Six Secrets for Introducing Successful Change in Your Church

By Charles Arn

People, by nature, resist change. Consequently, how a pastor introduces a new idea in his church greatly affects whether the congregations will adopt it. The pastor should not assume that the congregation will accept the idea on its own merits. It will not. In fact, the pastor is much safer (and more likely to be correct) in assuming that the people will resist the idea. People are allergic to change.

In a national study on churches' responsiveness to change, Paul Mundey, director of the Andrew Center in Elgin, Illinois, asked pastors: What is the most difficult change you have attempted to make in the church?

"Overwhelmingly," he reports, "respondents listed something connected with the worship or the Sunday morning schedule as the most difficult, including:

- The addition of a worship service, especially a contemporary one.
- A change in time for the existing worship service.
- A change in time for Sunday School.
- An attempt to introduce more contemporary elements into an existing worship service."[1]

Here are six guidelines for successfully introducing change that will be helpful anytime a pastor presents a new idea in his church and when he must convince others to accept it.

1. Introduce the Idea as a Way to Reach an Agreed Upon Goal

One of the best reasons for a church to spend time developing and adopting a mission statement is in preparation for a time for change. If thought, discussion, and prayer go into the mission statement, and if the congregation has adopted it, then subsequent change is more likely to have support if ideas are *positioned* as a step toward previously agreed-on goals. Several years ago, the First Nazarene Church (Pasadena, California) included a question-answer, bulletin insert prior to launching a contemporary worship service. The first question read:

Q: Why are we studying two worship service options?

A: Our mission statement states that we intend to offer ministry with a "diversity of options." This means any options offered take into consideration the needs of our church family and those in our community. Both experience and research indicate that a seeker-sensitive worship service would allow us to have a significant impact on local people not now part of our church fellowship, or of any other church fellowship."[2]

2. Introduce the Idea as an Addition, Not a Replacement

Most people resist change not because they fear discovering the future, but because they fear discarding the past. If a pastor were to present a new idea for a new worship service, for example, he needs to assure that he will not change the present service. The goal is to offer more options so more people have opportunity to be a part of the body of Christ. A pastor will have much more freedom to initiate a new service, and try new approaches, if he does not ask those who attend the present service — and enjoy it —to give up their service.

3. Introduce the Idea as a Short-Term Experiment, Not a Long-Term Commitment

Members who question whether the change is an appropriate or wise move for the church will be more open to accepting a trial period in which the church implements and then evaluates the new idea. Agree on a date when the church reviews the new idea. At that time, collectively evaluate whether it is accomplishing its goals. If the *experiment* is, in fact, a successful step in the pursuit of the church's mission, it will be easier, at that time, to obtain permission for a longer-term commitment. If it is not accomplishing its goals, it is to everyone's advantage to re-evaluate.

Another benefit of an initial short-term view toward the new idea is that people are more tolerant of change if they see it as temporary. Then people discover that the change is not as distasteful as they had feared and, in fact, is more desirable than the past.

"Respondent after respondent," reports Mundey, "shared that the strategy of a 'trial period' had made it much easier to introduce change. People knew the change was not permanent and that they would have opportunity to evaluate what the church had done. That increases a congregation's openness to experimentation. This strategy also helps those seeking the change, because they do not have their necks stuck out so far. If the experiment does not work, no one has lost great dignity or reputation because of it."[3]

4. Encourage Enhancements To Create Ownership

Good goals are my goals; bad goals are your goals. If a member has ownership in the new idea, he will more likely support it and work for its success. Goal ownership comes when a person helps to formulate or refine the goal. Ask others for suggestions on how to make the new idea most effective. Their ideas will enhance the result, as well as broaden goal ownership.

