

# “We Just Don’t Like It”

**When good and reasonable changes don’t “feel right” to people, what’s a leader to do?**

Kevin Ruffcorn

**B**ooks for implementing change in a congregation often read like technical manuals. “Seek congregational input, get leaders on board, draft vision statement, alter course, start new ministry.” They’re all about techniques.

But successful change is as equally dependent on feelings as facts. How do the church members *feel* about the new direction?

The key to thriving in change is not found in casting a bigger vision, mastering the Powerpoint presentation, or escaping to an island paradise until things blow over. It’s in the interactions that we, as pastors, have with our people.

I learned that when my shiny new worship service blew up in my face.

Several years ago we developed a contemporary service. Following the advice of several church growth gurus, we added rather than subtracted. We inserted the new service between two traditional services, opposite our Christian education hour. Not only were we able to disturb very little of our established Sunday morning structure, we also gave some parents a second option. They could worship instead of dropping their children off for Sunday school while they had coffee and donuts at a nearby restaurant.

Discordant notes were soon heard, though, over the rhythmic beat of the con-

temporary music that echoed through our hallowed halls. We had difficulty recruiting enough workers for three services. We had parking problems and jammed hallways. Attendance increased, but not enough to fill the large sanctuary three times. We couldn’t sustain three services.

The church faced a watershed. We could drop the contemporary service, thus alienating a significant portion of our congregation. Or, we could drop a traditional service and disenfranchise another significant group. Somebody had to lose.

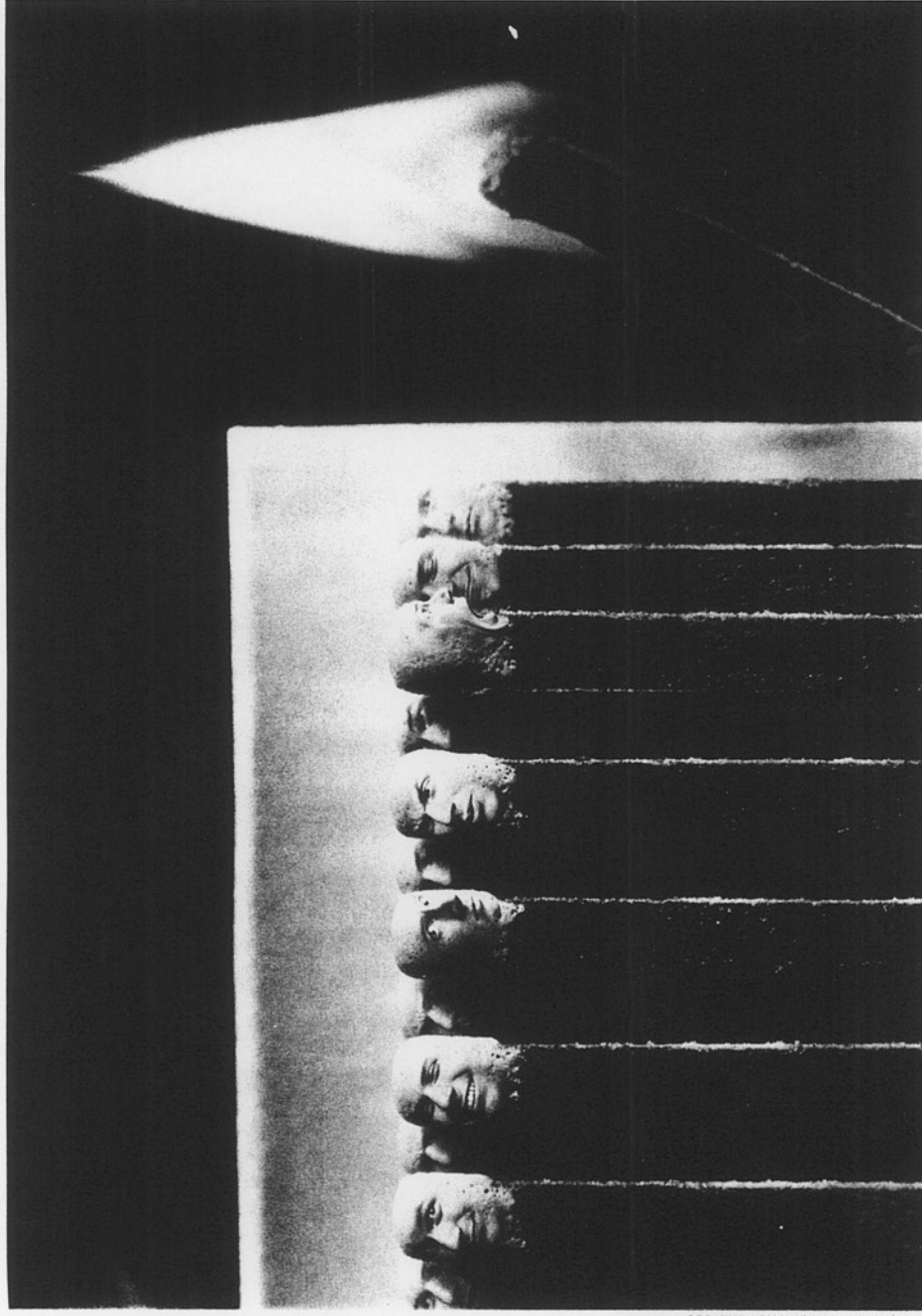
After four months of discussion and prayer, the congregation voted to alter the future by establishing the contemporary worship experience as our second Sunday worship service.

