

Making Changes in Churches—Exodus 32: A Word for New Pastors

by Earl C. Johnson

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When Barack Obama ascended to the top of the nation's political mountain in 2008 by becoming the first African American and one of the youngest-ever presidents, he vowed loudly and clearly to bring something to America: Change.

One of his first acts as President was to bail out failing banks and secure the struggling auto industry by way of an economic stimulus package. He also spent most of his first year working to reform the healthcare industry, to ensure that all Americans would have some form of coverage. Change had come to America, but many people were not prepared for, or even excited about, the changes that were being instituted. Even some of the President's most ardent supporters spoke out vehemently against his policy changes, leaving his administration scrambling to reassure a fickle public that the changes were necessary for the economic vitality of the country.

I brought a similar message of change when I was called to pastor my first congregation in the mountains of Virginia. The congregants repeatedly told me that they wanted "a change of pace" and that the previous pastor's inability to incorporate change had led to the church's stagnation. As a new and first-time pastor, I worked diligently to make changes in the church's ministries and its organizational structure. However, it didn't take long for me to determine that my perception of change and that of the congregation was different. Within six months, many of my changes came under attack, and I found myself standing alone against a congregation rife with confrontation and confusion.

As I reflect on my first pastorate, I realize that I was a novice in congregational management. The people who resisted were not mean-spirited or intent on seeing me fail. They did not hold secret meetings to vote me out, nor were they a horde of backward-thinking people who knew nothing about congregational life. Many simply felt that their customs, beliefs, and traditions were being threatened by the type of change I brought to the church. Consequently, I have altered my position on bringing change to churches, and now believe that new pastors must explore the spiritual and the cultural dynamics of a congregation before pressing "the change button."

New pastors must understand that people typically strongly resist perceived threats to their traditions and values. The same church traditions that seem antiquated to some may be sacred to others. Many traditions may even date back to the post-slavery period when many black churches were established. What I learned and what I would like to share with others is that when you ask people to change what they are doing, you may be asking them to get rid of things they hold dear. More specifically, you are asking them to abandon years of practices and traditions that directly correlate to their identity as a congregation.

Too often new pastors take on congregations and bring with them preconceived notions not based in evidence. They want to make changes because they believe that taking over a new congregation requires making immediate changes. Many are anxious to test out on the new flock what they have studied and learned in seminary or Bible College. One of the first questions a new pastor (especially if he or she is young) should ask is, Will this change create a healthier body of believers and worship environment or is the change being initiated just for the sake of changing something I believe is outdated?

Some new pastors are pressured by groups and individuals within the congregation who often demand that changes be made right away. However, every new pastor should realize that most changes in churches occur gradually, not immediately, even if there are members who are telling you to move swiftly.

Additionally, congregations must trust a pastor as a leader before they will buy into where he or she is leading them. The people want to ascertain that where you are leading them is in their best interest. If they are unclear about your motives and/or where you are going, they will resist. In the classic children's story Alice in Wonderland, Alice comes to a fork in the road and asks the Cheshire cat which direction she should take. "Well," says the cat, "that depends on where you want to go." Alice replies, "I really don't much care where." "Then," said the cat, "it really doesn't matter which way you walk." If a pastor is changing a program or policy or adding something new without considerable assessment as to why and where it will take the church, it can send mixed and confusing signals to a congregation.

I understand that there may be situations where a new pastor has no alternative but to act immediately. I have known pastors who made major serious changes in the core beliefs of a congregation before they were installed. I also know pastors who took over and cleaned house within two to three months and survived the ordeal because it was expected, necessary, and wanted. However, even if change is immediate, some rules still apply. John Maxwell writes in The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership that making changes, whether in a congregation or a corporation, has more to do with timing than anything else. His "law of timing" illustrates that knowing when to lead is as important as what you do and where you go.¹ As a new pastor, 99% of the time, the time to make most major changes is not right after you get to a church.

I want to take the matter a step further and suggest to new pastors that timing is everything in the life of the congregation. Whatever changes you make have to be made with accurate timing, because every change has either a positive or a negative effect upon the congregation. Maxwell list several reasons why timing is everything. First, he states, "The wrong action at the wrong time leads to disaster." This concept has a biblical basis.

In Exodus 32, Moses, the leader, who brought the people out of Egypt to the foothills of Mt. Sinai, is summoned by God to meet God atop the mountain to receive further instructions on how and when to proceed with the people. Apparently, Moses' journey of 40 days and 40 nights was long enough to cause the people to lose interest in God's plans. They became anxious and began to discuss the possibility that Moses would not return. In their frustration and

rebelliousness, they solicited Moses' brother Aaron and convinced him to make a golden calf. Aaron was the priest who worked alongside Moses to pastor the people. Whether he was forced to build this golden calf or volunteered is a matter of debate. What is clear is that the people wanted change because they grew tired and weary of waiting for Moses, or because they concluded that their future was slipping away. Whatever their rationale, they solicited the support of a man of God to help bring about the change they desired.

Much can be gleaned from Aaron's irresponsibility. As a co-leader of this wilderness church, Aaron made a bad decision. Not only was his timing off, but also creating another god for the people to worship was repugnant and against the will of God. It was the wrong decision at the wrong time and it led to disaster.

