

LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

Research done by the ELCA Research and Evaluation Department on Lutheran evangelism in the 1990's found some helpful conclusions. Congregations that were strong and vibrant in their ministry had two common elements:

1. Clarity of Purpose/Vision as the congregation relates to the world.
2. Spiritual openness and a willingness to change for the sake of the mission.

Without these two elements all of the money and programs in the world didn't seem to matter. With these two things present, ministries were able to accomplish amazing things for the mission of the church.

As congregations struggle with how to discern a mission and grow spiritual roots that open them up to God's guidance it is clear that leadership is a key. Without the push from transformational leaders, most congregations will remain in their current state. This is a reminder of an important truth: changed people change churches.

There are some key things that are important for leaders to remember:

1. To lead a congregation into clarity of purpose and openness to God's direction, leaders need to have a clear sense of purpose and an emphasis in their lives that allows God to guide them. While leaders (like everyone else) will be incomplete and imperfect, the bar for leadership is high. A leader's willingness to pray, read scripture, foster and facilitate meaningful discussions, worship, tithe, tell the story and serve will be critical.
2. Communities respond to leadership and rarely exceed its expectations. Congregations that try to make faith easy and keep the bar low tend to end up with few results. Congregations that take leadership and mission seriously and can create higher expectations and accountability tend to move forward. As leaders, changing the culture of a congregation to one of expectancy and accountability can be essential.
3. Nothing that leaders try to 'get done' is likely to add up to too much apart from the vision/purpose work that leaders do and without the climate of spiritual openness and willingness to change that are mentioned above. Be sure to work on them early. They are the foundation for wise and focused ministry. Without them, congregations are most likely to wander in the wilderness. With them, the ability to make good and helpful decisions is near at hand. Help the congregation spend time with God so that the climate of spiritual discernment is present and clarity of purpose happens.
4. Good leaders do not make followers (any leader, by definition has those). Good leaders make more leaders. Involve and equip people so that leadership is a vehicle by which the ministry of the baptized is released and so that the priesthood of all believers is the foundation for mobilizing the whole body of Christ. The more leaders the better. The more leaders end up doing themselves, the more likely a leader is likely to fail. Always lead with an eye toward developing another leader.

Dissatisfaction + Vision + Concrete Actions > Costs

Dissatisfaction: This is the awareness that things are not who they are intended to be – that something is wrong. As dissatisfaction increases, the motivation to do something to change increases as well. This is often experienced as a law/judgment and may include decline in attendance, financial struggles, concerns about closing, etc. It may also be missional in nature and be a concern for the high numbers around the church who are suffering, lack faith in Jesus, etc. Raising dissatisfaction raises the urgency of the situation and is a key to initiating action for many.

Vision: It is essential that there be an alternative to what is currently there. Vision is a view of God's preferred future for the ministry. Vision can be hard for many to see, but it is a key gift for those leading change. A key to faithful vision is that the leaders and the ministry are not to simply copy a vision from some other place, nor are they to simply dream what they would like. Vision comes from God and is discerned through prayer, scripture and other ways that the ministry can tap into the dreams of God.

Concrete Action: At some point every successful change effort has to do something. For many who struggle to see vision, this will be the place where they sense movement and can see the vision unfold. In addition, if dissatisfaction and vision do not begin to materialize, people will generally lose hope and begin to doubt that the vision can become a reality. While initially, doing something to start change is helpful, long term action should embody the congregation's vision so that it contributes to God's dream unfolding in the ministry.

Costs: Every change comes at a cost. This cost, grounded for Christians in the cross of Jesus Christ and expressed in 'taking up our crosses, ' is born out of faith by the community. Costs can be financial, but more often grief, anger, conflict and pain are the key costs as people give up those things from their present that are not in God's vision for their future. When people experience the price as too high, change comes to a halt. Leadership that can deal with grief and conflict directly and honestly is key to continuing to move forward when the price of change rises.

The reality of change is that it is not a linear process. It is more of an art form. Factors to the left need to be increased. Costs to the right need to be dealt with in healthy ways based on an identity that places everyone at the foot of the cross. Good leadership helps keep things in balance and the community of faith moving forward.

Dissatisfaction without vision leads to depressed or unhappy people.

Vision without concrete action leads to cynicism.

Concrete action without vision leads to chaos.

DISSATISFACTION – Why do we need that?

Satisfaction is seen as desirable and dissatisfaction as something to avoid. Who wants to be a dissatisfied customer?

Change, however, demands that there be dissatisfaction. Without it, everything seems fine the way it is. Complacency can even set in. Anything that changes that with which people are satisfied is seen as bad and something to be avoided. The old saying, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is as true of congregations as it is of anything else. Good leadership finds ways to create healthy satisfaction.