Within days of the decision, the relational fabric of our church tore. Anger and fear snuffed out love and care. Sarcasm and criticism supplanted praise and encouragement. Everyone was frowning.

At first I attempted to mend the tear through logic and persuasion. After all, I reasoned, Christians are rational people. (No, I don’t know where that assumption came from.) My illogical assessment almost wrecked the congregation.

When I started to lead our church in this direction, I did so from a logical perspective. My logic was as solid as a mathematical formula:

*People’s need to experience a living God +*



FFG/Paul & Lindamarie Ambrose

*The Great Commission to proclaim the gospel = A user-friendly, contemporary service.*

I became as adept with graphs and pie charts as Ross Perot.

As the conflict erupted once more, I again pulled out my charts and graphs. I quoted Rick Warren, Lyle Schaller, Bill Easum, and other experts. It didn't work. No one listened to my logic, or if they did, they did not comprehend it. No one's attitude was changed.

### **Not the kidneys**

Through the total failure of my arguments, I finally saw that the reaction to change, no matter how logical the change may be, is not logical. It's emotional.

This is not only a sociological observation, but also a description of a neurological process. During change, the cerebrum, where thought occurs and which controls much of our human activity, is overruled by the thalamus.

The thalamus is the seat of our emotions. It is often called the mammalian part of the brain because its emotions of love, nurture, and loyalty link us with our fellow warm-blooded creatures. (Paul D. MacLean first proposed this idea in his article "A Triune Concept of the Brain and Behavior.")

This is an uncomfortable concept for cerebral me. One of my strengths is my ability to reason. When the bickering started over what I thought were a few reasonable changes, that strength became a serious weakness. Like most of us burdened with a Y chromosome, I don't deal well with emotions. I realized this during a conversation with a woman who came to complain about the new service.

It wasn't Lutheran, she said.

I offered a few facts to prove that the service was indeed Lutheran. She insisted it was not.

"It doesn't feel Lutheran," she moaned.

In response, I slowly and more force-



"Line one, Pastor Bob. Last name, Sims. First name, Mary. Preferred name, Honey."

fully pointed out the reasons why even Martin Luther would bless this service. She nodded during my explanation but replied, "It still doesn't *feel* Lutheran."

Suddenly, I heard the word *feel*. She was right. Our contemporary service didn't *feel* Lutheran. For Lutherans who had cut their teeth on a communion rail, it felt strange and uncomfortable. Worship at that service was like donning the latest teen fashion. It felt funny, looked silly, and wasn't really "them." It invoked a wide variety of feelings—confusion, discomfort, vulnerability, and anger.

