

Buckle Up - Congregational Change Isn't Easy

Peter Steinke had an article, [Buckle Up: Congregational Change Isn't Easy](#), in the November 16, 2010 issue of the [Christian Century](#) magazine. The article was adapted from his latest book, "[A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope](#)."

It was good to read a respected leader such as Steinke acknowledge in print just how tough leading change is. And that there are as many "failures" as "successes."

Despite the scores of books, workshops and seminars devoted to transformational leadership, most congregations and leaders are not prepared to institute change on a systemic level. Yet we desperately need training—training that acknowledges three key factors:

- 1) *Arduous effort is needed to move an emotional system to a new way of seeing itself.
Fear and other emotions complicate all efforts.*
- 2) *Many pastors are not prepared to do transitional work in congregations.*
- 3) *It's absolutely critical that churches connect serious change with mission.*

What I don't like about the article is that Steinke names only 3 key factors when I can think of at least 2 more:

- 4) Sound business planning and management.
- 5) Sustainable market share of the church-going audience.

I realize a short article can't cover all the bases, but no amount of re-setting the congregation's mission will overcome poor financial planning and management, or just plain lack of money. Many congregations rely on rental income but are poor property managers and are balancing their budgets by under-funding capital repairs and/or staffing.

We are solidly in an era of "spiritual but not religious," (which actually means, "individual personal preference but not personal sacrifice for the common good.") Which means over-all decline in volunteer organizations of all types - including churches of all types. Which in turn means that our market audience is in decline and fragmenting. Which means that no amount of re-setting the congregation's mission will necessarily overcome being located in an area of declining church attendance.

In other words, even Steinke's good advice about the perils of transformational leadership are, by themselves, only necessary but not sufficient, to address the total situation many congregations and their leaders must deal with.

And by failing to address to the total picture, articles and books on transformational leadership create false hopes that only further destroy the morale of leaders and congregations.

David Ewart

Resources for Worship, Leadership, and Congregational Health

Having said this, I wish I'd seen an article like this 20 years ago. It would have gone a long way to help myself and many other colleagues recognize that congregational behaviours like:

- engage in conflict,
- suffer a malaise of spirit,
- decline in some statistical manner,
- adapt to their most immature members,
- fail to mobilize people's gifts and energy,
- surrender to apathy or complacency,
- do little planning,
- become turned in on themselves,
- blame outside forces (or perhaps one another) for their depression, and/or
- be unable to make effective, appropriate changes.

which Steinke identifies as systemic responses to mission drift were just that: systemic responses to mission drift and not to me personally or to my leadership.

I highly recommend the [article](#), but with qualifications.

David Ewart,

www.davidewart.ca