Internal dissatisfaction: For congregations in decline, this is the most common place to start. This may be the result of looking at trends in giving or attendance over the last few years. It may be thinking about a shrinking staff. It may be finding a sense of apathy that indicates no one in the congregation is all that plugged in any more – everyone appears to be simply going through the motions. Whatever it is, good leaders help identify sources of dissatisfaction and use them to motivate people to make positive changes.

External dissatisfaction: Dissatisfaction may come from external sources. For example, a congregation could look into its community and discover that there is inadequate housing, children having nothing to do after school, 80% of community is unchurched, or any number of things. If people’s hearts are beating for mission, these are unsatisfactory situations.

One enemy of healthy dissatisfaction is success. When things go well, the satisfaction level increases. As a result, dissatisfaction goes down. Good leaders know two things:

1. When something goes well it is time to celebrate.
2. When the celebration is done it is time to find a new place to apply healthy pressure so the momentum isn’t lost.

Dissatisfaction is a necessary state until the reign of God is complete. If this isn’t the kingdom for which the faithful pray with Jesus, then there is still room for improvement.

Finally, dissatisfaction is a key to change for many, even most people in this world. It is not, however, something that can stand alone. Anyone can get people dissatisfied, even angry. However, the key to good leadership is knowing what aspects of the congregation’s life and context will best help people respond in healthy ways, advancing the work of Christ in that place.

MAKING VISION MORE ACCESSIBLE

Vision = Purpose + Guiding Principles + Time

Many people struggle to see vision clearly. In fact, studies show that over half of the population lack significant ability to process abstract information and overwhelmingly prefer concrete communication. In many settings where renewal is needed, the vision is all but non-existent and for those who are visionary, the need for vision means that most left the congregation to find it elsewhere. This means that an even higher percentage of the remaining congregation is likely to struggle to see God's vision clearly. For this reason, good leadership will make certain keys to the vision as clear and concrete as possible.

The following is one way of understanding this that has helped many congregations move forward:

Purpose: All Christian mission is grounded in the mission of God. In fact, it must be remembered that it is God's mission, not the church's. Claimed as the body of Christ for the world, the church is then sent forth as instruments of God's mission. Each ministry must own the mission of God in its own context.

Guiding Principles: These are core values expressed in missional form. Owning the purpose most likely will (though not always) come first. In many cases some visionary people will also be able to start discerning the vision. In addition, the context, prayer and scripture will lift up certain priorities and values. These values are then expressed as guiding principles for the ministry. When major decisions are made, these guiding principles and the congregation's purpose can be used to weigh options and to keep the ministry on track and making healthy decisions.

Time: Vision is always God's dream for the future. It is a product of time. A congregation's vision takes time and energy.

While some will begin to discern the vision early in the process, for everyone the vision will emerge when the purpose and guiding principles are lived out faithfully and with energy over time.

Remember: Vision, purpose and guiding principles are God directed and spiritually discerned through prayer, Bible study, community discussion and leadership.

Concrete Actions

Many people will not change just because there is a vision of a preferred future. They simply cannot see it clearly enough to be drawn in by the dream. Likewise, many will be unable to sense the urgency of changing – they are still comfortable enough with the present to not want to shoulder the burden of things becoming different. Many are satisfied with the way things are. This is simply the way things are.

Therefore, leaders committed to change must find ways to help people act differently and do so in ways that fit into the present smoothly enough to allow for transition. These actions will provide their own concrete examples of new behaviors. They may feel a bit uncomfortable in many cases. They may not be noticed. They may produce high anxiety. However, in order for a congregation to have a future that is different than its present, it is necessary at some point that the people act differently.

As smart leaders reflect on the issues that endanger the mission as well as get glimpses of the dream that God has for them, they find ways to embody newness in ways that overcome the factors that cause dissatisfaction and act more like the vision. For example, if a congregation has a vision of welcoming a diverse population into its midst but acts in closed and unfriendly ways, there are 3 things a congregation can do to approach this issue:

1. Discuss the fact that people who come report that the congregation acts in unfriendly ways toward visitors. For those who find that unacceptable, behaviors may change simply as a result of this information.
2. Lift up a vision of the congregation being transformed into a more hospitable and welcoming place. For those attracted to the dream, they may change simply based on this information.
3. For those who neither connect with the thought that they are unfriendly nor see a dream of welcoming in a new way, the congregation can change its practices (liturgically, in the way it uses lay ministers to create an environment of welcome, in adjusting the ways that people connect with each other during worship or fellowship or other times, etc.) For many, these changes in the system will impact how they function and allow them to be more welcoming by changing the default behaviors to become more positive.

