

Shifting Gears – Beginning with the Endings

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Illustration of learning to SHIFT GEARS on a 3 speed bike, and a 10 speed bike, after a single speed. Illustration of learning to drive a car – one had automatic transmission and one had a manual transmission – a stick shift – harder for me to learn that. It took me a while to figure out the clutch, how slow/fast to let it out, grind the gears, stall/shake the car, and I would feel so embarrassed. Once I learned to drive a stick shift, I loved it – made me feel like a race car driver.

We are in one of those periods of change in society today, where we are having to learn again how to shift gears. We've been leading our churches at one speed, and we're having to shift gears to move at another speed. When I would ride my bike or drive my car up a big hill, I would have to downshift to a lower gear in order to get more power. That's what's going on in many churches today. We drove on flat land for a long time, and we didn't have to shift gears, and it was easy – the car or the bike would just go. But, now we are in a much more difficult time, we have to learn how to lead our churches up a steep incline again. We're having to downshift to get more power, and it's hard work. Some of us are grinding our gears and it doesn't sound pretty. Many of us are trying to figure out how to shift gears in our congregations.

We are going through a time of Massive Transition time, when so many things are changing. Some people don't like what's changing, some people say we'll die if we don't change, and some congregations are fighting each other over the changes. This is a time when leadership is absolutely essential, but it's also very hard. These are not easy times for us to be attempting to lead the church. So, our hope is that some of our discussions today will help you in the role God has called you into in your congregation, to provide good, strong leadership, to help your church get through these challenging times.

A lot of what I will be sharing now and in our closing session after lunch is from a great book called *Managing Transitions* by William Bridges, and I think we have some copies available for purchase on the book table if you want one. Many people in the church have become jaded and cynical about change because we've had so many ideas come and go, strategic plans, new programs, and the latest fads that have all promised to be the greatest thing since sliced bread. And we've worked really hard and changed some things for a few months, only at the end of the year to see everything go back to the way it was before. It's like RUBBER BAND. We can stretch it for a while, but eventually it will go back to the way it used to be, and nothing will change.

Part of the problem is that we don't really understand how change happens, what it does to the people in our churches, how hard it really is, and how we can provide leadership for it. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith once said that "Faced

with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everybody gets busy on the proof." It's hard to change how we think and act, particularly if we're not convinced we need to. In the last presbytery I served in, in central California, I remember my secretary calling one of our congregations and asking if she could send them some information. Well, they didn't have email at their church. So, she asked if she could FAX it to them. Well, they had a fax machine, but it was in the closet and had never been hooked up. She asked why they had never hooked it up, and they said that they just never imagined why they would ever need to use a fax machine.

Most of us will not change unless we are convinced we need to. But, we also need to understand the difference between change and transition. CHANGE is situational. It's the new location, the new worship service, the new schedule, and the new program. TRANSITION is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is the external stuff we have to deal with, and transition is the internal stuff we have to deal with.

There is an old French saying: The more things change, the more they stay the same. What this means is: "There can be any number of changes, but unless there are transitions, nothing will be different when the dust settles."

Nothing undermines change in a congregation as much as the failure to think through WHO will have to let go of WHAT when the change occurs. Once you understand that transition begins with letting go of something, you have taken the first step. The ending is the FIRST GEAR. The SECOND GEAR is the Neutral Zone. The Neutral Zone is the no-man's-land between the old reality and the new. It's being in limbo. It is a time when the old way is gone but the new way doesn't feel comfortable yet. Then the THIRD GEAR is finally making THE NEW BEGINNING.

Ending – neutral zone – new beginning. People make the new beginning only if they have first made an ending and spent some time in the neutral zone. Yet, most churches try to start with the new beginning rather than finishing with it. We don't pay much attention to endings. We do not acknowledge the existence of the neutral zone, and then we wonder why people have so much difficulty with change. When we do this, it's like trying to start driving a car from park when it's in third gear instead of in first gear. It's never going to build up enough momentum to get going. And when we rush through the ending stage, and the Neutral Zone stage, it's like stripping the gears, and then we have to take our congregations into the body shop to get a whole new transmission. Leading in the Times of Transition of Today's World means learning how to shift gears in your congregation: not stripping the gears, and not trying to start in third gear.

It's also important to understand that the three stages of the transition are overlapping and ongoing. It's not like you finish the Ending and then start the Neutral Zone, and when that is finished you start The New Beginning. You're dealing with all three all the time. You may start with

60% Ending, 30% Neutral Zone, 10% New Beginning, then move to
30% Ending, 50% Neutral Zone, 20% New Beginning, and then move to
10% Ending, 30% Neutral Zone, 60% New Beginning. You will have people in all three locations at the same time, and you have to be able to identify which stage they're in, so you can know how to help lead them forward.

I want to take the rest of my time this morning to talk about the **FIRST GEAR**: how to make good endings. When we come back after lunch, we'll conclude the day by talking about the **SECOND GEAR**: how to lead through the Neutral Zone time. We're not going to talk about the **THIRD GEAR**: how to lead new beginnings, because that's the one that a lot of people already know how to do, and if you learn to do the first two well, the new beginning will naturally follow. So, let's talk about...

