

Churches Can Handle Change, But They Don't Like Surprise

Introducing big changes is much easier if we give church leaders and members the time to process them.

by Karl Vaters



Churches can handle change.

If you've tried and failed to change things at your church, that may not feel true, but it is.

The problem in many churches isn't that they can't handle change. It's that they don't like being surprised by changes. And they shouldn't have to.

Wise leaders work very hard to reduce surprises as much as possible.

The more changes are needed, the more critical it is that church leaders and members know what's happening and why.

A Promise Made and Kept

When I first arrived at my current church, a lot of changes were needed. The church was discouraged, unhealthy and broken.

But they had a long, bad history of changes being attempted before the church was ready to receive or implement them. So, in my first church leadership meeting, I established this principle.

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On small issues, it's not a problem. But big issues need time to simmer.

After all, most big issues have been simmering in our hearts and minds for weeks, months or years before we're ready to present them to the leadership team. We need to give those leaders some time, just like we needed time.

Matter of Respect

We've made a lot of changes in our church in the last two-plus decades. Some good. Some not. But no one was ever surprised by them.

Using that principle has been a credibility builder like no other.

Even when people disagreed with the changes, they understood the process. They knew what was happening and why, and they had the opportunity to give input and state disagreements without fear of reprisal. In short, the lack of surprise gave the congregation one essential ingredient.

Respect.

Everyone deserves it. Leaders require it. Churches will turn inward upon each other in dangerous ways without it.

But when people have it, it's amazing how much change they're willing to take a chance on.

If pastors respect the church's need to process the issue, church members are more likely to respect the pastor's leadership through the change. Then we can discover the joyful truth that most churches are far better with change than we give them credit for.

Give People Time to Ponder

Here's an example.

Over a decade ago, I was considering changing the name of the church. So I brought up the possibility to the deacon board. I told them I didn't want any feedback right then. I asked them to pray and ponder it until the next meeting.

At the next meeting, the longest-serving, most respected deacon spoke up.

"When you brought up a possible name change, I was opposed to it," he said. (*Uh-oh*) "But when my wife and I were on vacation, she found a pamphlet with the names of some local churches. When she read the name of one church, I told her 'I don't want to go there. It sounds dull and boring.'"

"My wife looked up from the pamphlet and said 'that's the same name as *our* church.'"

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," he admitted. "That's how people see us. We need to change our name."

If I'd asked for comments on the possible name change when I brought it up, his negative response would have been the first seed planted. And, like a weed, it would have grown and choked out any chance for change.

Instead, I gave him a month. And in that month, everything changed. Within a year we had a new name for our church. And we've made a lot more changes with the same process.

(No, I won't tell you the old church name. Some of your churches still have it. It's a name that works for a lot of churches. It had just reached the end of its usefulness for us.)

Take Your Time – And Give Some to Others

People need time to process big changes.

After all, I'd had months to ponder it before I'd brought it up to them, and I still wasn't sure. How do we, as pastors, expect people to make the right choice in 20 minutes, when we've had weeks, months, sometimes years to consider the question ourselves?

Most churches are far better with change than we give them credit for.

Most churches are far better with change than we give them credit for. As long as the church is relatively healthy, that is. If the environment is not just broken, but toxic and dysfunctional, different rules apply.

But the leaders and members of a relatively healthy church want what every pastor wants. Necessary changes, properly understood, with enough time to think, pray, learn, discuss and implement them.

Yes, this process takes a little longer. But doing something slowly and right is always better than doing it fast and wrong.