Therefore, when identifying an element of the ministry to be changed leaders identify why people might be dissatisfied enough to consider change and offer up as clear and tangible a vision for the future as can be described. Remember, most people will be different not by being told to be different but by behaving differently. Good leaders make this happen.

Counting the Costs

Jesus reminds us, “No one (builds a tower, goes to war, ...*you fill in your own situation...*) without first counting the cost.” All change comes with a price. There is no way to bring about change without some sense of loss, pain, or struggle. The willingness to engage this is a sign of leadership and discipleship. The strength to engage this comes from the cross of Jesus who used his own life as a model for all those who would follow.

Costs are on the opposite side of the equation from everything else. They are the weight that can bring a ministry to a screeching halt if not dealt with well and processing in healthy ways. When done properly, paying the price can become unifying, edifying and advance the work of God.

Costs become a concern when the price of change seems too high. As people’s energy and anxiety work to raise concern, they need to find a channel. Good leaders know this and plan for it.

Awareness of these three factors is helpful:

1. Anxiety is going to be present no, no matter what. Without it nothing can be done. Prepare people ahead for changes. Good communication is essential. Clear ownership of decisions and information ahead of time can help the majority of people deal with most changes. Some will resist change no matter what, but most will adapt if given information ahead of time, clear reasons for the change, a chance to share their feelings, and some sense that they are cared for through the changes.
2. Grief is often underestimated. All changes include an experience of loss. Major changes mean significant losses. Often leaders who lead change fail to see this because they are so excited about the new possibilities they have helped happen. People will grieve what they lose – even if they voted for it and know it needs to happen. Help people grieve, acknowledge their grief, and ritualize grief when major changes happen. Grief processed well keeps a community unified. Grief not processed leads to anger. Anger turned in is depression. Anger turned outward leads to conflict. Many church conflicts are caused by leadership missing the opportunity to help people grieve.
3. Conflict can and will happen. Changes cause stress and congregations going through renewal will be working toward a new vision and living out new values. The past and the future bring stress when they meet. Processed well, conflicts can generally be kept at a manageable level, but personalities and issues do mean that higher levels of conflict can and do happen. A good system for tracking conflict is outlined by Speed Leas, Alban Institute. He identifies levels of conflict in the following way:
 - a. Level 0 – No conflict (You are dead.)
 - b. Level 1 – Low Conflict. This involves simple decisions like deciding what to have for dinner. Generally when the decision is made people move on easily and don’t even notice the conflict.

- c. Level 2 – Moderate Conflict. This involves a more focused discussion and debate. These issues begin to have some emotional investment and people do generally have a preference that matters. However, in level 2 conflicts feelings are processed well and people remain open to each other so resolution is well within reach.
- d. Level 3 – Win-Lose Conflicts. When issues escalate to this level there is more on the line. People not only care about their position, they will feel a sense of defeat if the decision doesn't come out their way. Here people are very invested. When decisions are made at this level, some acknowledgement of the struggle should be clearly made. In some cases, making conscious space for reconciliation will be necessary, especially in longer term struggles.
- e. Level 4 – Fight or Flight. At this level, people have stopped processing most information using reason and are functioning almost completely out of their emotions. Anger and personal grudges are now in the mix and just being in the room together causes high levels of anxiety. People tend to either engage these heavily in order to clearly defeat the enemy in battle or flee to safer ground hoping to avoid the issue all together. Generally conflicts at this level are best approached with the help of an outside facilitator.
- f. Level 5 – Some is going to die. Here conflict and animosity are so high that physical violence is an option and lives are on the line. Although most congregational conflicts end at level 4 with people bailing out, in some cases people have been physically hurt or even killed. Space and outside facilitation are mandatory to prevent serious harm from happening.

Remember that leaders model healthy behavior. If someone in the congregation is anxious and functioning with high (even unhealthy) levels of grief and conflict, leaders can continue to be non-anxious. A leader's goal is to live life at level 2 conflict, moving into level 3 only as needed.

Remember also that a cost can become a dissatisfaction and be moved from the negative side of the process to the positive side. The ability to harness negative energy and redirect it into being helpful is an important skill. Whenever a leader encounters significant opposition ask this question, "How can I use this energy to further the work God has given us?" The answer to that question may turn a conflict that seems insurmountable into a gift that gives momentum.

These basic tools only scratch the surface of anxiety, grief and conflict. Hopefully they will serve to remind leaders of the importance of processing them well.