Final Summary Paper

Change Assessment

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**Introduction**

Change is something that is constant and must be accepted as such. We live in a changing world that will only change more quickly as time goes on. It is a fast-paced world that we live in with new technologies, a shifting culture whose identities often change, and a place where meaning is believed to be fluid and objective. Information, current events, and news about popular trends and products comes at people and their organizations at an ever increasing rate, even an alarming rate, and this is difficult to keep up with both personally and within an organization. New levels of success cry out to be reached both personally and corporately.

To complicate matters, people move quickly from state to state and around the world as our organizations are often global, which causes fluctuations in stability. People move, are transferred for jobs and there is fallout in personal lives as this happens. In addition, we now have a workforce that both includes aging baby-boomers (as is the case with this researcher), and very young adults and everyone else in between, each offering their own value if they are skilled and have the necessary work ethic. However, in this twenty-first century, the young, energetic, and innovative worker is often more valued and those who are from an older generation are used, but often not appreciated for who they are and what they can offer.

In all of this, one thing seems constant and that is change. Even churches and other religious not-for-profit organizations have to keep up with, accept, and manage constant change within and outside of itself. Change must be managed in this ever evolving and fast-paced organizational world and must be managed well if the transition period, including the neutral zone of that transition period, is to help and not ultimately hurt people with a goal of a healthy New Beginning.

This analysis of change in a not-for-profit organization, namely a church, will serve to explain the process of change that occurred over several years within that organization. This organization is a large church in a small, Southern town that was a place of employment for both the researcher and her husband for several years.

## Scope and context for change

This not-for-profit church organization's history includes beginning in the late 1970s and having a series of new pastors appointed once the founding pastor left. The second pastor was a good follow-up leader to the founder, in that he did not contradict much of what the founder originally did and was a friendly, encouraging figure. Though he had a different philosophy of ministry and came at the leading of this congregation with a different emphasis, historically within it is well documented that this second pastor was a beloved leader in the second phase of the organization. Though, there were some who were unable to forget that founding pastor and no matter

what that second pastor, or any subsequent pastor, did he could not please that core of people who preferred the founding pastor.

Enter young Pastor/Leader Number 3 of this organization (going forward, "Number 3"). Energetic, young for a pastor and ready to make changes, this excellent preacher and strong personality entered the scene from a think-tank kind of academic mentality which he projected to his congregation. This is what attracted the congregation to this strong leader. He had come from leading another not-for-profit organization connected to a nearby university. This researcher was not there in the early days of this pastor's leadership. But, indications are that things went well within the congregation for the first couple of years of his tenure. However, Number 3 found many things to roll up his sleeves and work on in the first several years. Some young parishioners were eager for these upcoming changes and many "old-timers" were definitely not. Quite a few were caught in the middle when they were faced with this change to a new, younger pastor and some of which were also overwhelmed and resisted radical changes that he made.

Without much warning, the beginning of a new way of "doing church" was put into motion. The first of the changes that Number 3 took on was to fire the long-term choir director whose skills in that role was waning. The goal was to have more relatable and beautiful music. Next, Number 3 hired a new Director of Worship and Music and asked him to re-order the services to be very family oriented so that children were included throughout the

services each week. To do this, Number 3 took away the two overlapping Sunday School hours, putting a Sunday School hour for both adults and children between the two services, doing away with a tradition of Sunday School during church services, and moving away from adult only worship. This was a difficult adjustment for some older members. A third very early morning service, a favorite of some old-timers, was canceled. On the heels of this difficult change of having a different way of doing worship, Number 3 took away a beloved small group structure that the church had held for at least a couple of decades where people stayed with their group and met every Sunday after church. The advantage here was a small group that one could be close with and learn through the years with and simply do life with. These were meant to remain an indefinite structure, though only a small core of people actually participated in these groups, called teaching fellowships, which at least internally was the reason for cutting them out. The reason for doing this was not well communicated to the members. The decision was tied into the decision to put Sunday School hour between the two services. Also, instead of having the groups focused around age and stage of life, Number 3 wanted the Sunday School classes to be content focused. The groups were simply taken away without much explanation.

