Managing Change

If there is one subject in church circles that can be guaranteed to generate conflict and lead to heightened emotions, then it is change. The story is told of the vicar who wanted to move the piano from one side of the church hall to the other. When the plan ran into opposition, he decided to move the piano by one foot each year until finally it ended up where he wanted it!

On the face of it, it is hard to understand why there should be so many stories of grief. Change is going on all around us. We are used to it. When our cars, our televisions, or our fridges break down, we replace them with new models. Personal computers, video and DVD recorders, the availability of cheaper foreign travel, satellite television and mobile phones have revolutionised our lifestyles. If a church grows, it changes. New people arrive and form relationships with existing church members. Soon the church is fuller than it once was; there are more people to relate to; the dynamic of the congregation changes; new structures of pastoral care are required, and so on.

In a world of rapid change, change in the church is a necessity. Figures presented to the Lichfield Diocesan Larger Churches consultation in November 2003 suggested that those churches which had introduced something new in the previous year were far more likely to have seen growth than those which had stayed the same. With the culture changing all around us, for the church to stay the same is to go backwards. It means that we grow increasingly out of touch with the people we wish to reach.

Coping with loss

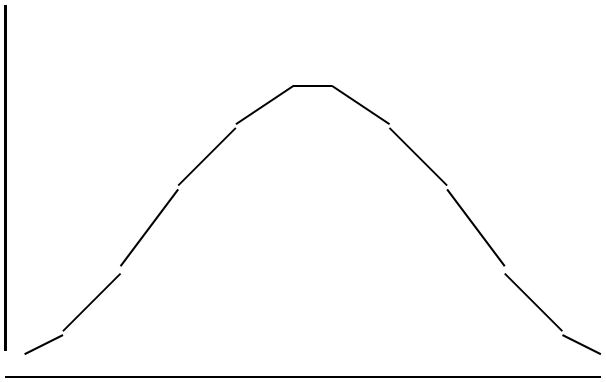
On the other hand, experience has shown that change can be fraught with difficulty. Change always causes bereavement, the loss of the old. And usually it is the bad results that affect people before the good ones. A church that needs to expand to accommodate more worshippers must go through a time of dislocation and the rubble produced by building work before the hoped for new building is complete. Other changes can produce metaphorical rubble, the sense that all is not as it should be, before the positive results become apparent. The creation of a new ministry team, for example, changes most of the key relationships in a church and can lead to people no longer being quite sure where they fit.

As well as the necessary loss involved in any process of change, many people have bad experience of previous changes which lead them to expect a similar outcome in the future. There may also be a high degree of personal investment in the present situation, acting as a barrier to change or recognition of the desirability of change. A congregation may bemoan the fact that younger people no longer attend, without being willing to make the changes that would enable younger people to feel at home in their worship. Then there is the fact that negotiating change successfully is not an easy task. There are many pitfalls on the way. It can be easier not to try than to risk failure.

The importance of discontent

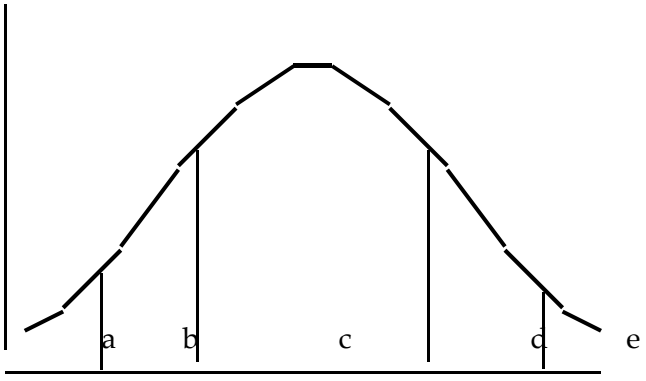
When leading a change of any kind, it is important to recognise that the amount and pace of change that is possible is determined by the amount of *discontent* that is present. If everyone is satisfied with the *status quo* no change will be possible. But discontent will create a desire to change and act as a spur to analyse the problems of the present situation and to find solutions. The leader or group of leaders who wish to initiate change must therefore create dissatisfaction with the present situation. Alternatively, they could set out to discover, by listening to the people, where the present sources of discontent lie, and seek to make the kind of changes that people already want. However, having created the momentum for change, change itself must follow. If the desired change does not happen or the process of change is aborted half-way the discontent that has been created or unearthed will begin to focus on the leaders who failed to satisfy the desire for change they had created. Leaders who wish to introduce change must therefore understand not only how to introduce it with as little disruption as possible but also how to create the right kind of dissatisfaction and how to judge when the levels of dissatisfaction are right for change.

