

Leading Change: Painful, But Worth It

Can there be change without pain?

The answer, of course, is, "No."

(Ok, so this may be the shortest blog post ever.)

Actually, I think it's an important question, so I want to address it in a more serious manner.

When Pain Is Worth It

When I was a seminary professor, a church called me to be their pastor. Actually, they asked me, "Can you come help us reach the young people?" That is what church tend to call the neighborhood around their building—the young people.

The median age of the church was 68 years old. In a church building that sat 250 people, 35 (mostly) senior citizens sat huddled together at the front left corner of the sanctuary. At the end of every row, it seemed like there were oxygen tanks and walkers.

As a former church planter, recently called seminary professor, I didn't have a lot of contact with senior adults. They are not the most commonly responsive demographic in church planting. But, I learned to love these people and we loved one another.

They wanted to reach the community, so I had them go out to door-to-door to meet "the young people." After it was over, I asked them what they thought about it. Here's what they said: "The people aren't like us." Indeed.

The church that had been founded in the 1950s had stayed there, while the area around them changed. I worked with them to address the question they faced now, "What are we going to do about it?"

We went through a process of evaluation and change that took six months-- a lot faster than normal. (Do not expect to go into a church and say one Sunday morning, "We're going to change our worship style." You had better have a U-haul truck ready and running behind the church because more than likely you won't last long.)

But for this church, their desperation (and probably their perception of me as some sort of expert) made it possible to move quickly. There were still bumps along the way. When we decided to cancel Sunday night services, a lady I'll call "Alice" told me, "Preacher, the devil's gonna be runnin' loose in our church because you cancelled Sunday night services." I was a bit shocked that the Prince of Darkness had been held back this whole time because of the Sunday night service and the four people who attended it, but we moved on with the proposed changes anyway (and no Lucifer sightings were reported).

We reconsidered who we were as a church in light of who we were as a community. On top of ending Sunday night services, we changed our worship and made other adjustments to be more contextual to their neighborhood. And being an older church, we voted on EV-ER-Y-thing. The final vote for the changes was 34 to 1. ("Alice" voted no and left mad that day.) But everyone else in the church was on board. I led them through this process, but they wanted to make the change.

Two years later, the church had grown from 35 to about 175 in weekly attendance. The median age had dropped to the mid-thirties. On my last day, before I left to take a job in another state, all of the original members who were still living were there (except "Alice").

On that final day, the wise, old chairman of the deacons (akin to elders in most churches), came up to me, poked me in the chest and said, "Preacher, I still don't like the music. And the kids are breaking everything in this church." He was right; the kids were breaking everything. That's the difference between a church full of senior adults and a church full of kids with senior adults—vases.

If you're a church with senior adults every little classroom at the church has a corner table that's sliced off kind of at an angle, has a white doily and a vase with fake, dusty plastic flowers that have been there since 1972. Once you get the kids, the doily and the table are still there, but there's a dust ring where the now-broken vase used to be.

So, I knew this older leader was right; I just wasn't sure what it was he wanted to say. But with his finger in my chest, I looked into his eyes and I could see he was starting to tear up. This was not a man who cries easily-- think the World War II generation. But as the tears formed in the corner of his eyes, he leaned in and said, "But preacher, it was worth it all."

Changing Our Hurts

People hurt for their preferences when there's change. But part of the role of pastors and church leaders is to help people *hurt for the right things*. When people don't get things their way, it hurts them. That shouldn't surprise you. But, instead, leaders have to help them hurt for the things that break the heart of God.

Change can come, but it will come by the way of pain.

I often use my shoes as an example. I hate buying new shoes. My feet are shaped weird and it takes awhile to break in a new pair. Bones on the side of my feet rub against the new shoe, giving me blisters for three weeks until it has worn down in the right areas. So, I just don't buy new shoes unless things become unbearable.

I wear my shoes until the soles have holes in them. I'll keep ignoring the ever-growing hole because it's not bad enough for me to endure the way my feet hurt in new shoes. Then winter comes and everything changes. Walking around Nashville on a day that's colder than a legalist's heart, I'll step into a barely above freezing puddle of water. It will shoot up between my toes, into my sock, and sit there. Now, I'm finally thinking, "I've got to change!"

Here's the principle: **people never change until the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of change.**

That's why there can't be change without pain.

Now, with this church, their pain grew because they were desperate.

Early on, I showed them the statistical trends in their neighborhood. In one of the key meetings, that older key leader I mentioned stood up and said, "People, in 10 years, we're all going to be dead and gone, and this church is going to be closed." See, they had the pain already. It was helping them direct it to where it needed to be.

Leaders have to help their churches hurt for the things that Scripture tells us God hurts for. The body of Christ has to ache for those things that the Spirit of God leads them to, not the things they are told to hurt over by American culture and personal preference.

Change will require pain, but pain directed properly will bring results that are worth it.

Read more from Ed [here](#).