

The Challenge Of Continual Change

Grasping The Reality That Your Church Is Already Changing

"We don't want our church to change!" Too late. Your local church is more *organism* than organization. It is a living thing. It was born, it has a certain level of health at this point, and it will die. The average lifespan of a local church is about 70 years – roughly the same as a human life. All living things change continually. When a plant stops changing, it is dead. Your church is changing as each day goes by, for better or for worse. Are you leading the change or responding to it? This article discusses the biblical concepts on changes in the church, relevant research, and one potential service available to you from BMW.

THE CHANGING CHURCHES OF SCRIPTURE

God, His Truth, His standard of righteousness, the nature of sin, the basic desires of men and women, and the means and method of salvation do not change. Yet the Bible is equally clear that cultures, eras and individuals change. The calling of Abraham, the Law of Moses, the captivity of Israel, the work of Christ, and the grafting in of the Gentiles to the New Covenant were all events that marked dramatic change. In fact, the work of God's Word and the Holy Spirit upon the human soul – the process of sanctification – is change. Repentance is change. Spiritual growth is change.

CHANGES IN THE EARLY CHURCHES

The first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:40-47) had all of the essential elements of a church, and yet it lacked the structure and well-developed teaching that the churches in Asia Minor developed under Paul's teaching 30 years later. Beginning in Acts 10, the churches took on a different flavor as Jews who had never followed the events of Jesus' life, and Gentiles, swept into local churches. Leaving the synagogue model, churches in any given city were made up of a network of house-churches (Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19). The apostles teaching gave room for this flexibility of form.

THE CHANGING CHURCHES OF REVELATION

The command to repent (change) is directed at believers and churches almost as much as at unbelievers in the Scriptures. The oft quoted Revelation 3:20 states, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." Look at the context. It was directed to a *local church* in Laodicea, a wealthy church that was perhaps only 40 years old and had the best things money could buy. In fact, the admonitions of Revelation 2 and 3 are directed at local churches that were not very old. They had started well, but despite some virtues and achievements, they had changed for the worse and offended Jesus Christ. They were in need of some serious changes.

Now, we are a combination of all five! This complication of what local churches are creates huge confusion when any attempt is made to change something for biblical reasons. Church leaders must be very careful to explain the reasons why any changes are being made. There are plenty of wrong reasons.

DRIFT AND BIBLICAL RESTORATION

Because local churches are constantly changing, though at times imperceptively, their leaders need to consistently evaluate *1) the church's drift from the biblical basics and 2) how effective their programs are in carrying out true biblical ministry*. Virtually every church drifts into institutional deadness over time. Church leaders need to periodically rehearse with their congregations the biblical basics of what a church is, and realize just how much "cultural context" surrounds those basics.

Relevant Research

As a living organism, your church goes through the phases of any living thing. Research done by church consultants, organizational development consultants, and our experience with the church over centuries, shows that each local body of believers goes through several phases from birth to, in many cases, death.

A BIRTH WITH A MAN

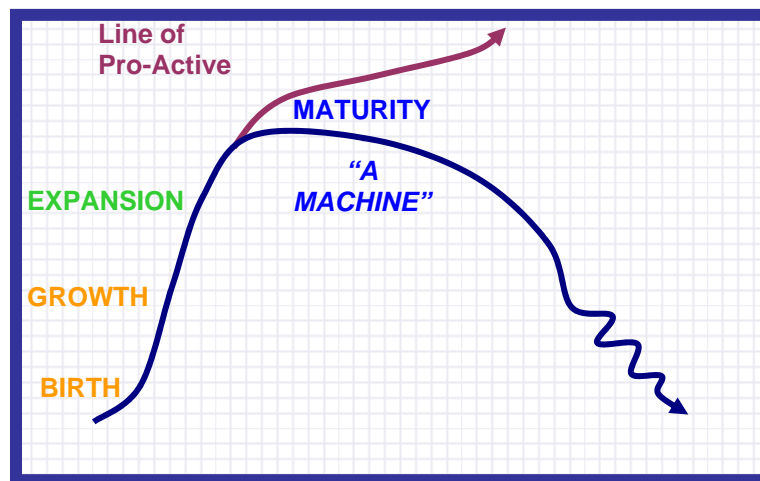
In the beginning, a Bible-believing local church is typically started by a man or a group of people with a vision and a mission. The little church, often meeting in a home, a school or a storefront, begins with enthusiasm, expectation, a commitment to Scripture, and a desire to impact its community and culture.

