

Sometimes I don't want the church to change, either

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

June 23, 2014

Years ago, when I was pastor of a smallish, "pastor-sized" church, it became clear that our chancel choir was not going to last very much longer.

By the point I had arrived, it was down to a half-dozen older women and a director who hadn't meant to be in that role for as long as she was. So when she announced that she was stepping down, there began some conversation first about a replacement, which then became a conversation about whether the choir was a viable ministry at this point in the church's life. We did, after all, have a second musical ensemble that sang more contemporary music and that had much higher participation and energy, so we wouldn't be without vocal music. Between that and the clear signs that the choir had neither much participation nor energy, maybe it was time to give thanks for what it had been for the church for so long, and let it go.

Unsurprisingly, this move came with some measure of grief. We always had a choir, after all. Lots of churches have them. That other vocal group, which sat with their families rather than in the choir loft and refused to wear robes wasn't the "real choir."\* For the rest of my tenure at that church, even so many years after that group disbanded, I occasionally heard about this grief; a yearning for something that had been around for so long and that was still going strong in so many other places. But it wasn't viable in that setting, and we had to move ahead as we did.

I understood that grief. I understood the desire to keep things the way that they were; to remain like other churches. I understood that this group had been a beloved mainstay for decades. Whenever something longstanding like that ends, it's hard to see it go and to give it up.

But there's another side to change: it involves not just the loss of something, but the need to live into something else.

And let me tell you, implementing new ideas is *hard freaking work*. It includes, but is not limited to

- discerning what new ministry or direction the church needs to begin with, including reading the people and surrounding culture,
- coming up with a logistical plan for said new ministry or direction,
- convincing the right people that it's worth doing,
- getting certain committees or individual volunteers to help implement it,
- actually implementing it,
- adjusting to hiccups and roadblocks,
- responding to concerns, criticisms, and misunderstandings,
- sustaining a ton of patience in the face of the possibility that the new thing might take a while to start working, and
- loin-girding for the possibility that the new thing won't work out.

Ministry is a lot easier when the stuff that has been around seemingly forever keeps working, because then you can avoid having to do all of this. But everything has a season, and new ways of responding to church needs and cultural changes is inevitable and necessary.

On top of that, sometimes I really like the stuff that has to go away. I have many treasured memories of my hometown church and its more traditional style, but have discovered in the past decade that some of what I remember and loved no longer works, or at least no longer works where I've ended up since becoming a pastor myself. Recognizing that hasn't come easily, but I understand and accept it now. Mostly.

Between grief for the loss and the difficulty of developing the new, there just isn't much that is easy about change. But the world calls for new forms of faithfulness and the church calls for new expressions of what it is meant to be at its heart. We may not always want to do it, but we pretty much have to.

Like it or not.

\*It would come out later that many members of the choir wanted to start sitting with their families and found the robes unbearable, so this was going to happen one way or another.

*Originally posted at [Coffeehouse Contemplative](#)*