



In Pursuit of Great AND Godly Leadership

Chapter 11: Are You Prepared to Change?

Change—it’s a word that strikes fear in the hearts of many ministry leaders. They have either known a close friend or personally experienced the pain and disappointment of a well-intentioned change effort that ultimately failed. It may have been a relatively simple change—a modest reorganization or a shifting of resources to support a new priority—that was met with intense resistance. Or it may have been a much more sweeping effort that ended with a church split or the firing of the leader. Change is never easy. In churches and other Christian organizations, the difficulty and complexity of change seems to go up exponentially. That is why many Christian leaders shrink away from the challenge, even though they know their ministry is falling short of what God desires.

There is a great irony in this. At the heart of the gospel is the message of life-giving, supernatural change. Christ not only changes our eternal destinies, but the Holy Spirit also stirs in our souls to make us more and more like Jesus each day. It’s the story of Paul, who was “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” (1 Timothy 1:13) before he was radically transformed by his encounter with Jesus. It is believing that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). If Christians have this divine source of power for personal transformation, why do they so often have a defeatist attitude about organizational change? And why is the corporate arena so much more successful at change than God’s church?

Of course, some spiritual leaders have a Pollyanna attitude, not a defeatist one, and this can be equally damaging. These leaders seem to think that every Christian change story should have a happy ending. In essence, they say, “If we commit ourselves to the Lord and are doing our best to follow His will, then everything should turn out rosy every time.” In reality, this theology is just as inadequate as the one that says change is impossible.

Applying the concepts from earlier chapters—planning, personnel management, measurement, culture—will involve change, which makes this a critical issue for every leader to understand. The leader who recognizes the complexities of change, particularly the inevitable obstacles, is better able to use all the other tools of leadership. Because of the dramatic shifts that have taken place in the business environment over the past three decades, there is a wealth of knowledge that we can and should tap into.



“The Heart of Change”

Let me start with a confession. The right side of my brain has been playing catch-up with the left side for fifty years. The left side, of course, is the seat of analytical thinking and logic. The right side is where feelings and emotions and intuition come from.

As I worked with my two coauthors on *Leading Congregational Change* more than a decade ago, my contribution was 99 percent left-brained. I emphasized structure and process. I focused on the power of a logical, compelling argument and a clear vision. One of the first times that we presented the material in a seminar, I was amazed at the contrast between Jim Herrington’s communication style and mine. We had a ton of information to cover, so I raced through my sections trying to convey as many facts and principles as possible. Jim seemed unconcerned about skipping material as he took time to tell stories of people and their struggles with change. By the end of the workshop, it was clear that Jim had connected with the hearts of the audience much more than I had. Today, when I make similar presentations, I don’t neglect the facts, but I work hard to balance the right and left sides of my brain, perhaps communicating less information but doing it in a way that is more meaningful because it touches people’s hearts.

I am not the only person who has learned this lesson. John Kotter is a professor at Harvard Business School and one of the world’s leading experts on organizational change. Kotter’s classic text, *Leading Change*, was a foundational resource in my earlier book. His clear, rational eight-step process for effective change efforts resonated with my left-brained temperament. Five years after *Leading Change*, a sequel was released: *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations*. In the introduction, Kotter and coauthor Dan Cohen write, “Our main finding, put simply, is that the central issue is never strategy, structure, culture, or systems. . . . The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people, and behavior change happens in highly successful situations mostly by speaking to people’s feelings.”¹ Kotter and Cohen explain, “People change what they do less because they are given *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* a truth that influences their *feelings*.”² Kotter also discovered that the right side of one’s brain must be engaged in any successful change effort.

One of the enduring characters from the television and movie industry is Star Trek’s “Mr. Spock.” He is a Vulcan, a race of beings from another planet who have no emotions and are purely logical. One of the ongoing story lines in the Star Trek series is the conflicts that occur as pure logic (in Spock) interacts with human emotion (in the other characters). One of Spock’s oft-repeated lines is “That wouldn’t be logical.”

When it comes to leading organization change, whether in a business or a church, we need the cool, clear-headed logic of Spock. Leaders need to question whether the diagnosis of a problem is accurate or is being driven by emotion. They need to ask



whether a proposed solution makes sense in light of the facts. But they also must realize that they are not leading a group of Vulcans. If they don't address the emotional and sometimes irrational side of change, they will never succeed.

