

Change in the Town and Country Context

In the article “Changes Affecting the Town and Country Church” we address changes that are, by and large, caused by outside forces. Thus they are changes beyond our sphere of influence—not changes we initiate, but changes we can only respond to. In this article we address changes that are within the pastor’s sphere of influence and jurisdiction. What follows is mostly excerpted from a seminar which Bob MacKay led at an RHMA Small-Town Pastors’ Conference.



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Contrary to what many think, rural people are not opposed to change per se. The image of backwards country bumpkins who are not about to change is simply not reflective of most rural people today. There have been lots of changes in rural areas in recent years—especially changes in farming methods (e.g., no-till farming, new chemicals, improved hybrids, hi-tech equipment).

Neither do rural people have a corner on the market when it comes to resistance to change. It is natural for everyone to resist change—even young people. Joe Stowell, President of Moody Bible Institute, tells about Matt, his teenage son, who proudly wore a new pair of shoes out of the store, while his mother carried the old pair. Those old shoes, wounded in the warfare of skateboarding, really had only one place left to go. On the way out to the parking lot, Matt’s mother spotted a trash container. But Matt stopped her just in time: “Mom, don’t throw them away! Those shoes and I have been through a lot together!” Change is difficult for everyone—not just rural people, and not just older people. We must not lose respect for people just because change comes hard.

Four perspectives

(1) *Change is usually a sociological issue.*

We need to be cautious about spiritualizing people’s resistance to change. Try sitting in a different chair at the dining table and you’ll see how reluctance to change is part of human nature.

While changing chairs is a sociological issue, it might lead to a spiritual issue should the family argue over the change. When sociological change incites ungodly behavior, it becomes a spiritual issue.

(2) *Our ability to lead our church through change depends heavily upon the trust factor.* Trust, especially in rural communities, is not earned by educational degrees or skillful preaching.

Trust is earned when people perceive we care about them. They will then perceive that this is our motive for change. (We, of course, need to be certain we don’t have an ulterior motive.)

Trust is earned by building strong relationships. An overseer of pastors wisely said, “If we rob people of security, then we must replace it with relationship.”

Trust is earned by demonstrating competence. The congregation must believe we have what it takes to lead them through change.

(3) We need to be innovative apart from our church ministry. There should also be innovation in our personal life and family. We can't expect to not be innovative in our personal life and family, but be innovative at church.

If we make the church our sole focus of innovation, putting all our innovative energies there, we will likely be left frustrated.

We will find they just don't want to change, or they want to change in a different way, or at a different pace. This will eat at us, unless there are other facets of our lives where there is innovation. If there is innovation in our personal and family life, then when innovation isn't happening like we think it should at church, we won't be nearly as frustrated.

For instance, there could be innovation in our quiet times with God.

There could be innovation in our reading. We can read a whole range of books.

We can be innovative by adapting to our adopted culture. If we don't change, why should our congregation?

We can make a deliberate decision to be innovative in our rural context. The alternative, in some places, is boredom, because you can hear the rust growing on the hubcaps!

We might be innovative by taking vacations to different places every year.

In none of these areas do we necessarily *have* to be innovative. However, if we're not innovative in our personal and family life, but we tell the congregation they need to be innovative, aren't we showing some inconsistency? And aren't we putting too many innovative eggs in one basket?

(4) We must understand that ministry is a

process. There is a fantasy that at some juncture we will arrive, that at some point—if we implement all the changes that need to happen—our church will be where it should be. This will never happen. Just as the church needed change when we arrived, it will still need change when we leave.

Four don'ts

(1) Don't let change become the main thing. The old adage rings true: "Remember to keep the main thing the main thing." Preach the Word. Love the people. Pray.

Our main job is not to sweep out the old and bring in the new. Innovation should be a sidelight to our ministry, not the main thing. Some pastors keep their churches in constant turmoil with relentless innovation.

(2) Don't give the answer before understanding the question. Proverbs 18:13: "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and shame." Rather than bringing the answer with us when we first go to our church, we need to spend a lot of time trying to discern what the question is. We shouldn't go with a pre-determined agenda or a pre-written vision statement. How can we possibly know what course a church should take without first doing a lot of listening? We should go with an open mind, and let the people in our congregation influence our thinking about what kinds of change need to happen.

