

Changing Your Church Without Blowing It Up

So you want to change your church. You know it is not where God wants His church to be and your heart is aching to see this wonderful creation of God become the disciple making movement God intended.

But how do you do this without blowing up the church and hurting people in the process? While not easy, it is possible. God is in the business of transformation. What is impossible for us to make happen, God can perform miracles and bring life from death.

This is a journey not for the faint of heart. But for those willing to take the journey there is an incredible sense of fulfillment when God takes what was broken and uses this to impact people and make disciples.

Are you ready?

One word of caution. Do not attempt this without a coach. We all have blind spots and a coach can help you work through the changes that should be made now and those that can wait. A coach can help you identify personal attitudes or anger that can be destructive in the process rather than helpful and healing. And a coach can help you sort through all the confusing details and ideas to focus on the key ones that will make a difference.

The process of change follows a similar pattern to the disciple making process. First, if a church is going to change, then the thinking patterns, the mindset of those in leadership and those in the church will need to change. For most things that happen in the church, at some point there was a reason for something getting started. Perhaps it made sense at the time, but now it doesn't. You realize that what you are doing is no longer making disciples. Perhaps it never did. Some things get started for the wrong reasons. Paul says we have the mind of Christ (*1 Corinthians 2:16*). If we are going to be the disciple making movement God intends then we are going to have to start thinking like Jesus. To do so will require change.

Second, if a church is going to change then the attitudes, the heart of those in leadership and those in the church will need to change. People usually have a vested interest in what is happening at the church. So taking something away can create havoc if not done correctly.

But the worst problem is our lack of love for those in the community. Churches who are not making disciples will discover a big reason for this is the judgmental attitudes of leaders and people in the church towards those without Christ. And if we do begin to discover a love for those without God the second biggest hurdle is the attitude of "come and see." We expect people without God to come to us rather than obeying what Jesus said, "*go and make disciples*" (*Matthew 28:19*). To have a heart like Jesus, to love like Jesus will require change.

Third, if the church is going to change then the behavior, the practices of what we do will need to change. Churches that are not making disciples typically have an inward focus rather than the outward focus that God desires. Most of the programming in these churches is about and for the people already in the church. Few resources like time and money and service are invested outside the church in the community. And the programming these churches do have is not resulting in disciples who make disciples.

We attend "worship" each weekend and hear the Word. But the Bible tells us to be doers of the Word, not just hearers. (*James 1:22*). Jesus told us that the wise person is the person who hears the words of Jesus and puts them into practice. (*Matthew 7:24*). Jesus told us, "go and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (*Matthew 28:19-20*). To obey Jesus, to live like Jesus will require change.

1 John 2:6 tells us, "whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." To walk as Jesus walked requires a changed mind, a change heart, and changed behavior. The result is a disciple who makes disciples teaching those he reaches to obey Jesus and thus continuing the disciple making process.

To change a church without blowing it up requires changing the minds and hearts and behavior of those in leadership and those sitting in the chairs each weekend. Each change we make in the church requires going through this same process. Some changes will come quickly. Others will take some time depending on the entrenchment of those in leadership. But the process is the same.

Take a look at the change process diagram. The left column includes five words that describe the steps each person will take as they begin to think and act differently.

UNWARENESS. People begin the process unaware of the changes that need to happen. The mistake leaders make here is assuming people know what needs to happen. Thus we can berate and belittle people and cause great harm to those God loves. This is not the way of God. Unless we as leaders are models for what we are trying to change the church into, we have no right to blast others. The Bible tells us to gently instruct others and it is God who brings people along. (*2 Timothy 2:23-26*).

AWARENESS. People reach an awareness level of what changes need to be made when they understand what the change is, why the change is necessary, how the changes will be made, who are the key endorsers of this change, what will be different when the change is completed and the hoped for results. The mistake leaders make here is assuming that when people reach this level of understanding they are ready to implement. So we push forward only to be surprised when resistance builds.

This is the danger point for blowing up the church. Leaders need to realize that at this level we have only touched the mind. People may be thinking differently, but their hearts are not fully with us yet. And until that happens, change is futile.

EMBRACING. When the peoples hearts change they have embraced the change the leaders are trying to accomplish. Attitudes shift from resistance to endorsement. The people are with you. They are ready to go to work. It can be an exciting time. The mistake leaders make here is assuming the people know how to make the change happen. They don't unless they are equipped. Excitement does not equal effective practice. So leaders can push forward only to frustrate and discourage the people because they don't know what is expected and they may not understand the tools or the resources available to help them on this journey of change.