5. Sow Seeds of Creative Discontent

This principle of change applies to most aspects of life, including the church: Voluntary change only occurs when people have sufficient discontent with the status quo. For many, the primary comfort of the church is its

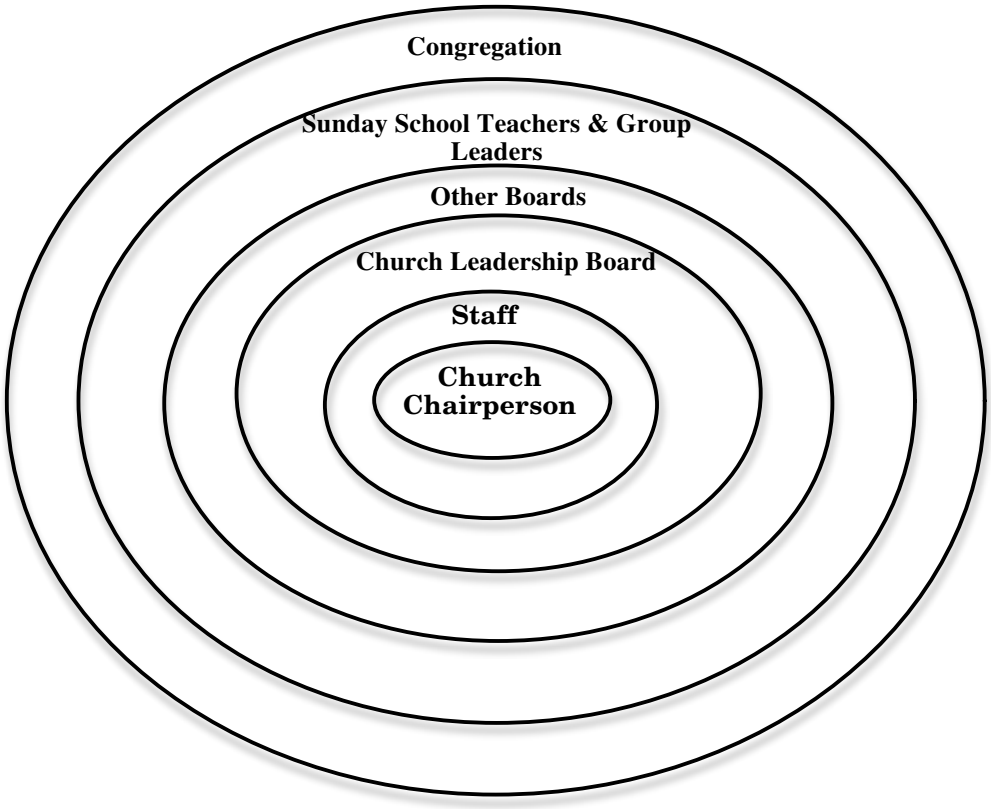
predictability. People think, *Things seem to be the same today as they have been for years.* This stability causes them to resist change in the church. "The solution," says Malphurs, "is to help those people and their churches discover that everything is not all right."[4] In generating support for your new idea, seek to whet members' appetites to the greater ministry God desires and the more people He wants to touch through the church. Point out that to continue the present course will not realize such a dream.

Destructive discontent and constructive discontent are different. Destructive discontent is a desire to leave the present for a more appealing past. Constructive discontent is a desire to leave the present for a more appealing future.

6. Start With the Leaders

"A wise leader," observes Doug Murren, "will subscribe to a basic 3-step process in presenting new directions to the church: 1) explain the idea to the core group; 2) collaborate with committed workers; and, 3) share with the entire congregation."[5]

This diagram visualizes the appropriate dissemination points of a new idea through the *bureaucracy* of the church:



As a pastor begins to integrate these six principles of change into his methodology, he will find that many more of his proposals will be met with a positive response, and his church will move forward in creative and effective new ways.

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Endnotes

1. Paul Mundey, *Change and the Established Congregation* (Elgin, Ill.: The Andrew Center, 1994), 33.
2. *Questions and Answers Concerning Multiple Worship Service Options* (Pasadena: First Nazarene Church).
3. Mundey, *Change and the Established Congregation,* 36.
4. Aubrey Malphurs, *Pouring New Wine Into Old Wineskins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 80.
5. Doug Murren, "The Process of Change," *Worship Leader* (September/October): 30.