

SEEDS OF CHANGE **BRAD POWELL**

Focus on the People

Q I'm the pastor of a small church. Do you have any experience with leading a small church through change? If yes, did you make any discoveries that could possibly help me?

A My first experience as a senior pastor began with a church of 18 people, and I couldn't have been more excited. I was passionate, committed to make things happen and ready to give the church my all. And, to be honest, I made a big impact—it just wasn't the kind of impact I had envisioned or that you would want to replicate.

Don't get me wrong—the church grew rapidly while I was the pastor. In six months we had grown to nearly 100 and were scheduled to baptize 18 newly saved people—as many as were in the church when I had arrived. Everything seemed to be going so well. Better than I could have imagined!

Then it ended. As it turned out, the original 18 weren't as thrilled as I was about all the "great things" that were happening. So without my knowledge, they were meeting to discuss the best way to get rid of me. It worked. Rather than celebrating the baptism of 18 new people, which never happened, they celebrated my departure. It was ugly.

At first, I blamed them entirely. What kind of carnal people would work so underhandedly to get rid of a pastor who was reaching people for Christ? But after praying through and processing the experience, I ultimately realized that I was to blame. After all, though they certainly had their problems, I genuinely believe everything rises and falls on leadership.

The good news is God allowed me to learn from my failure and gave me the privilege of going on to lead three churches—small, medium and large—through successful transitions. Here's what I discovered that I believe can help you: The church is people, not an organization.



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My failure in the first church was predictable because I led it as an organization. I changed the organization, but I didn't change the church because I failed to focus on the people. Sadly, I *did* leadership and transition to them rather than actually leading and transitioning them. To succeed, you must understand that leading and transitioning the church is all about leading and transitioning people. So, here's my advice:

Get to know the people. You can't lead or transition people you don't know. You need to get to know their spiritual temperature. Are they genuinely experiencing a growing relationship with Christ or is their relationship with Him stagnant? Remember, since the church is people, a stagnating or declining church is a reflection of the people. You need to get to know their view of the church and its purpose. Do they view the mission as reaching out or ministering within?

Win the people. You can't lead people who aren't following you, and people won't follow you if they don't like, respect and believe in you. They need to see and believe that you genuinely care for them, have true character and are competent to lead. All three are important. I learned this the hard way. In the early days of my present ministry, people believed in my character and competence, but they didn't believe that I cared about them. Until I learned this lesson and started sharing my heart, I couldn't win them. It was amazing how quickly my leadership influence grew when they started believing in my heart.

Invest in the people. Ephesians 4:11-12 makes it clear that this is the responsibility of pastors. Our job isn't to be great

at doing the ministry. We are to invest ourselves in equipping God's people to do the ministry. This was my huge failure in the first church. I was doing ministry at a higher level than it had been done in years. As a result, I was making an impact in the community beyond what the church had experienced in years. But, I was making the impact, not the church. I failed in one of my primary assignments as a pastor. As a result, my ministry failed.

Release the people. As you equip the church to understand that the mission is to love and reach out to the lost as Jesus did, share ownership with them in doing it. Get them involved in brainstorming new ways and creating workable strategies for your church to accomplish outreach in your community. Then, partner with and continue to motivate them to make it happen. If I had done this in the first church instead of doing it alone, the impact of my leadership would have been very different.

Celebrate with the people. As we were reaching new people and growing in attendance at our first church, my wife, Roxann, and I celebrated a lot. Sadly, because we celebrated alone, it turned into catastrophe. After I was removed from the church, it dropped back down to near 18, and it continues to exist without reaching new people with the hope of Christ. If I had gotten to know those people, won them, invested in them, released them and celebrated with them, I believe the story of that church would be very different today.

My prayer is that you'll learn from my story and have the privilege of celebrating many changed lives together with your people. And, if you do, your small church will make a big impact.

*The senior pastor of NorthRidge Church in Plymouth, Mich., **Brad Powell** consults with church leaders to help them lead their churches through transition. Brad has authored Change Your Church for Good (Nelson). NorthRidge Church is No. 15 on The Outreach 100 list of Largest Churches in America. Got an opinion on this column? E-mail: TellUs@OutreachMagazine.com.*

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