It is at this point you may not have a "blowup." Rather you may experience a slow drain as people realize they don't have what it takes to make the change. This is unfortunate as God is ready and able to help them on the journey, but it is the leaders that must help people realize this and sense the power of the Holy Spirit available to them. God is our enabler, so we must point people to Him to make the next step.

IMPLEMENTATION. With God as our helper, we begin to put into practice the principles that lead to becoming a disciple making environment. This is where the heart and skills of the leaders come into play. People learn and are equipped through modeling, teaching, coaching and mentoring. This was the way of Jesus and it must be the way of the leaders. Leaders point the way, take that way themselves and show others how to navigate the journey.

We also need to be aware of the blockages and "potholes" we may encounter on this journey of change. We are in a war with Satan and our enemy will do everything possible to stop this journey. Leaders make two mistakes here. One is assuming we will not encounter difficulty. So when it comes we can become discouraged and wonder where is God in all this. God is there, but He never said the road would be smooth. God promised He would be with us and He would get us through the journey. But there will be bumps along the way.

The second mistake leaders can make here is assuming results will come quickly. When they don't people can become discouraged and quit prematurely. As leaders we need to realize it is God who is responsible for results. Our role is to move in the right direction and put into practice "obeying" Jesus. This step is the equivalent of the behavior or lifestyle change of a disciple so we can walk as Jesus walked. The journey is not over, we are simply on the road.

RESULTS. With life transformation, our minds, hearts and practices patterned after Jesus, God shows up and the change we envisioned is now a part of our church and our lives. God has always been there through this entire process, but now we see the fruits of the direction He has been leading us towards. The mistake leaders make here is assuming we have now arrived. We will never be perfect until God calls us home. Our church will never be perfect--unless we all leave it! So we ask God what is the next step we need to take. And we begin anew going through the change process. The end of one change is the beginning of the next. To not change is to die. So we strive forward, with God's help until that day God says, "it is finished."

Unawareness. Awareness. Embracing. Implementation. Results. These are the steps we take to make change happen. They represent the mind, heart and behavioral transformation that is necessary to see the change God wants us to make.

So how do we get through these steps? What is the process to move forward from step to step? You have seen some clues in the description of each step. Look at the change process diagram again. On the right side are five words that describe this process.

EDUCATE: *moving from Unawareness to Awareness.* To avoid the mistake of assuming people understand what you are trying to do, tell them. And when you share with people answer the questions they will be asking:

- What are you proposing?
- Why is this change necessary?
- How will this change be made?
- Who is with you in endorsing this change?
- What will be different when the change is completed?
- What are the hoped for results?

Depending on the personalities of those you are sharing with, some of these questions will be more important to them than others. You will catch this when they start asking follow up questions. When you are bringing people to an awareness level share your heart about what you sense God is wanting to do and back this up with how you are understanding the Bible.

You will not get very far if this change is just about your own personal preferences. But if the change you are proposing is God's way and you see your church not "obeying" God, then begin to gently share this with people. Have them study the scripture themselves. God will do more with transforming people to grasp His ways than you ever can. So connect people with God and let God work.

In addition to getting people connected to God, when bringing people to an awareness level use all the tools at your disposal. Here are just a few: community statistics, viewpoints of respected leaders, consultants, research, field trips to places where the change has been successfully implemented, thoughts from the key influencers in your church. Talk with your coach to help you decide which tools might work best in your situation.

You have achieved the awareness level when people begin to say, "okay, we see where you are going." Remember, their hearts may not be with you yet, but at least they understand the direction you sense God is leading. Also keep in mind that people will move through this level at different rates. Some will come to an awareness level quicker than others. Those who grasp early you can include them in bringing others along.

ENLIGHTEN: *moving from awareness to embracing.* This is where you begin to grab people's hearts. And this is essential if you are to find lasting change. The danger is trying to implement change too quickly before people are really with you. Changes to the heart come through experiences, not more information. Building awareness is accomplished by sharing information. Embracing is accomplished through interacting with the information. So how do you build in interaction? Here are just a few ideas:

- Allowing people to express opinions and ask questions about the change in a safe environment (*meaning non-judgmental*).
- Hearing stories and testimonies of what the change has accomplished in other places.
- Seeing a need first hand (*like on field trip or someone sharing who is part of the need*).
- Praying together about the need so God can grab our hearts.
- One on one time with leaders so people and leaders can sense each others heartbeat.
- Time for people to process the information. Some people resist, not because they are against the proposal but they have not had enough time just to think through all the issues. So giving people time can help alleviate fears and allow God to bring them along.
- Studying scripture related to the need. God's word affects both minds and hearts. Let God work by getting into His word.