The Ending

In most cases, before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be. Before you can become a new kind of person, you must let go of the old identity. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that "If anyone is in Christ, she/he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Beginnings depend on endings. The problem is, people don't like endings.

It isn't the changes themselves that the people resist. It's the losses and endings that they experience and the transition they are resisting. That's why it does little good to talk about how healthy the outcome of the change will be. Instead, you have to deal directly with the losses and endings. But how do you do that?

FIRST of all, you have to Identify Who is Losing What

1. Describe the change in as much detail as you can. It's like hitting a cue ball across a pool table. Some balls you intend to hit, and some get hit and move unintentionally. Your people need you to describe what will be different when the change is completed.
2. You have started a chain reaction. You have to think through who is going to have to let go of something, and what it is.

SECONDLY, Understand the Impact of Losses

Loss is an emotional experience. People need to tell you how they're feeling about it. You can't argue with how people are feeling. It will end the conversation and you won't learn anymore. Loss is a subjective experience. You won't get people to commit to a new way of doing things unless you understand them and make decisions based on that. So, learn who is experiencing a loss and what it is they are losing. (Psalm 137:1) "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."

THIRD, Don't Be Surprised at "Overreaction"

The definition of overreaction is anyone who is reacting more than I am.

Changes cause transitions. Transitions cause losses. It is the losses, not the changes, that people react to. There is a piece of their world that is being lost, and that is hard. (Psalm 137:2-4) "On the willows there, we hung up our lyres, for our captors there, required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

Overreactions come from big losses. But, they also come from how past losses have been experienced. When past losses haven't been adequately dealt with, a sort of transition deficit is created – a readiness to grieve that only needs an ending to set it off. Sometimes, people are not reacting so much to the presenting situation, as they are reacting to some losses in the past that were never acknowledged or grieved.

Overreactions also take place when a small loss is perceived as the first step in a process of bigger losses that will be coming eventually. We need to look for the loss behind the loss and deal with the underlying issue.

FOURTH, Acknowledge the Losses Openly and Sympathetically

Talking about a loss doesn't make the situation worse. Pretending that the loss doesn't exist makes the situation worse. Listening is a leadership skill. If you don't listen to your people, they won't think you're a good leader. They will think you are either out of touch or don't care. People need the freedom and the safety to honestly express their loss, even if it makes us uncomfortable. (Luke 11:21 – Mary to Jesus – if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.)

FIFTH, Expect and Accept the Signs of Grieving: Shock, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Acceptance. The stages of grief are accompanied by depression and disorientation. These are all normal, natural, and to be expected.

SIXTH, Compensate for the Losses – is there anything we can give back to balance what's been lost? First Pres Madera – Harvest Community Church. Gave up traditional worship for contemporary, gave back a Wednesday lunch traditional worship.

SEVENTH, Give People Information and Do It Again and Again. Communicate Repetitively and Repeatedly and Redundantly. We think if we've said it once, people have heard it, digested it, and will remember it. However, most people forget things they only hear once. We've been socialized into hearing the same TV commercials over and over and over again, and finally the brand or the product begins to stick in our heads. That's why it's important for us to keep repeating our statements of faith of what we believe in worship, because we have a tendency to forget. Most churches need to communicate 2-3x more than they do.

EIGHTH, Define What's Over and What's Not. In John 16:5,7 Jesus says, "But now I am going to him who sent me ... Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your

advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But, if I go, I will send him to you.”

NINTH, Mark the Endings. Genesis 32-33. Jacob fears seeing Esau again. Esau had left angry and threatening to kill Jacob the last time they saw each other. But, they reunite and are reconciled. And in Genesis 33:20, Jacob responds by building an altar to God. It not only was a place to worship God and thank Him for saving his life and restoring their relationship, but it marked an ending to a sad chapter in their history. Even today, we use tombstones to mark the ending of a life, and as a way to remember. So, when things end in the church, we need to help people mark them in some way. Uncle Frank led the merger of two small Presbyterian churches in Springfield, OH. They brought symbols from both former churches into the new building as a sign of the history, the endings, and the start of something new.

TENTH, Treat the Past with Respect. Never denigrate the past. You don't have to put down the history to get people to embrace the future. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, “I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.” Now Jesus did change the law. He expanded the law. But He never said the Old Testament laws were bad. He treated them with respect. And still he was able to lead the people into a new future.

Doing this will show how endings ensure continuity with what really matters. When I was with Youth for Christ in High School, one of their mottos was “Anchored to the Rock, Geared to the Times.” The methods were changing, but what really mattered didn't.

THE SINGLE BIGGEST REASON changes in the church fail is that no one thought about endings or planned to help people deal with them. We get so focused on our future planning, that we forget we first need to help people let go of the past and the present. It's a paradox. We won't start well until we learn how to end well. If we help people to say good-bye to what's ending, it will be a lot easier to help them say hello to what's beginning. This presbytery can help your church make good endings, so that you can make good beginnings. Let's work together.