The difficulty about the latter is that people are not all persuaded at the same rate. Below is an approximation to what is known as a "standard distribution curve":



This suggests that in relation to any given variable, most people tend to bunch toward the middle, with fewer people at the extremes. For example, when asked to rate their enjoyment of a film at between 1 and 10, most people will go for the range 4 to 7 leaving a minority rating the film either 8 to 10 or 1 to 3. In relation to change, it will be the minority who are either generally keen on change or generally opposed to it. Most people will be found somewhere between.

To take this further, the area beneath the curve can be divided into five segments:



Segment (a) consists of the small group of "innovators". These are the people who like change and often initiate it. The danger is that they will want to take the change forward at a speed the rest of the church is not ready for. Another is that they become personally involved with the proposed change so that it becomes "X's idea".

Segment (b) are the "early adopters". These are usually more in number than the innovators and often include people with influence in the congregation. If this group is persuaded of the desirability of change, it is usually best to allow them to be the ones to persuade the others. As one vicar said, "Win the key old ladies, set them loose to 'gossip the good news of what's going on', and you're home and dry" (Administry Paper 87.6).

Segment (c) are the "early majority", the ones ready to be persuaded by the early adopters. The distribution curve demonstrates that this is the key group. When the early majority are convinced of the rightness of the change, it is as well to start the machinery to bring it about. Otherwise, their original enthusiasm may turn to frustration, their discontent with the *status quo* turn to criticism of the leadership for the slow pace of change.

The "late majority" in segment (d) are often persuaded by the process of change itself. Once they see the change as inevitable and, more importantly, what the majority wants, they are ready to adjust to it.

Segment (e), the "laggards", are the ones who will probably remain opposed to the change even after it has taken place and will always be ready to say how much better things were before the change. The standard distribution curve suggests that there will always be some of these people, which means it is a mistake to delay any change until there is unanimity in the congregation. Adopting this policy will lead to a much greater level of discontent, as all the other groups become frustrated.

Successful change

The key to introducing change, then, is to persuade the early majority. Here there are some important considerations:

Listen. It is vital to know what these people think about the subject under discussion and for them to know that their opinions have been heard and are valued. Sometimes, the fact that a person knows they have been listened to with respect and their feelings recognised will reconcile them to a change even if they are not sure whether they support it or not.

Explain. The perceived problem and the reasons for the plan being adopted to solve it will need to explained over and over again to an ever-widening group of people. It is unwise to assume that people have understood the first time they hear something. Often they will have several points needing clarification.

Value criticism. This will often sharpen up the process of planning and suggest problems that had previously been unforeseen.

Recognise the disadvantages of the proposed change and be open about them. A dentist promotes confidence in his patients by saying, "This may hurt," before a procedure. When it does, they are prepared and may even have a sense of working with him.

"**Work in the negative force field.**" The overall drive of the congregation is a balance between the positive energy of those in favour of the change and the negative energy of those opposing it. Taking time to listen to the opponents, allowing them to voice their point of view and recognising the feelings of loss that the change will create, will help to reduce the negative drive of those against the change. They will know that, while they may have not gained their point, they have at least been treated with respect.

Courtesy. Avoiding rushing the change, rubbishing the objections or using spiritual blackmail ("this change is the Lord's will"). Avoid becoming too personally involved. Above all, keep the rules. Changes brought about behind the backs of PCCs or otherwise disregarding established consultation procedures always store up problems for the future.

Below is a flow chart adopted from chapter 6 of John Finney's *Understanding Leadership*, which is the source of much of this article: