

Church Ministry: Balancing Tradition and Your Own Objectives

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As one of my students wrote, traditions are a “sore subject for most youth ministers. It is hard to come into [a church], and to have all these grand ideas in your head, and still stick within the bounds of respect for the past traditions of the church.”

All church leaders, pastors, youth ministers, and others whom God has called to leadership in the church, sense a call from God to lead his younger and older people to growth in Christ-likeness. Growth involves change, and some of the methods we want to use to facilitate that development involve changes in church programs or particular ways of doing things. Some of those procedures have been in a particular church for a long time and a tradition has developed whereby the members of the congregation value those programs or practices.

These rituals are sometimes part of the life and work of the whole church and are cherished by the broader congregation, and some traditions are part of the youth group, which the young people look forward to doing each year. Whether the congregation or the youth group has been existence for a long time or not, if a particular program a leader wants to change has been a blessing to the people, they will resist the leader’s desire to change what they perceive as having been a benefit and a joy to them. A program that has been a blessing becomes valued quickly; thus the desire to see it repeated at least annually is formed in the congregation rather soon. A popular program that meets many people’s desires doesn’t have to recur too many times and it is viewed as a valuable tradition. If a leader, especially a new leader, wants to change that program...be careful!

For one reason or another leaders decide it would be good to either make a significant modification in an existing tradition or to eliminate it altogether. Sometimes the reasons given are inadequate. Whether they admit it or not, they just don’t desire to spend the time (often involving a lot of administrative details) to continue a program that was begun by someone else. Sometimes the reason is more altruistic, involving a concern that a good idea the leader has won’t be able to be used due to an existing program that is in the way of implementing the new concept, which he or she truly believes will be more effective.

The leader may be right. The new idea may indeed be a better one. Nevertheless, engaging in certain customs each year meets important needs people have in a social system, and a church, while being much more, does possess the characteristics and dynamics of such a system. People become emotionally attached to these traditions, and when they are significantly changed or eliminated, the people tend to react negatively, often in a strong opposition to the change and to the person(s) perceived as promoting the change. Even if the tradition is not eliminated, but only modified to a rather insignificant degree from the leader’s perspective, the modification may well be seen as very significant from the point of view of the persons in the pew or young people in the youth group.

Traditions accomplish valuable purposes that meet important needs. As sociologist, Dr. Anthony Campolo, has pointed out, all people need roots and wings. Roots, are grounded in tradition, and tradition gives us stability. He identifies at least seven essential benefits of traditions, or rituals: facilitating a sense of belonging, a sense of stability and balance, developing and maintaining identity, a sense of certainty about life, relief from anxiety and other psychological disorders, making and keeping commitments, and binding the community together by taking what happened in the past and making it present.¹

Yet, sometimes changes are needed. Sometimes they are not. How do we determine when to make a change? Answering the following seven questions and proceeding accordingly will help us decide whether to continue with a change we're considering or whether to back off, at least for the present.

Seven Essential Questions before Trashing a Tradition²

First, *Whose needs will this innovation primarily meet?* Honestly now, am I doing this more for myself or for the Lord and his church? To be sure, we who are leaders in the church receive credit for the good things we do, or that occur on our watch, as a matter of course, including the innovations we initiate and implement well. That's not bad; it's a nice fringe benefit. However, it's better to keep in mind the adage, "God will do great things through people who don't care who receives the credit." The question we need to ask ourselves in all candor in God's sight is how much of this is for me?

Second, *Do I have the social capital it will take to implement this change?* As church leaders coming into an existing social system, we are perceived as outsiders, especially from a substantial segment of this subpopulation.³ As business people refer to this phenomenon, they speak of learning the corporate culture. Every social system, e.g., a corporation, a town, a nation, or a church, has a culture which contains norms we must learn, understand, and respect if we are going to live and function well within that context. To effectively lead we thus need to gain their trust which is the basis for a relationship. Are not relationships, both horizontally as well as vertically, at the core of

¹ Anthony Campolo, "Home Improvement," lecture at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Oak Brook, Illinois, September 2, 1998. This reference has been drawn from my essay, "Diffusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church" in *REC FOCUS*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 2003, p. 47.

² The seven questions in this section have been adapted from previous writing I've done on the subject of innovation in the church. Previous versions of the essay containing these questions have been published as "The Need for Initiating and Managing Change" in *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century*, Duane H. Elmer and Lois McKinney (eds.), Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1996, pp. 223-229 and "Diffusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church" in *REC FOCUS*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 2003, pp. 40-61.

