



# ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

## Being Progressive in a Stagnant Church

By Kary Oberbrunner

**CHANGE IS HAPPENING. ACTUALLY THREE WEEKS FROM TODAY IS THE DUE DATE FOR** my first son. Because I was a good student in the childbirth class, I know that he could come any day. My cell phone is always on, ready to receive the call. Our bags are packed. His name is picked. The room is ready. We are embracing this wonderful change about to happen in our lives.

Normally an avid reader of books on theology and spiritual formation, I've been reading very different books lately. I find myself watching one-hour shows with my wife about new parents on cable channels I never knew existed. Somehow these are supposed to help me prepare for the big change.

My vocabulary has increased a hundredfold. I thought concepts like pneumatology and hermeneutics were difficult to grasp. Now I find myself talking with people in Wal-Mart about words like "breech" and "bag of waters."

If change is such a natural part of life, why does it seem that change is so often absent from Christendom? In fact, change is the only uninvited guest in many of our churches. An older pastor friend of mine often says the famous last eight words of the Church are "that's not the way we've always done it."

Chances are that many of you have deeply agonized over the lack of change in your church. Although our culture has changed rapidly over the last few decades, it seems as if we are doing church the same way we did 50 years ago. People are stuck in their ways and have become obstacles to the change process. You probably struggle seeing how your church is dying, how it's missing people in the pews, how if it were just a little more open-minded, tremendous growth and change could happen. Yet it doesn't. To put it another way, you are a progressive in a stagnant church.

So what are your options? Should you just leave? Should you dig in your heels and go to battle? Should you cause a church split? You've probably entertained all of these options. What's God's perspective in all this? Does He even care?

Well, for starters, God is all about change. Salvation is intertwined with change. It's the essence of sanctification. We are being changed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). In fact, it's God's plan for each one of His children (Romans 8:28). It's been said that God loves us just the way we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way.

Be encouraged. Although you think you have a deep desire to see change, God's desire is much greater. God doesn't want minor change. He wants deep transformation for His Church and every individual who makes up His Church.

In my journey, I've had to learn quite a bit. I'm still learning a lot. I challenge you to learn from my mistakes. So I have 10 suggestions to keep in mind when attempting to be progressive in a stagnant church.

## 1. EMBRACE THE HYPOCRITE WITHIN

Jesus said it best. "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). And, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7).

I've noticed in my pursuit for change that I often have blind spots. I can clearly see how everyone else around me needs to change. You cannot expect change until you are willing to change. Until we allow God to change us, we cannot expect Him to change others.

You must look in the mirror and embrace the flaws and hypocrisy in your own life. Carl Rogers says in his book *On Becoming a Person*, "We cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly accept what we are." If you are not willing to do this, then don't bother trying to change your church. Why? Jesus is opposed to the proud. It was these types of people who have no need for a Savior. Instead, they think they are saviors. It is only as we allow God to change us that we can be used to change others.

## 2. REALIZE THAT GOD DOESN'T NEED YOU

You can easily fall into a trap where you think God needs you to make His Church relevant. This could not be further from the truth. You are not irreplaceable. Just because you have the eyes to see the need for change doesn't mean that God can't allow other people to see that same need for change. Don't think too highly of yourself.

## 3. REALIZE THAT GOD WANTS TO USE YOU

Hopefully, you're beginning to see that being progressive is closely linked with paradox. You've seen that in order to change others you must first change yourself. And now you must understand that although God doesn't need you, He does want to use you.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, God uses willing men and women to transform nations, kingdoms and families. This is His plan. Scripture says, "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chronicles 16:9, NAS).

The process of transformation is always bigger than we are. Robert E. Quinn, in his book *Change the World*, refers to transformation as "joining God in a dance of co-creation." Being a change agent is a spiritual activity. It's what many of us long to do, but few actually do.

Transformation is God's heart and His story of redeeming humankind. No wonder change is such an inherent desire. It is etched into the very fabric of our hearts.

