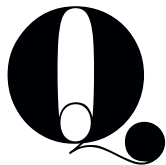


SEEDS OF CHANGE **BRAD POWELL**

Leading Change in Hostile Territory



Leading a church through change seems to result in a lot of negativity—anger, fighting and people leaving. How do you maintain the right course in such a difficult and discouraging environment?



No one wants to see it happen, but if you're going to lead a church through transition, you have to accept the reality that the process will generate some hostility, conflict and losses. Of course, none of this should be new to a church that's working right and reflecting Christ. He faced these same realities during His ministry on earth.

To keep leading properly in the face of these potentially discouraging experiences, you have to know and keep in mind some important principles.

Churches fail to live up to their promise because they shut Jesus out. In Rev. 3:20, Jesus makes His concluding remarks to the seven churches, most of which were failing in serious ways. He said, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Simply put, they had shut Him out. When a church does this, it can't experience Jesus' promise to build a Church that will prevail over the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18).

But Jesus doesn't walk away and leave us alone. He remains at the door, waiting for someone to hear Him and open it. So, at their core, revitalizing churches should be about opening the door to Jesus to do what only He can do: shine the light in darkness and change lives.

People's reaction to the real Jesus reveals a lot about them. That many Christian churches today do not let Christ work in and through them is a paradox. The sad reality is that while the phrase "opening the door of the church to Jesus" has a wonderful ring to it, reaction to you actually doing it may not be so wonderful. Of course, people who have genuinely experienced His profound forgiveness will respond in worship,



"I have found that, like Jesus, I must learn to love people without needing them."

no matter how it changes their world. However, those who believe that they have somehow earned their righteousness will respond in anger, hatred and even violence. We see this throughout the Gospels in the difference between those who followed Jesus and the religious leaders. Those who choose to let Jesus into their churches should expect the same response because nothing messes up the lives of religious people more than God showing up.

Love, and what was best for people, motivated Jesus. He loved people, and

everything He did during His time here was motivated by His desire to see them experience the full life God intended. Of course, most people didn't respond positively. The multitudes ultimately called for His crucifixion. Yet, Jesus never wavered. Simply put, He loved people and sought their best without needing their love in return.

Any leaders who seek to genuinely open the doors of the church to Jesus will experience negative and even hurtful attacks against them. Jesus promises that in John 15:18-21.

This has certainly been my experience. I've been called all kinds of names. One lady actually screamed across the lobby of the church, "You have the face of an angel but the heart of a thief." The last part was pretty hurtful, but I considered the first part a pretty great compliment.

To continue leading positively in the face of such negativity, I have to be motivated by love, and I have found that, like Jesus, I must learn to love people without needing them.

Leading a church to open itself to Jesus will involve short-term loss and long-term gain.

Sincere church leaders often ask me how to transition a church without losing people. My answer is simple: You can't. However,

if you don't change your ministry, you will still lose people—the wrong people. You'll lose those who genuinely love Jesus and want Him to show up. You'll lose the people who desperately want your church to fulfill the mission Jesus gave it—to “go and make disciples.” These men and women won't stay in a church that isn't committed to following Jesus. They will go find one that

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is. And losing them also forfeits the opportunity to reach new people with God's truth and hope.

However, when you introduce appropriate change without compromise, you lose the right people—those who don't like it when the real Jesus shows up and don't like the “sinners” Jesus hung around with and forgave. You lose the people who are keeping your church from becoming God's light in a world of darkness.

Here's what I've found in my ministry. Though facing down very angry and even hostile people can be difficult and discouraging, the rewards are worth it. I have the privilege of being the pastor of an unbelievably positive church today. It's filled with love, excitement, new believers and a desire to continue bringing God's hope to the hopeless. I can honestly say restoration never would have happened without the difficult season of change and the many agonizing losses. But, as it turns out, we never would have become the church we are today without those losses.

Sadly, many churches aren't reaching new people today because the wrong people have left, and the wrong people have stayed. Reversing this trend is one of the factors in successful church renewal. The key to this is doing everything you can to open the door of your church to Jesus again. He has a way of repelling and attracting the right people. He also has a way of fulfilling His promises. He will build His Church. And he will bless us with

the opportunity to participate with Him in that process—if we let him in.

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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