Diagnosing Heart Problems

It is important but insufficient to know that change efforts evoke emotional responses. Effective leaders are aware of the many ways that these emotions spill out and they seek to address them. On the surface, the most obvious reaction to a proposed change is active resistance. Kotter says, "Irrational and political resistance to change never fully dissipates."³ A less obvious reaction is complacency. Complacency may seem preferable to resistance, but it can kill a change effort just as quickly. Kotter's original research found that "transformations always fail to achieve their objectives when complacency levels are high."⁴

Any leader who has attempted to initiate change knows that resistance and complacency are normal reactions. That is why Jim Collins and Jerry Porras say, "Comfort is not the objective in a visionary company. Indeed, visionary companies install powerful mechanisms to create *discomfort*—to obliterate complacency—and thereby stimulate change."⁵ Similarly, the first step in Kotter's eight-stage change process is "creating urgency." He understands that urgency—a deep sense that something is wrong and needs to be corrected—is the only thing that will motivate people to support a change effort.

Creating urgency is easier said than done. That's because human beings have a tremendous capacity to deny the need for change, especially when they dislike the implications. A left-brained leader cannot present a simple list of pros and cons to create urgency. After many years of doing research on great organizations, Jim Collins wanted to understand why companies stumble. In *How the Mighty Fall*, he describes five stages in the downfall of once successful corporations and explains, "One common behavior . . . is when those in power blame other people or external factors—or otherwise explain away the data—rather than confront the frightening reality that the enterprise may be in serious trouble."⁶

Robert Quinn, another noted change expert and author of *Deep Change*, echoes the same theme: "Our first inclination is always from a perspective that externalizes the problem, that keeps it somewhere 'out there.'"⁷ Quinn later says, "Denial occurs when we are presented with painful information about ourselves, information that suggests that we need to make a deep change. Denial is one of several clear paths toward slow death. When we practice denial, we work on the wrong solutions or on no solutions at all."⁸ There are no quick fixes to overcome denial. Rather, the wise leader knows that creating urgency takes time and is often a process of two steps forward and one step back.



Even in the face of overwhelming evidence, some people will deny the need for change because they are afraid of what lies ahead. Some of that fear is driven by an awareness that change is often painful. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner say, “There’s just no way you can make it perfectly safe to make a change.”⁹ Some fear is driven by uncertainty. Quinn explains that deep change “requires that we leave our comfort zone and step outside our normal roles,”¹⁰ something people are very reluctant to do. Quinn later offers the memorable image that deep change requires us to “walk naked into the land of uncertainty.”¹¹ Reluctance is a natural reaction when people are faced with a daunting process leading to an uncertain future.

Underneath fear and denial is an even more basic human response: self-preservation. When confronted with the need for change, the first question people usually ask is “How will this affect me?” Kotter and Cohen observe, “People eventually focus on self-preservation instead of organizational transformation.”¹² When trust is high and people believe deeply in the organization’s mission, they will be willing to make significant personal sacrifices, at least for a while. If the person doesn’t understand the need for the change or doesn’t trust the leadership, even the smallest changes may be met with resistance. As the personal cost increases, you can expect less support and more denial from those who are affected by proposed changes.

The challenges of sweeping organizational change are evident in the story of Baylor University during Robert Sloan’s tenure as president. When Sloan became president in 1996, the announcement that the regents had selected someone with strong academic credentials and deep Baylor ties was met with excitement. Over the next few years, Sloan led a process to define a sweeping new vision for Baylor, culminating in the fall of 2001 with the public release of “Baylor 2012.” This ambitious ten-year plan called for Baylor to become a top-tier research university while at the same time strengthening the school’s Christian roots. Sloan and the board saw Baylor as uniquely positioned to achieve this dual goal. The plan called for significant new construction and the aggressive recruitment of nationally recognized faculty. A capital campaign, a large bond program, and increased tuition were necessary steps to finance this vision.

Baylor 2012 was developed after extensive collaboration with key constituents and was fully endorsed by Baylor’s board, and the initial response from the broader Baylor community was enthusiastic. As often happens, however, serious resistance began to arise once implementation started. Baylor had the reputation of being an “affordable” Christian university, and some alumni objected to the dramatic rise in tuition. Faculty opposition to the plan grew as well. Some long-tenured professors resented the new attention to research-oriented faculty who were given endowed chairs and other preferential treatment. Others, fearing their academic freedom would be stifled, were uncomfortable with Baylor’s emphasis on reclaiming and proclaiming its Christian heritage.¹³

Sloan continued to lead the charge, and the board stood solidly behind him in the face of growing faculty and alumni opposition. But in 2005, the issue came to a head, and



Sloan resigned from the presidency under pressure. One former regent said, “It’s been too much, too fast. Too many people have been alienated.” Shortly after announcing his resignation, Sloan himself said, “The natural side effect of change is conflict. We moved quickly and boldly to implement the vision and found that Baylor is not immune to the discomfort and insecurity generated by change.”¹⁴

The hard work of leading large-scale change is not developing the plan; it is implementing it. Baylor 2012 was birthed out of prayer and extensive stakeholder involvement and seemed to have the right ingredients and the right support. When implementation began, however, the leader’s interpretation of the vision and the full implications of the change effort became clear. The university continued to pursue Baylor 2012 after Sloan’s departure, but at a slower pace and with several adjustments. It is hard to know if the real issue was a flawed plan, poor implementation by Sloan and the Baylor leadership team, a failure of nerve by the board, or just the normal human rejection of change. It is easy to see that change in any organization is a complex undertaking that is not for the faint of heart.

