

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN THE NEW YEAR

Our presbytery Council is beginning to read through a book by Gil Rendle called *Journey in the Wilderness*. In this book, he describes some of the difficulty of the adaptive challenges that we are facing as we enter into a new year. He says this:

“I was born into a church where the mission field was on foreign soil. The operative assumption was that everyone within U.S. national boundaries was already Christian, either actively or nominally. Mission was a far-off enterprise to be managed by professional missionaries while mainline members could stay at home comfortable in a culture shared equally by all. Today, we recognize that the mission field is all around us in a complex and diverse culture where religions, philosophies, value systems, and consumer goods compete for attention and claim to bring meaning to a person’s life. The church must compete with other voices.”

“Will changing to drums, improved technology, renovated worship space, or a much more informal clergy who no longer wear preaching robes in the pulpit fix the problems of the mainline church? No. Such simple solutions cannot so easily be found at this time. Difficult conversations among leaders are necessary to determine the appropriate way for a particular congregation in a particular time and a particular place to learn to speak to its particular mission field. A part of the hard-earned learning from our particular exodus is that there are no simple answers in a complex culture that experiences rapid change. Certainly the challenge is all about change. We know more and more about change – the speed of change, the amount of change, the consistency of change, and the immediacy of change.”

“The task for church leaders is not just in keeping up with change, however, but shaping change appropriately for the gospel to have room in people’s lives. We need to learn to speak to this world without conforming to the world. We need to speak freshly to the people of a changed world without losing ancient practices and teachings that shape people in faith. All of this requires that we learn how to change ourselves. Much of the difficulty in the change necessary for the church comes from the depth of learning that is required of us. It is immeasurably more difficult for us to change ourselves than to participate in attempts to change others. Leadership may be more about asking the right questions that can prompt new learning than about installing the next answer.”

This ongoing shift from mission field on foreign soil to mission field on the street where I live has introduced a number of adaptive challenges to the church. Adaptive challenges are different from technical challenges. Technical challenges are about improving what we are already doing. They tend to be problems that we know how to fix or we can find someone who knows how to fix them. They are changes within a paradigm. These are problems that can be fixed by “polishing the apple”, laying down new carpet, putting on a fresh coat of paint, or constructing a new church sign. Technical solutions are changing to drums, adding powerpoint and screens, and not wearing a robe anymore. If a church is facing technical problems, these technical solutions will work. If a church is facing an adaptive challenge, these technical solutions will not work.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 9:17 when He said, “Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the new wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour the new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” Using the old wineskin is the technical solution. Creating a new wineskin is the adaptive challenge.

Figuring out what to do with our adaptive challenges is absolutely crucial to our future. It involves new learning and acquiring new skills, habits, and practices. Solutions to adaptive challenges are not obvious. They require a great deal of time, conversations, discovery, and experiments. They stimulate resistance, challenge our values, and make us uncomfortable. Often, there is not a win-win solution. It requires a change of culture and addressing underlying issues. And there are no experts.

Leading adaptive change is hard but necessary. Structural changes do not solve adaptive challenges. It requires a change in culture. We follow the missional change model of moving a congregation through awareness, to understanding, to evaluating, to experimenting, and finally to commitment (*The Missional Leader*, Roxburgh and Romanuk). Structural change follows culture change, it does not precede it. One of our defaults is that we usually start by looking for structural changes and technical changes. We have to learn to begin with culture change and adaptive change, if we are to lead God’s people to address the challenges of the changing culture in which we live.

My hope is that this year, we can spend more time together as a learning community, learning together from one another, how to address the adaptive challenges in front of us. We have tried all kinds of technical solutions. Those can help us begin to take a few steps forward, but the real changes facing us this year are adaptive. I want us to be the sent witnesses for Jesus Christ in the places where we live, work, and play. I want us to move back into our neighborhoods and join what God is already doing there. I want us to be led by the Holy Spirit to the places in our community where the Spirit is already at work. To do this, to be the faithful and fruitful people of God that I believe we are called to be, I believe we will need to address some adaptive challenges this year. None of us are experts at this. We are all learning and growing together.

God is up to something big in our world, and God is inviting us to be a part of this big work. I believe that 2012 is going to be a significant year. I believe some major actions will take place and some major decisions will be made. I hope that you will join us as we discover together how God is calling us to participate in this critically important mission of God. I hope you will let us know how we can come alongside your congregation and discover some new learnings together.

God bless!