Lastly, a couple of years after these changes were afoot, Number 3 hired an unsuspecting executive director to help him manage the chaos. When this happened, because of the country's economic situation and the

economic hardships of churches and other not-for-profits throughout the nation at that time, the budget took a nose-dive and something of an emergency measure had to be undertaken. Number 3 and his new executive director, only short months after the executive director had arrived on the scene, had to scramble to make some changes. The new director noted that the church was staff heavy and something needed to be done about that considering the recent financial downturn. These changes included the swift termination of the employment of five long-term, beloved staff and congregation members. This threw the church staff into a great deal of turmoil and made many in the congregation feel unhappy and unsettled. Many felt that this was the fault of the new executive director who was unaware of the previous turmoil, and other problems that had contributed to what seemed like hasty decisions. When that turmoil was barely resolved, two years later, a much loved twenty-year-long staff pastor was abruptly fired to save more money and to help that pastor move into a new calling that he was much more suited for. He and his much loved and respected counselor wife had to leave the area. The church reels from these fast changes to this day.

## Process for managing change

The three phases of transition in change as put forth by Bridges (2009) are the ending, the neutral zone, and the new beginning. This researcher would like to review the three phases of the change that took place

implemented by the pastor/leader Number 3 several years ago to evaluate how the management of these changes was processed. The first question is whether the organization was ready for the changes that would eventually occur. "A manager must learn to understand the nature of change and take a proactive role in communication before, during and after the change" Stevens (1992). Did this occur? Was this church in a position to weather large sweeping changes? Were those things considered beforehand as Stevens (1992) referred to? Was the effort of implementing these changes worth doing? We can say that the organization was possibly viewed by the top leaders as being ready for a change back when Number 3 was originally installed. Afterall, the church had been doing things the same way since before the 1980s. Worship styles had generally changed throughout America, methods of reaching people had changed, and even aesthetics and the way the space looked needed to be updated and upgraded to more modern times. So, these things had to happen to bring the church to a place of more relatability to its surrounding target area and the group it was hoping to reach through its mission.

Was this congregation ready for these changes? Possibly, yes, but in other ways, no. Was the congregation prepared for that ending of a former stage of its life? To this question, the answer seems to be that the ending of a past way of doing things was not properly handled by this top leader and the board of directors of the church. To properly handle an ending of a phase

of an organization, Bridges (2009) says that there are many things to do to ensure that the transition period is managed as well as possible. The three periods of transition that Bridges (2009) identifies are summarized this way. "Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had." And, "Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational... the 'neutral zone.'" Finally, "Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning." This process was not initiated well.

All indications point to the fact that the first of this trio of steps or stages was not properly handled at this church. People were not given the time needed to process the changes that were ahead, specifically by first having a time to grieve the "old identity" it had to acknowledge what would be lost. This was a first step in a series of unfortunate events that occurred that ultimately lead to a failure in leadership that was almost catastrophic to the organization. As was learned later from Bridges (2009), "Where there is change there is transition". This first step is to manage the endings that humans experience in change so that there can be the rest of the transition period without leaving people as "survivors" of a change, people who are experiencing what Bridges (2009) indentifies as guilt, anxiety, resentment, self-absorption, and stress. If this first of the three phases of transition in change were handled well, the next phase of the neutral zone could have been experienced in a much more positive way.

Speaking of the neutral zone, was that recognized and processed in

this transition period of change? It doesn't seem that it was. As Number 3 began firing people, there was a huge backlash. Congregants became sad, fearful, and angry about these sudden changes. The board of directors of the organization seemed to, at first, go along with and voted positively for the changes that the leader conveyed needed to happen: such as, the firing of the long-time choir director and the hiring of a new worship director, the change in services and subsequent decision to take two Sunday School hours down to one, the sudden inclusion of young children throughout all services, the teaching fellowships being discontinued, and the ultimate firing of some well loved staff members, along with some salary cuts across the board. However, once the main leader, and later his executive director, made some of these changes, the board of directors talked among themselves and also to general congregants and had their minds changed on some of these decisions. Once this happened, there was a retaliation from some on the board against the top leaders and as a result, chaos ensued for years.

Bridges (2009) talks about the fact that during the transition phase of a change, certain psychological adjustments need to happen with individuals and groups for there to be a smooth transition to the new beginning that is hoped for in any major organizational change. Also, there must be a clear purpose for any major change. In this situation, did Number 3 have an overall clearly defined **purpose**, for all of the change that he would ultimately implement? He likely did have a purpose, but it was not

communicated to all of the players and in an effective way. This was a major flaw in the process of leading this church through change. He also made many changes, but did not address his overarching goal with the key players.

If Number 3 had a purpose, though not communicated well, did he give **picture** to give its employees, members, and stakeholders of what these changes would look like? No, he did not give a clear picture of the before and after. The picture he tried to paint was that of a radically re-defined church that was more faithful to the Biblical model. This was a good thing, and sounded impressive, but lacked substance. It sometimes came across as overly critical of the current church. There was not a lot of empathy toward current members whom many of which had been around for a very long time. In a way, communicating his picture of before and after, he was critical of the members' "before" and this later backfired. "Part of the task of neutral zone management is to create a 'temporary wilderness' picture in people's minds, a picture that explains and validates what they are experiencing" Bridges (2009).

