

THE CHALLENGE OF
CHANGE

A guide to shaping change and
changing the shape of church

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Introduction

ALL CHANGE!

As if it wasn't enough being squeezed like a canned sardine inside a London tube train at rush hour, the change options coming over the tannoy were taking my sense of disorientation to a whole new level.

'Change here for southbound Northern Line service via Bank from platform six, Victoria Line, and mainline inner-city and suburban rail services...'

It may have been a perfectly clear and understandable announcement for a seasoned Londoner but, for the average traveller, it was a tad confusing. Of course, if I'd remembered to pack just one of my many London tube maps, or happened to be standing in front of one, I'm sure it would have been very straightforward. But without a map and with a heaving throng of impatient commuters pushing from behind, the change options became ever more confusing and the stress levels kept rising... three tunnels to choose from, no, four, with several more turning points along the way. Five minutes later, I was sitting on the wrong train on the wrong seat, staring at the wrong scenery, and going in the wrong direction. Ironically, I was thinking about writing this book at the time, and about whether my impending change of job might change my intention to write, and whether I needed to negotiate a change of timescale in the contract. Oh, and I was also visiting my daughter, who happened to be changing career and wondering whether to change churches as well as changing where she lived.

Change can feel uncomfortable and risky, but it invades our lives at every level. As a friend of mine used to say, 'constant change is here to stay'. If he was alive today, he'd now have to replace the word

‘constant’ with the word ‘increasing’. Change is a dominant force in our lives and it will always have a dominating effect on how we view and tackle our world.

This book is about how we view and tackle the Church in the light of change. Down in the underground I found myself unprepared and ultimately overwhelmed in an unfamiliar place, and that led to a few wrong turns and bad choices. Five minutes later, of course, I was back on the right train and on the right track, but in the Church our choices and turns can make or break the future. Decisions on what and how and when we change will not only affect growth or decline in a church but, most importantly, they will impact people. Too often it is people who are left damaged and disillusioned by the impact—congregations who couldn’t catch the vision, individuals who were left bewildered and bereft, and leaders who ended up burnt out by their attempts to bring about healthy and godly change.

What I’d like to do here is to offer a map for change. In the same way as a London tube map is simplified into colour-coded options, joining up at various points and highlighting the available routes, I simply want to provide a practical guide. It doesn’t attempt to navigate the thousands of tunnels you’ll encounter along the way, but it does set out to mark the stations and routes, the options and principles of change that will take us to a new and better future. As I write, I’m imagining a church leader who wants to take his or her congregation on a change journey, or a whole church either preparing to embark on a particular project or simply wanting to be envisioned and equipped for what lies ahead. I also imagine a wide selection of readers, from the impatient visionary to the reluctant traditionalist, from the energized leader to the broken pastor, and from large and thriving churches to small and struggling congregations.

With this in mind, I write very much as a pastor and practitioner, and have included over 100 questions for practical reflection and group discussion. These questions are not meant to be slavishly worked through one by one, but are there simply as a tool to help you identify and focus on the issues that are most relevant for you at

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the present time, and the areas that need to be addressed as a priority. This may also mean that you cover a single chapter's material in each session, or that you return to the same chapter more than once.

The book is broken into two halves. The first half is intended as a practical manual for shaping change of any kind in the life of a church. The second half is a guide to understanding the changing shape of church, and in particular the 'Fresh Expressions' of church that are now emerging. In this sense, the subject matter is fairly wide-ranging and can therefore be either read selectively or progressively. Chapter One, on 'shaping up', for instance, applies to every Christian believer and challenges our general resistance to change. By Chapter Six, however, thoughts about structural change may offer a challenge to some of our more senior church leaders.

Finally, what qualifies and inspires me to write on this subject? Well, nearly 30 years ago, I was taken on board and in hand by one of the most influential change agents of the late 20th century. David Watson was then leading one of the most exciting churches in the UK, at St Michael-le-Belfry in York. He recruited me to lead his team of singers, dancers and actors, and together we travelled internationally, encouraging renewal, promoting unity and modelling new ways of engaging in evangelism. I was a singer-songwriter and worship leader, writing and pioneering new ideas for worship alongside our more traditional hymns and liturgy. Singing rhythmic songs with the additional diet of dance and drama was a seismic change for some of the cathedrals and churches we visited. In one cathedral, we built our theme around some lines from Bob Dylan's song 'Ballad of a Thin Man': 'Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?' Only after the service did we discover that the sub dean of the cathedral was called Mr Jones. The early 1980s were exciting days for the renewal of the Church. Many of the changes that we now take for granted were pioneered in that era by godly risk-taking leaders. As a worship leader, I sat at the feet of many of them and was privileged to look, listen and learn.