A MOVEMENT - EXPANSION

As those initial years go by, the newness and effectiveness of the church normally multiplies the church's size and momentum: the congregation grows, the ministries and ministry positions multiply, programs are started with purpose, and the church calendar fills. The initial vision is becoming reality.

A MACHINE - MATURITY

As the institution grows (size + structure + time), so does institutionalism. Informal routines from the early days are replaced by procedures and guidelines for each ministry, and the leadership tree needs more branches. The building, grounds and vehicles require increasing attention. Programs and church traditions are imported to meet the evangelistic or discipleship needs of the expanding demographic groups within the church. If handled well, the church becomes a well-oiled machine.



The Bell Curve Of Organizational Effectiveness

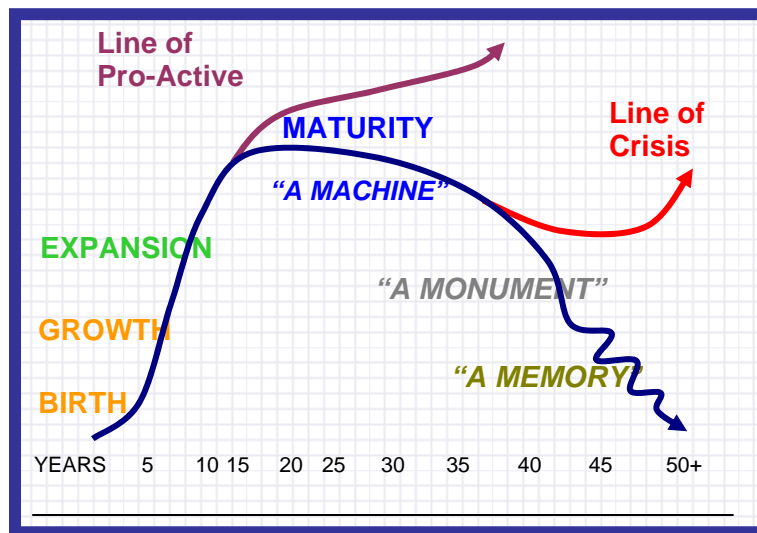
A MONUMENT - DECLINE

Over time, and almost imperceptively, the growth and momentum of the church peak and then begin to wane. Content that their full-service church is meeting the needs of existing families, the congregation becomes inward-focused and ministries move into maintenance mode. Church leaders, riding the "crest of the wave" become complacent, believing that the programs and methods that brought them success will sustain that success.

But as time goes by, those in ministry forget the “why” of ministry. Leaders seldom ask, “Why do we have this ministry, program or service?” The importance of the principle is replaced by the importance of the program. Ministry patterns become traditions and take on an almost sacred significance. When the church began, change and flexibility was the norm. But now, the machine is humming, and there is little incentive to change a good thing.

A MEMORY - DEATH

Another five or ten years go by. The young people marry ... but take their new families elsewhere. Then some key families start attending another congregation. Visitors don't return. Church leaders who see the attrition typically feel they must do something. Unfortunately, many churches make no meaningful change until they are in the death spiral, then they act hastily and pragmatically. They have not taken the time to seek the Lord about pro-active change, so they end up being driven by fear.



The Bell Curve Of Organizational Effectiveness

RESPONSE TO CHURCH DECLINE

What can the church leadership do? Fortunately, there are solid answers to this question, and BMW has put these in the third of the Change Workshops, *Tradition and Transition*. In this workshop we discuss

- Five Responses to Church Decline
- What Changes in a church and What Doesn't
- Why Change is So Difficult
- The Important Role of Leadership in Change
- The Seven Pillars of Positive Change

It is possible to lead your congregation through change without causing a church split. This 8 hour workshop, part of the Companion Church Concept, is provided to help your leadership team establish a strategy for managing change to fulfill your vision for the future. If you would like to know more about this and the other workshops, please check out our website at www.biblicalministries.org or contact Jerry Smith, Director of Church Relations at jsmith@biblicalministries.org.