Following a purpose, a picture, did Number 3 have a **solid plan**? What was the timing for this plan? Was it explained, and was he able to convince key players of this purpose and plan? Again, Number 3, did likely communicate a generic plan to his board of directors and to a few key stakeholders in an attempt to get them behind his decisions. Nonetheless,

the plan was not well thought out, communicated, nor well implemented. It was not specific enough to that church and its history and strengths. By overlooking this, Number 3 came across as unfeeling and out of touch with the common membership. His aspirational goals were lofty, but impractical. This later backfired.

Finally, did Number 3 give a well thought out **part** to these interested stakeholders? Did everyone understand clearly that they each had a part, especially the employees? Were the new hopes, dreams, and methods of these changes adopted? In short, the answer is that some people likely did feel that they were given a part to play in implementing these changes, but many others likely did not. Most congregants that were not a part of the board, and were lower level employees who had no say in what the lead pastor did. They did not understand, at first, why they were key to this organization, why it was important for them to still be there and what they could do to further the mission of this church as an important part of the church. Many were caught in a swirling sense of confusion and chaos. The chaos over so many staff changes and other changes made it so that many were not able to grasp the intended reason for these changes. The purpose was not explained. Many did not grasp the plan since they were not on the inside and were not on the board. So, many did not see the picture of what this church could look like nor enjoy a defined part in these changes. Therefore, it was not successful overall.

## Outcomes from change

This researcher believes that the planned outcome, though not well communicated, was to leave the past behind and begin a more thoughtful way of reaching out to the community. Its intent was also to help the Christian message reach more segments of the surrounding town and the university. The purpose of some of the changes was to expand beyond its wealthy, causasion congregation and reach different segments of the population from different backgrounds and nationalities. This was a worthy goal, but not well handled early in its transition process.

Renewal of the church was eventually reached, in some ways, through a series of difficult follow-up congregational meetings, communications and decisions that had to be made to deal with the aftermath of what seemed like sudden changes coming in quick succession. At first, the church was probably strengthened by a couple of the initial changes that were made. But, as changes continued to happen, and because of a messy process, fewer people supported them. Many long-time members left disgruntled. This is likely the case because of several mistakes that were made by the main leader in the process of communicating a clear purpose for the changes and in the lack of a clearly laid out plan for all future changes. The transition period was handled poorly and the new beginning that was sought after was delayed. It seems that Number 3 used the method of "Command" where he enforced a change, told people how it was going to be and what was to

happen. He more or less imposed his will on the church without getting proper buy in from all involved. He would tend to almost punish leaders who complained or didn't like what was going on, as described in the unpublished article from class regarding techniques for leading through change.

Many of the changes happened at a rate of quick succession, as mentioned above, and the decisions took the congregation in different directions each time they were made. The board of directors, wanting to go along with Number 3's ideas, seemed pulled along with each new idea. But, the staff and congregation were left in the dark as far as what the purposes were for the smaller, incremental changes, and also with the overall plan was. People did not understand what the outcome was going to be, nor where the organization was ultimately going. In the transition, people needed to understand to grasp the changes and it doesn't seem that they did. Also, their emotions through the process were overlooked.

The people experiencing changes within the church were not well managed through the transition period. Transition is different from change, Bridges (2009) states. "Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place" Bridges (2009). This first step of the change was ignored, this process of helping people with the ending that must occur first to be able to head into the neutral zone was not considered. It seems that the planned outcomes for the changes were

several layers deep. Were those changes effective? In some ways, this researcher would say that yes, some excellent outcomes did occur over a period of years because of the changes that were implemented within this church. Worship got much better under the new Worship Director. More people could enjoy Sunday School classes and so on. However, people were not well handled. There were too many mishandled messages and too many problems that could have been avoided. There were too many strong, uncaring communications of the change effort which caused hurt and pain in the members and staff.

What eventually happened was that Number 3 became discouraged because of the resistance he faced. His great ability and skill began to be of interest to people and organizations outside this church. Since there was so much turmoil during the neutral zone of the transition, Number 3 began focusing his energies on higher academic pursuits and in starting other entities outside this congregation. As he became more and more personally successful that way, he leaned away from his church responsibilities and eventually had to step down. The church lost a powerful leader because they could not handle a further change of having a pastor who was focused elsewhere. The congregation could not accept his double focus and he could not understand why the church wouldn't allow it, so he could not stay. The executive director was willing to step up to the Number 4 role, but was not given the opportunity to lead the church into a time of stability and return to

the original mission. Though he wanted to focus his energies there and had the skills and desire necessary to lead the congregation to the next stage of, (finally) a new beginning, he was not given that opportunity by the board of directors. He ended up moving on to his next calling. Number 3 left the pastorate all together.

