

When Change at Your Church is Worth Fighting Over

Inviting congregations to look back and connect with their past is essential for congregations to imagine their future.

At the Center for Healthy Churches, we encourage the churches we work with to engage in reflecting on their history as the first step.

One effective tool for doing that is to create a timeline that includes significant events from the life of the church, the community and the world.

Recently, one church we worked with did an exceptional job in noting when significant events occurred in the life of the church.

Along with the obvious major events, this group also noted how innovation has been a constant part of their story.

They dutifully recorded, for instance, when indoor plumbing was first installed at the church. Next came the year in the early 20th century when electricity was added.

Other notable advancements included the first time a sound system was put to use. Air conditioning came in the 1950s. The first paid youth minister was in the late '60s. The first church bus was purchased in the 1970s.

The first international mission trip was organized in the 1980s. The first webpage was set up in the 1990s. Screens in the sanctuary arrived in the 2000s. The first live streaming worship broadcast was two years ago.

As we traced their history of innovation, we asked, "What was the response to these innovations?"

In every case, there was substantial opposition, with multiple stories of bruised feelings and damage among the fellowship.

One elderly member remarked that he had never seen as bitter an argument at a business meeting as the night the church voted to install air conditioning in the

building.

That night, six families stormed out of the church and never returned over the reckless extravagance of air conditioning.

Remember, what seems indispensable to us today was at one time considered a luxury or a waste or folly.

We would do well to reconsider Arthur Schopenhauer's dictum: "Every truth passes through three stages before it is recognized. In the first, it is ridiculed. In the second, it is opposed. In the third, it is regarded as self-evident."

We regularly see two primary change scenarios that inflict great harm among congregations.

The first is when congregational leaders force change or innovation too quickly and without adequate relationship bonds.

Armed with good intentions and a substantial surplus of knowledge, these leaders assume that others will take their word for needed change.

Pushing forward without allowing others to come to experience a similar learning curve, such leaders incite havoc among the body with their steamroller tactics.

Nearly always, the resistance organizes, and the conflict escalates. Seldom is the end result a good one.

The second is when a leadership group has the mistaken notion that they can achieve 100 percent agreement with their suggested change. Inevitably, they end up paralyzed by their need for unanimity.

In such cases, a small minority holds the majority hostage and creates great discord in the body.

Even a cursory glance at the literature regarding change reveals that 5 percent of any group will fall into the category of "never adopters."

Jesus does not call us to make everyone happy. He calls us to be faithful to the gospel.

Rather than fall victim to these two extremes, perhaps we could all agree on some

insights into change or innovation as we seek to live out our divine mission.

1. Dramatic change is one of the hardest things for a human being to endure. At the very least, let's approach it with reverence and respect.
2. Resistance and opposition to your suggestions are not to be taken personally, but should be expected, planned for and welcomed.
3. To those who have taken a vow to resist all change, please, instead, take your cue from the biblical record.

Throughout Scripture, God is constantly doing a "new thing." Jesus threatened tradition with his radical notions about worship, discipleship and holiness.

Why would you expect any less from your church's leaders? In the end, you really do want to side with Jesus, right?

4. While our core message will never change, the methodologies for practicing our faith will be in a constant state of change for the rest of our lives.

The changes we will go through in our near future (for a glimpse, read "Physics of the Future" by Michio Kaku) will make our squabbles over screens and technology look laughable, for example.

5. Let's admit that not every innovation, piece of technology, software or new idea is equally valuable.

Remember shuffleboard inlays in the fellowship hall or the dozens of roller skates you purchased for the throngs who were going to come to the gym and skate?

What if we filtered all change and innovation through this question: Does this enable us to fulfill more nearly our mission as God's people?

What if that question mattered more to us than air conditioning, indoor plumbing or screens?

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on the Center for Healthy Churches' [blog](#). It is used with permission.