

READINESS IS THE KEY TO CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

These are difficult days for the church, but also days of real opportunity. The trends are alarming. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 50% of Americans were church members in 2019, which is down from 70% in 1999.¹ Of the generations alive today, the younger the group, the less likely it is that a person is involved with a church. For most of us, being involved in church life has meant dealing with a declining number of active members, decreasing involvement by those who do attend, a shrinking or perhaps disappearing Sunday School, disappearing youth ministries, infighting within denominations, and struggling to navigate the pitfalls of downsizing our church staff and programming.

Church leaders seeking to change the congregation have been involved in efforts to identify our core values, define our mission, clarify our vision, lay out a strategic plan, and/or create a discipleship system. We hoped that having these necessary ingredients in place would lead us back to the glory of the growth years of our church. But often, all that good intention and hard work has not produced the fruit of our dreams.

Why Do Revitalization Efforts Fail?

Many things can contribute to the ineffectiveness of our revitalization efforts. Some of these include:

- Unresolved conflict in the church can make forward progress impossible.
- Rushing the improvement efforts and involving too few people can minimize the sense of ownership and scuttle the development process.
- Creating a vague vision that does not delineate specific goals can make planning ineffective.
- Identifying a mission that does not resonate with the real values of the congregation yields a lukewarm response.

- Focusing spiritual growth programming only on the young leads to fading commitment in the adult leadership.

Readiness Must Be First

But there is a logically prior requirement if we are to make progress. We must be ready to change. “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” (Matt 9:17)² It is most often our inability to let go of the past that has blocked our efforts. Churches must continually change if they are to keep pace with an ever-evolving cultural setting.



“SO FAR, FIVE OF OUR PREVIOUS PASTORS AGREE WITH YOU ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF LETTING GO OF THE PAST.”

But people, generally speaking, do not like change, and institutions are more resistant to change than individuals. Institutions are designed to preserve themselves. But when the desired outcomes change, the system needs to change too; form follows function. We must organize in whatever way best fits what we are trying to accomplish.

This is obvious, but it is not easy. In church systems, as in our individual lives, a kind of inertia sets in over time. We fall into patterns of behavior that become automatic and comfortable. Edwin H. Friedman refers to this condition as “homeostasis” and defines it as “the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence.”³ The homeostasis is familiar and seems safe, but change feels risky. When change is needed, our comfort is disrupted. It forces us to let go of habits that are ingrained in us. It means the hard work of learning how to be in this changing world in a different way.

We often make the mistake of imposing change on churches that are not yet ready for it. The result is two-fold: the change is never successfully implemented, and many people become disgruntled in the process. Being ready for change is necessary to realizing the vision to which God calls us. Raymond Schulte, Executive Director of The Center for Parish Development, describes change readiness this way: “Readiness is that moment when congregation leaders become willing to expose themselves to learning something new. It is willingness to take a risk, to confess that a gap exists between the way things are and what they believe is God’s vision for the church; it is receptivity to the movement of the Spirit.”

We are ready to accept the sacrifices we must make to change when we see that the current situation is not viable. We need to really feel the urgency of our plight. We need to be shaken awake to the fact that our current reality requires something of us.

Pandemic as Wakeup Call

These days of trial in the pandemic may be just the wakeup call we need. The requirements of these days have forced us to be the church in new and different ways as it seeks to address challenges such as grief, a need for financial support, a heightened need for community, and a hunger for healing and reconciliation.

And with congregations already loosed from the grip of past ways of being, we are in a good position to address those needs. The pandemic has caused us to communicate remotely and this has been a blessing. We are more flexible in our worship. We are more efficient in the use of our meeting time. The most reticent media users have been moved to participate and have experienced the convenience of a variety of communication venues. It is easier for us now to share our faith and our care and concern with people we might not have otherwise reached.

This is the time; this is the moment now, to do the hard work of discernment, planning, and implementing that will reach our hurting nation with the love and care of the gospel of Christ. We are more ready for change than we were a year ago. The felt needs of our citizenry are clearly in our view. Now is the ideal time to reach out as our churches and our world find the way to a new homeostasis.

So get to work. Make clear the values of the faith, define a mission of reaching out with love and acceptance for all, clarify a vision of a grace-filled community, create a plan in line with your mission and vision and launch out in faith. Perhaps you were created for a time such as this!

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1. Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>, April 18, 2019.

2. The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

3. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 23.