



## **Moving Established Congregations through Change**

by Tom Berlin

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### **1. Learn the story of the church you serve.**

I have found that laity who have been in a church a long time love to talk about the life they have enjoyed there. They feel complimented when you ask them lots of questions about how that church has changed over time and what values have remained the same. If you will spend time with your long-term members learning the history of the church, they will spread the word that you are interested in the life of that congregation. This is important because their greatest fear is that we have a big agenda we are going to try to place on the church regardless of their needs or desires. When you spend time discovering the history, values, and story of the church you serve, you send a message that you are trying to join them on the journey God has been leading for many decades. Unlike the new church pastor, you are not the original leader. You are one of many who have already served and one of many who will lead in the future. Honor the long line of clergy and laity that have gone before you who faithfully pursued God's calling and find ways to compliment them at every turn. Build your credibility by honoring their past.

### **2. From the story, learn the leverage points for future movement.**

In any church you will have some members who are living in God's past and others who long for God's future. Everyone else falls in between. I think it is the pastor's calling to develop a sense of mission and vision for the future of the church along with key leaders whom God has called out of the congregation. Those who are resistant to the future can often be leveraged by their history. They will join your future plans and the vision it supports if you can show that the future you are moving toward is consistent with the values the congregation has held in the past.

### **3. Create a pattern of success connected to your tenure.**

Once I served a church with a very negative spirit. People told lots of failure stories. Worship attendance was down. Morale was low. And they were having a yard sale for the budget. I was complaining about this state of affairs when my wife, Karen, said, "Go make this the most successful yard sale ever. They need to succeed at something." Your job is to change morale or find ways to maintain high morale by helping people succeed. Success in the small things leads to success in more significant goals down the road.

### **4. Articulate a statement of mission and set goals that people are willing to lay down their lives to accomplish.**

One of the biggest problems in the church today is not that so much is at stake but that so little is at stake. One of our key leaders is a top officer of a large corporation. I knew we were doing something right when speaking about his involvement in our church he shared, "Outside of my marriage and children, this has been the most meaningful thing in my life over the last five years."



## 5. Structure around the basics of congregational life.

You must have a solid ecclesiology to lead the church through change. We focus on five basic functions of the church: Worship – Outreach – Evangelism – Fellowship – Discipleship. If the congregation knows their life together is improving and that they are growing spiritually, they are far more open to welcoming newcomers and reaching out to the poor. By attending to the basics, we assure current church members their lives are going to improve even as we focus on those outside the church.

One of the things Floris prided itself on was the care and attention people received as a small church in the old building. We realized that people were not really enjoying that level of care anymore and that in the past it had often been done because people were related and were taking care of family when they became ill. A congregational care ministry was started to bring meals to those who were sick, give rides to the doctor or watch the children of someone having an operation. If we were to grow, we had to have a system of congregational care in place. The message members received, however, was that we cared about our existing members enough to be intentional about their care. By attending to the basics, we assured the current church that life was going to improve even as we continued to focus on those outside the church.

## 6. Know where to spend your credits.

Clergy build up credits as they minister faithfully. Pastors desiring to lead congregational transformation must use these credits carefully to accomplish the most important goals. Learning to spend your credits is more art than science. I think the difference between leading change in an established church and crashing and burning is in large part determined by your ability to know when it is worth spending your credits and when you don't have the credits to accomplish the next goal that is in your mind.

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Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC, was established over 100 years ago and has faced several pivotal change decision points in recent decades in such a way to make possible the dynamic and growing ministry offered today. In the past eight years, the average attendance has grown from 375 to 820. Tom Berlin's email is [tberlin@florisumc.org](mailto:tberlin@florisumc.org). The church's website is [www.florisumc.org](http://www.florisumc.org).