

Leading a Parish to Change

Change is more than something ending and something beginning. When parishes undergo restructuring, blending parishes are not unlike a re-marriage or the blending of families. This means dealing with emotional dynamics, perceptions of favoritism and blending experiences, negotiating calendars, sharing values and accommodating diverse cultures. It rarely happens simply and it seldom occurs on a timeline. And because some feel as though they have lost their parish in the process it also involves grieving a death. Life is messy and change is life at its messiest. The greatest single factor in successful change is leadership. During change, leaders have an opportunity to take the group from one way of life to a life more abundant.

According to John Kotter, a preeminent authority in change management, notes that 70% of needed change fails either due to a failure to launch (even if most people within the organization see the need) or because leaders get exhausted before the innovation is completed. Tired leaders lose heart just when congregations are exercising new creative muscles. While implementing change typically takes twenty-two months, change burnout can happen within eighteen months. Result: tired leaders who retreat back into the status quo just when the community is beginning to accept new patterns and become open to new possibilities.

Jesus was all about purposeful change, but how can we organize a community for purposeful change? The first step is to realize that our iceberg is melting. This is an apt analogy for organizations in changing times. Today, stability is like an iceberg in warm water. It melts unnoticed and below the water line and before anyone notices it is too late. The changes can go unnoticed by those who place great value on stability. Healthy congregations pay attention to change. They become more resilient and adaptive with change. They are more intentional and agile in their response to change. They hear in the Gospel a call to purposeful change.

Our Iceberg is Melting is a story about complacent penguins (and people), written by Kotter which suggests an eight step process for leading successfully in times of change which can be transferred from the iceberg to the congregation. What the penguins learn is that all effective leaders do the following:

1. **Create a Sense of Urgency** - Stimulate awareness of the need for change with the congregation. Why? Because people don't naturally choose change unless they are dissatisfied with what already exists. Jesus helped others see the need for change and the importance of acting immediately. Effective leaders start by naming the discontent for those who have grown too comfortable. Parishes that focus on strategic purpose and preferred outcomes experience a sense of urgency. Do you know what needs to be changed? Can you say why?
2. **Assemble a Leadership Team** - Jesus gathered a transition team - the Twelve. And Jesus supported them with others who saw the need for change - women, the young, the imprisoned, the disabled and diseased, the outsiders and outcasts. Work with those who see the value of change. Who understands the need for change? What do they need to lead the parish through the process?
3. **Create and Communicate a Vision for Change** - . Most churches that close are not swept away by a catastrophic flood. They are eroded away by congregational complacency. Express the plan in the language of the convictions and heart-values of the people. Keep the focus of the change on the ultimate goal - a vibrant Catholic parish! This can be worship that inspires, leadership that empowers, compassionate community, effective structures,

spirituality that is vital, small groups that are enriching, opportunities to use gifts in ministry, or authentic evangelization. What will motivate people for change? Who can name it in compelling ways?

4. **Build Support** - Address those who will be affected first and affected the most. Communicate clearly without defensiveness. Give interested parishioners a voice in the planning. Give people the time needed to grieve. Avoid trying to talk people out of their feelings. Keep the message simple and personal. What objections can you anticipate? What suggestions can you offer about how people can prepare for expected changes?
5. **Empower People** - Where they lacked skills, Jesus equipped them. Where they lacked perspective, Jesus opened their imaginations. To those who were excluded, Jesus gave access. If they lacked power, Jesus authorized them. Listen and acknowledge feelings. The result can be a healthier, energized and more engaged parishioner. How can we authorize and equip those who have the ability to lead our parish through needed change?
6. **Celebrate Early Wins** - Nothing builds enthusiasm and silences critics like a successful trial. Change demands careful preparation. Create a plan and enlist supporters. Pay attention to initial small-scale innovations. What have you learned from small changes? How will you publish and celebrate early successes?
7. **Don't Stop**. Allow for a modicum of disagreement and distortion of your message in the community without resorting to defensive reaction. During denial - give information. Invest in building relationships and invest in careful planning upfront. Empower parishioners through a transparent process and inclusive decision-making
8. **Make Changes Permanent** - Give feedback constantly. Integrate what is learned throughout the parish. Change must be formalized into new policies, practices and patterns that enrich the vitality of a parish. Effective leaders make use of scriptural vision and ritual systems of our faith to formalize changes. This will create a new culture.

What did you do the last time you were the leader when the parish underwent significant change? What worked well and why? What mistakes were made and what impact did they have? What would you do differently?

What can you do next? Purchase and read: *Our Iceberg is Melting* by John Kotter (St. Martin's Press, 2005) or visit:

www.theheartofchange.com for a diagnostic questionnaire

www.ouricebergismelting.com for tools and training for making change happen.

www.whomovedmycheese.com to view the movie

www.catholicappreciativeinquiry.com for more resources and ways to use this strategic planning methodology for parish vitality

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