Change in the Church: It Just Gets Messier

Every one of the issues identified so far in this chapter is present in the church and other Christian organizations. On top of that, however, is another layer of organizational, theological, and personal factors that make change even more complicated.

A More Complex Organization

Churches have many unique characteristics compared to businesses, one of the most notable being their dependence on volunteers. When volunteers don’t support a change, things get sticky. In business, the cooperation of employees is important for successful change, but at the end of the day, the employer holds the power of the paycheck. If corporate leadership decides to make a particular change (redesigning the information system, outsourcing the manufacture of a product), the rank-and-file employees don’t have much choice. They may create some temporary obstacles, but in the end, those who don’t like the change will usually find another job. Churches don’t have rank-and-file employees—they have rank-and-file volunteers who are much harder to “fire.”

It is not uncommon for volunteers to stay in place and resist change efforts, either overtly or subtly. For example, a church that is becoming more involved in its community asks each small group to serve in an outward-facing ministry such as a local soup kitchen or a school tutoring program. One of the most successful small group leaders feels that his group’s sole purpose is to foster the spiritual growth of its members, so the leader never mentions the church’s new emphasis. When a group member asks about getting



involved, the leader answers that the group doesn't need to do anything different. In business, this leader would be reprimanded or let go for not following directions. Churches tend to ignore the issue because they are afraid or unable to "fire" the leader.

A related problem is the ability of church members to stay in place even when they are unhappy with organizational changes. Unhappy employees, if they have marketable skills, will generally leave a business. A church has a strong relational bond that tends to keep unhappy people from exiting. They may disapprove of the overall direction, but because "it's our family," they stay in order to be with friends they have known for years. An exacerbating factor is the short tenure of many pastors. Church members have learned from experience that if they don't like the current leader (and the direction being set by the leader), they just need to wait a couple of years and it will probably change.

One church developed an aggressive church-planting strategy. The senior pastor built a team and a culture that led to more than two dozen church plants during his long tenure. By all accounts, the church was highly successful and had a great impact for the Kingdom. Amazingly enough, some people in the congregation never accepted this strategy, and after the pastor's retirement, they helped shape a new direction in which church planting was deemphasized. The staying power of people is a powerful factor that can frustrate change efforts in any congregation.

Confusing governance structures are another obstacle to change in Christian organizations. I have seen all kinds of business structures—dotted-line reporting relationships, matrix structures, joint ventures, and task groups, to name a few. But none of these are as confusing as the typical congregation, where it is not clear what steps must be taken to obtain approval for major decisions. Much of this revolves around the real authority of the pastor versus the formal lay leadership group or groups. It becomes even more clouded when a small number of individuals "run" the church, irrespective of any formal roles. As noted in Chapter Nine, key leaders must be on the same page if the congregation is going to make any meaningful progress.

An even deeper factor is the congregation's unique way of making decisions and handling disagreements. Many churches have long histories of dysfunctional decision making, such as settling an issue after the meeting rather than in the meeting or resisting new ideas from the pastor. Once these patterns are established, they are hard to break. They become part of the culture, as noted in Chapter Ten. New members who bring a fresh perspective can help break the cycle, but many churches are so stagnant that they never hear these voices. Transformation efforts will never get off the ground as long as these patterns persist.

One final barrier to change in ministry is the lack of accepted measures for success. You have already seen the importance of measurement in Chapter Six and the reality that many Christian organizations struggle in this area. This has huge implications for change efforts. If the leadership does not see a gap between current results and an organizational goal, there is little urgency and even less impetus for change. Inadequate



measurement also fuels the tendency toward denial. It is hard to create urgency simply by saying, “I think we’re in trouble.” If someone asks why and the leader answers that it’s just a gut feeling, this response is easily dismissed. Even if there is an indicator of a problem—for example, baptizing only a few people each year—the leaders may not agree that this is the standard by which effectiveness is to be evaluated. Without useful metrics, churches may wait until a major indicator—such as giving—has gone into a steep decline, and they may miss the best window of opportunity for leading a positive change effort.