Maxwell also suggests, "The right action at the wrong time brings resistance." I made this mistake early in my pastorate by bringing in a new musician soon after the death of the church's longtime organist. We had no organist, or a pianist, and we needed a musician. So I hired someone and agreed upon a higher salary than had ever been paid for an organist at this church. It was the right action, I surmised. However, within two months, the new musician was on his way out the door. It was the right action but introduced at the wrong time. In this scenario, I failed to enlist the sentiments of the people in this endeavor, and did it too quickly, although we all agreed it was necessary and vital to the life of the congregation.

Introducing change into your congregation is similar to a corporation introducing a new product. In the business world, all products have a life cycle, which begins with an introductory stage. During the introductory stage, the idea of the product is shared, discussed, and tested and feedback is received. In some cases, if the product does not meet quality control standards, or if the people who are to benefit from it reject it, the product will not leave the introductory stage. The point is that you can have the right motives, but if your plan for change is introduced to your people at the wrong time or in the wrong way, things will not bode well for your new idea.

A third point is this, "The wrong action at the right time is a mistake." Aaron may have initiated what the people wanted at the time they wanted it, but what he did was clearly wrong. The timing might have been right for the rebels in the group, but making the golden calf was the wrong thing for Aaron to do. It is a mistake to give people what they want in order to win their approval. Aaron made a huge mistake and he paid for it dearly as God punished the people for their wickedness.

The following actions might help support and encourage new and especially young pastors as they work to incorporate changes into their congregations.

First, spend the first year studying and getting to know your congregation. Resist making any real changes until you have studied your congregation from top to bottom. The reason for this is two-fold. First, many pastors are voted into their positions. This means that a majority of those who voted wanted him or her as pastor. It also means that the minority may have had their hearts set on someone else or didn't think much of your skills and qualifications. Very few pastors take over the management of a congregation with one-hundred-percent approval.

I once pastored a 400-member church that had a substantial opposition to my hiring. Instead of spending time trying to build a consensus with these non-supporters, I ignored them. Consequently, they resisted everything that I implemented. The lesson learned is that the opposition culture needs and deserves to be studied along with the entire congregation. Spending time getting to know your congregation is a worthwhile endeavor.

Second, develop a congregational survey that members can fill out and do not have to sign. Create one yourself or hire an outside consultant. Alternatively, you might find a doctoral student at a nearby school who is skilled in survey creation and assessment. Surveys assist in discovering the needs of your congregation. Many congregants will tell you things in a survey that they would not admit in a group setting or even to you personally. The survey is a part of blueprint that acts as your guide for making the necessary changes you want to make. If done correctly, it will bring the congregation together and help shape a shared vision. Further, the weight of initiating change is taken off the shoulders of the pastor alone and there is a collective covenant that is shared by all. A survey can show church members that some things are “broken and need to be fixed.” It can also show a pastor that what he or she perceives as broken may not be. It is not likely that a pastor is the only one who can see that something is broken.

Third, new pastors should meet with every leader in the congregation. Associate ministers and members of various boards, including deacons, trustees, ushers, youth leaders, and financial overseers should be included in one-on-one discussions. You might also meet with secretaries, building and church office staff, and anyone else who holds a position of authority. This will aid you in understanding what each does, how they perceive their roles, their concerns, and their walk with Christ. It will enhance commitment from them to support your leadership as a pastor. If they are in opposition to your work, you need to know upfront and may have time to clear up misunderstandings and build consensus.

Fourth, review your congregation’s constitution and by-laws. You might want to speak with an attorney regarding “red flag” issues that are directly related to you as the pastor or the future fiscal health of the church. Unfortunately, during the interview process, churches are reluctant to allow pastoral candidates to review their by-laws and financial records. As a result, too many pastors take on a pastoral position rather blindly. The church could be broke, broken down, or both and you will not know it. Also, as pastors propose changes, members may remind you about policies and procedures outlined in their constitution and by-laws, so it is important to have a clear understanding of these documents. I would suggest that, if possible, you read the constitution and by-laws before accepting the church. Examining these documents as soon as possible will make you aware of some basic facts and perhaps explain why certain rules and rituals were developed.

Fifth, new pastors must remember that congregations are unique and autonomous. As the pastor, you might consider yourself a servant of the Most High God, but you have to earn the respect, love, and trust of the people. Chances are, your congregation has been around a long time and will probably be there long after you are gone, if you do not destroy it. The people will resist you taking away their religious practices unless you show them a genuine reason to abandon them.

Moreover, you will not know what to ask them to give up if you insist on acting as if no one is right but you. Also, why should people support you if they do not respect and trust you?

Finally, love and improve the leadership. A main problem affecting the growth and development of many congregations is inadequate leadership. Spend time training the men and women in leadership positions before you incorporate any major changes. Most importantly, encourage them to take leadership classes inside and outside of the church and promote small group participation. The goal is to create an atmosphere of leadership excellence where change can take place with the support of the church's leaders. Too few new pastors are good at and/or take the time to do leadership training. The failure to do so will come back to haunt you in some way at some point. If training is not your forte, call in an expert.

Being a new pastor can be immensely fulfilling. Knowing when and how to make congregational changes will be vital to your success.

Note

1. Maxwell, John C. The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998. pp. 196–198.