(3) Don't innovate just to be innovative. There is a lot of pressure today to be on the cutting edge. Pastors get together and boast about what their church is doing. If we say, "Bus ministry," they respond, "Where have you been?"

We must not let pastoral insecurities move us toward innovation. If bus ministry is effective, even though it is a 40-year-old idea, then let's do it. Some of us have been around long enough to see lots of things

come and go. If we seek to be innovative just to be innovative, we'll soon date ourselves because things come and go quickly.

We must not innovate unless we need to innovate. Otherwise, our innovation might make things worse. Hippocrates was right when he said, "First, do no harm." If we try to fix 20% of something but in doing so mess up the other 80%, we haven't gained anything.

(4) Don't die for change . . . unless you are willing to. Die professionally, that is. We may read a book saying our church should have a vision statement. When we suggest this to our rural church leaders they may not go for it. Are we willing to circumvent them and take our idea to the entire church? In other words, are we willing to risk dying for it? This doesn't mean a vision statement isn't a good idea, but is it worth dying for? Maybe to some of us it is. We all have to think carefully about the limits to which we are willing to go to push innovation.

In my opinion, there are very few things worth dying for.

Four suggestions

(1) We can't be innovative without a commitment to stay. Here's why: Smalltown churches have a history of pastors who haven't stayed. The church figures we'll be there about three years. But, most of them have been there 30-40-50 years. They've seen lots of pastors come and go. They've seen pastors come in with ideas. They've seen their pastors start implementing their ideas, but then leave the church to finish them.

Enter: the next pastor. What is the congregation thinking? *He probably won't be here more than a couple of years. If we let him, he'll start things and then leave in the midst of them.* A lot of pastors don't

realize that this is happening. They think the church is stuck in a rut, or that they don't like his ideas.

(2) Check things out with the power brokers before checking things out with the Power Brokers. By this I mean two things. One, the real influencers may not be the ones with a title. We need to find out who these people are and check out our innovation with them.

Second, check things out informally with the leaders of the church before talking with them about your idea at a board meeting. Talk about it on a tractor or over a cup of coffee in the cafe.

(3) Start with small wins, not big change. Innovation seldom happens in big leaps. People need to see that we have succeeded in small things before they'll trust us with something bigger.

I once read an article that compared the pastorate to—of all things—a game of poker! It said when you go to a church you are given a certain number of chips. They're given to you just because you're the pastor. (Based on the church's past experience with pastors, it may be a very limited number of chips, but you'll get a few!) You need to be careful how you play those chips.

You may only have two chips to start with. It may be that down the road you'll need 102 chips to take a step in your church—it's a big step. But right now you've only got two. You better not try to take that big step until you earn your chips. You earn chips as you minister—showing that you care, building relationships, exhibiting integrity, and achieving small successes. If you aren't careful to do this, and you try to take a big step prematurely, you'll lose what few chips you have and it'll take a long time to work your way back.

Start with what makes good, common sense. In most cases it doesn't take a nuclear physicist to figure out what the first

step should be—or the second or third, especially if you have an old church building! In our church it was the nursery. From there we did other things, saving the big sanctuary project for down the road a ways, after I had earned some chips.

(4) Expect deliverance. You'll face opposition as you try to bring change to your rural church. Sometimes it's best to ask God for deliverance and then wait for it to happen. When you begin to move toward change and difficulties come (you know they will!), God will deliver. We preach that God is a deliverer (Psalm 18 is a good text), but do we trust Him to do it? We may need God to change minds. Or to move someone out of—or into—our church to get the change done. Or to provide funds. There are all kinds of ways God can deliver.

With all changes, we await deliverance. Sometimes it takes awhile and we have to be patient. In our instant society we want drive-through deliverance or 24-hour deliverance. It may take longer than that.

Years ago in our church we formed a teen choir. The chairman of the board came to me and said, "I see you have a teen in this choir who isn't saved. He can't sing in the choir." It was my responsibility to deliver the news to the teen. Was I ever despondent! The teen was taking a real interest in spiritual things. He would undoubtedly reverse course if he got kicked out of the choir. I went home with my jaw down by my knees. My wife asked me what the problem was. I explained. She said, "Have you ever considered talking to him about trusting Christ as his Savior?" I called him. We met. He trusted Christ!

Expect deliverance.



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