## 4. SURROUND YOURSELF WITH TRUTH TELLERS

There are few things more important than truth tellers. Such people are individuals who know you and your context. Make sure these key people aren't afraid to confront you. There is nothing worse than having a bunch of "yes men" who lack strong backbones. In my journey I've had a couple key truth tellers who told me when I was wrong, strengthened me when I needed courage and loved me when I was unlovely.

You will lose courage along your way. You will want to throw in the towel. Maybe you should. But more often than not, these are times when you're feeling the fire. God is using circumstances to extract all the impurities inside of you. Don't forget. As you play a part in changing your church, God is in fact changing you.

The way you react and respond in your trials indicates what's going on inside of you. Truth tellers help contextualize your reactions. Because they know your situation, they can speak to it from a more objective point of view. They can help you when you feel like you've lost your way.

## 5. A TYPE OF DEATH IS INEVITABLE

Most people fear death. We resist it. We won't even speak of it. Even when our churches are experiencing a slow death, they would rather do anything than acknowledge it. As a progressive, you dare to verbalize the slow death taking place, and sometimes your church will seek to kill you as a result of it. By speaking up, you are breaking the rules.

Most of us are driven by fears of what will happen to us if we fail to conform to the will of the system. Yet despite our fears, we must refuse to conform. We have to kill our fears in hopes of preventing the slow death of our churches. Someone or something is going to die. Will it be your fears or your church? Quoted in *Managing Transitions* by William Bridges, 19th-century French literature critic Charles Du Bos said, "The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we would become."

It really comes down to how much you care. For many of us, even though we have a lofty desire to be a change agent, we also have a desire just as strong to simply exist. We don't want to rock the boat too hard. But if we don't overcome our fears, then we'll end up living lives of quiet desperation. Also quoted in *Managing Transitions*, French writer Anatole France said, "All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind is part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another."

It's very possible that there are others in your church also craving change. Just like you, they lack courage to transcend their fears. Remember, courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act in spite of it. Do you love yourself or the God who is asking you to initiate change? Jesus said the one who loves his life will lose it and the one who hates his life will keep it (John 12:25).

## 6. BE READY TO GIVE UP CONTROL

Many cynics and critics talk about their love for change. Such change is usually incremental change. "Deep change usually requires letting go of control," Quinn wrote. "It means facing the unknown, walking naked into the land of uncertainty. We spend most of our lives striving to avoid that very prospect."

Quite possibly, you have no idea where change will lead you or your church. There are a couple reasons for this. One reason is that if you really knew, you would become overwhelmed and paralyzed. Another reason is that it's impossible for you to know. You are not God. More often than not, change means letting go, not taking charge. You can't know where change will lead, for if you did, you would inevitably control things and obstruct change.

True transformation is letting go of knowing the next step. David didn't know what would happen when he stepped out to fight Goliath. Esther, when asking the Israelites to fast for her as she talked to the king, had no idea if she would survive. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego even added that if God didn't deliver them, they still would not worship the idol (Daniel 3:17-18).

This is what faith is all about. It's about not having control, not knowing the outcome and not knowing the steps to get there. Rather, faith is reliance upon the One who does. It's our faith that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). God is actually pumped when we trust Him and relinquish our illusion of control.

## 7. ADDRESS THE IMPOSING THREAT

Why is your church scared of change? People have different reasons. Perhaps they've wrapped their identity in the way your church has always done things. Perhaps the old thick King James Bible sitting at the front of the church, the one that intimidates guests and really annoys you, was donated by their deceased Uncle George. Maybe they're willing to part with it, but they simply need to be honored and grieve through the process.

Maybe other people feel that if they change, they'll no longer be needed or have a ministry. When organists transitioned out of Sunday morning services, did we empower them to find new ministries? I am convinced that the people most opposed to change are the ones with the biggest fears they need to work through.