³ An exception could be if one is returning to serve in his or her home church, if he or she was raised in that church, especially if his or her family is known and well connected in the church and in the surrounding community. However, even then in some communities and denominations, if the leader left the area for formal education elsewhere, and if he or she has been away for a considerable length of time during which many new people have joined the church, trust issues for some if not most in the congregation and community will have to be resolved over some time before the leader is generally viewed again as "one of us."

the covenant community?⁴

The trust of the people you serve is thus a prerequisite in order to change their traditions, which means you need to have served them well for an extended period of time, a minimum of a year or two and maybe much longer depending on the tradition and the degree of commitment to it that the people, especially key people, have. Furthermore, the support of opinion leaders and official leaders, including the one(s) to whom you are accountable, is required.

Two primary ways that trust is established are through meeting people's needs over time (including caring for them and loving them) and by demonstrating that our values are congruent with theirs.⁵ Over time trust emerges. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this reality. If people don't trust us, they won't support our ideas for change.

I have observed in the churches I've served that each year I could do more, because the longer I was there the more I was trusted. Eventually I heard someone say, "You've served here that many years! You're part of the institution!" In that person's mind I had moved from outsider to part of the community.⁶

Such a movement occurs sooner or later depending on the subculture, and sometimes it never takes place. One day my wife's father was reading the obituaries in the local paper of the small, rural, Southern Illinois community where he and his wife moved after he retired. One notice said the man lived 35 years in the area but wasn't a resident. Thinking that was strange, my life-long Chicago resident father-in-law inquired about that obituary, and the locals told him that only those actually born there were considered residents!

Some time ago I had a conversation with a minister who understood his position as a non-localite. He explained in hyperbolic jest how he gets his church board to approve his programs: "At the first meeting I put forth my idea with enthusiasm and vigor, and then table the matter; I don't let them vote on it. At the next meeting I speak against the concept...and it passes every time!" This perception of ministers as outsiders also explains why many times ideas they have promoted for years are often adopted by the church after the minister leaves.

⁴ Matthew 22:37-40

⁵ This perceived congruence of values is called homophily, literally love of the same, i.e., the degree to which people in a social system see the change agent as having similar values and other characteristics as theirs. See Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 18-19. The concept of homophily is an illustration of what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Corinthians 9:22 TNIV)

⁶ This is one of the reasons why it is imperative to plan on staying a long time in the ministry to which God calls you. It is also why study after study reveals the most effective ministers typically have served 11-13 years (depending on the study) or more in one place.

Thus, a related question for those just starting out in professional ministry is, “Is this innovation to be introduced and implemented in the first year of my service at this church?” If it is anything major or controversial, hold off!⁷ The first year or so should be primarily spent listening to the people very intently. We have to learn who these people are we’ve been called to serve and what are their felt and unmet needs. Only after we know them and their needs can we most effectively implement innovations that will help them meet their needs. One senior pastor told me shortly after he arrived at the church where he was called that he read a book which said he only had a window of 18 months to make his changes, and he was going to waste no time in doing so. A great mistake, as he shortly found out very painfully! When a *new* pastor comes into a church and decides he or she is going to replace the pulpit with a music stand and introduce a praise band in place of the choir to make the worship service more seeker friendly, that leader is setting him or herself up for unnecessary trouble that is counterproductive to accomplishing his or her objectives that will nurture and extend God’s kingdom. This reality exists *regardless* of whether or not the change has intrinsic merit.

The third question is, *Am I perceived as one who listens carefully?* Really listens?! A useful tool to help us answer this question accurately is this one: Can I state in my own words *to his or her satisfaction* what another person is thinking and feeling? This procedure is a good way to communicate to people that you truly understand their concern and the point(s) they are making.

A related question is, “Do I find myself accusing others of not listening, when they are actually just disagreeing with me?” This accusation is a common canard many leaders and other people use today in a conscious or unconscious attempt to justify unwarranted and/or weak concepts and positions. Some actually believe, without sufficient research, that their idea is so good that any intelligent person would have to accept it; they can’t believe any reasonable person would oppose it. A fellow staff member of a church I served, habitually accused people of not listening to him. What he didn’t realize was that they did understand him. They weren’t unintelligent; they just didn’t agree with him on certain matters. One day in a group meeting, when I countered what he was saying, he accused me of not listening. I told him that wasn’t true; I was listening, but I disagreed with him. I asked him if he would like me to repeat exactly what he said. He said, “Yes!” So I recited in my own words, including many of his, precisely what he said, and I explained the point he was trying to make. He dejectedly agreed that is what he said. Then, I proceeded to explain why I disagreed with him. He never again accused me of not listening.

