

Shifting Gears – The Neutral Zone

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So, we started off our day this morning talking about learning how to shift gears in our congregation. I said that changes are the external realities that we have to deal with – new worship services, new schedule, new carpet, new building, new elders and deacons, new pastors, etc. Transitions are how these external changes affect us – it is my emotional reaction to the changes, whether the changes make me happy, sad, excited, discouraged, encouraged, or hesitant. I said there are three gears we need to shift through in leading our congregations through a transitional time: the ending, the Neutral Zone, and the new beginning. We don't want to try to start a parked car in third gear, which is what we tend to do in the church. We don't want to strip the gears by running through the gears too quickly. So, we need to learn how to make the shifts at the appropriate times. This morning we talked about the first gear – how to make good endings. Now, I want to talk with you about the second gear – the Neutral Zone.

It's important to understand the neutral zone for several reasons. If you don't understand it, you will look for certainty and familiarity by going back to the past, or you will rush through it and try to get to the future sooner than is possible, and be discouraged when you can't. You may mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel is a sign that there's something wrong with you. Painful though it often is, the neutral zone is the individual's and the organization's best chance for creativity, renewal, and development. The gap between the old and the new is the time when innovation is most possible and when revitalization begins.

The neutral zone is at the very core of the transition process. It's the place and time when the old habits that are no longer adaptive to the situation are extinguished and new ones are developed. It is the WINTER in which the old growth returns to the SOIL as decayed matter, while the next year's growth begins to stir in the root underground. It is the SEEDBED of the new beginning. Most churches in North America today are in the Neutral Zone. What kind of worship do we do in the Neutral Zone? When we're in the Neutral Zone, we do what's called Blended worship. It's not the traditional worship of the past. It's not the new worship of the future. Worship in the Neutral Zone is called Blended Worship.

A lady named Marilyn Ferguson once said, "It's the place in between that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. It's like Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to."

A French novelist named Andre Gide once said, "One doesn't discover new lands without first consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time."

The Neutral Zone is a Conflict Time. It is a time of “radio silence.” The Neutral Zone is a nowhere between two somewhere. What happens in the Neutral Zone is that:

1. Anxiety rises and motivation falls. People feel disoriented and doubt themselves. Energy is drained away from coping abilities.
2. People attend worship less frequently.
3. People become overloaded, signals get mixed, systems are in flux and therefore unreliable. It is only natural that priorities get confused, information gets miscommunicated, and tasks go undone.
4. It is natural for people to become polarized between those who want to rush forward and those who want to go back to the old ways. It is natural for consensus to break down and the level of discord to rise. Loyalty gets undermined.

Managing the Neutral Zone is essential during a period of such enormous changes as our own.

The Neutral Zone is a Creative Time

Lacking clear systems and signals, the Neutral Zone is a chaotic time, but it is a time that is ripe with creative opportunity. Your task therefore is twofold: first, to get your church through in one piece and, second, to capitalize on the confusion by fostering innovation.

The Neutral Zone is a Normal Time

One of the most difficult aspects of the Neutral Zone for most people is that they don't understand it. They expect to be able to move straight from the old to the new. But, you can't. This is not a trip from one side of the street to the other. It's a journey from one identity to another, and that takes time.

The Neutral Zone is like the Exodus story. It is like the wilderness which Moses led the Israelites through. When you read Exodus, you find that it actually only took the Israelites 2 years, to go from the Red Sea to the edge of the Promised Land. But, they sent spies out to explore this new land and they became very afraid of the future, lost their faith in God, and didn't think they could be successful in this new venture. So, God punished them, made them stay in the wilderness another 38 years, until that whole generation had died off, and a new generation was ready to move forward with the exact same challenge. It didn't take 40 years because they were lost. It took 40 years because they weren't ready. They were still stuck in their ways of thinking that had served them so well in Egypt. But, these ways of thinking would no longer work in the wilderness or the Promised Land. They had to develop new skills and capacities to succeed in a new world. They weren't ready. And so God took the next 38 years and used that wilderness experience to prepare

the people and give them what they would need, so that they could enter the Promised Land.

The Neutral Zone is a Preparation Time

The Israelites had lived in Egypt for 400 years. So, what the Bible is telling us is that it took 40 years in the wilderness to get 400 years of Egypt out of their system, so they could finally enter the Promised Land. It took that long for the outlook, attitudes, values, self-images, ways of thinking to die before people were ready for life in the new world. Israel's transition time in the Neutral Zone wilderness was 10% of the amount of time they had lived in Egypt: 40 years compared to 400 years. So, think about your congregation in those terms. If your congregation is 50 years old, and you still have a lot of members who have been in the church for all of those 50 years, it may take you 5 years (10%) to go through your Neutral Zone time, for you to make a significant change in your ministry. Now, maybe your church is 50 years old, but most of your membership has only been in the congregation for 30 years. Then, it may take you 3 years to go through your Neutral Zone time, for you to make a significant transition in your ministry. The Neutral Zone is not like waiting in line at a fast food drive through window. The Neutral Zone time frame is more like putting a stew on the stove at 8 am, watching it simmer and smelling it cooking all day long, so that it's ready to eat at 6 pm that night. There is no way you can rush your church through the Neutral Zone. It can't happen.