Brash decisions and thoughtless comments might actually hinder the change process. Instead, talk to people about what the change will bring. What are the underlying factors that contribute to the imposing threat?

## SOMEONE OR SOMETHING IS GOING TO DIE. WILL IT BE YOUR FEARS OR YOUR CHURCH?

## 8. ASK QUESTIONS

There is only one way to get to the underlying factors. We need to be people who ask more questions. Forget about the manipulative leading questions proposed in so many leadership books. Ask people questions so that you can understand them. I am convinced that if people feel honored and understood, they'll be more likely to play a role in the change process. In fact, they might become your biggest supporters. Don't shortcut the process by assuming you know what others are thinking.

## 9. BE PATIENT

We don't change overnight. God doesn't put unrealistic pressure on us. Rather, He invites us to change one step at a time. Your church will not change overnight either.

A good tool that I've come to appreciate is the six-month test. I think back to my teen years. There were times when my friends were growing much faster than I was. I saw them everyday at school and was frustrated at how much shorter I was. Then one day I stood next to my friend and realized that we were the same height. Nothing magical happened. Rather, it was the slow process of steady change.

It's the same within church. If you look at how much it hasn't changed from one day to the next, you'll get frustrated. Rather, as you daily employ the first eight steps, look back six months later. Has your church experienced transformation? Are there any ministries that have fingerprints of change? Is there one more person in the church who is "getting it"? These are small signs that represent growth. Celebrate them.

## 10. EMBODY CHANGE

You need to model the very behavior you are hoping to see in others. You need to incarnate change. Let others see how open you are to change. As mentioned before, the end road might be far different from where you first started. Others will watch how you respond to things that you didn't expect.

God has a funny way of providing real-life examples for us. He often gives us the chance to live out the very behavior we are trying to work within our churches. In such cases, ask yourself, "Am I responding to change the way I want others to respond." Again, it is not about us changing them. Rather it's about us changing together.

Change. "The only thing that's certain is that nothing stays the same," the old adage goes. Believe it or not, even stagnation is change. Stagnation is slow death, and death is slow change. We can settle for slow death or we can be used of God to be agents of change within our local church.

As for my wife and me, our lives are going to change very soon. Deep change is only one phone call away. If only it were that simple in the local church. Who knows? Maybe it is.

After all, although I've never given birth, I've sat in enough church meetings to feel the agonizing birth pangs of the change process. Sometimes things can get pretty unbearable. But if we stick with it, just like in life, we have a beautiful little bundle of joy on the other side. And although I can't control the process with the church or with my child, I can't wait for my life to change forever. It's a next step I'm thrilled to take. **RL**

## Five Areas That Need Changing

**1 OUR CONCEPT OF WORSHIP**  
It's more than just singing. It's more than a prescribed and fixed order. If God is so creative in what He's made, why are we so uncreative in our response back to Him?

**2 OUR CONCEPT OF CHURCH**  
We don't simply DO church. Rather we *are* church. What does it mean to truly be the people of God? Although the kingdom is not here in its fullness, what are practical ways that we can incarnate the kingdom of God that Jesus said was among us?

**3 OUR CONCEPT OF OUTREACH**  
Unbelievers are not projects that need converting. They are people who have fears, dreams and needs. What do we lose when we view the lost in light of only an agenda?

**4 OUR CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY**  
It's by our love for one another that the whole world will know we are His disciples. How much love can we have for others when we only interact with them in a lecture format for an hour and a half a week?

**5 OUR CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY**  
Is spirituality reduced to a list of dos and don'ts? What about the wonder and mystery of God? Why do we divide life into categories of secular and sacred? Doesn't spirituality touch all facets of life?

**KARY OBERBRUNNER** and his wife, Kelly, are soon to be proud parents of a brand new baby boy. He is author of *The Journey Towards Relevance* (Relevant) and founder of Redeem the Day Ministries ([www.redeemtheday.org](http://www.redeemtheday.org)), a gathering of sojourners on a quest to buy back time.