Theological Factors

Church of the Redeemer, an Episcopal parish in Houston, was a pioneer in the charismatic renewal movement in the 1960s. By 2011, the ninety-year-old congregation had declined to seventy members and needed \$7 million in infrastructure repairs, so the diocese made the decision to close the doors. A newspaper article describing the closure included a picture of the church’s well-known mural, called *Christ of the Workingman*, and concluded with the statement, “Members can’t imagine worship without it.”¹⁵

Is there something you can’t image worshipping without? The story of Redeemer hints at the next layer of challenges that Christian organizations encounter. A person may “love” his or her job, but if the organization changes, it’s just a job. If you try to change something in the church, however, you are stepping onto sacred ground.

The problem is that some churches act as if everything they do is sacred and therefore unchangeable. In contrast, one of the teachings of *Built to Last* is that visionary companies “preserve the core and stimulate progress.” Collins and Porras explain, “It is absolutely essential to not confuse core ideology with culture, strategy, tactics, operations, policies, or other noncore practices. . . . Ultimately, the *only* thing a company should *not* change over time is its core ideology.”¹⁶ As noted in Chapter Ten, many experts teach that successful organizations have only a few core values. “Simulate progress” refers to the willingness to change anything that is not a core value or ideology. And yet the list of untouchables—beliefs, traditions, priorities, habits—in a typical church is several pages long.

How is this theological? Because underneath the long and inflexible list is the tendency for Christians to claim that each unchangeable item is biblically based and that it is vital to their relationship with God. If you come home to discover that your spouse has rearranged the furniture in the family room, you may not like the new layout. Perhaps you will discuss it, perhaps you won’t, but you know that this doesn’t fundamentally affect your marriage. But when a church changes its style of worship music, shifts from a Sunday school to a small group model, or moves from event-based to discipleship-based youth ministry, the outcry begins. People may turn to Scripture to support their position or argue that the change will inhibit spiritual growth for them and others. Because of the



relationships in the church, even a leadership team that was unified around the decision may come unraveled under this kind of intense, “theological” pressure.

The theological overlay is complicated by the ways leaders describe God’s presence in the actual decision. The leaders I interviewed spent significant time in prayer when they were facing important decisions. They often emerged with a sense of God’s leadership, sometimes just an inkling and sometimes a deep conviction. But when should a leader say that a recommended course of action is “God’s will”? Jim Leggett of Grace Fellowship in Katy, Texas, described a spirited debate on whether to give away 10 percent of the church’s capital campaign receipts to outside ministries. Leggett was inspired to do this, but his recommendation was turned down by the campaign leadership team. Leggett was disappointed in this decision, but he says, “It wasn’t a burning bush. I’m not going to claim a burning bush unless there’s been one.”

Leggett shows great wisdom in this approach. If a leader has an unshakable conviction that God has spoken on a particular matter, he or she should say so. But often the leader doesn’t have quite this level of clarity. In earlier chapters, we saw Todd Mullins of Christ Fellowship, Greg Hawkins of Willow Creek, and others express the importance of unity within their leadership teams and a confidence that God will speak with one voice. In Scripture, God communicates His plans in many ways: from the burning bush to Moses alone, through the prophet Nathan when David couldn’t listen, and to the entire council in Jerusalem. Leaders must be careful about putting God in a one-dimensional communication box.

Leaders should also be mindful that the people with whom they are communicating may be jaded by past experiences with others who frequently declared, “Thus saith the Lord.” As a result, a spiritual leader’s genuine, heartfelt description of how he or she feels that God is directing a decision can trigger strong negative reactions among followers who have been hurt in the past. Leaders cannot erase this pain, but they can be mindful of the many ways that people’s perceptions of God affect any proposed change. On top of this complex theological dimension, each leader brings his or her personality into the crucible of change.

The Leader’s Temperament

The first chair leader in a Christian organization—pastor, executive director, bishop—is not the same as a CEO in business. Even though the role may have some similarities to that of CEO, there are many differences, one of the biggest being the leader’s and followers’ perceptions about the position. One of my favorite exercises in seminars is to ask participants to list different words and images that come to mind when they hear the word *pastor*. Inevitably, the word *shepherd* is listed. It’s a great word that actually relates to the root meaning of *pastor*. It’s a biblical concept. And ultimately, this image is a problem.



As shepherds, Christian leaders see “caring for the flock” as a primary responsibility. They remember the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 and Jesus’ words about the good shepherd in John 10. Indeed, these are important and valid pictures. In the context of change leadership, however, they can be taken too far. When leaders believe that success means that no one will ever leave (losing a sheep) and everyone will always be satisfied, they are setting themselves up for failure. When they think of sheep as cuddly and cute animals that just need gentle coaxing, they are wrong about sheep and draw incorrect conclusions from the analogy.

