

Buckle up: Congregational change isn't easy

by [Peter L. Steinke](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue



Church in Heylipol, Scotland. Photo by [Paul Hart](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

I have my doubts about programs that claim to train transformational leaders. Most of them are implementing a pattern developed elsewhere, one that has to do with technique and data collection. I received one advertisement from a church consulting group that promised a transformed church. Eight churches that the group worked with attested to success. The brochure had the appeal of magic—quick and direct. But I know from experience that what was missing in the ad and in a lot of training efforts were the failures. Some churches didn't experience success. What didn't work? And why? Anne Lamott advises, "When the seasons change, buckle up." I would like to see a transformation project that says, "Let us prepare your congregation for change. Buckle up!"

I appreciate the goals of the transformational leadership movement. After all, in a world where "perpetual novelty" is creating a situation of "permanent stress" for all leaders, any help is welcome. But I have doubts about any movement that makes transformation appear easy and ignores the power of emotional forces.

Despite the scores of books, workshops and seminars devoted to transformational leadership, most congregations and leaders are not prepared to institute change on a systemic level. Yet we desperately need training—training that acknowledges three key factors: 1) Arduous effort is needed to move an emotional system to a new way of seeing itself. Fear and other emotions complicate all efforts. 2) Many pastors are not prepared to do transitional work in congregations. 3) It's absolutely critical that churches connect serious change with mission.

The first of these factors is based on what I've seen in congregations: leaders often don't understand and anticipate dramatic, disruptive emotional response. Because transformation redefines who we are and what we do, it is always an emotional experience. For one thing, transformation begins with endings. Death comes to the congregational system in some form, and when this happens, the natural response is grief. As Ronald Heifetz notes in *Leadership on the Line*, leaders become vulnerable to people's grievances. The action needed for transformation tends to cease or slow down as grieving puts people on hold. This means that transformation may take five years, a generation, or perhaps even 40 wilderness years.

One guaranteed emotional response to change is fear. As an interventionist at churches in conflict, I have seen fear go off on its own course regardless of anyone's ironclad process, and I've seen change make a direct hit at the amygdala, the anxiety alarm in the brain. I have seen clergy thrown to the antichange wolves. I have watched self-declared transformational leaders butt their heads against emotional barriers. I have my own bruises and wounds from efforts at change. Congregations hire me to move them out of their systemic paralysis, yet some cannot muster the courage or imagination to break the gridlock. Since the churches are remunerating me for my services, one would assume that they would be ready to move beyond their anxiety-generated immobility, but instead I often become the target of their frustration and anger.

Change sets off a burst of emotional energy. In working with congregations, I'm occasionally surprised by the vehemence or the source of the emotionality, but never by its presence. When congregations ask me to help them move out of a mess, morass or maze, I use a process that eventually produces proposals for change. Someone or some group will grind an emotional ax in order to hatchet the process. If the change is not what they expect, they try to cut off its legs.

Economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller observed that in financial decision-making, a disproportionate emphasis is placed on rational behavior and that irrational and misguided behaviors are undervalued. They claim that more consideration should be given to the inconsistent, restless elements in the economy—to powerful psychological forces that they refer to as "animal spirits."

Many of us assume that people make decisions about wealth solely on the basis of enlightened self-interest, but the researchers found that animal spirits, the primitive instinct to act without logic or foresight, also play a significant role. People in the church make the same wrong assumptions as those in a corporation; we believe that people will behave rationally and extend goodwill, patience and respect when interacting with others. We think that our core values will rise to the top like cream and that if we make a few sensible changes, harmony will take hold. But animal spirits find their way into any system.

I witnessed animal spirits in a congregation where a clergyman decided to revitalize the parish. Without consulting anyone, he suddenly changed the worship times, style and the leaders, then rearranged the church staff. After the 26-year stint of the previous pastor, nicknamed by some "Reverend Right Friendly," many in the congregation yearned for something new and aligned themselves with the pastor and his bold initiatives. But a sizable segment of the 3,000 members became emotionally ruffled when he wrote a newsletter article telling them he was not going to "hold [their] hands" and be "an enabler of [their] dependencies." His supporters liked his command-and-control leadership, but allies of the former pastor were not about to let "Dr. Changelove" disrupt familiar patterns.