The fourth question can be stated, *Is there a more opportune time for this innovation?* As with personal communication, timing is also a critical factor regarding when a group of people will be most receptive to your message. You have no doubt discovered that your spouse, another family member, an employer, an employee, or a neighbor is much more

⁷ To say this does not mean a youth or any other kind of minister shouldn’t do anything new in his or her first two years. However, anything new should be positively viewed by most if not all the church and, for youth ministers, the young people and their parents in particular.

inclined to listen to a proposal you want to make when certain conditions are favorable. If you want someone to accept an idea you have, it is crucial to wait for a good time *in his or her sight* to present that idea. That is, you hold off until he or she is feeling well, is not burdened with heavy problems, is not being interrupted with a myriad of other matters, and where any additional key factors pertaining to him or her are positive and unlikely to interfere.

Such sensitivity to timing is essential in group communication. If or when the second question above can be answered, “Yes,” it still may not be the best time for the congregation to hear of an innovation. One of many factors could exist that would threaten your idea now, but waiting until a more opportune time could greatly facilitate its adoption, for example, a time when you can obtain the support of key opinion leaders in the church.

Part of this question involves possibly postponing one or more aspects of the change; that is, implementing the change incrementally. Sometimes not requiring the whole pie all at once means you can have and savor part now and the rest later. Consider whether some aspects of the change can be inaugurated now and some another time. People who like what they see will likely want more; then you can implement the rest all at once or in acceptable stages. Being willing to compromise *where Biblically possible* is sometimes wise. Remember, part of Paul’s definition of the love Jesus commanded us to perform (John 13:34-35) is that love does not insist on its own way.⁸

Fifth, *Is the change I want to implement Biblical, moral, and ethical?* Can it be justified by the Scriptural criteria, i.e., does it run counter to anything in the Bible that is prohibited? If either the change itself, or the process of implementing it, conflicts with God’s Word, reject it, for the sake of God, his people, and your own sanctification, credibility, and effectiveness.

Sixth, *Is this change I’m considering supported by the facts?* For example, many church leaders want to change the worship music to attract teen-agers and younger adults, who, they rightly reason, are not only the church of the future, but a vital part of the church now. This is an admirable concern, but it is usually an unexamined one. They should check into careful research on the subject where they will find that most teen-agers and young adults are surprisingly traditional and believe that customary church music is most appropriate for corporate church worship services. This observation is true among youth of many denominational backgrounds. Moreover, by the time many adult church leaders catch on to a popular tune with young people that they think will attract them to worship, the youth themselves now consider that song passé, and they are not attracted to it any more, now being into something else. Many adults make decisions concerning the young people in the church without consulting the youth. They think they know what the young people want, but they not only don’t ask them, they don’t even ask a representative sample of the youth. Especially in smaller churches it is important to poll all the youth to ascertain what they think about a certain matter, and it is highly valuable to discuss it

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:5 (RSV)

with them.

The seventh question we must ask comes from the field of sociology: *Will this innovation uproot and destroy a need-meeting tradition?* Careful research in this field informs us of the place and importance of tradition. As sociologist Tony Campolo has emphasized, everyone needs roots and wings. Roots, are grounded in tradition, and tradition, he maintains, gives us stability. In fact, he cites at least seven functions of traditions, or rituals: facilitating a sense of belonging (one human beings' basic needs), a sense of stability and balance, developing and maintaining identity, a sense of certainty about life, relief from anxiety and other psychological disorders, making and keeping commitments, and binding the community together by taking what happened in the past and making it present.⁹ [See above, top of p. 2.]

Each one of these functions of tradition helps teenagers manage the psychosocial, biological, and theological aspects of their stage of development. The stability of traditions facilitates their navigating the turbulent waters of adolescence. When everything else in their lives is changing, they need some things to remain constant that constitute familiar and trusted guides to stay on course, especially those that keep them focused on Christ. Their parents and other adults in the congregation are also engaging much change; therefore, the functions of recurring rituals are especially helpful to and appreciated by them as well. Keeping these realities in mind will inform us as to what changes need to be made, when, and how.

Philip Gulley well described some of the values of tradition in his popular novel, *Christmas in Harmony*. "In this unsettled world, it is good to have this steadiness—the Christmas Eve service, the peal of the bell, the star atop the [Asa] Peacocks' silo... There is a holiness to memory, a sense of God's presence in these mangers of the mind. Which might explain why it is that the occasions that change the least are often the very occasions that change us the most."¹⁰

Other Crucial Questions to Ask in Order to Accomplish Your Objectives

We thus see why many well-meaning but misinformed ministers become entangled in great trouble unnecessarily when they thoughtlessly try to eliminate traditions that meet needs. Such trouble causes disruption in the church that diverts valuable time and energy away from their most important tasks, such as equipping people for more effective witness for Christ.

Therefore, before proceeding with the implementation of an intended innovation, it would be good to ask ourselves several other challenging questions regarding any tradition that would be replaced by an innovation:

⁹ Anthony Campolo, "Home Improvement," lecture at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Oak Brook, Illinois, September 2, 1998.

¹⁰ Phillip Gulley, *Christmas in Harmony* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 11.

