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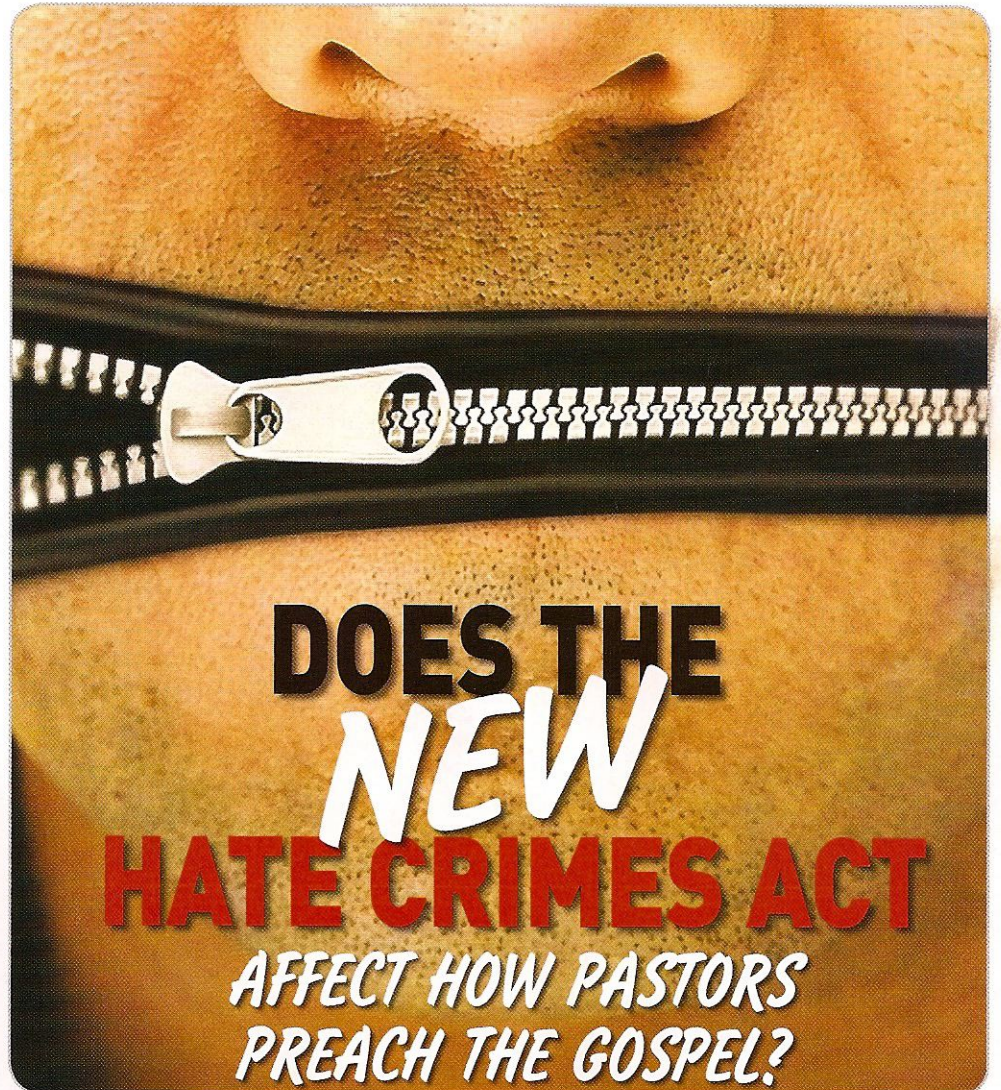
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Helping Leaders Become Better Stewards.

**A 'PERFECT STORM'
WARNING OF
PORN SLAMS
THE CHURCH | 26**



GARY GALBRAITH
HOW A SURFER BECAME AN
INDONESIA EVANGELIST | 12

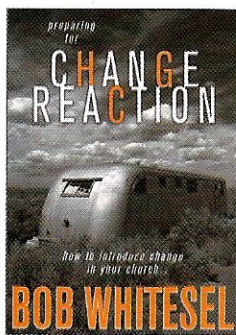


| 18

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Understanding the four forces that control church change

Get to know the “basic motors of change” and the tools for crafting long-term plans for growth.

I have found that managing change is a daunting task for church leaders. Regrettably, in most seminaries managing change is not taught. Yet in my work I have discovered that the process is not so mysterious or unexamined.

Dealing with change in a church is difficult because there are more forces pushing for change than church leaders usually recognize. As a result, most church change strategies are too narrow, because leaders usually address only a couple of the four forces that may be present.

Andrew Van de Ven and Marshall Poole are management researchers who compiled an exhaustive study of organizational change. They discovered that change theories revolve four forces that push or generate change.

These change forces are sometimes called the “four basic motors of change” because they push an organization into change. Sometimes only one force is pushing for change, but often two, three or four forces combine to push an organization through change. While they have observed the affect of the four forces upon theories of change, I believe these forces also give us clues to the tools that can help a church change.

Why the forces are important

If an organization such as a church is addressing only one

or two forces pushing for change — the usual church strategy — and more forces are pushing for change, I believe that the change will be unsatisfying and incomplete. If all of the forces pushing for change are not addressed, congregants can feel the change did not go far enough or address their concerns.

