

it takes a year

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In any system, change is difficult. Very few people like change; systems and institutions like it even less. Good theology, however, recognizes the role of change in a life of faith. What is creation except change? What is transformation (such as a mustard seed becoming a tree that birds can nest in) except change? What is resurrection from death except change? Despite the constant challenge in scripture to make changes in our lives and in our world, the Church has been consistently resistant to change.

In my life as a minister, I have seen countless churches torn apart by change. In a recent CBFNC Annual Gathering workshop, we created a list of topics that we knew to have been divisive in churches. The topics ranged from building projects to personnel issues; from the placement of flags to gender identity; from the type of music in worship to the type of bread used for communion. Like other systems, churches struggle with change. There are things church leaders can do to help their churches be prepared to handle healthy, productive, and inevitable change.

Create a theology of change. Offer a sermon series about the people who embrace change in their lives (Abraham, Sarah, Gideon, David, Ruth, Mary, Simon Peter, and Paul, to name a few). Lead a Sunday School series exploring the themes of change (or transformation, if you prefer) in Jesus' teachings. Have a Wednesday night series focusing on your own church history. Where have you changed in the past? How did it go? Where was God in your change?

Help connect the people of the church to a theology which reminds them that God can be in change, that growth involves change (and often, death), and that to be "born again" is to embrace a policy of change in one's own life. Teaching the people of the church that change is a normal part of the process of a life of faith, with sound theology behind it, helps reduce their anxiety over the basic idea of change. If change becomes normal, people do not have to adjust to the idea of change—only to the change itself.

Do your identity work. Ask the people of the church to explore the important questions: Who are we? Who have we been? What do we want? What are we, currently, actually doing? What would we like to do? What are our goals?

Identify the Babies and the Bathwater. What are the things we still value and need to protect? Who are the most vulnerable people in this process and how can we protect or prepare them for this change? How can we make this process a gentle one, which takes the time to constantly evaluate the effect it is having on the people and the system?

Respect the process. Any significant change will take time. Some people will leave because of the change. Period. Be prepared. Some people will stay but will never like the change. Always be able to speak to the issue that the change seeks to address, and to return to process.

Get buy-in. Start small. Unofficial. Work within your systems. Be transparent. "Our Missions Team is working on ways to improve our communications between the Missions Team and our members! Share your ideas with someone on our Team today!" Prevent conspiracy theories by including as many people as possible in the process. "We are offering three open meetings on X Topic this summer!" Visit classes and small groups to update them. Factions are easily countered with inclusion. By the time any change gets voted on, the people of the church should be weary of the amount of information they have been given on the topic.

Evaluate. Evaluate. Evaluate. Evaluate the problem. Evaluate possible solutions. Take the pulse of the congregation on the proposed solution. Have your research ready when questions are raised. After launching the program, have an evaluation process in place, so that one year later you can tell whether it is working, and report results.

Create rituals of adoption and rituals of retirement. For example, when the library dies (as most of the church libraries across America inevitably will), how will you honor the people who have kept it going? How will you bring new life to that space? How will you invite new people to own space in the church?

As the change is implemented: value people; value process; bring goals forward; fight fear with information; listen and respond (even if it means changing the change); invite people to pray; and invoke sound theology around the change as often as possible.

The world is changing every day in the 21st century. As we invite people into a theology of change, we have the added advantage of being able to comfort them with a theology of stability—a God who likes change, and whose nature never changes.