## Analysis of the change

This researcher believes that the most important thing to have done was to think ahead and follow the four P's as laid out in the Bridges (2009) book. One, there should have been a very real purpose, not just a desire to change things for a vaguely inspiring vision of the future. "Management fails to fully understand and apply pre-change, during change and post-change methods that stress leadership, commitment, good communications, and team acknowledgement/involvement. Unnecessary changes or change for change's sake should be avoided" Stevens (1992).

Also, key stakeholders should have been given the opportunity to properly grieve the losses of the "old way of doing things" and the old identity that the church enjoyed for decades. This grieving should have happened, especially where it came to the loss of loved staff members, and should have been allowed and played out for as long as was necessary. But, this could not have happened without an understanding of the purpose of these changes. Also, people needed to be brought through changes with compassion. "People seem to 'overreact' to a change when they are reacting

more than we are. But when we think that way, we overlook two things: first, that changes cause transitions, which cause losses, and it is the losses, not the changes, that they're reacting to: and second, that it's a piece of *their* world that is being lost, not a piece of ours,…." (Bridges, 2009). Number 3 knew where he was going with his vision, but he did not properly bring people along with him.

Next, there should have been a clearly thought out plan covering all aspects of transition over the course of several years. Communication of this plan and outcome is key to this part of the process. The purpose and a clear plan should have been communicated to everyone involved. This lack of clear communication lead people blindly into changes that they couldn't keep up with. There should have been a willingness to listen openly and to hear from all sorts of people in these changes. As Butcher explains in the larger collection of unpublished articles from class, "Managing Through Change", a leader should "Communicate, communicate, communicate." Also, "Allow for an emotional response." And, "Proactively address the negative effects of less staff for the same work". He gives other suggestions, but this researcher would have used these to work toward early processing for people, even for adjusting to less staff and having to accommodate for that. Both the ending phase and the neutral phase of transition could have been better handled by the implementation of a different style of leadership during this period.

This researcher would have liked to use the "Whole-System Planning" style of leading as laid out in the article "Techniques for Leading Organizations Through Change" that was used in the course. In this technique, people are gathered together in a room. This could be for all top leaders in the church, or possibly open to all members, and could be done as a three day retreat, or simply as three day long seminars on consecutive Saturdays. This researcher believes that this method would have worked well with this group. The idea is to spend a day focusing on and celebrating the past. Talk about it and let leaders and others tell great stories of wonderful times in the past of the church, stories from the time of its beginning and going forward. Have a time for grief and sadness. Come up with a tangible way to let people celebrate, but also grieve. Let people process in small groups and individually the loss of what went before. The next day should totally focus on the present, on what is going well in the church and also what is not. Focusing on strengths here, as the article points out, is a great idea. The last day should be a day focusing on the future of the organization. This is where Number 3 could have laid out his plan, why things had to change and how he was going to do that. Getting feedback from people would be important. If this style of leadership had been implemented, Number 3 and the board of directors would have had a much better grasp on what should have been done ultimately. Taking time to listen to people through these days, would have been a better way to handle change and its

transition period. It is how this researcher would have processed the transition time of change, if possible.

Once leaders, staff, and the congregation understood and were behind the new direction of the church, many of the controversies, financial crises, and even some of the later staff downsizing might have been avoided or at least better accepted.

This church in a small college town has gone through a lot of change in a relatively short period of time. The transition period of this change was not handled well in the opinion of this researcher. Going forward, this church cannot fix the past. However, the recommendation for the future is to stabilize for a time-being. Provide congregants and staff with some season of rest. With so many changes in recent years that eventually lead to the loss of the two top leaders, the gifted senior pastor and the skilled executive director, cannot be undone. However, this can be avoided in the future by allowing the church to regain its footing in the new form, restoring its basic ability to worship, grow and provide community for those involved in the church. "Organizations and change, like the butterfly and shopping mall transitions, go through similar stages of change. The stages are inevitable, whether the change results in a negative or positive outcome" Stevens (1992). And as Stevens (1992) also makes clear in his article, there is the before, during, and after a change. These three processes must be managed well in this large church going forward if change is to be positive and

uplifting so that the organization can renew itself and not move toward the

organizational stage of death that Bridges (2009) warns about. Lasting

change and continued renewal is possible with this organization.

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