

PHILOSOPHY OF CHANGE

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by  
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## PHILOSOPHY OF CHANGE

Change happens. Bumper stickers say other things happen, but really, change happens. Animals change. Caterpillars become butterflies. Tadpoles become frogs. Styles change. Big hair was in during the 80s, but is out now. Bell-bottom pants were in during the 70s, went out, and are now back in. Technology changes. Just consider the move from mainframes to personal computers to laptops to tablets. Economies change. The United States was once a leading manufacturer of goods. Now it is a service-based economy, outsourcing its large segments of its manufacturing needs. Cultures change. Once proud of its Christian heritage, now the United States has expelled almost all expressions of Christianity from its public spheres. Nations change. Czechoslovakia became the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Germany became East and West and then unified Germany. Seasons change. Even climates are thought to change. But can a church? Better yet, should a church? And if so, how? Well, that probably depends on who you ask and the scars that person bears from previous attempts to change a church.

As an emerging leader in the church, I must answer these questions thoughtfully, reflectively, biblically, and theologically. To such an end, I write this paper. First, it will engage the question, “Is there case for the church to change?” Spoiler alert: then I will outline the journey for leading change in the church.

### **The Case for Change**

If a middle-aged patient called a doctor complaining of chest pains and shortness of breath, how would the doctor respond? Would he tell the patient to just go home, keep eating the same foods, keep smoking the same cigarettes, and keep on avoiding physical exercise? No. He would rush the patient to the hospital. Why? Because the patient was likely experiencing a heart attack. Time would be of the essence in order to save the patient’s life. And then, after the

emergency services are rendered, the doctor would say, “You need to change your eating habits, your smoking habits, and your exercise habits if you don’t want another heart attack to kill you.”

Really, it’s a matter of first order logic. If what you are doing now has gotten you to where you are today, then you need to do something different if you want a different result. We at least respect, if not follow, that wisdom in seemingly every sphere of life...except church. We have often confused praxis with doxy and made the way it’s done, especially in *my* church, as sacred as the incarnation, death, resurrection, and return of Christ. To change how things are done in church equals heresy, a deliberate abandonment of the true faith. Admittedly, my ecclesiology says some praxis should be orthopraxy, but those are limited to sacraments, leadership, and discipline—not the day, time, and location of church gatherings, the style and instrumentation of worship music, or the presence of ministries such as Sunday School, Awana Clubs, or Celebrate Recovery.

Nonetheless, only a fool hears the doctor say, “Change,” and continues about with status quo. So is the church showing signs of a fatal illness? Is it having a heart attack? Yes. Malphurs says 80 to 85% of churches are plateaued or in decline.<sup>1</sup> In the early 2000s, ten churches permanently closed their doors every day.<sup>2</sup> Even 10% of church goers are dissatisfied with the church, and that 10% consists largely of the most mature, engaged believers—63% of which are dissatisfied enough to consider leaving their church.<sup>3</sup> The church in the United States faces increasing marginalization in the culture, pushed out of the realms of education and justice and belittled in the media. Moreover, those belonging to the body of Christ are virtually indistinguishable from those outside the body because of gossip, anger, adultery, addiction,

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 8.

<sup>2</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 52-53.

hatred, divorce... Yes, the church is sick, and something desperately needs to change. The church must change. It's that simple. And yet it's not.

### **The Change Journey**

Change is messy. Change is hard. Nevertheless, I believe the church has a biblical imperative to change in order to accomplish its mission. The church is failing in its efforts today to make disciples, and yet those were the marching orders of the Messiah. The question, then, is: How? How do you lead change in an organization steeped in tradition, in an organization devoutly loyal to both its message and its methods? How do you change a community that is deeply personal and significant in people's lives? How dare you mess with *my* church?

The answer is one step a time. Change is a journey, fraught with successes and failures. Change will bring some people to their knees and make others shout praises. It is a journey that starts with God taking action.

