

Change Makers

*What have you learned about bringing change to your church—and at what price?
4 leaders respond.*

Leading means making changes. They're twin concepts. If nothing needs to change, you don't need a leader. In church ministry, however, most pastors find themselves having to lead the way to change, and sometimes those changes have unexpected costs. Here are the stories of five such change makers.

Face the pace of your place in a rural congregation

In our rural community, change equals bad. Change means selling the family farm. Change means businesses moving out of town. High school graduates move away and never come back. In this environment, if you propose a change, people assume it's a loss.

Our community's population has declined nearly 20 percent the last two decades and continues to shrink more than 1 percent per year. But despite that, our church has grown by more than 25 percent over the last three years, with most of that coming in the last 10 months.

One visitor even told me our church has "a good stink about the place." He meant it as a compliment.

Prayer has been a key part of this growth. A core group of prayer partners I call my "inner-ring intercessors" began to pray daily for revival in our community. God is answering that prayer.

And we changed our leadership structure. That was a long process. Three years ago our leadership team was a board of 30 people who met every other month or so. But I'm not a solo thinker, and I need to process things more regularly in a team setting.

I started the process of establishing ministry coordinators, who serve essentially as lay staff members in five areas of ministry, corresponding to the Purpose-Driven model. These ministry coordinators developed their own missions within the overall mission of the church, and they've really taken off. We have reduced the leadership team from 30 members to 12.

For many churches this may not count as innovation, but around here, we're on the leading edge. Just getting to this point has meant continuing to take one tiny, tiny step after another.

One cost in this process has been its emotional toll on me. I've needed to swallow my tongue again and again, and to realize sometimes I'm trying to move too fast. Personally, I love change and movement. Backing off at times has been hard. While I can see God's hand at work, it's slow. That drives me bonkers.

But the things that we've been praying for the last three years are finally happening. New people are coming, and people in our church are taking hold of the changes and letting go of old things. A guy told me the other day, "Brad, I finally get where you're taking us. I understand it now."

Brad Jensen is pastor of Oakdale Evangelical Free Church in Meriden, Iowa.

Build on your differences in a multicultural congregation

The whole idea of a multicultural, suburban church is innovative in and of itself. When we started, we were really bi-racial, black and white. So becoming multicultural for us meant adding a third culture, and later a fourth.

We first pulled the Korean community together for a time of fellowship and to ask what their needs were and how we could serve them. These conversations with Asian Americans have taught me a lot.

For example, when I stand up on stage and communicate, "Hey, we need volunteers," our Asian members generally will not volunteer, even if they have the ability and interest. Instead, they wait to be asked. Because of their culture, they are honored to be asked, but they respectfully wait until they can say yes to a person in authority.

Blending cultures stretches us. We've learned that African Americans don't think they've been to church unless they've *felt* something. Caucasians, on the other hand, want to *learn* something. Put the two together and you've got a great church service.

We approach everything we do with that same desire to cultivate a "garden" where multiple cultures can thrive. We don't talk about being colorblind; we talk about looking at the beautiful bouquet of colors that God has given us. We want to enjoy colors and cultures.

But this approach takes additional time, money, and leadership energy. For example, we shoot all our own videos, because most of the videos you can buy portray only one culture. When we portray Jesus in a drama, sometimes he's black, sometimes he's white, and sometimes he's in shadow and of indefinite color. If people walk into a church and don't see themselves represented up front, we've got a problem.

For one staff opening, I knew we didn't need a white or a black person. But that meant we had to wait two years to fill that position, and we finally hired a Puerto Rican woman.

Some people got impatient with that. But as we've modeled it through our leadership, our passion for multicultural ministry has grown and become important to others.

David Anderson is senior pastor of Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland.

Teach the value of relationships in an urban congregation

Three years ago God called me to a church on the verge of closure. It was the most depressing place I could imagine. The first time I preached here, 25 people, all over the age of 40, were sitting in a dark, cold building.

In Australia, only 10 percent of the population attends church. I knew the church would have to innovate to survive. If Australians would not come to church, then our church would come to Australia.

The challenge was to see, really see, the people around us. We're located right next to a university of 30,000 students from all across Australia. Instead of running a

youth ministry at the church, we registered a club that meets on the university campus.

We're also close to state-subsidized housing, so we started home groups for these neighbors. (I remember doing one study on "Why you shouldn't smoke pot before church.")

We also started a Bible study in one of the most prestigious business clubs in our city. After each week's study, we stay to build relationships with the men as they do business in the cigar and brandy lounge.

In the last three years, our attendance has tripled and the average age of the congregation has been cut in half. Everyone has a role in the church, from teenagers to retirees.

Perhaps the hardest part of this change was going from a church where we met on Sunday but didn't interact during the week, to a church where relationships are highly valued. When I arrived, we did not even have a church phone directory because there was little need to phone each other. Now, people get phone calls almost weekly about one ministry or another.

The cost? When we started giving everyone in the church a job to do, suddenly older leaders were reduced to being just another member in the church. This caused much hurt to some people, and they quietly left, which was hard to watch.

We tried to change everyone's mindset from "It's good to see new people in church" to "It's good to see my friend come to church."

Getting people to own outreach as a personal goal, and not just a corporate one, has been difficult. But about two-thirds of our people have brought one new person with them to church in the past year.

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