

Quick Guide...

Turning Dreams into Reality: Managing Change

Church Without Walls Team

So you have some ideas or plans for implementation in your congregation. These could have been developed in a number of ways: your congregation may have just completed a Future Focus or Local Church Review process, you may have a strategy team looking at how best to use a bequest. Perhaps the halls needed upgrading, and you have taken the opportunity to do a wider review of how they are used. However you have come to the point of beginning to implement your plans, the role of those in leadership, then, is to affirm the outcomes of the process, clarify them and do what is needed to turn vision into reality. In practice, this will mean planning: deciding the how, when, by whom, with what resources etc, that are necessary if ideas are not to remain just ideas.

It is vital that everyone involved in the process (and those in the congregation who were not involved) hear as soon as possible that the outcomes have been considered by those with leadership responsibilities, have been affirmed and that steps are being taken towards implementation. The rest of this section is intended to help those in leadership to ensure that the move from dream to reality, from vision to implementation, is as smooth and as effective as possible.

Navigating change and transition

Too many excellent decisions are never implemented; too many sound ideas never progress from the drawing board to actuality; too many sound plans fail, or create unnecessary problems, because of a lack of wisdom in how they are put into practice. Any planning for the future will inevitably involve change, which may be minor or major in scale. It may involve initiating something new, stopping something existing, or making adjustments to something current. Understanding some principles about human nature and how congregations behave in relation to change is helpful in creating consensus and commitment – and avoiding unnecessary misunderstanding and conflict.

What next?

Change, even when it may seem a very minor change to some, will have an emotional impact. When changes occur – to what we do as a congregation, how we do things, or physical changes are made to buildings – different people will respond in different ways. For some, a particular change will be like embarking on a fresh and exciting journey, something that they anticipate with eager excitement. For others, the very same change may cause anxiety and a sense of loss; they may strongly disagree with the proposed change. Any change will bring with it an experience of ‘transition’ as individuals, groups and the

congregation as a whole come to terms with the change and what it means for them.

In many ways, 'change' is the easy bit. 'Transition', the psychological process people go through to come to terms with change, is the difficult part. For most people, change is perceived as a loss before it is experienced as a gain. We cannot initiate a process of change without creating a grief reaction in people – however irrational this may sometimes seem. Those in leadership need to understand, therefore, that how they implement change will have a significant impact on people's experience of transition. How we manage change and transition pastorally will shape the culture of the congregation into the future. The following insights and tips will help to introduce change while avoiding unnecessary pain and struggle.

Communication

The single most important piece of advice about introducing any kind of change, whether small or huge is this:

Communicate, communicate, communicate...

and when you think that you have communicated enough,

communicate some more!

Communicate a picture of the future (vision); communicate the purpose of change and the reasons for change; communicate clearly regarding the part that people have to play; communicate in every possible way and many times. Do not just include a note in a bulletin sheet and think that everyone will read it and understand. Use every means possible to communicate – clearly – several times.

If changes are planned that are in any way complex, controversial or expected to be difficult for some people, it is a good idea to have people specially assigned to the task of communication, including having time to spend with people individually when that is necessary.

The change formula

Experts in managing change in commercial and charitable organisations have observed that, for change to take root and be fruitful, certain conditions need to be present. The same is true in the context of churches. David Cormack expressed these in what is known as 'the change formula':

$$C = D + V + FS + E > \text{£}$$

To translate into everyday language, it means:

$$\text{Change} = \text{Discontent} + \text{Vision} + \text{First Steps} + \text{Energy}$$

The Energy required must be perceived to be greater than the Cost involved, or put another way, the resulting changes must be worth the cost and effort.

Preparation for change

Before embarking on a particular change it is worth reflecting on these factors:

- Is there sufficient discontent with the current situation to make change worthwhile?
- And/or is there really a commitment to the vision for this?
- Is there clarity around the first steps that will be necessary?
- Is there the energy to carry it forward?
- Will the cost be justified?
- The 'cost' may include time, money, emotional costs, closing the door on other alternatives, etc.

Understanding reactions to change

In a group of people like a church congregation, it is usual to find that, in regard to any particular change, there will be a spectrum of reactions. At one end of the spectrum, there will be a few people who are passionate advocates for the change. There will be others who respond almost immediately once they have understood the change that is being proposed. At the other end of the spectrum, there will often be some who will remain intractably opposed to any change. The majority is usually found between these two extremes. They will embrace the change if it seems to be the right way forward and is well communicated. They will reject the change if they fail to see its benefit, do not understand it, or sense that it is harming individuals or the congregation.

A key to introducing change, then, is to

communicate effectively with the majority rather

than rush ahead with the enthusiastic few.

David Cormack, *Change Directions*
(London: Monarch Books, 1995)

It is worth noting that it is at either end of the spectrum that the volume level tends to be highest. It is important not to be intimidated by those who are loudest. They are operating out of strong emotions and intuitions. The people in the middle tend to be relatively quiet and respond to careful and reasonable explanation: what? why? how? when? who? how long? and how much? Effective implementation of change requires patience in winning the quieter, reasonable majority. Once a course is plotted, we need to be entirely consistent with that new direction. However, the pace at which we advance needs to be sensitively managed to encourage those not yet committed to get on board and to avoid unnecessary stress.

Quick wins

In developing plans for change, many from the congregation may have invested their time and shared their perspectives and opinions. It is important, then, that everyone can see some tangible outcomes as soon as possible. There is a lot to be said for analysing the outcomes of the process in terms of their expected impact and the inputs required. (In fact, if there is time, using the matrix below to evaluate the outcomes is a valuable addition to the Vision Day.)

<p>High impact Low cost <i>Quick win</i></p>	<p>High impact High cost <i>Strategic</i></p>
<p>Low impact Low cost <i>Debatable</i></p>	<p>Low impact High cost <i>Avoid</i></p>

Obviously, changes that are perceived as having a low impact will need to be debated carefully. If they require a lot of input, whether in time, money or any other resource, then it is probably best to avoid them altogether. Many long-term, high impact changes will require considerable resources. These are the big, strategic changes that are going to take time and other resources. Often, though, there are some changes which, although they are perceived as high impact, actually require relatively little in terms of time and other resources: these are the ‘quick wins’ –

changes that should be implemented promptly. As people see these things becoming reality, it will encourage them that change is possible, that the process is bearing fruit and that those in leadership are committed to seeing things through.

Experiments

Most major changes will have their advocates and their opponents. However, many opponents are unsupportive because they are genuinely unconvinced about the suggested benefits. Many, although they will resist commitment to a plan they feel is unwise, will not be averse to trying something for a limited period or on a small scale in order to see whether the hoped-for benefits materialise or not. There is, therefore, much to commend the idea of time-limited experiments or trials.

Sending out the spies

It is unlikely that any of the ideas that have emerged from the planning process in your congregation have never been implemented or considered by other churches. There can be considerable benefit in doing some detective work to find other churches that have tried something similar and then going and seeing for yourself. Just as Moses sent out the spies to investigate the Promised Land (Numbers 13), you may be able to send a team to visit a church where similar things are being done. Include a mix of people in the team: men and women of different generations, and not just the enthusiastic advocates of what has been suggested. Then, after the visit, get the team to feed back their findings. The Mission Development Worker for your region will probably be able to help you contact churches that might be helpful to visit. You can contact them via the Mission and Discipleship office: Email: mandd@churchofscotland.org.uk Phone: 0131 225 5722.

About the author

The Church Without Walls Team are involved in resourcing several processes which deal with change management in congregations, including Future Focus and Local Church Review.

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