice the size of the elephant. One thing that they note is that the elephant (emotions of change) is so large, that it is very hard for the rider to control the change process when the rider and the elephant disagree. Emotions are not bad, but they can easily control the change process. When change works, it’s because leaders are speaking to the emotions as well as the rational side. The remainder of their book discusses how to accomplish those three objectives in the change process.

One of the most significant ways I learned about this emotional process was experiencing an object lesson by Ken Blanchard, the author of many books on leadership and management, at a leadership

conference twenty years ago in 1995. Mr. Blanchard had everyone in the group pair up with a partner. Then he asked everyone to face their partner and look them over. After about 30 seconds, he asked each partner to turn around and change five things about their appearance. A gentle roar settled over the crowd of 100 people. After a minute, the partners turned about around and then guessed what the partner changed about themselves. Then, Blanchard gave the instruction to turn back around and change five more things about themselves. A very loud roar came over the crowd. You could hear comments like “I don’t have five more things to change,” “I am not going to do this,” “this is silly,” and other such expressions. Eventually though, the partners followed his instructions. Blanchard then had them turn back around and guess what they had changed. Following this second guess, Blanchard called out one more time, “Now turn back around and change five more things about your appearance.” And now, there was not only a load roar, but a total mutiny developing. People shouted, “There is no way,” “you have lost your mind, Blanchard,” and other such comments. Blanchard then called everyone back to their seats and had them sit down.

As he debriefed the experiment, Blanchard shared that he had just led us through an experience of change. He shared it was interesting to watch the conversations and emotions each time he asked the group to do the exercise. Here were some of his observations and learnings for me about change:

- 1- The first thing people think about when they are asked to change something is what they must give up. Blanchard observed that when he asked people to change five things about their appearance people naturally started taking things off or switching them around.
- 2- When people are asked to change, they usually think they are the only ones going through the experience. Very few people asked other people to help them by giving them something from them. Even though everyone else in the room was having to do this experiment, people were only thinking about themselves. When people go through change, they are experiencing it very personally.
- 3- People started reacting very negatively when they were asked to change five more things the second time. By the third time, they were beside themselves. Most people can only handle three to five changes at a time in their lives.
- 4- People were given a certain amount of time to change. When people feel the pressure of time, they are not thinking resourcefully. They do not realize all the things in the room that they could have used for the experiment.

The lessons continued, but I was amazed about what I felt. My elephant had taken over. While I rationally knew I only had to change five things, I was reacting negatively to even the idea. When people in our churches are asked to change or innovate, they are thinking in similar ways. We as pastors and leaders must help them see beyond themselves and see the possibilities that await. We must give them time and be patient with them as they experience their emotional connections.

5 TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CHANGE AND INNOVATION JOURNEY FOR OUR CONGREGATIONS:

- 1- Create a sense of urgency for change and innovation by appealing to the spiritual journey of the person and the congregation. Create a spirit of expectation through prayer and spiritual

awakening. Allow people to hear the stories of other congregations who have made innovations, which are similar to their life journey.

- 2- Preach and teach on some of the change stories of the Bible. The number of them are endless. Some of my favorites are Joshua's call in Joshua 1:1-9, Jeremiah's Letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29, Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10, Nicodemus in John 3, and the Samaritan woman in John 4. And of course, Jesus tells many parables that point to growth and change.
- 3- Ask powerful questions that allow people to dream big dreams and think about what God can accomplish through them. Ephesians 3:20-21 reminds us that God can more than we even think is possible. Help people think that way.
- 4- Collaborate with passionate people and key leaders in the congregation to bring about innovation and change. Collaboration is a key word. If a leader attempts change on their own, they will experience the pain of change alone. People will come alongside as they see the benefits.
- 5- Love people. Compassion goes a long way to address the change process. Build relationships with the people and let them know you care about them.
- 6- Be patient. Proactive change takes time and patience. Early adopters will welcome the change, but you must allow people time to understand and accept the innovation. Remember it took William Carey seven years before he experienced someone accepting Christ. Now conversion is the ultimate change!
- 7- Communicate! Communicate! Communicate! You must communicate the benefits of what is coming. Be positive in your communication and help people see what they will gain from this change.
- 8- Listen to the feelings of the people. Allow people to express themselves about the change. Let them express their emotions. Remember many of them think first about they have to give up before they can experience the benefit.
- 9- Know that some people may never be willing to accept change. Remember the rich young ruler. Jesus invited him to change, but he decided that it would cost him too much to become a true follower of Christ. Sometimes, people do not accept, but love them and encourage them however you can.
- 10- Celebrate the change – When the innovation has occurred, celebrate the change with the people. Allow people to experience the joy.