The past eight decades have confronted residents of the United States with an unprecedented series of changes. In addition, these changes have arrived at a faster pace than ever before. Examples can be found in agriculture, mining, transportation, communication, manufacturing, entertainment, recreation, the delivery of health care, education, marriage, financial services, retail trade, and American foreign policy.

Therefore it is not surprising that the most effective “way to do church in America in the twenty-first century” also has been transformed. One example is the erosion of inherited religious loyalties. A second is the replacement of the small neighborhood congregation with the large regional church. A third is the new focus on learning that is replacing the old system called “Christian education.” A fourth is the rise of the nondenominational megachurch. A fifth is the unprecedented competition for the charitable dollar.

One consequence of these rapid changes: religious leaders, in both congregations and denominational systems, are now expected to be effective agents of planned change, initiated from within an organization.

What are some of the most effective tactics in a strategy for planned change?

1. Do not surprise people! The normal, natural, and predictable response to a new idea when it is first proposed is rejection. One reason for appointing an ad hoc study committee is to affirm that the time has arrived to consider change; and thus, help people anticipate specific recommendations for change. A common example is most American women receive several months’ advance warning before delivering their first baby. That gives them time to prepare to fulfill a new role.

2. Do not accept an initial rejection as final! View that as a normal response to a new idea, and give people time to talk themselves into an openness to change. It is not uncommon for six-to-twenty months to pass before a series of negative responses turns into a “YES!”

3. Life is relational! During the past half century the old focus on titles, functions, and tasks has been replaced by a greater recognition of the power of interpersonal relationships. One example is the new emphasis on teams. A second is that in the majority of Protestant congregations in America, seven long-tenured, widely respected, and influential persons hold the balance of power. If all seven agree to oppose a proposed change, it probably will not happen. If all seven favor it, that usually generates approval. Thus the effective agent of change always places a high priority on winning allies.

4. Build alliances! Effective alliance-builders often find it is helpful to enlist one group of allies as the initiating group, plus one or more supporting groups of allies.

5. Complacency often is a barrier to initiating change from within any organization. One expression of this is denial. Today it is easy to find congregations of all sizes, as well as denominational systems, in which denial appears to be an insurmountable barrier to change. One effective response to denial can be to flood the system with relevant information.

GULP! I FORGOT THAT EVERY CHANGE AGENT NEEDS ALLIES, TIME, AND A THICK SKIN!

And also place high on your checklist the need for a loving attitude and patience!

---FRIAR TUCK.
and documented information. When denial produces a re-
jection of information, one alternative is to appoint a “Blue
Ribbon” task force of respected individuals who support
their diagnosis and recommendations with their prestige,
relationships, and publicity.

The operational translation of that paragraph: The change
agent may have to feed the fires of discontent with the status
quo. Frequently that requires enlisting allies who will
function as a support group for spreading discontent with
the status quo.

6. Earned respect has replaced the old deference-
pyramid based on position, titles, education, and other
credentials. This means that a top priority for the recently
arrived pastor or denominational executive is to earn the
confidence, trust, and respect of the constituents before
creating that alliance to initiate change.

7. If you are convinced that changes are neces-
sary, do not offer people the choice of “yes or no.” A
better approach is to offer a choice between change and
the probable negative consequences of no changes.

8. Picture change as continuity with the past pri-
orities and values. In the vast majority of situations in
which planned change is initiated from within an organiza-
tion, wise leaders identify, affirm, and reinforce points of
continuity with the past that can make change more ac-
ceptable.

One example is the widely respected and beloved re-
turning pastor who continues in a limited role as the part-
time minister of pastoral care. A second example is to reno-
vate and/or construct an addition to that old building rather
than completely replace it. A third example is to add a sec-
ond worship service to the schedule rather than redesigning
that traditional service. A fourth example: rather than relo-
cating the meeting place, choose to become a multisite
church. A fifth example: when expenditures exceed receipts,
add one or two new income streams rather than reducing
ministries or completely scraping the current system for
raising money.

The BIG exception is when everyone agrees “This is a
crisis!” A genuine crisis makes the old rulebook on change
completely obsolete and opens the door to radical change.

Recognize that one common, negative response of some
people is to perceive the crisis as marking the end of all
widely valued continuity with that congregation or
organization’s past. Therefore, in a major crisis, many people
feel it is a good time for them to leave.

Two examples of that type of negative-reaction syndrome
to what many people perceive as a crisis: (a) The response
to the pedophilia crisis in the Roman Catholic Church in
America. (b) The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf
Coast in 2005 and 2006, as many people decided on perma-
nent departures.

9. If at all possible, first design and secure adop-
tion of a comprehensive five- or seven-year ministry
plan that includes specific, attainable, and measurable
goals. Focus the discussion on a specific recommended
change and why that change is necessary for implementa-
tion of that larger plan. The context for the debate should
be on that ministry plan, not on the changes needed to ac-
complish it.

Without that larger context, some people are tempted to
focus on personalities and choose up sides “us against them.”
The higher the quality of that long-term ministry plan and
the broader the support base for its implementation, the less
likely divisive conflicts over interpersonal relationships will
surface. In the ideal world of denominational systems, the
ministry plan adopted by each congregation will be compat-
ible with and supportive of that larger denominational strat-

10. A neutral approach to planned change does not
exist! Do you want to bias the process in favor of change
or against change? The strategies you use determine a great
percentage of peoples’ responses.

Six ways to bias people against change:
1. Ask for a vote at the same time you introduce the
proposed change.
2. Give each vote equal weight. (Some church mem-
bers have more influential opinions than others.)
3. Articulate the choice as between change and per-
petuating the status quo.
4. Suggest that change should be by subtraction from,
not addition to, ministries we are already doing.
5. Present every proposal in the context of a scarcity of
resources rather than as one component of the larger min-
istry of this congregation.
6. Rush the process.

Five ways to bias people in favor of change:
1. Articulate the options as a choice between Change A
and Change B.
2. Open the door to amendments and revisions of the
original proposal.
3. Give people sufficient weeks or months to talk them-
selves into affirming a new idea.
4. Spell out in detail the probable negative consequences
of rejecting change.
5. Perhaps most critical of all, whenever possible, present
every proposed change in the larger context of a continuing
effort to improve the quality of, to reinforce the relevance
of, and to expand the total ministry of this congregation.