

The process of change

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I'm a big fan of change, especially in the church. My upbringing as a pastor's kid kind of ingrained change into me; it helped me accept change as a natural, inevitable fact of life. This has been a helpful asset for me in ministry.

The church needs to change. We've been hearing this for years via countless books, articles, speakers, workshops, conferences, and blog posts. It's a new era and a new culture, we're told. The church can't just make the same assumptions about its place in the world any more. Both in terms of the way it functions internally and the way it interacts with the surrounding community, the church needs to face the reality of each and make changes accordingly.

There are at least two ways to go about making changes.

The first follows the adage "it's better to ask forgiveness than permission." I've used this method plenty of times as I've tweaked worship, altered the way I structure confirmation and other programs, established my approach to visitation, and even when I've changed the way I've greeted people before worship (seriously, this was an issue at one point).

Usually, this first method may be used with smaller things, or perhaps when a pastor is still new and establishing that he or she probably will end up doing things a bit differently than the last person. Depending on the issue, it could be used with larger items as well. There do come points when something is so obviously broken that ministry staff and/or the governing board could get away with an executive decision and then put out a few fires afterward.

The second way to make changes is a little more complicated, and a bit slower. It recognizes the complexity of a church system and carefully weighs the impact of a decision on that system. This second method recognizes all the moving parts involved and understands that it needs to take its time, to evaluate, to consult.

Let's be clear about something with this second way: change really is going to happen. Sure, some churches use the process as an excuse to put off a decision until everyone gets so worn down that they stop caring and nothing happens. But that's not what I'm talking about. Instead, I'm talking about a process where the ones in charge of making a change do their homework first. They are propelled forward by a certain urgency, but they temper it with enough patience to make sure the people and programs it will affect have given their input and will have appropriate consideration in order to adjust.

Taking the time to go through such a process doesn't mean change isn't coming. It just signals a desire to gather enough information and lay enough groundwork that the impending change comes in light of proper account of what it will affect. How will this change affect staff? How will it alter program schedules? Do people in charge of those programs know about the change we're considering? How will this change affect visitors? What impact might this change have on various demographics of our congregation, e.g., young families, the elderly, etc.? What might this change do for our relationship to the community?

These are questions worth pondering for a while. If you're asking them just to put off a decision, you're doing it wrong. But if you're asking them because you love your fellow members and want the best for your church as a whole going forward, then you're taking the time to do it right.

It is indeed better to ask forgiveness than permission sometimes. But other times call for a little more time, consideration, and care. Discerning which calls for which is the first step.

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