### **A Holy Discontent**

Change begins when God puts on the heart and mind of a leader that something is not as it should be. Perhaps something is wrong or broken. Or perhaps something could just be done better, more effectively, more efficiently. But the leader has an unshakeable sense that something must change. It haunts him. Bill Hybels speaks of a Popeye-the-Sailor-type moment in the life of a leader—"I've had all I can standz, and I can't standz no more!"<sup>4</sup> Hybels calls it "a holy discontent."<sup>5</sup> Change begins when a leader is struck by God with a holy discontent, and he is compelled at the core of his being to pursue a new reality and to bring people with him.

Honestly, my mind seems predisposed to identifying opportunities, "ought to's," "could's," and "should's." I suspect such a mindset is not uncommon in people with a bias for

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Hybels, *Holy Discontent: Fueling the Fire That Ignites Personal Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

action, leader-types. In order to rightly process such opportunities and discern which are Kingdom-building and which to forego, a leader must walk closely with God. Before a leader can lead the renewal of God's people, he must seek renewal himself. He needs regular communion with God, thorough examination for sin in his life, and a humble, repentant heart.

### **Assembling a Guiding Coalition**

Change is not a solo sport. It takes a team to make change happen in organizations, and especially in a church. The leader, convinced that his church must change, gathers a handful of people to help lead the change. Not everyone is cut out or wired to be on the frontlines of innovation or change. Research shows that only 12-25% of people in a given church are early adopters when it comes to change.<sup>6</sup> In addition to finding people hard-wired for change, the leader seeks out key stakeholders, people who are both significant vested in the ministry and able to influence the people around them to embrace the forthcoming changes. He is looking for kindred spirits, fellow leaders with the gifting, skills, and passion to see the change through to fruition.

When searching for right people on the guiding coalition, the leader carefully sows the possibility of change among a trusted few of his kindred spirits. The masses are not yet ready for hearing about change, so the leader sows just where he senses God may have already made the soil fertile. Such efforts may take time, patience, and some intentional grooming and development of potential coalition members.

### **Mapping the Course**

Naturally at this point, action-oriented people are chomping at the bit to do something, anything. They have been bitten by the holy discontent. But only fools rush in. If wisdom prevails, a plan will be constructed next.

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<sup>6</sup> Gene Appel and Alan Nelson, *How to Change Your Church without Killing It* (Nashville, TN: Word, 2000), 75-76.

Good planning starts with the end in mind. The guiding coalition collectively conceives a preferred future, a vision. “Vision is a clear, shared, and compelling picture of the preferred future to which God is calling the congregation.”<sup>7</sup> What does the church look like when the change has taken hold? Why is this change important? How will it affect those inside and outside the church? In the case of wholesale change in a church, rediscovery of both the mission and the values of the church births the new vision.

Next is a step often overlooked. Everybody loves to dream dreams and have big ideas, and the temptation is to run out with these big ideas and just try to make them happen. Yet the guiding coalition must do its due diligence. To chart a course from point A to point B, leaders need to know where both endpoints are, the preferred future and the present state.

Understanding the present state is an investigation not only in how things are today, but also why things are the way they are today. This pursuit of understanding can suffer from two plagues: navel-gazing and superficiality. Anytime introspection is undertaken, one can easily get consumed, lost, and overly fascinated with self-discovery. Subsequently the flames of action are squelched. On the other end of the spectrum, the desire to make something happen can serve as an excuse to settle for superficial answers to “Why?” In my consulting experience, we were taught that when we were investigating a problem, we were to ask why five times. That would usually dig deep enough to find an actionable root of the problem while not getting lost in the investigation or skipping ahead to implementation too quickly.

Then, having defined the present and the preferred future, the work of designing the bridge between the two begins. At this point, the more planning-averse members of the team may toss out lines like, “Why don’t we just trust God to see this thing through? After all, it is *His* vision.” The highly analytical types, on the other hand, will strive to iron out every detail for the next twenty years down to the penny. Neither position is healthy, but neither should be ignored.

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 50.

Yes, God should be trusted in the journey. If there is no obvious need for God to show up and act, then the size of the vision is too small. Still, leaders must steward both the vision and the resources that God provides well, and to do so requires a thoughtful plan. At the same time, only God is God. Only He knows whether a plan will work, whether a natural disaster will strike, whether a crucial team member will still be alive... So the coalition must draft a plan that is both simple and flexible. It should identify the macro-movements and changes needed to move the church from where it is to where it should be, and where there is clarity, how to achieve those movements. Then the plan should be held loosely, knowing that God will likely redirect at one or more of the steps along the way.