I then entered the ordained ministry and served as a curate in

St Peter's, Yateley, a church that had had its building burnt down by an arsonist. This dramatic event had not only left the church with the chance to rebuild from scratch but had given them a sense of spiritual rebirth and rediscovery. It led to a period of ongoing change and development, of which I was a part, and a time of astonishing growth. When it was discovered that the arsonist had burnt down other churches, which had also then seen renewal, the suggestion was made that he should be released from prison and given a ministry and a list!

Four years later, our family moved to a traditional, urban community in Haydock on Merseyside, and so began a ministry lasting nearly 20 years in the parish of St Mark's. Of course, I'm often asked why somebody who likes to do change did not change his place of ministry for that length of time. My answer is that St Mark's went through five major transitions during that time, changes that effectively gave me the feel of leading five refreshingly different churches. The first phase was simply *renewal*, where the foundations of worship, community and mission were reviewed and developed. This included a review of all our resources, including our buildings, and led to a major phase of *reordering*. The biggest reordering, of course, was in people's hearts and expectations, and the ministry and growth that this released led to a period of *restructuring* and the advent of cell church. Over a period of six months, we overhauled our programmes, groups and structures and began to embrace the cell motto that 'small is beautiful'. The resulting growth and blessing gave us an appetite and a very clear call for *resourcing* others. Not only did we host conferences and welcome visiting leaders but we began to look for ways to team up with others and offer our gifts more widely.

Eventually, we grew to four congregations, but I was haunted by two thoughts. First of all, it's easy in a full building to become complacent and feel successful, when the reality is that there are still 10,000 people on our doorstep who never venture inside and for whom we are still irrelevant. The second thought followed quickly,

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that if any church was in a position to take risks and experiment in reaching the totally unchurched, it was a community like St Mark's, since by now we had learnt some powerful, if sometimes painful lessons about the importance of ongoing change. So we then entered our riskiest and most exciting transition of all, and we called it *reinventing*. This involved loosening our hold on all our programme-driven services, groups and events, and led to several groups of people moving out into completely new contexts, where the shape of church could be allowed to evolve in new and exciting ways.

Since then, I have entered another change phase of my own, which I call *releasing*. After many years in the parish, I have now taken up the post of Director of Pioneer Ministry in the diocese of Liverpool. Put very simply, I've been told that my job is to 'illustrate the future'. With a team of pioneer ministers and an ever-increasing army of lay pioneers, we are doing church in new ways alongside the old ways, and beginning to imagine and then illustrate how tomorrow's church might look.

At times, I must confess, it all feels a little like the London tube experience. Not only are there several possible routes, but also a lot of tunnels and one or two cul de sacs along the way. And then, of course, there are several voices coming over the tannoy, all suggesting different stations. Around it all, there's a heaving, pushing mass called 'the unchurched', who are often sick of the Church but still hungry for God. My greatest conviction, however, is that we are definitely on the right train and heading in the right direction. I also hope you'll agree, as you travel these pages, that for followers of Jesus there is nothing more important or fulfilling than the challenge of change.



Chapter One

SHAPING UP: THE PATH TO CHANGE

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

ISAIAH 43:18–19

This was the very first motto verse I introduced at St Mark's as a fresh young vicar. I was sure the church was ready for new things because they'd said so in their parish profile. In fact, the document was so full of high expectations that any candidate might be forgiven for concluding that the church wanted only Jesus himself to apply for the post. (A careful read, however, would also confirm that he would never have been appointed because he wasn't married with two children!) Even so, it seemed obvious that, with such a list of expectations, here was a church ready for change. I was offered the job and took it.

The motto verse was introduced and Isaiah was preached, and the first opportunity for change appeared in the worship on Pentecost Sunday. Having come from York, I had a very high view of Pentecost as one of the most important festivals of the year, a time for renewal and rededication, and an ideal occasion for marking new beginnings. I came also with the memory of waves of people receiving the laying on of hands, streaming forward to embrace any and every offer of further blessing and spiritual strength. So I preached on the new thing that God was doing at Pentecost and invited people to come forward to receive prayer through the laying on of hands. It was all done very carefully, gently and sensitively in the context of Communion, so people could respond after receiving the bread and the wine, without

feeling pressurized or threatened in any way. My wife and I knelt together at the upper rail and we waited for the waves. We waited and prayed and waited some more and continued to wait for some time after, until even we were embarrassed.

