

## How the Church Should Address Change

The kingdom of God is a great movement around a simple message: “Jesus saves!” Nothing else saves. No one else saves. Only Jesus saves.

The movement crosses cultures and times. In so doing, it encounters a myriad of local human problems that must be addressed. Human problems challenge the status quo. They confront us with the need for change, which we usually fear. *Especially in churches* do we fear this, as Gordon MacDonald so vividly pointed out to us in Who Stole My Church?

Something MacDonald said at our annual church leaders’ conference started me to thinking about how the church should address change. What if we had a way to change that would allow the movement to thrive as problems are addressed?

Such a way is shown to us in Acts chapter six. Here we encounter an example of *mission-focused change*. I define mission-focused change as “change that addresses the human situation AND reinforces the essence of the movement.” Consider for a moment what Acts 6:1-7 shows us.

1. *The Jerusalem church was experiencing rapid change.* “The number of the disciples was multiplying” and the ethnic / cultural mix was changing, too. This meant that the church would have to deal with a set of human problems they had never dealt with before.
2. *Change led to conflict in the church.* The growth in both numbers and diversity caused them to realize that one part of their church’s ministry – taking care of widows – was broken. What they had been doing was no longer working in this new reality.
3. *The twelve leaders realized that there was more at stake than bread distribution.* The issue was not simply how to make everyone happy with the food ministry. The issue before them was: How do we address this need to change what we are doing as a church in a way that will reinforce the essence of the movement? In other words, how can we adjust to the new situation so that disciple-making is furthered rather than hindered? The Twelve could have jumped in and taken over the ministry to widows, but then what would have happened to the movement?
4. *The twelve leaders laid out a plan that would both address the human problem and reinforce the movement.* They knew that “it would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to wait on tables.” They led the congregation to select “seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” who would oversee the widows’ ministry. These seven men were empowered to do what was necessary to make that ministry work, freeing the Twelve to do their part of the movement.

5. A “new normal” came into being in the Jerusalem church with regard to the widows’ ministry. After the change got underway, no doubt some in the church decided they preferred the “old normal.” It probably took folks a while to get used to it. But the change happened anyway, and it led to something even more important than effectively distributing bread.
6. Under the “new normal,” the movement advanced! The conclusion of the passage says, “So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Side note: What kind of human problems would the movement encounter with an influx of Jewish priests? Keep reading Acts and you will see some of them, especially as the movement began to reach Gentiles. Yes, more mission-focused changes are ahead!)

Quite honestly, I do not know how to tell you to “do Acts 6” in your church. The human problems that the movement encounters in your context will require a customized approach. But two things are NOT viable options: 1) To do nothing in the face of change or 2) to abandon the essence of the movement in an effort to seek comfortableness. Somehow mission-focused change has to happen. As Gordon MacDonald told us, “We must come to grips in the church with the accelerated pace of change in the larger world if we’re going to function effectively as the church in that world.” Someone has to lead, someone who refuses to be constrained by fear or criticism.

Final thoughts: Does anyone want to argue that the Twelve could NOT have run a dynamite widows’ ministry if they had wanted to? So why didn’t they? Do you *react* to conflict or see it as an opportunity to be *proactive* for the good of the Christ movement?