### **Cultivating a Hunger for Change**

The work of making the new vision a reality does not start when the planning is done. A savvy leader starts the implementation when the coalition is just getting started because the first step towards the preferred future is creating a sense of urgency, a desire for change, in the rest of the church. No matter how grand and glorious a future the leader may paint for the congregation, if they are comfortable and satisfied with the status quo, the vision will remain just that: a vision. The leader must find intentional and creative ways to infuse his holy discontent into the masses.

Kotter places this step first in the process of leading change.<sup>8</sup> He may be right in doing so, for he says, “With urgency low, it’s difficult to put together a group with enough power and credibility to guide the effort or to convince key individuals to spend the time necessary to create and communicate a change vision.”<sup>9</sup> Yet time and again in Scripture, God brings leaders the key people they need to accomplish the mission—without the leader pre-selling anyone on the mission. God brought Paul Barnabas. God brought Moses Aaron. God brought Elijah

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<sup>8</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Elisha—though technically God brought Elijah to Elisha. The work at hand, the mission, the change—it is not just the ideation of a man. It is the great work of a sovereign God active in the world to redeem it, to restore it, and thereby glorify His name. I cannot rule out that a leader may need to sow seeds of discontent and create urgency in order to find guiding coalition members—especially if the change is radical or exceptionally difficult and demanding. However, if a leader’s holy discontent truly is holy—that is, from God—then it is possible, if not probable, that God has already been moving in the lives of others in the church with the same discontent.

Nevertheless, the need for urgency is difficult to overstate for the remainder of the congregation. Herrington defines this urgency as the tension “generated by contrasting between an accurate perception of reality and God’s ideal.”<sup>10</sup> The congregation needs to sit and stew in this tension. If the leader presents the gap and then resolves it in the same sermon, then he has short-circuited the process. He has unintentionally communicated that despite the words he used, the stories he told, and the Scripture he preached, this problem, this gap, is not that big. It is not that ugly. It is not that significant. It is not that urgent. It can be resolved in the same amount of time as a weekly sitcom or drama. Any problem that is easy to solve is not going to get the congregation’s heart pumping and ready for action.

In addition, Kotter says, “Creating a strong sense of urgency usually demands bold or even risky actions that we normally associate with good leadership. A few modest activities ... usually fail in the face of the overwhelmingly powerful forces fueling complacency.”<sup>11</sup> To build the urgency, the leader must confront and expose those elements which conceal or anesthetize the congregation to the truth of the present reality. Such actions include authentic self-evaluation, confession of sin, accurately measuring the church’s performance, telling the truth about deviations from the church’s mission and values.

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<sup>10</sup> Herrington, *Leading Congregational Change*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 42-43.

## Casting the Vision

When the soil is prepared and the coalition's plans are enough to get the ball rolling, then the next step in change is to go public with the vision and strategy. Going public with just the vision or just the strategy is a mistake. The vision captures the heart. It plays to the emotions—"the Elephant," as the Heath brothers refer to it.<sup>12</sup> "The Elephant is the one who gets things done."<sup>13</sup> The leader can motivate the elephant, tap into the congregations emotions by communicating the vision visibly and tangibly.<sup>14</sup> In other words, motivation requires more than just normal vocabulary. Think Technicolor. Think stories, media, and other people's witness. Using actual experiences will bring the people to the mountain... or the mountain to the people.

In contrast, strategy connects with the logic part of the brain—"the Rider."<sup>15</sup> People's reasoning needs to know the plan—"How are we going to get from A to B?" A great idea without a plan is crippling to change efforts because the resulting "ambiguity is exhausting to the Rider."<sup>16</sup> The congregation, as individuals and as a whole, will feel overwhelmed because the leader is asking them to turn off their auto-pilot and begin making different decisions and acting in new, foreign ways.<sup>17</sup> Communicating the strategy gives the church a script that cuts through the uncertainty. Much like parenting a young child, the strategy tells the church what steps it will take and when. The church then begins to mentally incorporate the new way doing things, and eventually the new way becomes habit.

