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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How to Prevent Bad Behavior during Times of Change

After finding a brain tumor behind the patient's left eye, a doctor referred the man to an oncologist.

Three years later, the patient is back in his physician's office. He never went to see the cancer doctor. Now, the tumor is greatly enlarged. Immediate surgery is essential to saving his vision. With compassionate honesty the surgeon tells him, "No matter how effective this surgery, your chance of survival is about fifty-fifty."

For individuals, denial (not accepting reality and taking appropriate action) can be fatal. For groups of individuals in organizations—such as congregations—denial often causes a thirty-year death. Ministries diminish in effectiveness. Worship attendance shrinks. Young-adult families disappear as the median age of worshippers slowly rises beyond sixty-five. A few years later the church closes.

What causes this fatal behavior? When people who face a challenge outside of their knowledge base and past experiences, they tend to become either extremely fearful ("The sky is falling, so let's hunker down and wait for awhile!") or resigned to their fate ("There is probably nothing we can do, so we might as well give up!"). Either of those reactions can freeze a congregation's ability to accurately assess reality and take appropriate action.

What should a congregation do when denial surfaces in response to the necessity of moving in a new direction? The church's people need a several-month process to think their way through the issue—months in which six elements pervade the atmosphere.

1. Emotional support to help people move beyond fear or resignation: The attitude of the pastor and the lay leadership is especially important, setting a confident tone that helps parishioners move beyond denial and set in motion the necessary changes.

2. Sufficient time to clarify and communicate the pros and cons of the issue and add rational facts to the decision-making process: In the 1700s and 1800s—unlike their European counterparts—the money to operate American churches did not come from taxes the citizens paid to the government. So how did congregations pay their expenses? One common procedure was to rent

or sell pews. Central heating had not yet appeared in church buildings. Thus, the best pews were nearest the stove—in the center or front of the worship area. Class distinctions were obvious every Sunday. The pews nearest the stove were more expensive, occupied by people who paid more for them than did people who sat toward the outside and the back.

Then, during the mid-1800s, a big transition occurred. Americans began to view egalitarianism (the idea that we should treat people equally, regardless of their station in life) as an essential ethical practice in churches. This transition caused much conflict. "The very idea, depending on voluntary giving to support the church!" many said. "How will we know that we'll have enough money to get through the year?"

Did churches transition away from pew rent? Yes, their governing boards figured out that many young-adult families demanded the change—and if they didn't get it, found another church to attend. The majority of people on those governing boards wanted their church to stay alive during the next 100 years and beyond. So they moved beyond denial to action. Pew rent disappeared.



The necessity of new directions during changing times requires patience, kindness, and firm love.

In the 1800s, congregations provided restroom facilities in one or two small buildings at the end of a dirt path behind the church building. From about 1900 through 1940, most churches brought their restroom facilities inside. This transition caused much conflict. “The very idea, putting something as filthy and smelly as an outhouse right inside God’s house!” some protested. “Who would want to go to an outhouse inside the church?”

Did churches make this transition away from outdoor restrooms? Yes, their governing boards figured out that many young adults demanded the change—and if they didn’t get it, found another church to attend. A majority of people on those governing boards wanted their church to stay alive during the next 100 years and beyond. So churches added restrooms to their buildings.

By the 1970s, the traditional hymns so meaningful to older parishioners began to feel boring to most of the age-eighteen-to-forty-four young adults. This “appreciation gap” continued to widen during the next three decades. Congregations that avoided the beginning of a gradual thirty-year death discovered ways to offer worship music that spiritually connects with new generations of young-adult families.

During many of the transition periods noted above, governing boards gathered information from one or more outside-expert sources to help them better understand the issue and how other congregations have handled it.

3. Sufficient time to reflect and discuss: This includes time to discuss the new challenge, the likely results of not taking action, and the proposed changes. For a variety of reasons, not everyone in a congregation facing the necessity of major change sees the danger of not changing.

Some individuals fear that the proposed changes will destroy some of their church’s positive qualities, so they vote for the status quo. When given a choice, some individuals prefer allowing the congregation to gradually die rather than make the changes necessary to avoid death. “I just want the church to live long enough that my funeral can be conducted in it,” some of them say.

People need time to discuss their feelings with one another: time to feel that their views are heard; time to feel that they are respected even when not agreed with; time to influence one another to move beyond denial to acceptance and action.

4. Sufficient time to move through the grief stages: This includes several months to voyage through the normal stages of fearfulness and move beyond denial to appropriate action—time to face facts such as “what worked so well two or three decades ago is not working now.”

5. If possible, time to experience in a few small ways the results of addressing an issue in new ways: That’s why, during its early years, Rick Warren’s Saddle-

back Church decided to stop singing hymns at its seeker services and begin using a contemporary/rock style and praise songs. Did all of Saddleback’s lay leadership agree with that decision? No, but attendance exploded during the following year. That result helped people move beyond their fears.

6. Recognition that some people can’t move beyond their denial: Using the five methods outlined above fail to achieve results with a few of the parishioners. Time, discussions, and new information don’t produce transformation in their thinking. Although reasonably intelligent and selflessly loyal church members, they cannot overcome their denial, accept reality, and decide to try something new.

To effectively work with the various types of people in this category, the pastors, staff, and governing boards respond in two ways: (a) Patiently and kindly love the denial-trapped people anyway; (b) Kindly but firmly refuse to let denial-trapped people shorten the congregation’s life-expectancy.

Practical application: After reviewing the six elements above, make a six-paragraph plan for addressing a transition issue in our congregation.

The bottom line: The most destructive hurricane in American history hit Long Island, New York, in September 1938. (The Red Cross reported 700 people killed, 1,754 injured, and 63,000 homes destroyed.) The U.S. Weather Service issued the first warning September 18, several days in advance. But it had been 123 years since a hurricane had turned inward, toward land, instead of moving eastward into the Atlantic Ocean.

A New York City radio station reported that the storm had changed course and would “probably hit Long Island.” But most people along the coast were comfortably cocooned in denial.

One Long Islander had ordered a barometer a few days earlier. It arrived in the morning mail on September 21. Annoyed that the needle pointed below 29—where the dial read “Hurricanes and Tornadoes”—he shook it and banged it against the wall. Irritated, he put it back in the box, drove to the post office, and mailed it back. While he was gone, his house blew away.

This is normal behavior. People of all kinds—individually and in groups—often deny reality, even when warned by scientists, statistics, and other reliable sources.

So don’t take denial personally! But do try to help people transition through it.

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