

Is This Change Really Necessary?

John R. Cionca

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With deep convictions I rolled up my sleeves and jumped into the ministry of my new church. Within the first year, even the early months, I made several changes to help us strengthen the biblical functions of worship, education, fellowship and evangelism. From my perspective, at that time, not that much was changing; I was accustomed to change. Furthermore, the changes squared with the purposes of the church, so obviously they would be well received.

As I look back at the changes I initiated that first year, I am amazed at my naivete. I made changes in programs, times of service, curriculum, the worship service format and even structural change.

As I look back after six year I am embarrassed at the amount of change I threw at our people. A sound rational undergirded the initiation of each change, but not all of the changes needed to be implemented the first year.

Changes that affected forms of worship and existing programs were difficult for some people to accept. One woman came up to me after a morning service and mentioned that a couple of women seated in front of her were talking about the fact that the "Gloria Patri" and "Doxology" were no longer sung on a regular basis. She asked if I realized that bothered them. I found out later (and learned a general principle since then) that *she* was bothered by those changes, but voiced her complaint in a third person.

Initiating a home Bible study program or moving the evening service to an earlier hour did not need to take place in my first year. Maintaining a centralized prayer meeting and maintaining the "traditional hour" for the evening service could have provided stability for those who were troubled by other changes. Changes like these seemed important to me because they were forms, not functions. I failed to realize, however, that they were important to the people simply because these forms had been practiced so regularly.

Almost everyone believes that change is important. We would rather drive our car to work than walk; we would rather watch the news on television than wait for a messenger to herald news by foot; and we would rather use our indoor plumbing than the shack out back. Change is not wrong, rather it is helpful. The problem comes when we initiate change at too fast a pace, or when we stimulate change in areas deemed sacred by people.

I have learned to go more slowly with implementing change, but I continue to encourage change where necessary. I have also learned several lessons which have increased my sensitivity to our congregation and have led me to anticipate how to help people move through the innovation process. Here are six principles worth keeping in mind when stimulating change in your church.

- **Create an atmosphere where change is accepted.**

Change will occur more easily in a church which is positive and open in atmosphere. An atmosphere that encourages change is one that keeps ministry, rather than methods, before people. It focuses on function, not form. It stresses the positive, not the negative.

A healthy church atmosphere is developed by both the pastor's formal teaching ministry and by informal relationships built among the flock.

- **Continue to build trust in church leadership.**

One church with which I'm familiar had an ongoing problem on how to handle seasonal attendance increases. The church already had identical morning worship services at 9:45 and 11:00. In the winter months when many retired folk vacationed in the South, the church would add an 8:15 worship service to its schedule. Unfortunately, the 8:15 service drew very few people, and consequently, the attendance bulge at the 9:45 service was not relieved.

In order to deal with their local situation, the board of deacons decided to schedule the normal church programming at 8:45 and 10:00, adding at 11:15 service in the winter. The rationale was that people would likely come at the 11:15 time, since they would not come at the earlier 8:15 hour.

After an unsuccessful year in the new arrangement, the old schedule was finally reinstated. Throughout that period of change the church did not seem to suffer in either spirit or attendance.

Why could that church survive the change of the morning hour of worship, while other churches cannot even change their bulletin cover? Several people expressed that it was because they trusted Pastor Dave and believed that the staff was trying their best to solve the church's growth problem. Some churches would have mutiny in the pews if the deacons changed the morning worship to 10 a.m. This church, however, could move into the experiment and then move out without repercussion, because of the high trust in their leadership.

- **Be sure a specific change is the best alternative.**

When I came to my new church, I tried to adapt to the large wooden pulpit located on center stage. Eventually I thought it would be much easier simply to eliminate that large box, so the associate pastor and I moved it into a side room.

After I preached for six weeks without the pulpit, one dear woman asked me if I was aware that all the furniture in the sanctuary had been donated. In response to her statement I asked others if they noticed that I had not been using the pulpit. My informal probing led me to the realization that the pulpit was important to most people.