Being an effective Christian leader does not mean an absence of conflict. Jan Davis of First Methodist in Rowlett, Texas, reflects that the story of Moses has taught her “God is calling me to lead people to places that are uncomfortable.” Many spiritual leaders think that does not sound like being a good shepherd. These same leaders forget the many times that Jesus confronted his followers with hard sayings. Unfortunately, the shepherd image is deeply ingrained to the point that many pastors strive for peace at all costs and are unable to lead meaningful change.

In virtually any transformational effort, some people end up unhappy or angry. Ronald Heifetz, writing about this kind of leadership, says, “Leaders are always failing somebody. . . . Someone exercising leadership will be shouldering the pains and aspirations of a community and frustrating at least some people within it.”¹⁷ The fear of lost relationships and a disappointed community is daunting enough to stop some leaders. Quinn refers to this as a “peace-and-pay strategy”¹⁸ in which leaders choose to not engage in deep change because of the personal cost.

Because they want the flock to be happy, pastors sometimes present a distorted picture of how their congregation is doing. Kotter identifies a number of sources of complacency in business, one of which is “too much happy talk from senior management.”¹⁹ Pastors are notorious for offering rosy descriptions that mask underlying problems. Whether they do so out of personal insecurity or habit or some other reason, this overly positive perspective contributes to a sense of complacency, which in turn hinders the very change that is needed. Christians should find hope in the gospel, but that does not mean that they should gloss over the real problems facing their ministries. Doing so only postpones the need to deal with the problem and often makes it worse.

A final reality is that success is not guaranteed. Quinn says, “The possibility of failure is a constant companion who walks beside every real leader.”²⁰ As a result, some spiritual leaders choose not to initiate any change at all. Others may make a feeble attempt at change, encounter resistance, and then retreat into doing whatever is safe. Their tentativeness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat that adds to the legacy of failed change efforts.

Though retreating may seem safe, it often leaves a deep, hollow place in the leader’s soul. Quinn’s thesis is that we only have two choices: deep change or slow death. While he recognizes the cost of change, he also appeals to leaders to not give up:



Why, then, would anyone be willing to accept the pain that accompanies acts of transformational leadership? I suspect that such people have discovered that the pain of leadership is exceeded only by the pain of lost potential. They understand that excellence is punished, but they have developed a value system that provides no acceptable alternatives. They are internally driven leaders who are committed to continuing deep change and the pursuit of excellence.²¹

Quinn appeals on a purely human level that drives toward greatness, but an even more important argument for courageous, godly change comes from Scripture.

A Word from the Word

We know that God is unchanging. Psalm 102:25–27 says that God remains the same throughout all time, and Hebrews 13:8 tell us, “Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Hebrews 6:17 speaks of “the unchanging nature of His purpose.” But God accomplishes His unchanging purpose by changing His people. You cannot read the stories in Scripture without realizing that change is an essential part of the journey for people of faith. God starts by changing an individual, stirring in his or her soul, and then using that individual to change something much larger. Young King Josiah’s heart was pierced when the rediscovered Law was read to him, so he instituted massive national reform to remove the idols and restore the temple for the worship of the one, true God. Joseph of Arimathea took the simple but risky step of retrieving and burying Jesus’ body, and his name is now a permanent part of the greatest story ever told.

God’s plans often upend “organizations” just when things seem to be running well. The church in Jerusalem was growing by leaps and bounds, but the widespread persecution after the stoning of Stephen scattered the believers throughout the region. This caused the gospel to spread even more rapidly as a Jewish sect until Peter’s dream and the resulting encounter with Cornelius opened the gospel to Gentiles. Paul’s subsequent missionary work with Gentiles forced the church leaders to address an even more uncomfortable question: Which of the Jewish customs would believing Gentiles be required to follow? The answer, of course, paved the way for the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. These were massive changes, far more tumultuous than the ones that shake many churches today.

Clearly, God works through change, but it is equally clear that we cannot predict the outcome. Paul was a change agent. His ministry, empowered by the Holy Spirit, introduced dramatic change in the beliefs and religious practices of Jews and Gentiles. But the narrative of his work in Acts 17 shows the unpredictability of change leadership. In Thessalonica, most of the Jews rejected Paul’s message and started a riot that forced him to leave town. At his next stop, in Berea, the Jews were “of more noble character” and “received the message with great eagerness.” Same message, same messenger, different results. One of the greatest mistakes spiritual leaders can make is to believe that



the success of a God-inspired change effort is guaranteed. That simply does not square with the Bible.

Similarly, it is a mistake to think that God will unveil a complete plan before starting a process of transformation. Throughout the book of Acts, Paul and other leaders stepped out in faith without knowing where the journey would lead. Joshua is another vivid example of a change agent who led with an incomplete road map. He knew that the ultimate goal was the conquest of the entire Promised Land, but God guided him through the journey one step at a time. Frequently along the way, God came alongside Joshua and encouraged him to be strong and courageous. I believe that Christian leadership may be filled with even more short-term uncertainty than secular leadership because God wants us to learn to be dependent on Him, not on our own plans, and to demonstrate this dependence to others.

