

A Look at Change-Friendly Organizations

If you assent to the notion that Jesus' message is a message of conversion, that is, of change, then it falls to reason that parishes should be change-friendly organizations. They should be places where people encounter the call to conversion and see how it is done. What follows is one look at some characteristics of change-friendly organizations. Keep in mind there are many ways to look at this concept.

Patrician McLaren, in an article entitled "The Change-Capable Organization" says

With the number and complexity of changes increasing, it's time to rethink how we design organizations. It's time to admit that change is a way of life and not an appendage to "business as usual." It's time to take a new view of how your organization works and must work every day so that it isn't constantly trying to override the usual organizational processes. That requires a structural and mental redesign of the organization—a transformational approach.¹

It seems to me that she has articulated what should be the view of a parish since it is about the work of Jesus, the one who calls for change at every corner, the one concerned with transformation of individuals, parishes and the world into pieces of the Kingdom of God. So let's take a look at some of what she and others have to say about change-friendly organizations and see what implications this may have for parishes.

McLaren and others have begun to identify qualities that characterize nimble organizations, that is, organizations able to live in constant change and thrive. What I am going to do is provide their list and then some comments and questions pertinent to the parish organization in terms of this list. My hope is that you will do two things with this list: assess what is and begin to consider what can be in your parish.

1. Change-friendly institutions have workers that link **the present to the future**. Rather than being informed and energized by "how it's always been done", change-friendly institutions have workers that link their work to the future: what will be, can be or should be. This seems to me to tie perfectly to the theological notion of the already-not yet. This is what is, but what can be, the Kingdom of God is not yet in its fullness. That does not stop us however, from linking what we are doing to that vision of the Kingdom. For parishes, it means asking of each parish activity and of each parishioner: how does this help create the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? If that question has a solid answer, then the present is linked to the future and that will contribute to nimbleness.

2. Change-friendly institutions **make learning a way of life** for everyone. It's expected that all are continuing to learn and grow in age and wisdom, in expertise and skill. Rather than relying on the continuous learning of a few (like priests and parish staffs), a change-friendly parish will have all the baptized, but especially the adults (see *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*), engaged in lifelong faith formation. The climate of the parish can become a learning climate, where new discoveries (perhaps of ancient truths, but new discoveries) characterize the climate. By definition, when someone learns something, really learns something, it changes them. And

when they are changed, so are perspectives and related skills. This creates a nimble organization, one prepared to embrace change, to learn and grow. But if learning is focused on the very young, and essentially stops after Confirmation, nimbleness is hampered and new ideas do not have fertile ground upon which to fall. And a note from McLaren that echoes movements in the Church today: organizations that make learning from one another easy and that offer systematic learning opportunities, thrive. She also notes that the behavior of top management as it pertains to learning has a tremendous influence on creating a learning climate. Our Church is calling for these activities.

3. Change-friendly institutions **support and encourage day-to-day improvements and changes**. All around the parish, day by day, there are ways to improve what's being done, if that's the mindset. How can we improve hospitality in the office during the week? How can we improve our care for the environment by being more "green" in the parish? How can we use resources efficiently and with care? How can we improve catechist formation? How can we invest in training to enable adult learning? You get the idea. Day-by-day those doing the work presently are asked to be considering, and wherever possible, implementing these changes. What this does is teach adaptability and creativity and empowers those closest to the work to be responsible for its quality. And then when larger changes come, the system is accustomed to adaptation, knows how to communicate and adjust and so can be nimble. It's a mindset, a challenge and these kinds of improvements are rewarded. That means it falls to leaders to be watching, noticing and commending these efforts.

4. Change-friendly institutions **make sure working groups, committees and teams are diverse**. Diversity in and of itself forces a movement away from "business as usual." Our Church says this in multiple formats and venues, from documents like *Unity and Diversity: Welcoming the Stranger Among Us*, to initiatives to engage various age groups and ethnic groups, to our call now to find ways to be one Body in Christ across language and culture divides. Those who work with social justice know already that one of the most important questions is who is not heard from around a table? Whose voice is not here? How do we get it heard? In and of itself, this prevents "the way we've always done it" from being the norm, PROVIDED that the diverse voices are welcomed and truly listened to. We all know too many examples of silent faces around a table, and no space created or room given to another perspective. We've heard the idea of a young person shot down (We tried that before. It doesn't work.") We've heard the plea of someone not from this country to welcome the stranger better ("I came here and no one could speak to me in Spanish. No one could help me find my way.") We've seen the same people serve on either the same committees or rotate through committee work, so that the parish leadership never changes. Group-think has taken over and no new ideas can get heard. The status quo is favored over the struggle to do it differently. Diverse teams and working groups work against this and make a nimble organization.