- Is this a God-given or a mankind made tradition? (Messing around with the sacraments, e.g., is much more serious and essentially different from moving the flags in the sanctuary, though for many people there isn't much difference even on this issue!)
- What needs does this tradition meet?
- How does eliminating this tradition shape the future?
- Is it really necessary that I cancel this tradition? Relatedly, do I have something as good or better to take its place? Generally, it is unwise to do away with something without a replacement that is better.
- How likely is it that my decision to do away with this tradition will cause a major division in the church? Maintaining peace in the church is imperative in the New Testament. (Romans 14:17-19; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:15; 1Thessalonians 5:13; Hebrews 12:14; 13:20-21; James 3:17-18; 1 Peter 3:11; 5:14)
- Is it possible this tradition will die a natural death if left alone, and I do the “new thing” alongside it?
- How do I implement the “new thing” most effectively? To answer this question it is valuable to consult the research in the diffusion of innovations.¹¹

When youth ministers and other leaders come into a church and decide they're going to simply do away with the church's cherished traditions without a rationale for doing so that is understandable and acceptable to the congregation, and without employing effective procedures for introducing and implementing an innovation that is better, they cause disruption, discord, and disharmony in the church. They often lose their jobs in the process, which makes even more disharmony and prohibits them from accomplishing their objectives. Such a situation causes harm to the body of Christ and is a serious

¹¹ To accomplish the objectives we want to implement in our ministry we have to earn the right to be heard. Profound and extensive psychosocial dynamics that pervade social systems in cultures throughout the world have been explored by research in a subfield of the field of communication called diffusion research or the diffusion of innovations. These studies show how anything *perceived* as new (even if it is not actually new) by the people in a social system is diffused or spreads throughout the system. The diffusion literature also explains how innovations are thwarted and what can be done to facilitate their adoption. Since a church contains characteristics of a social system, it is important that we who are leaders in the church become aware of these dynamics and utilize them in order to accomplish our objectives to “prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12-13) In my essay, “Diffusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church,” I explain the main aspects of diffusion research and apply them to ministry in the church. That essay can be accessed by logging on to the Church Leadership and Administration page of my Website at <https://fromacorntoak12.com/church-administration-5/>. See related resources there as well.

matter that should be avoided to please God and nurture and extend his kingdom.¹²

These understandings help us see what we are up against by just coming in and summarily discarding traditions, which many unwise youth pastors and other church leaders are doing. Does this mean that I'm against innovations? Perish the thought! In my specialized area of ministry, primarily focusing on church education, including youth ministry, innovation has been part of my work for well over half a century. Being on the cutting edge has been an important part of my ministry; this was one of the main reasons I was hired, and a major expectation was that I would always be producing innovative programs and ministries. The crucial and key question is *how* to do it, and here I've found that following the above principles is very helpful.

When God calls leaders to ministry he gives them gifts, skills, good ideas, and many other resources to lead and equip his people for his service. They thus not only want but need to implement those good ideas. Yet, no matter how fine those plans are, if the congregation perceives them as not being good, they will reject not only the ideas but the source of those ideas that is creating the pain they feel.

In order to be able to implement your good innovations, you first have to remain in the employ of the church and be trusted by those you've been called to serve. Then, as we've seen in this essay, you can function most effectively by carefully considering the dynamics involving tradition, and acting accordingly. Doing so will enable you to be a leader who is trusted and give you the opportunity over time to facilitate the Lord's will and accomplish your objectives as well.

For Reflection

1. Why are traditions important to people?
 - a. Cite several values of tradition.
 - b. What needs that young people and others have do traditions help meet?
2. When you want to change a tradition, which other people need to be consulted and brought into the decision-making?
3. You are the new Minister of Youth at Rising Flame Community Church. You correctly believe that God's original plan for nurturing and raising his children in the faith is that parents have the primary responsibility (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Psalm 78, Ephesians 6:1-4) and that the church educational and youth ministries should be supportive of and supplementary to what the parents are doing. You reason that since Sunday school attendance is dwindling; since it is becoming more and more difficult to obtain volunteers to teach and to do so with an extended time commitment; and since from an historical viewpoint Sunday school is "the new kid on the block," being only 200 years old, it is not a tradition that is grounded in Scripture. You believe that we cannot improve on God's original

¹² See, e.g., Colossians 3:12-17, esp. vv. 15-16.

plan, and you want to replace Sunday school with a more Biblical program that equips parents to do the job the Lord gave them, while at the same time involving the covenant community in its Biblically mandated supportive role (e.g., Hebrews 10:24-25). You also want to implement a new method of working with children and youth in special meetings to build on what the parents are doing and to meet the special needs of the children and youth. In the light of the subjects discussed in this essay, what will you do and not do to implement your innovations?