I took the woman's hand in mine. "You're right," I said, "It doesn't *feel* Lutheran, and that's scary isn't it?"

She sighed. Her shoulders slumped as her muscles relaxed. "Yes, it is." Her feelings had been heard and acknowledged.

That moment I resolved to put away my flip charts, dry erase markers, and interactive videos. Instead of attempting to prove I



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was right, I would seek to hear the pain and confusion that many of my flock were feeling.

Their emotions were similar to those encountered during illness, broken relationships, and job loss. After all, on some level, they had lost something. And they feared losing more.

As their pastor I could walk with them through their struggle and share the good news of God's love and presence, even in a time of change.

### "I feel your pain" isn't enough

It almost seems trite to say that the most effective way to lead most people through change is to love them, to provide a sensitive, caring pastoral presence. Ed Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation*, from the perspective of his family systems approach to ministry, would add the adjective "non-anxious." Of course the cliché immediately comes to mind, "It's easier said than done."

The congregation in transition requires specialized care. Here are a few principles that provide the foundation for artistic and skillful pastoral ministry to a congregation feeling the pain of change. These practices enable us to grow personally and professionally, while we nurture our flock at the same time.

The first rule is to speak the language of emotion. This is not to say that we talk down to people—a theological stalwart addressing a fragile, emotional being—like some adults talk to children. The logical pastor's temptation is to view the language of emotion as inferior to rational speech, that we are lowering ourselves to another person's level. That's as counterproductive as persisting in addressing emotional pain with logic.

And it is not effective to spice our conversation with a few feely phrases. It's more than saying "I feel your pain."

The language of emotion is a different language—for many of us a foreign language. We may never become fluent in it, but we must at least become conversant. It is learned as we grow in the awareness of our own feelings, develop sensitivity to the emotions of others, and struggle to express those emotions.

The amazing thing about the language



of emotion is that it goes beyond words. Its vocabulary includes presence, touch, and body language. A hand squeeze can say, "I understand and I'm here for you," more effectively than the spoken words.

Another key to establishing a loving pastoral presence is offering public prayers of blessing and thanksgiving for everyone in the congregation, even those who are agitated. This appears to be a no-brainer, but in the emotionally charged environment of change, it is often forgotten.

### Staring down an angry lion

When a church member, out of fear and vulnerability, impugn's my integrity as a pastor, it's a challenge to respond in a loving manner. It's very difficult for me to be non-anxious when three council members storm into my office and declare that they—"and countless other members who wish to remain anonymous"—are upset.

Some people's automatic response to change is anger, and the pastor is the natural target. The pastor, after all, allowed, welcomed, or even caused the upsetting thing. In this situation, a better term for non-anxious is unflappable.

Not long after we instituted the contemporary service, a children's Sunday school teacher came roaring into my office seeking someone to devour.

"You are destroying the faith of our children," she began.

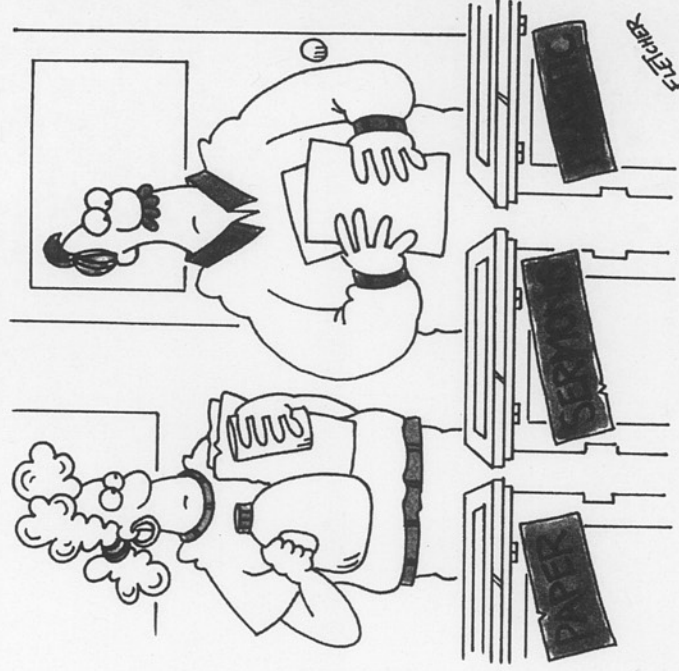
She reminded me of a lioness: the welfare of her cubs was threatened and she was on the attack. I planted my feet firmly on the carpet, looked her straight in the eye, and endured her roar (while my knees shook and I fought the urge to turn and run). "Now they must choose between worship and Sunday school."