5. Change-friendly institutions **encourage mavericks**. I expect that many of you had a reaction to this similar to mine: Egads! Encourage those who call for radical change rather than evolutionary change? Really? That means listening to the young people who scream in many ways (often by their absence) that what is happening in Mass and in the life of the parish does not reach them. They want radically different expressions. Do we give them room to experiment? Do we help them do so and offer them ways to reflect on their experiments and to assess them? It means listening to calls for radical changes in parish governance, flattening out

the hierarchy, providing checks and balances, and finding ways to pray together across language and cultural divides. Nimble organizations embrace disturbers of the status quo. McLaren notes,

Research is helping to clarify the qualities of disturbers of the status quo. In one study, executives in each of 24 companies of various sizes in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada describe the qualities of people who had led small but effective changes in their organizations. The executives said those change leaders were energetic, independent but committed to the organization, questioning of the system, impatient and not put off by resistance, and willing to go beyond the requirements of their jobs to make a difference. These mavericks usually didn't get formal support until they'd proven their ideas. They were driven by the needs of the organization, not by rewards or promotion.ⁱⁱ

She goes on to say that if they are not given room to experiment, they simply leave. This made me wonder if this is at least one reason why we are seeing the exodus of many from our parishes. Are our parishes full of rocky soil, so the seeds of innovation cannot grow?

6. Change-friendly institutions **shelter breakthroughs**. In a business climate, this means they have a way to set up smaller organizations (often independent of the parent organization) where innovations and breakthroughs are sheltered from the very system that gave birth to them: a system set up to reject the breakthrough because it will kill the existing system. In some ways, this is what happened to Christianity. Judaism could not accept the reform called for by Jesus, and could not accept him as Messiah. A new sect was born...that gave shelter and protection to the ideas and ways of Jesus so that they might flourish. But how is this playing out in our Church today? Where are the innovations being protected and sheltered so they can grow? The internet and virtual communities seem to be one place. The success of BustedHalo, a haven for young adults, is one such protected place. Things can be talked about and explored in that venue that cannot be done in many parishes---no courage, no formation, no will. Are there other places where this is happening? What will it take to integrate these sheltered innovations into parishes? What will have to change? Can the existing ways of doing things be adapted or do new models need to emerge? These are all good questions for those wishing a nimble parish, one open to transformation from God's many sources.

7. Change-friendly institutions **integrate technology**. Some of you reading this one are moaning. Some of us are already wondering where the technology infiltration stops, or if it does. Some of us are wondering what parts of parish life benefit from integrated technology and where is technology just window-dressing for something that is not working well fundamentally? Technology is a means to an end. Parishes need to figure out the ends to which technology is well-suited. They must adapt messages, train messengers and receivers, bridge the technology generation gap, and find ways to do all of this well. When it's possible to create a high quality website at home, and make visual presentations with video clips, sound and that have live access to the internet, homespun attempts fall flat. So, nimble organizations seem to integrate technology. They have a clear sense of what it supports well and they integrate there. But they are not technology junkies, having the latest and greatest just because. Parishes can learn from this approach: what's the end we are reaching toward? How does technology support or detract from that end? Can we do it with high enough quality?

8. Change-friendly institutions **build and deepen trust**. According to McLaren and others, the research bears out that the degree of willingness to change is directly related to the degree of trust within the organization, especially the degree of trust members of the organization have for

the leaders and change agents. In terms of a parish then, changes are more easily implemented when the parishioners have a high degree of trust in the pastor and in the parish leadership. This high degree of trust is created over a long period of time and is easily compromised or eroded. It takes very little to erode trust in authority figures in today's American culture. Authority is already suspect. Like it or not, the sex abuse scandal eroded trust in the offices of the Bishop and the Presbyterian. Like it or not, absenteeism, anger, dictatorial styles, carelessness, laziness, and indifference all mitigate against trust. So does the frequent changing of leaders (both lay and ordained) and secrecy. Jesus knew this. He taught us to let our yes be yes and our no be no. He taught us to stand together to reject evil. He taught us to follow certain commandments as a people so that we can trust one another. He taught us to call God "Abba", a trusting endearment. We have heard that what was whispered in the dark will be proclaimed from the rooftops. And yet in parishes we still find secrecy, authoritarianism, rapid turnover of lay leaders, clerical absenteeism, and of course, the sad instances of criminal behavior by leaders. For a parish to be nimble, trust must be built and deepened. How does your parish do that?

Trust can be built and deepened by

- Consistent presence. Leaders can be relied on to be there.
- Telling the truth. Leaders can be relied on to admit mistakes, make restitution, acknowledge what they do not know etc.
- Reconciling. Leaders who admit sin, ask for forgiveness publicly, and seek reconciliation create a climate of trust.
- Honoring others. Leaders who acknowledge the gifts, presence and achievements of others build trust, but only if this is done sincerely. Having someone else write the note, or go to the game in your stead will diminish trust.
- Working alongside others. Leaders who roll up their sleeves in the kitchen, dig weeds in the garden, sweat alongside the kids at Bible School, and help teens wash cars engender trust. They build relationships based on mission and support, they laugh and cry with the people. They can be trusted.

If you read other authors, you will be sure to find other characteristics of change-friendly organizations. There's a lot of literature out there. The list is less important than the reflection upon it. How do these principles, taken from business/management/leadership studies transfer to parishes? What might parishes be attending to in order to create climates where conversion is the norm? It's what Jesus had in mind when he said Repent!; when he said he came to proclaim liberty to captives and sight to the blind and a year of favor from the Lord; when he said, sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and then come follow me. Change...change. How do we create climates in parishes where this is possible? Try these 8 elements and be sure to let us know what you discover as you do.

ⁱ McLaren, Patricia. "The Change-Capable Organization." http://www.n-email.net/TRIMAX/change_capable_organization.htm Internet. Accessed 1/23/10.

ⁱⁱ Ibid