After further reflection I realized that the pulpit issue was also important to those who led the worship. The worship leader preferred the pulpit for leading congregational singing and readings. A number of soloists felt less self-conscious when they sang behind the desk. Six weeks after removing the pulpit, I reinstated it to center stage.

I learned that when we make a change, we must be fairly sure that the new alternative is better than the former situation.

Credibility and trust are important factors in change, but equally important is wise choice in changes.

- **Create change slowly.**

The final step of change can be enacted swiftly, but the process of change from planning, ownership, communication to implementation must be given adequate time.

For more than 20 years our church had mid-week Bible study and prayer meeting. Convinced that spiritual growth takes place best when there is accountability, I believed it was important to start home Bible studies. While not intentionally de-emphasizing the mid-week prayer meeting, I did establish the first study.

Within the first year our church had four home Bible studies. Previously only 12 percent of our church membership had been involved in mid-week study, now with the addition of the home groups, over 50 percent of our adults were now studying weekly.

While it would appear that everyone should be excited over this renewed interest in Bible study and prayer, a number of people were less than impressed. The people who attended prayer meeting only noticed the decrease in their program from 25 to 15 people. At my evaluation by the board of elders, the board commended me for the new groups, but also recommended that I “rekindle the interest in prayer meeting.”

For the sake of the mid-week service, and even for the long-term health of the Bible study ministry, I could have moved more slowly in implementing this new teaching form. Because of the number of people who wanted to attend the studies, some were begun with leaders who were not trained enough to carry the groups long term. In my eagerness to see the home groups begin, I encountered more misunderstanding and a less stable program than if I had implemented this change more slowly.

- **Communicate changes early and thoroughly.**

Sometimes changing Sunday school curriculum is touchy. When I came to our church, I notice that they were using materials from four different publishing houses. Teachers would use whatever new course interested them. This practice caused overlap of material from grade to grade, made long-term content planning impossible and hindered the curriculum coordination with other programs.

I asked the Christian education committee to consider the problem. I shared with them the shortcomings of the “do your own thing” plan and asked them to settle on a unified curriculum. In turn, the Christian education committee explained our teachers the rationale for a unified curriculum, including the value of a long-term curriculum scope and sequence.

When the new curriculum was finally implemented, a few teachers complained that one feature or another was not as good as their former curriculum, but in general the change was made smoothly. Communicating changes early helped us with that change.

- **Keep all lines of communication open while changes are being implemented.**

One of the changes implemented in our congregation was moving the evening service from 7 p.m. to 6 p.m. For more than 20 years the evening service had been at the 7 o'clock hour. At one of our board meetings I asked the elders to give consideration to the pros and cons of moving the evening service an hour earlier. The initial reason for the change was that it would be beneficial to the weekly youth fellowship that met after the evening service. The earlier hour would allow the teens to meeting homes and still conclude by 9:30 p.m.

As the board gave consideration to the change, they also saw value for seniors who do not like to be out late in the evening, and they believed that families with school age children would also benefit from the earlier hour. Without real prodding on my part, the board decided to change the hour. That decision was made in the winter, with the scheduled implementation being the Sunday on which Daylight Saving Time would begin in the spring. With the lead time that was afforded us, we used the church newsletter to promote the rationale for the change, and when opportunity actually arose to talk about the change, I would mention it in a positive way. The benefits of the earlier hour were always stressed, and the motive for change (a better time for our younger families, teen and seniors) was always kept before the people.

Looking over the list of changes I made six years ago, I asked myself: "If I had it to do all over again, what might I do differently?" I honestly believe that I would try to implement every one of those changes on the list. However, I would be much more cautious with how and when I made those changes.

I would spend much more time in my first year creating a positive atmosphere for change and building credibility in my leadership and that of our elders. I would try to know the church and its culture well enough to be sure that the best alternatives were selected. I would use both the leadership and regular attenders as sounding boards during the planning, education and implementation stages of change. Minor changes could be made together, but changes that would affect what many people had been accustomed to over a long period of time, I would implement slowly and only one at a time.