

Transitioning: Growing into the church you want to be

by Dan Southerland

Around the world, churches are in need of transition. The 21st century is presenting church leaders with new challenges and new opportunities. It appears that God is doing something fresh and new in his church. At least four movements of God are sweeping through the Body of Christ:

The small-group movement started in the Korean churches during the 1950s. Cells of various forms are present in almost all of the largest and fastest-growing churches in the world today.

The contemporary music movement began in the 1960s at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, Calif. Many churches throughout the world today are embracing a style of music that is culturally relevant to their setting.

The seeker movement was birthed in the Willowcreek Community Church of Chicago. The idea of doing church for the unchurched is rapidly changing the philosophy of many church leaders.

The purpose driven church movement originated at the Saddleback Church of Lake Forest, Calif. Rick Warren has given the world a new blueprint for how to do church (For more information, read *The Purpose-Driven Church* or go to www.purposedriven.com).

These four major movements and many other smaller ones are causing church leaders to evaluate the need for change in their own congregations. Many are frustrated by the lack of growth. Others simply want to get in on what God is doing.

The central question is this: How can we lead the transition from the church we are to the church we want to be?

The Book of Nehemiah offers an eight-step process for leading change in the church. The process was first implemented at the Flamingo Road Church of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and it's being followed today by thousands of church leaders around the world. If you're looking for a road map for transition, try these eight steps.

Step 1: Prepare for Change

Most church leaders are so desperate for change that they simply plunge in without giving any thought to preparation. The results can be disastrous.

There are five parts to preparation:

Information gathering - You need to go to school on the unchurched people in your community. To reach them, you must know them. You also want to study the churches in your community that are reaching unchurched people.

A holy discontent - Nothing changes until someone is dissatisfied. God usually gives us vision when we are desperate for it.

Fasting - This is the most serious form of prayer. Yet many church leaders spend more time each year going to conferences to hear from other men than they do fasting to hear from God.

Prayer - Nehemiah prayed for "some days" before he began making his transition (Nehemiah 1:5-11). If you do not bathe your transitions in prayer, they're doomed from the start.

Waiting - You must wait on God. God's will is doing the right thing in the right way for the right motive at the right time.

Step 2: Define Your Vision

Before you can know which changes are necessary, you must answer three questions related to your vision:

What is our purpose?

This question deals with what God wants the church to do. Every church is driven by something, but until you're driven by purpose, you do not know which changes to make.

Who is our target?

In Acts 1:8, Jesus taught his disciples that they were to begin in Jerusalem. This question identifies who your immediate community is. Every person in your community is on your target, but who is at the center of the bull's-eye?

What is our strategy?

This question deals with the methods you'll use to accomplish your purpose. A strategy that is process-driven rather than event-driven is best.

Step 3: Plant the Vision

Next you need to plant your vision with key church leaders. Before changes can be presented to the church, they must be shared with three key groups of leaders:

The power brokers - These are the opinion-makers in your church, the people of influence. When they speak, others listen.

The doers - These people will provide the needed resources of time, talent, and treasure that are necessary to make the changes happen.

The vision team - This is a small group of people who help the pastor dream the dream and define and implement the needed changes.

Step 4: Share the Vision

It is now time to share the coming changes with the remaining leaders and with the entire church. Since vision is both caught and taught, it's best to communicate the vision in multiple ways. They include preaching, small-group studies, purpose statements, vision phrases, vision verses, tapes and books, conferences, testimonies, one-on-one encounters, and demonstrating the vision in your own life.

Step 5: Implement Change

After thorough preparation it's time to start making changes. At this point there are four principles to be followed:

Implement the changes one at a time - No church deals well with multiple transitions occurring all at once.

Set up a strategic order for making changes - It's usually best to make alterations in purpose first, target second, and strategy third. If you change your strategy without defining your purpose and target, the process is likely to fail.

Put lay leaders in the forefront of change - Let them lead the charge whenever possible.
Put people to work wherever they are vested - When they're working on a piece of the vision that they own, and when the changes will benefit their families, they'll put their all into it.

Step 6: Deal With Opposition

Anyone who attempts to do anything for God encounters opposition. Those who are courageous enough to lead change in a church certainly will. Nehemiah had a twofold plan for dealing with it:

Expect opposition (Nehemiah 4: 1-8) - The greatest difficulty with negativity is that it discourages you and causes you to doubt your vision. Nehemiah experienced apathy, anger, ridicule, criticism, and even a fight! We must expect the same.

Keep on track (Nehemiah 4: 16) - Opposition distracts you from your vision and shifts your attention from those you can lead to those you cannot. You need to keep on leading, working, praying, encouraging, and watching over the church.

Step 7: Make Adjustments

In the course of any long journey, there are always detours, barriers, and surprises. In the process of leading change, we must learn as we go and make the needed adjustments. Nehemiah made three course corrections:

Care for the neglected (Nehemiah 5: 13) - During any type of change, there will be some who feel left out or overlooked. We need to demonstrate our care for them.

Be prepared to negotiate peace (Nehemiah 5: 9) - Change often brings conflict. Leaders must be ready to negotiate between those who like the changes and those who don't, between those who are involved and those who aren't, and between old-guard leaders who tend to resist change and new-guard leaders who tend to support it.

Stay among your people (Nehemiah 5: 16) - When church members sense that their leader is one of them, they tend to follow. That means we need to be aware of the things that tend to separate us from our people. Ivory-tower leadership is not nearly as effective as leadership from within.

Step 8: Evaluate the Results

The last eight chapters of Nehemiah describe eight specific results of vision. When we lead change well, these results should be present:

Completion of the transition - God is a finisher. We must finish the changes we begin.

Obvious demonstration of God's work - It will be so obvious that God is at work that only he can get the credit.

Continued opposition and criticism - It never stops.

Emergence of new leaders - When the right changes are made, new leaders step forward.

Major contributions by the people - People give to vision. Churches do not have financial problems; they have vision problems.

Renewed commitment to worship and obedience - The right changes will produce a new depth in the church.

New people joining in - A new vision will draw new people.

Openness to further change - When we lead a transition well, people will be more open to transition in the future.

It takes great courage to lead a church in change. May the fear of missing out on what God wants to do in our churches be even stronger in us than the fear of failure.

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