

WHAT KEEPS CONGREGATIONS FROM IMPLEMENTING NEW IDEAS?

All individuals and organizations struggle with change. Implementing new ideas always means accepting that change comes as part of the package. Congregations hear about dozens of new ideas and gain new knowledge from denominational leaders, books, and workshops. Yet that news too rarely becomes part of a practical, local-church strategy. Why? There is often a big gap between what we know and what we do.¹

Beware of the Gap

Which of these create the gap between knowing and doing in your church?

Fear of change. When congregations shrink in size or begin to lose vitality, their leaders fear that any change they might introduce will only make matters worse. Often, members and pastors view the past with an undeserved glow and resist the very changes that could bring new life and strength to the church. To “confront our past and see it for what it is” is a necessary first step for understanding our fears.²

Past success. Ironically, churches that have experienced success—such as a large membership, recognition as a community anchor, or significant ministries—believe that because their efforts worked in the past, their way of doing things will continue to bear fruit. A reinventing-yesterday strategy drowns more congregations than it saves.

Tradition. Someone called the phrase “We never did it that way before” the last seven words of the church. Anyone who has ever tried to introduce an action plan that goes against church tradition knows the sanctions deal a blow to even the most enthusiastic and committed leader.

Congregational identity. The statement: “That is just who we are” sums up a church’s sense of self. The church’s sense of self includes many things that express a unique identity—such as what people wear to church, what music is appreciated, and the actual arrangement of furniture in the worship space. Any new idea that

seems to undercut the congregation’s core identity rarely gets off the ground.

Denominational identity. In addition to their congregational identity, congregations incorporate the parent denomination’s theology and themes to form a sense of self. In declining-membership denominations, leaders see few successful models to emulate. Because leaders take pride in their denominational theology and ministry methods, they are willing to learn new ideas only from churches similar to their own—even when there is evidence of ineffectiveness. That same pride keeps leaders from seeking out new approaches from churches outside their tribe.

Judgmental attitudes. One member said she would never attend *that* church because “they put rubber ducks in the baptistery for children’s worship.” Judging an action without sympathy for the motive prevents us from thinking in creative ways. For example, criticizing megachurches, churches more theologically conservative or liberal than our own, or nontraditional forms



“YOUR NEW IDEA IS SO URGENT, WE VOTED TO DISCUSS IT AT OUR NEXT 7 COMMITTEE MEETINGS.”

of church reveal an unconscious prejudice toward congregations that do things differently. Cynicism and pessimism inhibit openness to new ideas and action.

Confusing discussion with real action. Many people feel more comfortable talking about new ideas than trying out new strategies, which arise from those ideas. Just discussing an issue does not count as addressing the issue. Lengthy hearings without concrete plans, task assignments, and serious deadlines for implementation do not count as meaningful change.³

The gift of rationalization. For those leaders prone to procrastination or inaction, rationalizing lack of action comes naturally. Many congregations possess this gift and exercise its full potential. “We can’t do that because . . .” is the church motto.

Addressing attitudes before behavior. Congregational leaders put the cart before the horse when they buy into the myth that changing attitudes precedes changing behavior. Research indicates that people often change their attitudes *after* they try out something new, rather than *before* they do something new.

Underestimating the task of transferring ideas. Every church in every community reflects unique opportunities as well as barriers to change. What works in one place typically needs major modifications and adjustments to work well somewhere else.

Perfectionism. We all wish for every plan to work out smoothly, if not perfectly. Working out the glitches and snags along the way can be frustrating, discouraging, and time-consuming. Successful leaders and their congregations accept that only through implementation of an idea do we see what needs to be smoothed out.

Failure to evaluate. Decisions and actions eventually require evaluation. What went well? What needs improvement? If we tried this tactic again, what would we do differently? Reluctance to ask these hard questions keeps some churches from continuing to implement new ideas.

Moving from Knowing to Doing

Once leaders and members commit to crossing the divide between what they know and what they can accomplish together, several principles prove valuable.

Tell stories. Every church creates a narrative about their creation, the best times, challenging episodes, and their changing community context. These stories reveal something about their core values as reflected in the actions of church heroes, sacrifices, failures, and persistence. Telling stories about the past helps people

see how the next chapter for the church represents continuity with the larger story that they have been a part of all along.

Identify a need, challenge, or passion. Effective idea implementation stems from what people are already talking about and focused on. Assign responsibility for the tasks involved with the new idea and set realistic deadlines for getting things done.

Practical experience and skills count. Effective new idea implementation involves people with track records in getting things done. Leaders and members with practical experience in other settings can offer insights. Field trips to other effective congregations or organizations generate fresh perspectives. What people observe for themselves creates additional motivation and inspiration for local efforts.

Look beneath the “what” to understand the “why.” Leading congregational change is not like following a “some assembly required” set of instructions. Knowing or learning the technical skills is seldom enough. What are the underlying philosophy and core values behind effective efforts?

Stop looking for the perfect plan. If what your congregation wants to try were easy, many churches would already be doing it. “Do it and fix it” is a better plan than waiting for the perfect plan.⁴

What Is the Best Idea?

Alan Roxburgh says churches daring to write their next chapter should ask the best question: “What are the challenges we currently face for which we presently have no answer but must address if we’re to live into God’s future for us?”⁵

Unless you ask the best question, the best answer has not been discovered yet for your church. Have the courage to take this advice: “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”⁶

1. Ideas drawn from Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

2. John Hope Franklin in Drew Gilpin Faust, “John Hope Franklin: Race & the Meaning of America,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/12/17/john-hope-franklin-race-meaning-america/>.

3. Pfeffer and Sutton, 29.

4. Statements made by Herb Miller in many conversations.

5. Alan Roxburgh, <http://themissionalnetwork.com/>.

6. Attributed to Muriel Strode.