Perhaps the most important biblical message for Christian change agents is found in Romans 8:31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” This is the message that sets us apart from non-Christian leaders in secular institutions. In the marketplace, leaders find it difficult to separate the end result from their personal identities. If the effort succeeds, they are heroes. If the effort fails, it reflects poorly on their competence. Christian leaders know that God doesn’t guarantee a successful outcome, but they have great confidence that God is at work in the situation and loves them regardless of the end result. This should give them a boldness and a calm that is rarely found elsewhere.

One Church’s Change Journey

In this chapter, I have focused on the barriers to change, because too many spiritual leaders neglect these challenges. We have seen the problems that occur when leaders ignore the emotional dimensions of change or fail to create urgency. But we have also seen that the transformational call comes from the heart of God and is something that leaders cannot avoid. So what does it look like when change is done well? As evidenced by the many references in this chapter, a number of resources look at this question. The ultimate answer will be unique for each organization, but Oak Hills Church in San Antonio is an instructive example.

Oak Hills is a fifty-three-year old congregation where Max Lucado served for twenty years as senior minister (and continues in a teaching role). When Randy Frazee stepped into the lead role in 2008, he had a clear vision to reshape the congregation even though Oak Hills was already one of the most vibrant churches in the city. Frazee says his “city-reaching vision [means] less time in the building and more time in the neighborhood, shifting from an attractional model to a missional model, leveraging the other six days of the week, and leveraging our people as ministers.” That is the kind of change few leaders would attempt, especially when things are going well!



Frazeo communicated this vision to the church's leadership before he was called to Oak Hills. He knew what God had put on his heart, but he wanted the congregation to decide: "Is my agenda an answer to your prayer?" They said yes, but Frazeo didn't take for granted that they had a clear understanding of what this would mean. After arriving at Oak Hills, he led the elders and senior staff members through a six-month process to lay a biblical foundation for the vision. He wanted the leaders to have the conviction that the vision was God's call for the church so that they wouldn't reverse course when the implementation got tough. After this foundation was laid, the leadership team spent the next year in a highly collaborative, strategic planning process to develop specific plans that would move them toward the vision. Before approving the plan, the elders spent forty days in prayer, asking God to show them if this was His desire. Ultimately, the elders voted unanimously for the plan, and the church began to restructure staff and align resources.

The church's web site proclaims, "We are the body of Christ called to be Jesus in every neighborhood in San Antonio and beyond." The plans, which are now being implemented, involve doing more ministry in homes and local neighborhoods and less at the central campus. The biggest challenge is not structural but attitudinal. The new vision will challenge Oak Hills' members to have enough margin in their lives to be ministers in their own neighborhoods. It will push them to be not "consumers" of church programs ("I come to Oak Hills because it has the best ministry for my kids") but ambassadors of Christ in their communities.

One of the most interesting examples of the new strategy at Oak Hills involves the women's ministry. Like many churches, Oak Hills has offered several Bible studies for women at different times throughout the week. In the past, these Bible studies have been conducted at the main campus, with the church paying for child care, room setup, and administration. Not only is this approach costly, but it also has finite capacity limits and forces participants to come from all over the city to the one location. Under the new strategy, Oak Hills is emphasizing women's Bible studies in homes throughout San Antonio, launching twenty-five such groups in the first semester. This approach allows the church to exponentially increase its "capacity" for women's ministry and take a step toward being "the body of Christ in every neighborhood."

Frazeo is quick to acknowledge that Oak Hills is a healthy congregation when it comes to making major decisions. He credits Max Lucado's leadership for creating an "environment built on humility and grace." Even in this environment, Frazeo knows that the new direction is a substantial change and that some people will not be happy. Oak Hills is still in the early stages of making this shift, and time will tell whether it is successful. Irrespective of the ultimate outcome, the Oak Hills story illustrates several important principles that should undergird transformation in any Christian organization.

Start with a spiritual foundation. Even though this book is exploring ways to tap the wisdom of the business world, Christian leaders should never neglect the spiritual foundation. If they fail in this respect, the knowledge they gain is for naught. Randy



Frazees started in the right place at Oak Hills. Even though he had communicated his vision before coming on board and it had been accepted by the church, he had not had time to lay the spiritual foundation to support that vision. He wanted the congregation's decisions to be based on biblical arguments, not pragmatic ones. Because Oak Hills spent time in God's Word and in prayer, the elders stood firmly on their convictions, even when some people questioned the new strategy.

