

NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF CHANGE

By Justin A. Irving (© 2003)

Twelve miles east of Portland lies the growing city of Gresham, Oregon. This is the place I called home for the first 17 years of my life. Gresham is nestled in the foothills of Mt. Hood with the Willamette River and Columbia River Gorge just minutes away. Gresham was a great location to enjoy the outdoors. Camping, hunting, hiking, skiing, and windsurfing in my home state are a few of the memories I carry with me to this day.

Perhaps my most enjoyable memories of growing up in Oregon, though, are the family trips we had driving to the coastline. Cannon Beach and Haystack Rock, playing on the beach at Seaside, tours through the famous Tillmook Cheese Factory, and the always present seagulls and saltwater taffy were just some of the stops and attractions along the beautiful Pacific Coast Scenic Byway, US Highway 101.

In our journeys along the coastline, the towns of Astoria and Coos Bay were always special stops for me. Beyond being part of the beautiful coastline region, Astoria and Coos Bay are also both seaports. I remember being fascinated by the maritime lifestyle, and was enthralled by watching the boats navigate their way to sea from these ports. Where would their journey take them? What countries would be visited? What cargo would be carried or what fish would be caught? What unexpected weather would be encountered and how would they navigate the unpredictable waters of the ever-changing sea?

Though I live far from the Oregon coastline now here in the heart of the Midwest, navigation of another sort has been a part of life in the pastorate. Perhaps you can identify. Congregational change often feels like unexpected weather patterns and unpredictable waters. As with sea-bound captains, pastors in local congregations inevitably face the waters of change in congregational life.

Change has been compared to the inevitability of death and taxes. If this is true—which experience in my corner of the world confirms—are pastors sufficiently prepared to meet the challenge of change? How will change be navigated? Is there a common course to be plotted through the waters of change?

Though the details of congregational change may not be outlined with absolute specificity, there are six key buoys that mark the channel along the way throughout the change process. These six buoys are demarcated by what I call the Leadership C.H.A.N.G.E. Model.

Create a Sense of Urgency

Change is happening all around us. Sometimes change comes in sudden strikes, as the events of September 11, 2001 permanently changed the way we view terrorism in America. But most of the time, change is incremental. As with the infamous frog in the kettle syndrome, change often sneaks up on a congregation. But when change comes in the form of hazardous situations, sometimes the most important thing is to create a sense of urgency—enough urgency to move the congregational death-bound frog to a place of life and safety.

Immanuel Baptist Church has a rich history going back to 1917. Originating near the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, MN, the church was founded by immigrants from what was then called Czechoslovakia. For several decades, the church experienced significant growth, but over time, as children moved away from home and as the urban location of the church became less attractive and less safe than the emerging suburbs, the congregation dwindled to a small handful of six members.

It was at the point when the church was literally facing the hard reality of having to close its doors that a deep sense of urgency began forming in the membership. Thankfully the boiling waters of congregational and cultural change did not bring Immanuel to a final demise. As the urgency of the situation was recognized, the members sought out help from a larger congregation in a neighboring area that graciously played a central role in the revitalization of God's work at Immanuel by sending a pastor, financial resources, and several new members to help in the church's restoration.

The story of Immanuel's health and near death is all too common in congregational life. Thankfully, God intervened and restored this congregation to health. But must such a near death experience be the only thing that creates the sense of urgency necessary to raise a congregation's awareness of the need for change? Ought not urgency be felt when a congregation is not seeing lives transformed by the Gospel? Ought not urgency be felt when God is not being honored in authentic worship? Ought not urgency be felt when the church is not experiencing the joy of Christian love and community?

Before meaningful change can begin at the congregational level, urgency must prepare the way. One of the first roles of a leader in navigating the waters of change is to help church members see the emerging need for change. Creating a sense of urgency is the first buoy along the way.

Harness a Guiding Coalition

Once a congregation has owned a sense of urgency, the next stage in navigating the waters of change is to begin communicating the change vision to key leaders within the congregation. This group of key leaders may be called the guiding coalition. Some of these leaders may be in formal roles in the church, while others are the unofficial leaders who people in the church naturally look to when decisions need to be made and opinions expressed.

In his book on change leadership, John Kotter says that this group must have at least three important characteristics—credibility, expertise, and leadership ability. For a vision of change to move to a place of reality, harnessing a guiding coalition is vital. But any group will not do. Whether in formal or informal roles, at least three questions must be asked. 1) Are members of the guiding coalition wired to lead? 2) Are they knowledgeable and competent? And 3) are they of such integrity that issues of credibility are un-compromised and above reproach?

The early church asked similar questions in selecting leaders. For instance, in Acts 6 the deacons selected were to be full of wisdom, faith, and the Holy Spirit. Likewise, in 1 Timothy 3, Paul exhorts Timothy to select elders on the basis of their established faith, un-compromised character, and their ability to teach in the church.

Leaders in a guiding coalition who do not exhibit credibility, expertise, and leadership ability will be severely hindered in their leadership of the process of change. However, leaders who have these issues in place are ready to navigate the change vision forward to the next stage along the journey—aligning the majority.