Friends and relatives ceased talking to one another. Each group stood emotionally riveted to its side of the controversy. Then the new senior pastor resigned and disappeared for three weeks. When he returned, he learned that no action had been taken on his resignation, and he sought to retract it. When the leaders announced that he would preach on the following Sunday, the opposition turned their sour complaints into acid threats. A couple of brothers who stood on opposite sides convinced the leaders to delay the pastor's return until the resignation matter was settled. The pastor publicly chastised a few of his supporters for being cowardly and invited the more militant supporters to his house for a cookout. However, he left again, this time with his wife, child and furnishings.

On my first visit to the congregation as interventionist, a professor from a local university told me that the senior pastor was a "change missionary" who failed to mobilize "the change agents" to deal with "the culture keepers." Her comment reminded me of the findings of John Kotter, professor emeritus of Harvard University, who has studied the change process in corporate settings and claims that 70 percent of the companies that he studied initiated change only to see efforts collapse in the first phase.

A second concern is the pastor's skill or lack of skill in leading change. In some congregations the pastors are as ill prepared as the members they're supposed to lead. I have not found much aptitude in clergy for guiding change or much urgency among lay leaders to initiate it. More often, the leaders are expected to stay inside the box of day-to-day problems. Changes that might adjust the design or balance of the system are not pressing priorities. Many congregations take pride in their homeostatic ways.

Many clergy are caught in a vise. They've been trained to be priestly in their ministry and have received little assistance in being prophetic and visionary. The priest is the consoler, the reconciler and the soul friend. Relational abilities are paramount. Healing is the centerpiece of this activity. The prophet, in contrast, speaks out and is a truth teller, though not brash or cynical; the prophet cares about people but at times may use militant words. Awareness and action are the heart of the prophet's work. The visionary role includes governance, oversight and planning.

With steep changes happening in our society, congregations have to ask themselves whether they are responding to a world that no longer exists and whether they have the sort of leadership required to shift to new understanding and practices. Yes, the priestly work is always needed, but many clergy need to become advocates for adaptive change. Does your congregation need a more prophetic ministry? Do you need a more visionary type of ministry? Does your clergyperson offer the gifts of awareness and vision that will be needed?

Despite the urgency of their situation, many congregations opt for the priestly role. "If we just had a pastor who loved us, we would be all right," they insist. Other congregations don't contest that argument but want the love to come with a concern for justice, mission and new visions. Laity who understand the depth of congregational crisis are asking clergy to do more than preach the gospel and administer the sacraments; they're asking that leaders help them become focused

and stay focused.

A third challenge for a congregation that wants to commit to and effect change is to redefine and redirect its mission. Rethinking mission is difficult, especially for congregations that are burdened by big or deteriorating buildings, small staffs, a paucity of young families and a shortage of hope. But expansion is not the sole gauge of mission orientation. Not all congregations are in the same place, stage or circumstance. As significant as it is for mission, growth does not by itself define what mission is.

I ask church members, "Does this congregation have a clear sense of its mission?" Typical responses range from "poor sense of purpose" to "running in circles," from "lack of vision" to "our mission is not to have a mission." Questions such as "Who are we?" and "What is our primary focus?" cry out for answers. When I ask individuals what they think the mission is, the answers are rote: "Spread the word," "Support the church," "Love everyone," "Preach the Bible." No one has ever said, "Our mission is to turn the world upside down" or "to join God's ongoing promise to re-create the world" or "to let the world know that the resurrection means the world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ." Some members say their congregation has a sense of mission because they have a mission statement. Sad to say, few know what it is.

Limping along without a focus is called mission drift. It is what happens when people have forgotten what their objective is and are just going through the motions. To judge from my experience, congregations in mission drift will at some point:

- engage in conflict,
- suffer a malaise of spirit,
- decline in some statistical manner,
- adapt to their most immature members,
- fail to mobilize people's gifts and energy,
- surrender to apathy or complacency,
- do little planning,
- become turned in on themselves,
- blame outside forces (or perhaps one another) for their depression, and/or
- be unable to make effective, appropriate changes.

A congregation is a group of people who come together with a purpose, but after years of being together, they may wonder what happened to the purpose that once

energized them. This is normal. Again and again, we have to explore why we come together and who we are. What are we trying to be? What is our calling at this time and place? Can we make a difference? Is there a purpose for our presence? If we are unaware of the particular lens through which we are looking at the world, then we do not have any true choices about what we are going to see and how we are going to respond.

