

Change: Some Random Reflections

In their book *Our Iceberg Is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions* by John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber tell an allegorical fable about a colony of emperor penguins living in Antarctica. The main protagonist is a penguin named Fred who discovers a problem that will destroy the lives of thousands in the penguin colony if not the entire colony. Fred doesn't know how to get the Leadership Council to listen and to buy into the problem without making a fool of himself and ruining his reputation. The story relates how Fred cleverly convinces and enlists key players, such as Louis, the head penguin; Alice, the number two bird; the intractable NoNo, the weather expert; and a waddle of school-age penguins, to save the colony.

The story is peppered with personalities found in every organization: the naysayers and nitpickers, the innovators and agitators, the procrastinators and go-getters, the leaders and followers. The moral is that everyone in the group must play a role in navigating change.

The delightfully told story of their journey illuminates in an unforgettable way how to make, manage, and sustain successful change.

The reality is congregations unavoidably, inescapably, inevitably, unalterably change.

Here are some givens:

- Change is the only constant. It's happening around us all the time as climates and technologies and cultures change.
- Change is inevitable.
- Change is as inevitable in our congregations as it is in our bodies or in our communities because, even if we want our congregation to always stay exactly the same size and be exactly the kind of congregation that it was because it was so perfect and so comfortable and so lovely, and we can't afford anything else anyway, we will still have to add new people to replace our current people as they leave or die, and new people mean change.

So, given the inevitability of change, how do we make it possible for Cedar Lane to move its furniture around, sing different songs, do justice work, and live out our mission without coming apart in the process? In other words, how do we practice change?

Congregational consultant, Sarai Rice, shares the following insights about how we go about practicing change:

Intentionally

Instead of negotiating a significant change once a decade with anticipatory fear and trembling all around, invite the whole congregation into the effort to get good at this. Talk about it in meetings, write about it in newsletters, have change parties! Invite everyone to come to church wearing something they've never worn before! Have sit-in-a-different-place Sunday! Celebrate small changes as much as large ones, because what looks like a small change to you may be unimaginably large to me.

Constantly

Change needs to be the norm rather than the exception in the life of a congregation. Colors, carpets, pictures on the wall, where the choir sits, when the congregation rises, how the minister preaches, and particularly what the members do with themselves after worship – all of it can change. And not all changes have to be permanent – sometimes we just need to lay down some new pathways in our brains. Wouldn't it be wonderful if research showed that changing where we sit in the sanctuary on a regular basis is one way of working out our brains as we age?!

Experimentally

Everything can change, but every change does not need to be perfect. In the church, we may have gotten used to thinking that there is one theologically consistent movement of the liturgy or that there are only a few ways to lay out a sanctuary. We could learn a lot from developers of new technologies who know that, in today's world, there is no time to fully plan in advance the next technological breakthrough. Instead, they create and launch good-enough products and quickly learn from their community of users how each product needs to improve over a series of iterations. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter has pointed out, this kind of change process looks more like improvisational theater than the perfect script.

Supportively

For some people, change will always be hard, but these same people probably have friends who will be early adopters of any change program. (I learned from my mother that not all older adults are resistant to change. Some adopt changes easily because they've had so much practice in their own lives.) Congregational leaders can admit their own struggles with proposed changes and can model how they're learning to think and act. They can be, in effect, peer supporters/coaches/mentors for those for whom proposed changes are more challenging.

Unexpectedly

Human brains are apparently hard-wired to appreciate positive surprises. Think back to your favorite experience with something you consider to have been a "breakthrough" product—pop-rocks, the iPad, disposable diapers, Amazon, Etch A Sketch. Are you smiling? People who think about pleasant surprises will almost inevitably smile and want to tell the story. They want to experience more and to share the surprise with others. Surely we can find opportunities in the church to offer positive surprises!

Faithfully

Sometimes, the changes we are experimenting with will be on the cutting edge of faithfulness to our mission and values in our congregation. In order to become unstuck, we need to practice. We need to refresh our eyes so that we can find the holy again, and sometimes that means looking for it from a different pew. Sometimes, the cutting edge of faithfulness is us.

A religious community is something we perpetually build, to last long after we are gone, whose final shape we will never see because it will never be completed. A church should last beyond our years, and the only way that it will is if we take action to see that it does.

We are blessed to be part of this place, our spiritual home. We are blessed to be a part of a religion that shakes us out of our complacencies and self-satisfactions; that 'afflicts' us when we get too comfortable and 'comforts' us when we are afflicted.

Will we respond to this blessing by strengthening it, so that it may bless others long after our transient ministries and our mortal days? Will we help others, if we have been here awhile, to understand the meanings of our changes more fully? As leaders, will we empower others to gather around us and assist in their transformation, gifting, and discernment? Or will we turn away anxious, preoccupied, and self-satisfied?

I close with these words from the sermon Theodore Parker preached at his own installation in 1848:

"The church that is to lead this century will not be a church creeping on all fours, its face turned down, its eyes turned back. It must be full of the brave spirit of the day, keeping also the good of times past."

Our time cries out for such a church and such a ministry; our free faith demands it.

-Abhi Janamanchi