

## ***Confronting Change***

Dear Priscilla,

The one constant of these times is change. Everyday we face astounding scientific and technological changes resulting from the greatest knowledge explosion in history. Our culture is changing socially, economically, educationally, politically and spiritually.

Let's be honest: Change is difficult for all of us. Change involves the loss of position, requires cooperation, results in new roles and job descriptions, demands the acquisition of new skills and knowledge and, therefore, threatens our comfort zones.

The world seems to be saying to the church: *Be relevant! Speak my language! Show me how Christ can make a difference in my daily life.*

It is interesting to note just how many pastors and churches are feeling quite irrelevant these days. George Barna surveyed a group of pastors and asked them, *How would Christ rate your church if he were to return today?* Less than half of one percent said Christ would rate them highly effective; 43 percent said He would find them respectable; and 53 percent said He would rate them as having little positive impact on souls or society.

One of the most important aspects of change, as it affects a local church, concerns the issue of providing meaningful ministry for the diverse groups which comprise the congregation. All this talk about being relevant, transforming

congregations and adopting new ministry styles sounds great except to those who still prefer the old wineskins (and they usually represent the bulk of the church's financial support).

How can we simultaneously minister effectively to children, with their high-tech, multi-media, visual approach to learning; baby boomers with their love for seventies-style music, involvement in political issues and demands for quality family ministry; generation X-ers with their re-enactment of the hippie era, struggle for recognition and search for future security in a world that appears very insecure; unchurched neighbors who are unaccustomed to the sights and sounds of Christian expressions of worship and can't tell the Old from the New Testaments; and traditional members who love to sing the old hymns, cherish the traditional approaches to ministry and base their weekly schedule around the events at the church?

If staying on the cutting edge demands new, innovative approaches to ministry, what would I tell you about staying relevant and leading your congregation through seasons of ministry? Let's try this:

*Connect with the church's history.* Study the congregation's history, including such factors as past leaders, important developments, vision of ministry, growth patterns, demographic make-up of the congregation, past struggles and so forth. New ministry approaches need to build upon the foundation of the past if possible.

*Bond with the congregation.* Pastors who effectively lead their congregations do so because there exists between them a strong bond of mutual love, respect and trust developed through years of devoted service.

*Earn the right to lead.* Longevity in ministry is fundamental to effective leadership. Before initiating change, consider your own future commitment to the church.

*Secure the support of your key leaders.* Avoid making decisions in a vacuum. Use a team approach which involves both selling your ideas to your leaders and submitting to their counsel. The circle of leadership is only complete when others follow. Make sure you have key leaders on your side before initiating change.

*Keep changes commensurate with the overall vision of ministry.* The German adage is appropriate to this point: *The main business is to keep the main business the main business.* Avoid sporadic, impulsive changes, which fail to compliment the central thrust of your ministry.

*Learn to live with certain imperfections and frustrations in the ministry.* We all know that no perfect churches exist, yet pastors seem obsessed with the idea of creating them. Before making changes ask, *Will this new approach result in any measurable accomplishment in the kingdom of God?* Constant change of non-essentials can type-cast the pastor as being preoccupied with the trivial and unsatisfied with the congregation.

*Be sensitive to the different dynamics involved between pastoring a newly formed congregation and an older established one.* The former is seeking a

ministry vision; the latter has operated from a ministry vision for a long time. Trying to impose a new vision on an established congregation can appear as a criticism of their ministry as it currently exists.

*The agenda for change must come from the leadership of the Holy Spirit accompanied by effectual prayer.* The pastor's prayer needs to be that of Paul on the Damascus Road: *Lord, what would you have me do?* There exists no virtue in change for the sake of change. Change needs to be Spirit-led and goal-directed in order to be effective.

*Follow through. Take the risk. Implement the change.* Leadership transcends the fear of failure, takes the leap of faith and implements change when it is needed.

So Priscilla, as you face the challenges of tomorrow, remember the words of Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma: *Our future is as bright as the promises of God.* Go for those Spirit-led, Kingdom-impacting innovations, and warmly bring your people along on the journey.

God's blessings!

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*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care . . .  
not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*

*1 Peter 5:2-3*