

Why Do We Need To Encourage Flexibility?

A church that I visit often has posted two common church rules on the wall as a means of making fun of inflexibility in church communities. The first rule says, "We've always done it that way." The second rule says, "We've never done it that way." Have you heard similar statements made seriously in your church by people who are possessive about "the way things are done around here"?

Most churches simply cannot expect growth from doing things the same old way. Mainline Protestant denominations declined significantly during the last 35 years because they have not adapted to cultural changes in the world. Adapting does not necessarily mean abandoning "traditions" as some seem to fear, but it does require some new approaches.

If we embrace change rather than avoiding it, we have an opportunity to significantly improve our response to the changing world. We need to think and act past "the way something was always done" to improve on the old way or find a new and better one. Our churches must become more flexible, more willing to adapt to the new conditions where we find ourselves. The irony of the statements in the two ironic rules gets to the heart of this: to adapt, you must be willing to adapt.

A terrific little book on adaptation is the best-selling fable by Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved My Cheese: An A-Mazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and Life.*¹ Some of its valuable lessons about flexibility are:

- *Change happens whether we like it or not.* For example, in the 1960's the norm that most people felt they should attend church changed. So churches now need to reach people and bring them to church rather than simply expecting them to come to church on their own.
- *Only through change can we achieve a new and better place, but our fears often keep us from reaching that place.* Many people are uncomfortable with making direct efforts to bring new people to church.
- *Being flexible and willing to change means overcoming the fear of what the change will bring.* Generally our fear is worse than the change itself. When people make new friends and bring them to church, they find the process of developing better relationships is especially meaningful.
- *Nothing improves until we change ourselves.* We need to change what we *believe* so we can change what we *do*. We will not bring new people to church until we truly believe that each of us is responsible for sharing in Jesus' Great Commission to go and make disciples.
- *A person cannot change unless he or she is willing to let go of the past and to begin to trust what lies ahead.* This should be easier for us who believe in God. But life is a risk. God's

¹ New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998.

call requires us to stop holding on to our false sense of understanding and control, and to look forward to the surprises (and costs) of discipleship.

- *People who initiate change are more successful than those who merely react or adjust to it.* Effective flexibility means anticipating, monitoring and quickly adapting to change, changing ourselves, enjoying the change, and being ready to quickly change again and enjoy it.

So we need to be willing to change, but how do we know we are making the right changes? How do we develop a culture that works in today's environment without losing our sense of community and stability? The answer lies in being clear about our shared and compelling vision. If we understand where God is calling us, we need to change to answer that call. The call to every Christian church involves helping Jesus make more and better disciples (Matthew 28:19-20) and loving God and one another (Matthew 22:37-40). Each of these activities involves a journey or adventure of creating better relationships and requires us always to be flexible and open to change. Jesus' commandments tell us our church needs to change if we are not experiencing a joy so overpowering that we feel compelled to share it with others.

Perhaps it is not surprising that, along with making fun of inflexibility, the church that ironically posted these two rules experienced a forty percent increase in average Sunday attendance over just fourteen months.