

Are You Ready for Change?

As you are reading this article, you are aware of the changes that *The Connection*, the newsletter of the Capitol Area South District is undergoing. As I shared in the last print edition of *The Connection*, the newsletter was published under the former Columbus South District and the Capitol Area South District for thirty-nine years. I inherited the editor's job when I came into the office in 2006.

District Superintendent Hank Stringer advised me earlier this year that the CAS Board of Directors wanted to cut the cost of the newsletter by eliminating the print edition by the end of the year. So here we are in a new year with a new format. If you receive the West Ohio Conference *News.NET*, then you are familiar with the format we are using in the district newsletter.

This fall I began to research ways that we might continue to distribute the newsletter via email and cut costs. It was apparent to me that the services of Constant Contact – the host/provider of this email service would probably be the way to go. So during December, I set out to recreate the December newsletter (the last in a hard copy edition) by publishing a test version using the Constant Contact format.

In putting the newsletter together, I experienced that word that is so difficult for us in the church -- *CHANGE*. We heard a lot about "change" during the election this fall. But change in the church is usually an entirely different matter. Most of the time we are comfortable with the way things are, and the last thing we want to do is to *change*.

As I put my test version of the newsletter together on the Constant Contact site, it was a continual learning experience for me. I had become used to putting the newsletter together in a certain way that had become familiar to me. It was *comfortable*. But now I had to learn new things and figure out different ways of putting the articles that I want in the newsletter on this new format. All in all, it has been another learning experience for me.

In the church whenever we confront change, we face many of these same issues except on a much larger scale. In the Alban Weekly email recently, there was an article entitled "The Messy Work of Renewal" by Daniel P. Smith and Mary K. Sellon (click [HERE](#) to go to the article itself on the Alban website). In their article they describe the hard and difficult work of renewal in the church. "Renewal" is another way of talking about *change*. As they note, "The church seeking renewal (change) must look beyond simply improving its programs and its building, though they may ultimately be changed. Pastors and laity leading renewal in their declining congregations are asking people to make fundamental shifts in their perspectives, their attitudes, and their behaviors."

These writers point out that your congregation is what it is today not because of what a bad pastor did to it, or because the neighborhood has changed, or because our culture is going to hell in a hand basket. They note that your congregation is what it is today because of how it responded, or failed to respond, to the realities it faced. Smith and Sellon then offer the

challenge, **“What your congregation will be in the future is up to you and other members and how you work together to create something new from the realities you face.”**

While acknowledging that this kind of systemic change/renewal is hard work, Smith and Sellon remind us that it is not a hopeless situation. They comment, “We’ve seen it happen enough times to know that the hope is true and that renewal is possible – not easy, but possible.

Smith and Sellon continue in the article to talk about both the outer and inner aspects of renewal. To move to a new place, a congregation must tend to both. They lift up three phases of work that must be cared for organizationally:

1. Developing readiness: preparing the leaders to lead the congregation in a new direction
2. Surfacing a compelling congregational vision that will guide decision making
3. Developing and implementing strategies that move the congregation toward the envisioned future

Importantly, Smith and Sellon do not leave the *change* issue only at the organizational side. They also discuss what they call the “inner work” that must accompany renewal. They call this the “greatest challenge” for the congregation. They write, “To complete these organizational tasks, the people of the congregation must make inner shifts, making the transition from one way of thinking about the congregation to quite another. During renewal, people let go of what feels right and normal to create a new normal for themselves.”

This inner work has multiple steps in itself:

- It begins with the recognition that something is wrong – that congregational life, while adequate has something missing.
- The next step needs to lead to becoming anchored in a biblical and historical understanding of the purpose of the church.
- When that purpose seems clear, the next step is to name and let go of preconceived notions about the form ministry should take.
- This step leads to a period of genuinely not knowing what to do – it is expectant waiting.
- From this expectant waiting, God’s leading is sensed and a path forward is chosen.
- Finally, actions are aligned with intent, and a new way of being and doing church is created.

Please note that the congregation moves through these steps of transition only as individuals in the congregation are able to move through these shifts.

That is the challenge, isn’t it? **How do we create/allow for the possibility that the members and friends of any given congregation will have the inner strength to make these transitions that Smith and Sellon write about?**

We do know that the possibility of change is always present (if we do not believe that then how and why do we exist as the church of Jesus Christ?). But we also know that change is never easy.

So the *change* that the district newsletter is undergoing is relatively easy and painless for me. However, the change/renewal issues that your congregation may be facing are much more daunting. As Smith and Sellon conclude in their article, “It may help to think of renewal as physical therapy for the body of Christ. The body is renewed as the people engage in practices that develop and strengthen the muscles of Christian discipleship and community. It isn’t easy work, but it’s worth it.”

Is it worth it to you? In my recent article last fall on “Reaching Those Under Forty While Keeping Those Over Sixty,” I quoted Edward Hammett, “In most communities, if the congregation decides to keep the 60 plus crowd satisfied, they will not grow numerically and in time the congregation will die.”

This is a “life and death” matter for your congregation. It is also a “life and death” issue for those we are called to reach with the good news of Jesus Christ in our communities. How is your congregation dealing with facing these renewal issues?