Now, nearly 20 years later, the whole culture of receiving prayer ministry in the context of worship has massively changed. It is now the norm for people not only to respond but to respond continually and in several ways. It happens through teams of people praying before and after services and during Communion, and it also happens after most sermons in most services. The church culture itself has changed so that people of all ages and every taste and temperament understand it, expect it and collectively embrace it.

So what changed? The answer is ‘a great deal over a long period of time’, and over the next few chapters we’ll explore some of the more practical principles from the journey. But the very first lesson that I had to learn, with all my new ideas, was that before we could see the culture change, we needed to see a climate change. The truth here was that there was an ingrained resistance in the church that had nothing to do with opposing the ideas or the vision itself, or even the way in which it was presented to people. The problem was a deeper one and far more fundamental. What was needed before anything else was a change of heart. As the saying goes, ‘The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart’.

I’ve heard and preached many an evangelistic sermon on this saying, but it’s just as true for the Church of God as it is for the cynical unbeliever. The problem with any change is not primarily about resources, traditions, communication or even understanding, but about the heart, and at the heart of the ‘change’ problem is the problem of changing hearts. Over the years, I’ve learnt as a pastor to put this at the top of our change agenda, which is why it’s introduced here in Chapter One.

My first significant lesson in this area was in leading the church into a major building project. As we set out, we applied some very helpful and practical principles that you’ll find in the following two

chapters. We prayed, discussed and debated, consulted, explained and communicated, and eventually we agreed clearly and unanimously to move ahead. Everything was now in place, and we were ready for our first major gift day. Or were we? Two months beforehand, I went to Tanzania for two weeks to teach at a clergy conference, leaving a keen and buzzing congregation preparing for the launch. When I returned, I couldn't believe how quickly the mood had changed across the church, as I was met with wave after wave of confusion, anger and a toxic fear that was quickly beginning to spread.

Immediately I cancelled everything in my diary and began to visit people. I tried to go well armed with the arguments and assurances that had already been carefully worked through and agreed. I thought, 'If they know in their heads what I now know, they'll see it all clearly and come on board.' Fortunately, that thought was overtaken by the far more important one, that 'people don't care what you know till they know that you care', and so I went primarily as their pastor to listen. To my amazement, I encountered the very same experience every time. The visit would begin with a barrage of issues about the project and why they were now against it, but within half an hour the conversation had shifted well beyond the building issues to issues of the heart, which had nothing whatsoever to do with the challenge of changing buildings. In essence, the challenge of change itself had stirred up deeper hurts, fears, pride and prejudice that needed dealing with before anything else could happen. The very move toward making history by transforming the building was causing people to remember history—whom they'd fallen out with, the roles they were never given, needs that were never met.

We put the building project aside for a while and worked on these issues of the heart, restoring relationships, addressing personal needs and working through unfulfilled expectations. The lesson I'll never forget is that as each of these deeper issues was dealt with, the building problems evaporated and became irrelevant. One month later and the whole church gave a resounding 'yes' to the project, with an amazing gift day that raised nearly 20 times the expected amount.

Shaping up: the path to change

In hindsight, I shouldn't have been so surprised. The renewal of buildings, services, groups and programmes is always preceded by a renewal of the heart. Around the time of our own building project, I read and re-read George Carey's book *The Church in the Market Place*. Halfway through his congregation's project, it came to a grinding halt, and he writes:

*It was clear then that grievous as the Council's decision was, God was telling us something so clearly that we would have been spiritually stone-deaf to have misunderstood. He was saying 'I am more interested in you than a fine building. Unless you are renewed, a lovely place is beside the point. When you are made alive then I will bring this thing to pass.'*¹

What is required to make us alive and alert to the changes our churches need? The Old Testament prophets were specialists in spiritual change. While they were not always the most sensitive change agents, they were cuttingly clear in communicating the word of God. Isaiah has often been called the prince of prophets, and I've found myself returning to his words when trying to communicate the heart of change: 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!' Reflecting on the lessons I've learnt about changing hearts, there are six things in particular that seem essential in changing a church's spiritual climate, all illustrated in the life and times of Isaiah.

