

Changing Change

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I have a lot of conversations with clever, talented, young youth pastors who are eager to unleash their ideas and energy into new or future ministries. Often I hear them say something like this: “When I get into that youth pastor role, I’m going to change everything.”

We don’t have to be rookie youth pastors to share this sentiment. Even those of us who have been in ministry feel that urge, at certain times of the year or after we come back from a conference, to say, “I’m going to change everything.”

Before anyone starts revamping everything, youth pastors should reflect on what change actually means.

The temptation of change

There’s a temptation that comes with leadership, especially new leadership, to change things once one is in charge. Changing things often makes a statement that “we’re leaving the past” (so as to erase the memories of previous leadership) or to demonstrate to those around them that the leader is “in charge.”

Interestingly, most of these types of changes are structural in nature. Mix up the staff, re-assign the volunteers, change the youth group name, re-create youth group night, move the piano, etc., etc. They make a big splash but do not really have the power for creating deep, lasting change. Youth pastors (new and old) must continually realize that, while surface change brings a new look, people and practices often remain virtually the same.

- Does it really matter that volunteers get new “staff” youth group t-shirts when what they really need is training?
- Does it really matter that the youth group name changes but the practices of the youth group stay the same?
- Does it really matter if you use more video in your messages, when students are finding meaning elsewhere?
- Does it really matter that you have a new “vision” for the youth group when there is still little communication with volunteers?

The quick, unreflective fixes to change things on the surface, diverts youth pastors from addressing the deeper issues.

Everything’s got to change!

He sat in my office and told me that he had been to a few meetings at the church and that he was going to take the teaching away from some volunteers who were “boring the students to death.” “I just have to change it because it’s horrible,” he said.

“How do you know?” I asked?

“Because I can tell it’s terrible and it’s not fair to the students.”

“That could be,” I said, “but how do you know that changing the teaching is the best thing to do?”

- Do you know the volunteers?
- Do you know the history of the youth group?
- Do you know the relationships of student to student or student to adult?
- Have you thought about the consequences of the changes you’re going to make beyond the programmatic?
- Have you thought about how you’re going to shepherd your volunteers when you ask them to stop teaching?

I'm not saying my friend was wrong in his assessment. He's smart and he may be on to something. He was wrong about his assumptions, because he had nothing to found them on other than his opinion. If one fails to take the time to understand the history, the relationships, the dynamics, and the hearts and minds of the volunteers, he/she will "solve" one problem and create even more.

Before a youth pastor attempts to change anything, they need to seek to understand and articulate people's reasons for not changing that lame annual camping trip, the 70's youth group name, or Ted and Ethel who have taught Sunday School since the 19th century. Everything doesn't have to change. Everything shouldn't change, until you understand why something is the way it is.

- Do you know *why* some of your volunteers, volunteer?
- Do you know *why* a certain volunteer always wants to go on the retreat?
- Do you know *why* the youth group is sensitive to certain topics, or loves certain traditions?

Whether you think their reasons are good or bad is irrelevant. Changing without understanding benefits only one person— you. And that's not good enough.

What does have to change?

If you're tempted to change anything... or "everything," then start with changing you. You can start by asking important questions to yourself:

- Why do you want to change something? Does the ministry need changing, or are you trying to make a point, position yourself, move someone who makes you feel uncomfortable? Be honest about why you want to bring change.
- Leave the god-speak out of your reasoning. There are times when you might "feel led" or "God is telling you" or "you've prayed about it." But I find that these types of statements don't allow for dialogue or understanding. After all, if "God told you" something, who's doing to want to disagree with that? Be careful to not use your position or god-talk language as a cover for power and manipulation.

Good youth pastors don't change the youth group and volunteers to fit their personality, they learn their context and get close enough to serve within it. This is the essence of the incarnation.

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Change must happen "with" volunteers— not "to" them or "apart from" them. If you can't communicate "your vision for the youth ministry" enough so that others can understand it and articulate it their own words, the group probably isn't ready for change. To change means to change together, which requires patience, dialogue, and searching for what is best for everyone. This is what it means to be the church.

Change agent youth pastors bring about change slowly and carefully, not wanting to crush anyone. Through Jesus we see a life gently and patiently led (what did he do those first 30 years?). Let's not allow change to be a statement or reaction. Let's let it be a healing balm that draws people in. This is redemption.

Everything's got to change. In fact, because of the resurrection, everything is changing as God is putting the world back together. Embracing this change, demonstrated through Jesus, ignites change in the youth pastor, shared change with the volunteers, and lasting change for the faith community. Change is changed to something much more significant.