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<sup>12</sup> Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

## The Journey

Throughout the entire change process, the leader is trying to gain buy-in and acceptances of the change. Remember that only 12-25% of a congregation will be quick to join in the change process. The next 50-80% still need to be brought onboard.<sup>18</sup> These people will join in as they see the change generating wins and becoming the new norm.

In consulting, we often spoke of pursuing low-hanging fruit, easy projects with quick, visible results. We would frontload our implementation plans such projects to begin reaping benefits early in the deployment. With wins under our belts, we had greater credibility with those slow to embrace the changes. Winning turns heads and builds confidence in the change leaders. Picking low hanging fruit and celebrating the wins also helps establish the new ways as norm.

Major change takes time, sometimes lots of time. Zealous believers will often stay the course no matter what happens. Most of the rest of us expect to see convincing evidence that all the effort is paying off. Nonbelievers have even higher standards of proof. They want to see clear data indicating that the changes are working and that the change process isn't absorbing so many resources in the short term as to endanger the organization.<sup>19</sup>

The temptation, though, with celebrating the short-term wins is mistaking that win for completing the change all together. The Heath brothers advocate "shrinking the change," by which they mean making "people feel as though they're already closer to the finish line than they might have thought."<sup>20</sup> While I appreciate their concern for not overwhelming people and subsequently demotivating them, this is risky for effective leading large-scale change. I agree that to swallow an elephant, you do so one bite at a time; however, the goal is still to swallow the elephant. A wise implementation, then, takes one step at a time rather than giant leaps, and a wise leader celebrates achieving those steps but never loses sight of the real finish line.

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<sup>18</sup> Appel, *How to Change Your Church*, 76-77.

<sup>19</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Heath, *Switch*, 127.

### **Does Everyone Cross the Finish Line?**

As much as 10 to 20% of the church will not make it through the change process.<sup>21</sup> They cannot fit into the new ways of doing things. Or they cannot let go of how things were done. Or the pain of seeing their friends struggle and leave is too much for them to bear. Whatever the reason, there comes a point when a wise leader, a good shepherd, says to that person, “I think it is time for us to part ways.” This is not an easy point, nor should it be the first response to someone who is struggling with the change. It is a shepherding moment, a teachable moment. It comes after genuine attempts to hear the concerns and to coach the person through the changes. It is said out of patience and love not impatience and anger. The story that God is writing in the life of the person who cannot make the change is no less important than the story God wants to write with a renewed church. They just may not be the same story or overlapping stories anymore.

The beauty of a sovereign God is to look at breakups like Paul and Barnabas and know that it did not catch God off guard. Instead of halting the spread of the Gospel because of their conflict over Mark, God doubled His missionary teams. More people were reached and served, and God was glorified all the more. So too, when someone leaves, a good shepherd will make the effort to see the person launched into the next phase of ministry and spiritual growth that God has in store for the individual, at whatever church that may be a part of.

### **On-Going Change**

Once upon a time, the need for change was low. The culture and environment in which the church served remained relatively static. Things moved at the speed of a glacier. However, that is a thing of the past. The exponential growth of knowledge in the digital age has ignited a series of changes and innovations at an unprecedented pace. The church has its work cut out for it if it hopes to keep up.

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<sup>21</sup> Appel, *How to Change Your Church*, 77.

To stay abreast, though, does not require wholesale change every year. In fact, the body can only endure so much. For a church that has not rethought its ways in decades, a wholesale change, much like a trip to the emergency room, may be in order. Much like regular physicals, a healthy habit for a church consists of committing to learning and growth along with regular evaluation. These will reveal opportunities and invite change on a regular basis, making periodic change the norm, the culture of the church.

### **Conclusion**

Change is not for the faint of heart, especially changing a church. It can happen. It must happen. But the road is long. It will require a coalition passionately committed to a preferred future. It will require a plan that clarifies for people the new ways of doing things. It will necessitate the patient cultivation of discontent with the status quo as well as the ability to know when to say goodbye. Ultimately change requires God to stir, to move, to confront, to empower, and to see it through.

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