A NEW HONESTY

Under C in *Bacon Sandwiches and Salvation: an A-Z of the Christian Life*, Adrian Plass offers the following entry:

*Change: rare phenomenon as far as the church is concerned, except when it comes to the collection. Tends to be fairly limited even then.*²

The Challenge of Change

There is no shortage of jokes around when people reflect on change and the lack of it in many churches. Inside those churches there is no shortage of excuses for not changing. Here's a list that someone compiled and I've extended.

- We've always done it that way in this church.
- We've never done it that way in this church.
- I'm sure it's not God's will.
- You'll upset/offend your mother/father/minister/children/friends/bishop.
- It's too ambitious/soon/far/quick/new/different.
- We're too old/young/inexperienced/set in our ways.
- It will cost too much.
- It's not professional enough.
- Folk will not understand/appreciate/support/listen.
- We've tried that before.
- We haven't the time/resources/people/gifts.
- We're not ready for it yet.
- Interesting idea, but our church is different.
- All right in theory, but can you put it into practice?
- It's against our tradition/policy/doctrine.
- It needs more research/study/investigation.
- Somebody would have suggested it before if it were any good.
- Let's discuss it at another time.
- You don't understand our problem...
- We have too many things going on now.
- Let's be practical.
- Let's form a committee.
- Let's shelve it for the time being.
- Let's get back to reality.
- Who do you think you are?

The trouble is that beneath the humour lie some serious issues and uncomfortable truths. Gordon Bailey sums it up starkly in his poem 'Granite Choir'.

*No wonder the graveyards and tombstones have spread
To where the pews echo the chants of the dead.
Decay marks the windows, the arches, the walls,
And granite-faced statues sit in the choir stalls.
They seem to have fossils where hearts ought to be
Their stoney-hard minds knowing nothing of me.³*

It's a bleaker picture than most, perhaps, and anyone reading this book will be hoping their church looks nothing like this. But it's the phrase 'where hearts ought to be' that bites, and the picture of a church so fossilized that it's incapable of relating to anyone outside its walls. What is most disturbing, however, is that churches that are not in touch with the heart often perceive themselves in a completely different way, believing that they are open, flexible and perfectly healthy. In fact, someone has likened the Church to an equestrian statue, a horse portrayed in the very act of leaping forward with its mane flowing and muscles rippling. Whether you come back in ten years or 200 years, it won't have moved a fraction of an inch. My fear is that the Church is very good at appearing to move and consider change, especially through initiatives like the Decade of Evangelism, Fresh Expressions and countless other mission ventures, but the pace at which it moves is still frighteningly slower than the pace of our world.

Isaiah's words, 'See, I am doing a new thing', reflect the fact that God, by his very nature, is a God of movement. He never stands still but delights in doing new things in people's lives. He is the God of the new song, the new heart, the new name, the new covenant, the new creation, and the new heaven and earth. The writer of Lamentations wrote: 'Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3:22–23). In other words, he is a faithful God who never changes, the rock who is always the same, yesterday, today and for ever—but he is dealing with an imperfect people who constantly need changing and moving on. Every day and every week

of every month of every year, there are new things that I and my church can learn about God and his compassionate ways, and new responses for us to make.

All this has to begin with a new honesty, and, if we are not to cling to the past, we can certainly learn from it, as Isaiah was keen for his audience to do. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard rightly said, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards', and Isaiah encouraged people to be honest about their past. God had delivered them from the slavery of Egypt and they'd journeyed into the wilderness with great joy and praise. However, instead of reaching the promised land in about 40 days, it took them 40 years, because of their rebellion and unbelief and their enormous capacity to grumble at any sign of change. Even when they did arrive, they ultimately refused to go the whole way with God, continued to rebel and ended up in exile. Isaiah's prophecy takes these events in the past and looks forward to the day when the nation will be led out of exile and, beyond that, when the Messiah will come and give them a new future.

Tragically, when Jesus did come and died on the cross, God's people still didn't recognize what God was doing; they were still too busy rebelling and grumbling. That is a powerful parable of many churches today, of people who have been set free from sin and are being led into the promised land of God's grace. Wherever the Church is too busy being rebellious and unbelieving, it fails to see what God is doing and misses out on the fullness of his promises. Meanwhile, our churches can end up taking 40 years to develop something that should only take three or four at the most, going round and round in circles and failing to look and live forwards.

Any change process, then, must begin with a brutal honesty about where we really are at the moment. Over the years, I have often found the following self-examination questions helpful, offered by David Watson in *I Believe in Evangelism*.