ESSAY · APRIL 16, 2015

To Bring Change Do This

Written by Bill Perkins

I recently got into a conversation with a pastor about how to best facilitate change in a church. He wanted to know how to stop a tradition that has been practiced since the church's inception. I felt like he had just asked me how to get through a mine field. And so I stuck an index finger in each ear, closed my eyes and tip-toed across the room. After we both laughed I shared a critical principal: **Identify assumptions and challenge their validity**.

The Good News

Before getting into the principal here's some good news. According to a Harris Poll, over ninety percent of surveyed people would change their lives if they could. I don't want to draw any false conclusions from one survey, but it seems to indicate most people welcome change that would improve their lives. And I'm sure most church leaders would welcome change that would improve their church.

The Other Ten Percent

Of course, this applies to any organization. But beware, we have to lead the other ten percent as well. I'm talking about the ten percent who do not welcome change. It would be easy to ignore them since they're such a small minority. But they are important because their resistance provides an opportunity to more thoroughly think through the process.

Communion on Sunday Night

So how does an effective leader bring along the ten percent? He or she must repeatedly challenge people's assumptions. Suppose a pastor's church has historically served communion once a month at an evening service. The new pastor wants it served one Sunday morning a month.

The pastor would be wise if he asked why the church has always served communion one Sunday night a month. The answer to that question would provide him with the assumption upon which the practice is based. Suppose he asked that question and learned the founding pastor believed serving communion on Sunday mornings would turn off visitors.

The assumption is that the church body and visitors are best served by having one Sunday evening communion service a month. Now that he knows the assumption the pastor needs to ask the church leaders if it's still valid. This will open the discussion and the church may figure out a way to serve communion on Sunday mornings that's safe for visitors.

Jesus Challenged Assumptions

As I've been reading through the Gospels I'm amazed at how Jesus consistently challenged people's assumptions. For instance, the Pharisees believed since Jesus hung out with crooks and prostitutes, he was a sinner like them. Their disdain for the Lord was based on the assumption that God hated sinners and wanted nothing to do with them.

Jesus challenged their assumption with three powerful parables. He told of a shepherd who celebrated when he found a lost sheep. And a woman who had a party after finding a lost coin. And a father who hosted a BBQ for his family and friends when his lost and thought-dead son returned home (Luke 15). Each of these stories described a God who loves the lost and celebrates when they're found.

The problem Jesus confronted was the one every leader faces. The Pharisees assumed certain things to be true and based on those assumptions they developed a menu of activities and institutions. Before long the activities were valid because nobody ever challenged the assumptions on which they were based.

A Safe Place to Ask Why

In order to do this it's imperative to create an environment where assumptions can safely be questioned. Where everyone is encouraged to ask, "Why?"

"Why do we do things this way?"

"Why can't we do things differently?"

"Why haven't we changed this before?"

When we ask "Why?" we force ourselves, and those on our team, to challenge our fundamental assumptions.

Jesus realized the danger of false assumptions and the conclusions that would flow from them. One day his critics asked him why his disciples ate and drank while and John's, and those of the Pharisees, fasted and prayed. Jesus answered their question in a way that reveals a third principle crucial to effectively bringing about change.

We'll look at that next week.