"I share your concern," I assured her. "We're here to build children's faith, not destroy it. That's why we started a children's class on Wednesday evenings."

"What if it doesn't work?"

Reasonable concern. "If it doesn't work, we'll address it. But we should give this a chance to work before we condemn it."

Her roaring lessened to a throaty growl. I shared some options she might consider and listened to her objections. Eventually we settled on a plan that involved minimal



Recycling at the pastor's house.

changes on her part.

She left my office a little less a lioness. A few weeks later, when I called her up to check on how the changes affected her, her roaring had ceased.

Not every scenario is wrapped up so neatly, but when faced with angry challenges, look for the sources behind the anger. Sometimes it's pain that's become very intense or fear that can't find appropriate expression.

When the roaring starts, it's tempting to limit our contact with people we feel are dangerous. We either put a fence around them in an effort to control them, or we develop a convenient excuse for avoiding them. Neither works. Fences increase anxiety. And broken, distant relationships are a classic definition of a sick congregation.

### Don't fake it 'til you make it

There are times when I haven't been up to the challenge of demonstrating a non-

anxious pastoral presence. When this has happened, I have fallen into the trap of faking it. That's a big mistake.

Some of the most embarrassing and pathetic images in my memory are those times I tried to bluff when I was scared. Everybody saw right through me.

If we are anxious, it is best to admit it. It doesn't necessarily mean that we are headed in the wrong direction. More likely, it simply affirms that pastors are human, too, struggling with doubts like the rest of

our brothers and sisters. Being non-anxious is not about the pastor's strength, it's about the pastor's faith.

It's about our actions being based on our faith, not our fear.

Along with our confession, we can point to the great "Non-Anxious Presence." After all, it is in God that we place our faith and our hope, not pastors, visions, or congregational health. God will create within us a believing heart when we act in faith—affirmation follows action.

## After the Vision Statement, What Next?

**Your church has agreed on a vision statement, maybe even core values. Now what? Four pastors explain their next steps toward making the vision a reality.**

### The Vision Chart



**Lou Diaz**  
*Wheaton Evangelical  
Free Church  
Wheaton, Illinois*

When I came to WEFC in 1991, the church was celebrating its fortieth anniversary with the theme "A Vision Revisited, A Vision Renewed."

During a Concert of Prayer, we had people contribute their vision ideas, and as leaders we compiled them into five "vision points":

- A healing community
- Intentional disciple making
- Target community evangelism
- Facility expansion
- Church planting

Then we distributed a Vision Chart, with the five components as headings across the top. Underneath was a brief description and then blank space for people to write the specific way they would be willing to help fulfill that vision point for the next year. We asked

everyone—from new members to charter members, to indicate how they would help—whether praying, giving, assisting, or leading a particular aspect.

In eight years, the entire vision was fulfilled! Specific ministries emerged from the Vision Chart such as Stephen's Ministries, discipling small groups, community impact efforts, a new worship center, and a church plant that's now reaching 240 seekers in a theater west of Wheaton.

This team building, through a common focal point, the Vision Chart, made the invisible visible.

of evangelism, finding lost people, and understanding God's passion for reaching those not yet in his kingdom.