You have achieved the embracing level when people begin to say, "okay, let's get moving." Again, as with awareness, people and leaders will reach this level at different rates. So be patient. The process takes longer but you will not damage God's people or blow up the church.

There is a word of caution here. Some people may not reach the embracing level for a number of reasons. Some of it is related to spiritual warfare or spiritual maturity. So it is not always necessary to get 100% buy-in before moving ahead. But it is necessary to achieve 100% buy-in from the key influencers in the church. Without this, do not attempt to move forward. Keep praying, keep sharing, keep working on awareness building and some of the ideas listed here for embracing. If God wants you to move forward He will perform the miracles necessary for life transformation in the minds and hearts of the leaders. In some cases, leaders may be removed. Let God do the work, don't run ahead of Him. God knows better than us how to keep His mission moving forward. And move forward it will!

EQUIP: *moving from Embracing to Implementation.* When the leaders and people are ready to move then it's time to equip them for the changes ahead. The equipping depends on the change. If it's moving into an intentional disciple making environment then the equipping may be helping people understand how to share their faith and then mentoring those that respond. If it is the church moving into the community for service and compassion projects then the equipping may be helping people understand how to express love in practical ways, what to do in difficult situations, the resources available in the community they can tap into and serving with wisdom. If the change is connecting to God in a more intentional way then the equipping may be providing people with guides for bible reading and prayer, as well as helping them connect to someone who can provide some encouragement and accountability.

The question to ask is "what do the leaders and the people need to successfully navigate this change?" Don't assume people know how to do this. Equipping can come through many different kinds of vehicles: small groups, one on one, seminars, reading, visiting places where the change has already taken place to see how the other group did it, and coaching.

ENCOURAGE: *moving from Implementation to Results.* As people begin to act in new ways it's important to provide feedback and encouragement. For some, this will be a scary time as they move into uncomfortable new territory. Someone being there for them is what most people need to keep going forward. Leaders can also help people remember that God is always with us, so we can go to Him at any time for direction and encouragement to keep moving in the right direction.

It is important to grasp that results are in the hands of God. As you read the Bible it becomes clear that God often moved His people in ways that on the surface did not make sense. And tangible results were often not present. The issue for God was obedience. It still is today. That is success in God's eyes.

It is possible to effect change in our own ways and even see some tangible success, like growth in our churches, yet be a failure in God's eyes. The reason is that growth is not the mission of God. Making disciples is the mission of God. As we go about being on this mission, some will see remarkable results. Others may not. But both can rejoice because we have been obedient to God and are walking in His ways. For some, results may come quickly. For others results may come more slowly. Throughout the process, encourage everyone to remain obedient, to stay connected to God and each other and the community. That is the desire of God and what it means to be On Mission.

EXCEL: *continuing to move forward.* With one change behind you, it is time to be asking God what is the next step. The Bible tells us that God will build His church. As we stay connected to Him, He will reveal to you what is necessary to move forward and continue being On Mission.

Are you ready?

One final thought and it's one of the most important principles you will learn. Here it is:

The next five years are going to go by anyway. Profound isn't it? So yes, you say, we all know this. What's the point? What does this mean for changing the church? Here's an illustration. Some people would like to finish their college education, yet they say, "But it takes four long years." Then a year goes by. Then another year goes by. Then another year goes by. Finally, four years go by, as they always will. And these people say, "You know, if I had started four years ago, today I would be done!"

The same principle applies to the church. Your church will not get healthy overnight. It takes time. **But time is going to go by anyway. So start taking little steps toward your goal and you will arrive.** How do you get to the second floor of your home or a building? Do you take one big step? Of course not! How do you get to the second floor? One little step at a time until you reach the top.

How do you get healthy? One step at a time. Some churches will be able to do this more quickly than others because they already have some principles in place. Other churches will take longer to put everything in place. **The time it takes doesn't matter. What matters is getting healthy.** The next five years are going to go by anyway. At the end of this time you are either going to say, "If only we had started five years ago," or you are going to say, "We've done it! Praise the Lord!"

Each step you take you can encourage your leaders with the thought, *"we are not where we want to be yet, but thank you Lord, we are further than we were!"*

Are you ready? What is your first step? Figure that out. Take it. And you are on your way to becoming the church God wants you to be.

This has been a brief overview of the change process and how to change your church without blowing it up. Some great resources are available online to help you even further with this process. Check out Building Church Leaders (www.buildingchurchleaders.com) and these excellent downloadable guides:

- *Are We Ready for Change?*
- *Thriving Through Change.*
- *Navigating Change.*
- *Managing Change.*