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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Shepherding New Ideas through Change-Resistance Minefields

"Let's *just do it*!" the new member quipped.

"It's a great idea, but it'll get resistance," responded a long-term member.

In congregations, as in any type of organization, most new ideas advance against the natural inclination to avoid change.

Lay leaders and pastors whose congregations move beyond change-resistance with minimum conflict acquire three interconnected skills.

1. Understand the People

The four adult generations in congregations—due to their life-experiences in teenage and early-adult years—possess different values and thinking-patterns. Those habits of thought produce differing convictions regarding "how we should do things around here."

People born prior to 1927 experienced the 1930s Great Depression and the 1940s World War II. Many of them are fearful of economic insecurity and disloyalty to denominational institutions.

People born 1927 to 1945 experienced the 1950s from a perspective tinged with depression-era and war memories. Many of them prefer to avoid financial expenditures (such as hiring staff and expanding programs) until after the funds are in the bank. Financially, they are savers.

People born 1946 to 1964 experienced Vietnam, the 1960s protest movements, and reduced loyalty to all political and church institutions. Many of them are willing to launch a new ministry before the finances are in hand. Financially, they are borrowers.

People born 1965 to 1985 experienced the results of the 1960s civil-rights reforms, the media-information age, and more years of education. Many of them feel tolerant toward other religious groups and theologies. They are willing to *experiment* with new ministries: "Let's try it and see what happens."

Wise church leaders respect all four thinking-habits and involve all four generations in planning and decisions.

2. Understand the Key Principle of Change

Married men know that when their actions or words fail to honor their wives, the wives seldom respond with "I don't feel honored today." Instead, wives usually express some form of anger. Gary Smalley's summary of the principle: the opposite of honor is not dishonor; it is anger. [*Homes of Honor: Parenting Series* (Branson, MO: Today's Family)]

Wise church leaders know that *honoring* the thinking-habits and opinions of people in each generation reduces conflict. Likewise, anger intensifies if church leaders dishonor or *passively allow* dishonoring between generations.

3. Understand the Processes of Change

Wise leaders shepherd congregations through the dangerous valleys of "grief" that all new ideas inevitably bring. Two outlines by John Maxwell, summarized below, give excellent guidance. [*Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc.)]

Individuals' acceptance of a new idea happen in six stages. Effective shepherding *honors* people by anticipating that re-thinking requires multiple exposures.

Stage 1: "I don't like the idea. It conflicts with my ideas."

Stage 2: "I understand the idea, but I don't like it."

Stage 3: "I agree with the idea but have reservations about using it in our church."

Stage 4: "I like the idea."

Stage 5: "I used the idea today."

Stage 6: "I believe in the idea and gave it to someone else yesterday."

Summary: individual change is almost always a process that unfolds in several conversations and church meetings.

Corporate acceptance of a new idea happens in eight steps. Effective shepherding *honors* people by providing several weeks or months of opportunities for committees and governing boards to evaluate and reflect.

Step 1: *Ignorance*. They have not heard of this idea.

Step 2: *Information*. Leaders provide general information. Initially, few people embrace the new idea.

Step 3: *Infusion*. The new idea may cause confrontations with status quo apathy, prejudice, and tradition. People tend to focus on problems this new idea could create.

Step 4: *Individual Change*. The "early adopters" begin seeing benefits in the new idea. Revised personal convictions replace complacency.

Step 5: *Organizational Change*. People discuss pros and cons of the idea with less defensiveness. Momentum shifts from anti-change to pro-change.

Step 6: *Awkward Application*. Implementation of the new idea results in some failures and some successes, accompanied by rapid learning.

Step 7: *Integration*. Awkwardness decreases and acceptance increases. People feel a growing sense of accomplishment. A secondary wave of successful results begins.

Step 8: *Innovation*. Significant results create confidence and a willingness to take risks. People feel willing to change more rapidly and boldly.

Summary: Effective leaders learn that skipping steps multiplies grief. Allowing time for all of the steps is part of the honoring process that graciously shepherds congregations through the grief of change.

All change brings grief. After implementing new ideas, leaders often hear comments such as, "Things are not like they used to be." Large change brings significant grief. Small change brings minor grief to a portion of the congregation. Even positive change produces grief!

With every change, leaders observe one or several of the five classic "stages of grief" outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and the more positive stages of resolution and healing.

Honoring Processes: Three Examples

With major and intensely emotional decisions, wise leaders use processes such as B. and C. on the following list.

A. Use the nominations committee as an honoring process. Shape or reshape the nominations committee to include all four adult generations. As the committee becomes more balanced, its members become more inclined to nominate peers from their generation for positions on committees and the governing board.

B. Use focus groups for the more challenging decisions. Richard A. Krueger provides a clear understanding of the nature and function of these groups. The essential element in focus groups is to select people who represent all four generations. [*Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.)]

C. Use the "Hats of Change" process in emotionally charged decisions. Edward DeBono details this process in *Six Thinking Hats* (St. Louis: Little, Brown, and Company):

A "white hat" represents facts and definitions of the issue.

A "yellow hat" represents feelings about the issue.

A "red hat" represents fears.

A "green hat" represents possible benefits from this idea.

DeBono's "colored-hats" procedure (a) enables individuals to express their anxious feelings and resistance in a safe environment and (b) helps leaders to become more aware of the specific nature of divergent opinions and feelings.

As people express their feelings, the leader encourages everyone *not* to respond or provide rebuttal. Feelings are listed on a board or newsprint for all to see.

The leaders remind the group that every person has equal value and voice. If one person says that something is a fact, no other person is to suggest that (a) it is not a fact or (b) the person suggesting it is less valuable in the group for having made that statement.

As group members state the elements of each hat category, someone takes detailed minutes—accurately stating both the element named and the element's wording. This historical record *honors* all four generations. Everyone who reads the minutes sees that someone noticed and recorded a fact or feeling "similar to one I hold."

Publish hats minutes for subsequent meetings, so that the group does not spend time restating the same information.

Bottom-line question: Do our congregation's leaders understand and use these three skills to help people consider new ideas?