This aligns with an experience that Jim Herrington, James Furr, and I describe in *Leading Congregational Change*. In the early years of our consulting work with congregations, our starting point was a strategic planning approach that assumed a strong foundation of "spiritual and relational vitality" in each congregation. We were surprised when serious conflict emerged in almost every case. We eventually learned that our assumption about the spiritual health of these congregations was incorrect and that we had overlooked the most important element for effective transformation.²² Christian organizations that attempt deep change without a solid biblical and spiritual foundation will flounder.

Be patient and intentional. Once God has birthed a vision in a leader's heart, he or she feels a personal sense of urgency to make it a reality. Frazees's story is somewhat unique in the clarity of his vision before arriving at Oak Hills. He even developed a nine-page "memorandum of understanding" to communicate this to the church before accepting the call to serve as senior minister. With that kind of starting point, you might expect him to have swung into action quickly, but Frazees took a year-and-a-half to develop plans.

His approach underscores an important truth about change leadership. People's heads start nodding yes long before their hearts assent. If a leader acts just because heads are bobbing up and down, he or she may discover that few people are following. Frazees's goal was to keep key stakeholders involved throughout the process so that they would not be surprised by major decisions. He believes that one reason pastors get into trouble "has less to do with the content than lack of good process." In other words, it's not the ideas that cause problems but the ways in which the ideas are developed. When pastors get impatient, they shortcut the process in their haste to make something happen.

Sociologist and leadership expert Michael Lindsay offers a helpful explanation that underscores this need for patience. Building on Gil Rendle's image that the emotions accompanying change are like a roller coaster, Lindsay adds, "Leaders must remember that they do not encounter these ups and downs at the same time as their followers. Leaders ride in the front cars of the roller coaster, which means they reach the peaks and the valleys before their followers. Sometimes the lag between the leader and follower can be so great that the leader is reaching the crest of a peak as the follower is just entering the valley before it."²³

Selecting the right pace for a change effort is one of the greatest challenges of leadership. There is no formula to know when the organization is ready to move forward. The year-and-a-half process at Oak Hills may seem long, but Frazees actually had the



advantage of a healthy congregation that knew his vision from the start. In many cases, it will take even longer to establish spiritual and relational vitality. In other cases, a deep and obvious organizational crisis will set the stage for change to happen much more quickly.²⁴ Just remember, your sense of “crisis” may not be shared by the congregation. The wise leader knows the importance of patience and persistence in leading change.

Share the leadership burden. The process of discerning God’s vision at Oak Hills may have started with one person, but it didn’t end there. Frazee involved the elders throughout the process, and this led to the unanimous vote in favor of a radical change for the congregation.

Sharing the leadership burden is a theme that appears throughout the literature on change management. Heifetz notes, “Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others.”²⁵ Kotter’s second stage in the change process is to “establish a guiding coalition.”²⁶ In *Leading Congregational Change*, we refine Kotter’s concept and refer to the coalition as a “vision community, . . . a diverse group of key members who become a committed and trusting community in order to discern and implement God’s vision for the congregation.”²⁷

Shared leadership is an important theme in many of the stories in this book. It is a powerful way to discern God’s will and build consensus for change. It is also an important way to prevent leadership burnout. Leaders who truly share the burden of the role are following a model that can sustain them for the long haul.

Strive for clarity at every turn. An understated point in the Oak Hills story is Randy Frazee’s drive for clarity throughout the process. Kotter says many visions “don’t provide a clue as to how or why a transformation is feasible.”²⁸ Frazee’s initial declaration was an important first step, but each succeeding step brought a greater awareness of what it would actually mean for Oak Hills to be “the body of Christ in every neighborhood.”

The clarity problem is especially pronounced in congregations. Some pastors think that they have been clear when they declare a high-level vision, but if the congregation doesn’t know what to do, then clarity is still lacking. Frazee didn’t offer concrete steps when he first described his vision for Oak Hills, but he was willing to engage other leaders to develop the next level of detail. Some pastors consciously (or unconsciously) avoid clarity because they are uncertain themselves. Others know that getting clear means saying no to some things so that they can say yes to others. That leads to the final characteristic of effective change efforts.

Change requires courageous leadership. Randy Frazee, and the abbreviated way I have told the Oak Hills story, makes change sound easy, but of course it never is. Even in Frazee’s case, the journey has required courageous leadership that is driven by faith-filled conviction. It requires courageous leadership to be willing to walk away from an opportunity to lead a prominent church if its vision doesn’t align with yours. It requires courageous leadership to enter into a significant and risky change process in an



organization that is already experiencing great success. It requires courageous leadership to change well-established programs because they will get in the way of something even greater that God seeks to do.