As the teacher, I set the agenda for establishing topics and priorities. I used these weekly opportunities to fertilize the congregation so it might adopt a variety of methods in the future.

Even though I was familiar with Bill Hybels and Willow Creek and had led a seeker-oriented youth ministry before coming to Central, I did not initially consider transforming our church in that direction.

Then I began taking staff and lay leaders to progressive church conferences (Willow Creek was one) to introduce them to new ways of ministry.

This created an atmosphere of openness to fresh ideas that we would eventually modify to fit our church culture.

Instead of sudden, cold-turkey change, we gradually pushed the envelope. Incremental adjustments allow you to test your congregation's tolerance for change. Small successes build credibility for you as a leader.

### Exposure to Creative Options



**Gene Appel**  
*Central Christian  
Church  
Las Vegas, Nevada*

Outreach was part of our vision. I invested the first two or three years in preaching through the themes

This truth should be affirmed frequently in a changing congregation. Change brings with it over-sensitivity, hurt feelings, and anger. Because of this, it is necessary for emotional awareness, honesty, and forgiveness to be abundant in a congregation going through transition.

Four years have passed since we started the contemporary service. It is now our largest service, and most of our visitors attend it. There are still a few who would like to have things the way they were. The ma-

jority, though, has learned that what really unifies us is our faith and commitment to mission.

I'm still tempted at times to argue logically for change. When I catch myself reaching for a marker to illustrate my point, I'm more likely now to stop and ask, "How do you feel about this idea?"

Yes, logic and discernment must guide the leader, but in dealing with resistance among the followers, change is primarily an emotional issue from beginning to end. ✱

We added a second morning service and Sunday school program, which was well received. In worship we introduced more contemporary music and added drums, which did not sit well, so we backed up. Later we introduced drums again, and now people can't imagine not using drums with congregational singing.

So we take three steps forward, two steps back, but the net result is gradual progress toward the vision.

—adapted from *Change Your Church* by Alan Nelson and Gene Appel (Word/Willow Creek Association, 2000)

### Identify the New Realities



**Randel Everett**  
*Columbia Baptist Church*  
*Falls Church, Virginia*

For a long time, the vision of our church has been "Every member a minister." But now we're thinking of changing it to "Every member a missionary" because the church can't be just a haven from an evil world. We've got to be a boot camp equipping peo-

ple to go into the world and make disciples.

The world we live in right now is much nearer A.D. 55 than 1955. It's not a Christian world. There is hostility to the gospel in many ways. And so we're training people to live for Jesus in whatever environment they're in—not expecting secular people to come to church to hear the gospel.

I don't even use the words "Christian" or "Christianity" much anymore. I almost always use the word "Christ-follower" because many people around here see "Christianity" as wrapped up in capitalism and a certain polity. A Muslim neighbor is not offended by Jesus, but he is offended by Christianity and certainly offended by Baptists. And so we've got to unwrap Jesus, present him as the Christ of Scripture, and then challenge people to be Christ-followers.

Today, a church's vision is not a destination or a location—it's a journey. "Come, let's follow Jesus" is invitation. If we ever think we've solved the riddle of what that means, then we've stopped growing.

It's a fascinating time to lead a church. We don't have to solve every problem, but we do need to keep people moving toward Jesus.

### Constant Review Is the Glue



**Beecher Hicks**  
*Metropolitan Baptist Church*  
*Washington, D.C.*

How does one implement a vision statement? My father is 87 years old and has been preaching for 65 years. His answer: "Constant review is the student's glue."

Repetition and review hold it all together.

Whatever the vision is, restate it over and over again, so that people understand what you're trying to do. It needs to be broad and bold.

That's what Habakkuk was leading to when he talked about writing the vision, and writing so large that even a man running a race would be able to read it. And that's not an easy thing.

A vision will be most successfully cast through preaching. In other words, it needs to be set in a biblical context in order for people to receive it as the vision from God. It is through the preaching event that the vision is best cast.