Change in a church is often inadvertently too narrow and rejected by congregants who sense there are other forces push-

“Congregants will not support the change for it does not address the force they feel pushing most robustly upon them.”

ing for change. I have found that successful change strategies first discover how many forces are pushing for church toward change, and then use the appropriate tools to control each force.

I have simplified the change forces, briefly describing each change force and followed with examples of tools to control each.

Life Cycle Forces defined.

Life cycle forces are motors pushing for change because an organization is at a crisis point in its

life cycle. This could be a church that has an aging congregation or a different ethnicity moving into the neighborhood. Churches that feel this force are often older congregants who are concerned that the church is not adequately reaching out to other cultures or generations.

If a change strategy does not address their concerns about the longevity of the organization, the congregants will not support the change for it does not address the force they feel pushing most robustly upon them.

Tools to address life cycle forces usually involve crafting long-term plans for growth. This often begins with the “visioning” process. Subsequent tools include starting new services or ministries to reach new generations or cultures. This may require hiring staff from this new culture to help the church make the transformation into a new cultural lifecycle. Many church growth strategies address such life cycle forces.

Goal-orientated Forces defined. These are forces that push for change because a goal has been created for the organization. This may be an attendance goal imposed upon the congregation by a denomination and/or the church leadership. Such goals often motivate leaders who see the bigger picture better than they see the mechanics of getting there.

These forces may be >>

generated by a personal vision or a biblical mandate. Goal-orientated forces are often associated with churches that are struggling to survive, megachurches or newly planted churches. While this force is often felt most acutely by top-level leadership, attendees often have trouble appreciating this force. This is because for many attendees there are other forces that are more powerful.

Tools to address goal-orientated forces usually revolve around measurement and research. Donald McGavran, the father of the Church Growth Movement, said there is a “universal fog” in our churches that masks our appreciation for measurement. He pointed out that there is no such reticence in the Bible. Thus evaluation becomes an important tool for measuring progress.

Though reaching goals is an important force pushing for change in churches, it is not the only force present. If leadership tries to motivate an entire congregation by goals alone, many congregants who are feeling the push of other change forces will deem the change insufficient and/or inauthentic.

Conflict-orientated Forces defined.

These forces push a church toward change because there are opposing viewpoints in the congregation. Often this occurs when new concepts are introduced and they appear to conflict with previously held ideas. Needless to say many churches suffer from this. While churches comprehend that this is a problem, my experience is that conflict resolution is poorly addressed in many congregations. This omission may be because congregants feel that the church should be a peaceful place, and thus they often avoid conflict. But conflict is a powerful motor for those who feel conflicted or at odds with other attendees, and thus it must be addressed.

Tools to address conflict will be found in books and programs that foster conflict resolution. Compromise is the goal, but first each side must understand the other before they can find middle

STEPS TO CONTROLLING CHANGE IN YOUR CHURCH

- Determine which of the four forces are pushing for change in your church
- List the change forces by their relative strength
- Create a collage of tools to control the four forces pushing for change.

ground. Research has also shown that it is critical that church leaders go slow when introducing change until compromise has been accomplished. (I have written on the six steps of church compromise and how going too fast with new ideas usually dooms creative ideas; see *Staying Power: Why People Leave the Church Over Change* [Abingdon Press, 2003].)

Trend-orientated Forces defined.

This force occurs when some congregants observe a new “trend” evolving and which appears to be working in other churches. Change proponents often push enthusiastically and unrelentingly for popular new ideas to be implemented.

Often they do so without addressing the change forces pushing upon others (such as lifecycle or conflict-orientated forces). Trend-orientated leaders are seen as dividing the congregation and/or not sensitive to the church’s unity and health.

The primary tools used to handle trend-orientated forces is to help all factions see that a popular program or strategy will only fix part of the problem, and that a successful approach must address all forces pushing for change. Fashionable programs are usually beneficial, but are perceived by lifecycle and conflict-oriented leaders as incomplete or inauthentic. Another tool is to adapt the trend to the local situation. Leaders must slowly foster compromise, show how their strategy addresses the church lifecycle, and adapt the trend to the local church context.

There are three steps in holistic change. Step one is to determine which forces are pushing for change in your church. This inaugural step means studying the above definitions, reading appropriate books and using roundtable discussions to create a list of the change forces evident in your church.

Subjective ranking

The second step is to list the change forces by their relative strength. Some forces will be pushing more forcefully, while others may be present but diminutive. The ranking is subjective and thus it is important to solicit input from as many segments of the church involved as possible.

The third step is to create a collage of tools from the above lists to control change. Organization theorist Mary Jo Hatch believes that effective theories are “collages” or a patchwork of tactics. This is required because each local church is unique and the most effective strategies will be those that address all the forces present.

Many books today are focused on encouraging church change. But few actually address how to do it. Yet I have noticed that what most church leaders want is a plan to create positive change. Understanding that there are often four forces pushing for change simultaneously, discovering the relative strength of each, and then combining tools to create a collage tactic are the first steps toward long-term and effective church change. CE

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