Leading organizational change is hard. It's a path that is filled with uncertainty and risk. Quinn is right in saying that deep change "happens only when someone cares enough to exercise the courage to uncover the issues no one dares to recognize or confront. It means someone must be enormously secure and courageous."²⁹ It is why Heifetz says, "In exercising leadership, people often are drawn to taking courageous stands. Indeed, leadership may require the willingness to die."³⁰ Of all people, Christian leaders should have the courage to step out and lead. After all, it's the example of the leader that we all follow.

Journey or Destination?

A final challenge for leaders who seek to bring about organizational transformation is the success-oriented mind-set that surrounds us. Don't get me wrong—the work we are doing is important, and we need to carry it out with great energy and diligence. But if getting to the final destination is all that matters, it can make for a very unpleasant and ultimately unsuccessful journey. Driving intently toward a destination can make leaders anxious about developing the perfect plan to get there. It can cause them to treat people as tools to be used to reach the objective.

Compare this destination mind-set with that of someone on a journey. If you are on a journey, the companions you choose and their well-being are important. Success is not defined strictly in terms of reaching a destination. You may not know exactly how you will get to your end point, so you are more willing to adapt and adjust to surprises along the way. That brings us back to two core concepts about leading change.

Enduring transformation requires touching the hearts of those who are being asked to change. No matter how compelling the logic for change may be, no matter how captivating the envisioned destination, a person's choice to support deep change is an emotional decision. I know of one church that was wrestling with whether to make several major changes in order to reach a younger generation. The pastor had plenty of facts to support the proposed changes—facts about the attitudes and spiritual beliefs of twenty-something adults and about the aging and declining status of the church—but the lay leadership was not motivated by this. The turning point was when one of the matriarchs shared her anguish that her twenty-five-year-old grandson was far from God. She concluded by saying, "I'd give anything for a church that would reach him. And I think we need to be that church for someone else's grandson." Her story touched hearts in ways that facts couldn't do, and it opened the church to a journey of change.

The other reality is that even if the final destination is clear (or at least somewhat clear), the complete map to get there rarely is. This can be difficult for leaders who are



accustomed to providing confident answers. According to Heifitz, change leaders live with this tension: “Rather than fulfilling the expectation for answers, one provides questions; rather than protecting people from outside threat, one lets people feel the threat in order to stimulate adaptation.”³¹ Rodney Cooper of Gordon-Conwell in Charlotte, North Carolina, says it succinctly: “If you can’t live with ambiguity, you can’t lead in the church.”

One of my favorite images on the ambiguity of leadership comes from Robert Quinn, who says, “When we have a vision, it does not necessarily mean that we have a plan. We may know where we want to be, but we will seldom know the actual steps we must take to get there. We must trust in ourselves to learn the way, *to build the bridge as we walk on it*”³² (italics added). To publicly acknowledge this is scary for leaders. It’s even scarier to take the first step forward on an unfinished bridge. But that is what is required for leaders who want to see their organizations soar in an uncertain future.

Footnotes

1. John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen, *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. x.
2. Ibid., p. 1.
3. Kotter, *Leading Change*, p. 132.
4. Ibid., p. 4.
5. Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, p. 187.
6. Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 78.
7. Quinn, *Deep Change*, p. 33.
8. Ibid., p. 52.
9. Kouzes and Posner, *Leadership Challenge*, p. 205.
10. Quinn, *Deep Change*, p. 9.
11. Ibid., p. 10.
12. Kotter and Cohen, *Heart of Change*, p. 28.
13. Mark Wingfield, “Baylor Vision Sparks Changes and Questions,” *Baptist Standard*, July 11, 2003, www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=503&Itemid=131
14. Marv Knox, “Sloan to Step Down as Baylor President, Assume Chancellor’s Role,” *Baptist Standard*, Feb. 4, 2005, www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3083&Itemid=133



15. Kate Shellnut, “Joyful Noise Is Going Silent,” *Houston Chronicle*, Feb. 25, 2011, www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/7445234.html
16. Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, p. 82.
17. Heifitz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p. 235.
18. Quinn, *Deep Change*, pp. 20–22.
19. Kotter, *Leading Change*, p. 40.
20. Quinn, *Deep Change*, p. 158.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
22. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, pp. 7–10.
23. D. Michael Lindsay, *Rev*, Jan. 2007. The roller coaster analogy is based on Gil Rendle’s *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 1998).
24. Randy Frazee also has experience with this kind of rapid, crisis turnaround, described in *The Comeback Congregation* by Randy Frazee and Lyle E. Shaller (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995).
25. Heifitz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p. 268.
26. Kotter, *Leading Change*, pp. 20–22.
27. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, p. 41.
28. Kotter, *Leading Change*, p. 75.
29. Quinn, *Deep Change*, p. 103.
30. Heifitz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p. 246.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
32. Quinn, *Deep Change*, p. 84.