If the effort to define mission works only for congregations that are increasing in numbers, the three congregations described below would have to be omitted from the list. They are in numerical decline. But they are self-consciously and intentionally working on sustaining their mission orientation. Indeed, they have spiritual spunk.

Congregation A (in Pennsylvania) is about 80 years old. It has modest facilities and a central location but a demographic dilemma. The old pattern of children and grandchildren following in the denominational footprints of their parents has practically ended. Besides, the area's economy cannot offer enough jobs for youth who are entering the work world. Farm life is no longer central to the area. The old industries have either moved to new locations or no longer exist. A unique feature of this particular part of the state is the high number of citizens who have served in the military, including members of this congregation. They have seen other parts of the world, have embraced service as part of their identity and have benefited from their education within the military.

Congregation A has experienced a downturn both in membership and worship attendance. Yet as the numbers ebb, overall giving is increasing. Although one would have expected the congregation to suffer from a severe financial shortage, funds designated for mission have tripled in ten years. Perhaps more amazing is that mission increased from 10 percent to 33 percent of the budget. When I inquired about these statistics, most members attributed them to a new pastor who came in 1996 and to his emphasis on stewardship. He recruited a number of the ex-military members to work alongside him. He encouraged mission trips, planned Bible studies to lift the people's vision and devoted time to training lay leaders.

Congregation B (in California) would not fit the label "in mission" if numbers were the gauge. Its golden age lasted from 1954 to 1964. Then, a dozen years ago, a downward trend developed. But now worship attendance is steady. The congregation is located in an old suburb in the first ring of suburbs circling a city. The smaller homes in the suburb are owned by young or older couples. The

neighborhood school has closed because the young families have fewer children than their parents and grandparents. Half of congregation B's members drive more than ten miles to worship—a pattern repeated in neighboring churches. What makes congregation B special is its active laity. Sensing a need to challenge the congregation, the pastor and the parish nurse collaborated in designing a holistic approach to ministry. They led the congregation in developing a stewardship plan that expanded pledging beyond money. Members were asked to pledge a personal mission gift to the community. Some started a food pantry; others started a "Walk for Wheels," using donations to purchase wheelchairs for needy people in poor countries. Many ministries serve the considerable number of elderly in the neighborhood.

Congregation C (in Ohio) has had a similar pattern of losses. In the past 18 years membership has declined from 1,200 to 541. Worship attendance mirrors the loss. Of the three congregations, congregation C has had the most internal problems: an assistant pastor involved in sexual misconduct, a couple of lay leaders convicted and sentenced for fraud, and a pastor's resignation that polarized the membership. The congregation had four retired pastors among its members. Two of them, a former missionary and a prison chaplain, initiated several projects. The congregation distributed Bibles to new immigrants in the community and provided useful information and counsel to them. They planted a congregation in a prison. The youth caught the sense of urgency for mission and served lunches after worship once a month, then used the proceeds to pay school tuition for a nine-year-old boy whose mother's bout with cancer had led to financial distress for the family.

The response of these three supposedly declining congregations may be exceptional. In similar circumstances, other congregations wait for people to show up at their doorstep and sign on as members. Some churches continue to expect the pastor to be exclusively a chaplain (priest) who services their needs and preferences with an occasional nod to the world outside the congregation.

A church that once numbered 1,000 and now is supported by 200 is a significantly different church. The need to be mission-focused is still there, but the church may lack the imagination needed for refocusing that mission and may continue to function as if nothing has changed. If it has a long tradition of having two pastors, for example, having two may now be a luxury, perhaps a financial burden, and the congregation must learn to function with one pastor.

Several factors are evident in congregations A, B and C. First of all, they demonstrated a readiness to work on change over time and with and through emotional reactivity. (Yes, messiness erupted in each case when changes were implemented.) Second, leaders were ready to lead, as well as to endure the necessary timeline not of months, but of years. Finally, each church had a clear sense of its mission and implemented programs and services that reflected that mission.

When I first saw a congregation making a significant change by associating that change with mission, I saw far less resistance to the change than in other congregations. And I have seen change made that had no connection to mission and was easily sabotaged or emotionally resisted. It makes sense to raise the congregation's consciousness of mission before embarking on a major shift—to put the horse (mission) before the cart (change). Then the congregation must assess the readiness of its leaders for long-term change and put plans in place if leadership training is needed. Finally, everyone involved should prepare for the work, patience and commitment that will be needed. Tell yourselves and your congregation, "Prepare for change. Buckle up!"

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