The Neutral Zone is a Re-tooling Time

Now, a lot of people think that the 40 years of the Exodus in the wilderness was a waste of time. They don't think that God was doing anything. They think God was simply waiting 40 years for a generation to die off. I don't believe that. I believe that God was using that time to shape a new generation of leaders, getting people to think and behave and live differently. I believe God was using that time to teach the people the skills they would need to live successfully in the Promised Land. The skills they had and needed in Egypt were how to make bricks out of straw. In the wilderness, those skills were useless. They didn't need to make bricks anymore. They needed a whole new set of talents to survive and thrive in the new world.

I believe God is doing the same thing in our congregations today. The Neutral Zone that we go through isn't just meaningless waiting and confusion – it is a time when we are learning a new way to be the church. We are learning new forms of ministry that will be needed in a post-modern, post-Christian, post-written word world of pictures, images, and global influences. The Neutral Zone we are going through is a necessary reorientation and redefinition that is taking place. What is hard for us is that we can't see most of this taking place. It's invisible. It's not tangible. It's happening beneath the surface. It is the winter during which the spring's new growth is taking shape under the earth.

The Neutral Zone is a Redefinition Time

Sometimes we need to change the metaphor. People will refer to the congregation as a SINKING SHIP. We need to change that metaphor to a ship that is getting a

new engine put in. The first just makes people feel hopeless. The second one gives meaning to the waiting. The first says get out of here as fast as you can. The second one says make the most of the situation.

The Neutral Zone is an Attack-the-Leader Time

While it is natural for people to feel somewhat frightened and confused in this no-man's-land, they don't always handle their emotions well. Ambiguity increases, and so does the longing for answers. As a result, people begin to develop doubts and misgivings about their leaders. This is what happened to Moses and Aaron in the Exodus story. In Numbers 14, after the 12 spies come back from scouting out the Promised Land, and they tell the people how big and strong these giants are who rule the land,

the people got scared, they said they would have rather died in Egypt,

they said they would have rather died in the wilderness,

they said we should choose new leaders and go back to Egypt, and

they said we should stone our leaders and kill them. When our congregations go through Neutral Zone times today, our people often react vs. us as their leaders in the same ways. They will want to kill us, they will want to throw us out and pick new leaders, they will want to find some leaders who will take them back to when they were slaves in Egypt. People don't always act rationally in the Neutral Zone time. It is a very unsettling, disorienting place to be, and people will take it out on us as their leaders.

We need to understand that this can happen, which is why we need to be unified in our sessions and deacon boards. We don't all have to agree, but even when I'm on the losing end of a vote, I still walk out of the room supporting the decision of the whole group. We need to be unified with other elders and deacons and pastors from other churches around the presbytery, and call on each other for help, because the Neutral Zone time is so unpredictable. You can't predict what's going to happen, and we need to support one another and we go through these uncharted waters together.

Neutral Zone is a Map Time

We need to give people a map - Set short range goals for people to aim for - checkpoints along the journey. Give them a map - here is where we started, here is where we are right now, here is where we are going. Like the Missional Change Model. The Missional Change Model (Awareness - Understanding - Evaluation - Experimentation - Commitment) helps people to see some markers along the path, when its hard to point to any concrete successes or accomplishments. This is a time when people get discouraged easily. Nothing seems to be happening in the Neutral Zone most of the time. We need to give people a sense of achievement and movement.

The Neutral Zone is a Lonely Time

People feel isolated, especially if they don't understand what is happening to them. It is important to rebuild relationships and a sense of connectedness within the congregation and with the presbytery.

People need communication channels. Without these, rumors will multiply, creating anxiety and apathy. Use emails to send out regular updates. We need to increase our face to face times when we are going through the Neutral Zone, not decrease them.

The Neutral Zone is an Experimental Time

While you have to help your church get through the Neutral Zone intact, you also need to capitalize on the opportunity that the Neutral Zone provides to do things differently and better. Every church has its own natural "immune system" whose task it is to resist change. This gets weakened in the Neutral Zone, allowing for more innovation.

Innovation takes place automatically in the Neutral Zone if you provide people with a structure to operate in, and if you encourage them to find new ways to do things. Encourage creativity, give people permission to fail, hold brainstorming sessions, launch some experiments and pilot projects, and resist being pushed to reach decisions and closure prematurely.

The Key to the Neutral Zone

It is your best opportunity to do something new and interesting. You can emerge from the wilderness stronger and better adapted to the environment. NZ creativity is the key to turning transition from a time of breakdown to a time of breakthrough.

Q &A Time

We are living in a time of massive transition. Churches all across North America are trying to figure out how to shift gears. While many of us get impatient and want to move quickly, we can't just start with the new beginning. We have to start by bringing something to an end, and helping people to understand that and accept it. We have to lead people through this in between time of the Neutral Zone. And then we lead them to move into the new beginning.

Therefore, trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Christ, and He will direct your paths. God bless you.