

Living in a World of Adaptive Change

In our world and in our churches, we are dealing with technical changes and adaptive changes. Technical changes are those kinds of changes that are smaller and easier to handle. They are the kind where we already have the skills to deal with them. We may need to add a little to our knowledge, but once someone points us in the right direction, we can figure it out. Solving technical changes doesn't necessarily change us or our church; it simply brings a small improvement to what we already have.

Adaptive changes are paradigm shift types of changes. They are changes we have to deal with where we do not have the skills to figure them out. We have to do some new learning. We can't solve them by ourselves – we need help from others. Dealing with adaptive changes will change us and the congregations we serve. We have to adopt an entirely new approach, and they are usually issues that are critical for our future.

Last week, as I was reading the San Diego Union-Tribune, I was struck by how many stories were about adaptive changes going on in our world. Here's a list:

1. GM offers last-ditch plan to skirt bankruptcy. Once a symbol of capitalist might and U.S. industrial prowess, General Motors would be half-owned by the federal government under a new, sweeping plan that would also shut down GM's Pontiac operations, lay off 21,000 workers, and impose harsh terms on the company's bondholders. The partial nationalization proposal – a last-ditch effort developed by GM and the Obama administration's auto task force to keep the leading U.S. carmaker out of bankruptcy – raised hackles in Congress and ratcheted up the game of brinkmanship with the company's bondholders who have until May 8 to accept the deal or try to negotiate better terms.
2. World Health Organization raises alert level for swine flu outbreak. The novel strain of swine flu that has gripped the globe not only infected more people from San Diego to Spain yesterday, but also started exacting an economic toll as stock markets fell and travelers reconsidered trips to Mexico and the United States.
3. Loss of faith attributed to spiritual drift. More Americans have given up their faith or changed religions because of a gradual spiritual drift than switched because of a disillusionment over their churches' policies. It also illustrates how personal spiritual attitudes are taking precedence over denominational tradition.
4. Pontiac's demise no surprise to dealers. "They've been around for 83 years. We're in unprecedented times with all brands of cars, and nobody likes to see a well-known nameplate go away."
5. Newspaper circulation falling faster than ever. The New York Post was hit hardest, with its weekday circulation plunging more than 20%, or about 144,000 copies. It's the most severe downturn since newspaper circulation began to crumble in the early 1990s. The erosion has been accelerating during the recession of the past 16 months.

6. Bank of America has dropped the Countrywide name from its mortgage operations, shedding a 40 year old brand that had become synonymous with risky lending practices that helped fuel the U.S. housing boom and subsequent bust.
7. General Electric's research divisions said it had developed data-storage technology using holograms that could store the content of 100 standard DVDs on a single disc. The micro-holographic material can support 500 GB of data in a standard DVD size disc, equivalent to 20 single layer Blu-ray discs.

And that was just from one day's newspaper!

What does this all mean for us? It means that we are being pushed to have to learn and adapt to all kinds of major changes in our world, and figure out how we minister in a world that is shifting and changing in major ways at rapid speed. We need to discern what affect these are having on our congregations, what it means for our present and future ministries, and how we need to adapt to have a fruitful and faithful ministry.

This is probably similar to what Paul and his companions had to figure out when they left the Jewish world to go on their first mission trip into Greece and Asia. They went into cultures that were very different from what they were used to. These countries had different beliefs, different values, and different customs. They had different worldviews, different frames of reference, and different "hot button" issues. What appealed to the Jewish people, didn't necessarily appeal to the Asian and Greek people, and vice versa. They asked different questions, cared about different issues, and responded in different ways. Paul and his companions had to do some just-in-time learning as they adapted on the run.

Many of our churches here in America have been able to get by for a long time by only making technical changes. Those days are quickly ending. More and more, the changes that we are dealing with are adaptive. If we don't learn how to shift and adjust our habits and patterns to address these major challenges, our future will eventually be in jeopardy. The Presbytery of San Diego is becoming a learning community. We want to find ways to bring churches and leaders together, to learn how to make the changes we need to, to be able to minister faithfully in this rapidly evolving world. It's not going to be easy, it's going to be uncomfortable, but this is something that we can do. I hope that you will join us as we continue to learn together, how to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in this constantly shifting world.