Align the Majority

Once the sense of urgency has been owned and a guiding coalition has been harnessed around the change vision, it is time to begin aligning the majority in a congregation. Along the congregational change voyage, this stage has the tendency of becoming one of the most underestimated. While urgency is felt and key leaders have gathered around a unifying vision, aligning the majority often fails through an under-communication of the change vision.

Illustrating the importance of this point, a friend of mine in his work with Campus Crusade for Christ used to have a note by his phone stating: “Who Else Needs to Know?” The note served as a regular reminder of the need to communicate updates frequently. Such a simple tool might be just the reminder needed in the process of communicating the importance of and need for the change vision.

Everett Rogers in his classic book on innovations and change describes how many people differ in their readiness to embrace a new vision of change. While 16% may be viewed as innovators and early adopters, and 34% a part of the early majority of innovation adopters, it's important to remember that some people need more time to process change than others, and some may never be ready to move with the vision of change. As the guiding coalition implements the vision of change in a congregation, it's important to both recognize the differences in individual change readiness and to seek to minister to these people through instruction and dialogue around the change vision. Approaching the alignment of the majority in this way often saves a great deal of unnecessary bruising in the implementation of a change vision.

Navigate the Path of Vision

Once a sufficient percentage of the majority has been aligned around the change vision, it is time to begin to navigate the path of vision. In many respects, the process up to this point has been a gathering together of everyone who will be onboard the vessel during the change voyage. This fourth buoy marks the ship's departure from the safety of preparations in the harbor and channel and is finally launched to sea.

The realities of change often begin to be felt at this stage. With the waves of conflict splashing their waters on the ship's deck, and with the undercurrents of tradition exerting their force to bring the ship back to port, it becomes tempting to abort the change mission. But it's important to remember at this stage that the very forces working against the voyage may eventually become its allies. For conflict handled with grace is able to produce strength and unity, and tradition held in honor is able to create space for new “traditions” to emerge and be embraced.

One of the churches that I'm familiar with is currently in the process of formalizing a vision of team-based ministry. This church-wide vision has been encouraged both by the vision of ministry found in passages such as Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, as well as churches who seem to be doing

team-based ministry with excellence such as New Hope Christian Fellowship in Hawaii. Having moved through the process of creating a sense of urgency, harnessing a guiding coalition, and aligning the majority, the church is currently in the initial stages of navigating the path of vision. Though the new voyage has just begun, it's hopeful to see how the initial stages have already created a congregational culture that is excited and eager as they journey out to sea on this new adventure.

Galvanize It through Routine

The next stage in the change process is that of galvanizing the vision through routine. The process of galvanization is used for the purpose of taking an already strong substance, such as steel or iron, and strengthening it through the adherence of zinc to its exterior surface. Once the process of galvanization is completed, it is estimated that the life of a metal product being exposed to the elements is increased by at least 15 years. On sea-bound vessels exposed to the harshness of saltwater, galvanization is considered essential. Along the congregational change voyage, a form of galvanization is also essential if the change vision is to be woven into the fabric of the church's congregational life.

Though setting aside all questioning of tradition—tradition for the sake of tradition—is not healthy for a congregation, nevertheless, degrees of stability resulting from a process of change is a helpful congregational feature. At this fifth buoy, the congregational vessel is well along its way in the change voyage. Those features of the change vision that once felt awkward and new at the initial phases of navigating the path of vision are now beginning to become a normal part of the congregational life. At this stage land-lovers begin to acquire their sea legs, feeling both peace and satisfaction in the community-wide voyage and what God is doing in and through their congregation.

Through the process of making a change vision a part of the church's routine life, the vision undergoes a congregational galvanizing. Illustrating this point, many congregations over the past decades have been led to pursue more contemporary expressions in worship. For these congregations, this has meant opening the door to a wide range of styles and instruments associated with contemporary and diverse forms of worship. But such changes take time in order to be sensitive to both congregational roots and the emerging generations. Effective change leaders allow time for new traditions to emerge and galvanize the to steel of the congregation culture. Effectively navigated, changes that were once new and perhaps awkward for some now become a vibrant and fully embraced part of life together in these dynamic communities.

Establish a Culture of Change

With the change vision galvanized and established through the process of routine, it's easy for congregations to miss this important and final buoy in the congregational change voyage. In the life of a congregation, change can be challenging when it is an unfamiliar part of the church's life. However, it is at the end of a successful change process that congregations are most open to the ongoing benefit of change in the church's life.

For this reason, the final stage in the Leadership C.H.A.N.G.E. Model is establishing a culture of change. Change for change's sake is no more helpful than tradition for tradition's sake. However, if a congregation is able to embrace the God-honoring role that change is able to play, future considerations of change become more feasible and will be met with a higher degree of biblical unity. As

congregations grow accustomed to change, dreams of what God may do within a congregation are released and change is accepted as a divine tool in the life of the church.

Plotting Your Congregational Course

The sea is fascinating for so many reasons, but its invitation to freely dream is one of the greatest. On the sea there are no roads or rails to prescribe the course that's plotted. So where will your congregational journey take you? What places will you encounter? Who will be met? What lives will be transformed through the message of the cross? And how will eternity be changed? Perhaps these six buoys of the leadership C.H.A.N.G.E. model will help you plot your course. Dream God-sized dreams of change, remembering the words of missionary William Carey: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."