

7 SECRETS TO LEADING YOUR AGING CHURCH THROUGH CHANGE



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PREFACE

The aging of the church is no secret. The average age of people attending church is rising. This makes sense, especially when you think of the large aging Baby Boomer population.

A casual look around many sanctuaries on Sunday morning reveals a large percentage of gray heads.

Don't misunderstand. There are older people in your congregation who walk on water. They are like pure gold. You can count on them. They have your back. If there is a need, a phone call works miracles. Your church is better because they are part of the congregation.

But this is not the case with many older congregants. I'm guessing there is a group of older Christians who challenge your leadership at every opportunity. They have different views of where the church ought to focus ministry efforts. For example, many of them want to guide the church toward a certain worship style. And if change is in the air, these older church-goers fall into despair.

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You've heard older folk make comments like these:

- “They need to get that rock band off the platform.”
- “Why did they remove the pulpit?”
- “I can't believe they serve coffee and donuts in the foyer.”
- “The pastor gets all of his sermons from the internet.”
- “When are we going to revive the Sunday night service?”

Here's the irony: these older Christians have the potential to help the church move forward in extraordinary ways. At their stage in life they have maturity, experience, skills, and financial assets which can propel your church to new heights.

Whatever you do, don't write this group off or plan to run over them. I'm speaking as a Baby Boomer when I say, “We will not go gentle into that dark night!”

Your ability to lead a church through change, hinges on whether or not the older saints decide to help or hinder the process. If they rally to your side, success is only a matter of time. But if they rebel against you, the road ahead is sure to be painful.

You face the daunting challenge of holding the ship together while guiding it in a more production direction. You may have already discovered that pastoral leadership during times of change is a breeding ground for discontent. This is especially true for the older folk. Attempts to lead the church through change, risks alienating many in the older crowd. And if this happens, you have turned potential allies into a group working behind the scene against you.

Trust me. You do not want to make enemies of the older crowd.

Does this resonate with you?

In your congregation it is possible to turn the older crowd into the golden crowd. They represent a golden opportunity you dare not waste. This group of people rarely remain neutral. They will either work for you or against you. And considering their considerable congregational influence, pray they are working with you.

This ebook contains 7 leadership secrets on how to help older congregants find fulfillment as you work together to make changes with greater effectiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

Do you recognize the name Ernest Shackleton? He might be the world's most celebrated leader of a failed expedition.

Why celebrate failure? In times of facing extraordinary challenges, opportunity knocks.

In 1914 Shackleton led an expedition of 28 men to the South Pole with the goal of being the first to walk across the continent of Antarctica. Sailing south in a ship named *Endurance*, they became trapped in the ice. They hunkered down, waiting for the summer thaw. Six months later, as the ice expanded, the ship snapped into pieces.

Crew member Frank Hurley wrote this to describe the scene:

“The ship groans and quivers, windows splinter whilst deck timbers gape and twist. Amid these profound and overwhelming forces, we are the embodiment of helpless futility.”

I can't imagine the sight of watching your ship sink into the icy water while stranded on an ice flow.

This was the leadership challenge facing Shackleton. How do you lead men in a crisis? What do you say? How do you motivate them to do the impossible? How do you keep them from giving up?

When you read a story like this, no one is going to say, “This is going to end well!”

If you want to read this true adventure story check out THIS book. But I’ll fast forward to the end of the story. Eighteen months later, all 28 members of the party were safe. Shackleton did not lose a single member of his party even though faced with impossible odds. Think of it. For eighteen months Shackleton led his crew through unimaginable dangers. And each of them survived!

What secrets did Shackleton have which he used to lead in difficult circumstances?

When leading a church through change, you face a difficult challenge. And if you have a significant number of older people in your congregation, your task is even more challenging.

Here’s the good news: you can succeed despite the difficulties. Like Shackleton’s failed expedition, it may seem impossible. But as I studied the leadership of Shackleton I recognized he demonstrated several secrets of leadership which you should follow if you are to survive the expedition of change:

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1. Let them know they are valued.
2. Set the example.
3. Find ways for them to be part of the solution.
4. Communicate everything.
5. Be willing to change your goals.
6. Keep them focused on the future.
7. Deal with conflict.

There is some overlap in these leadership principles which help older saints join your team for change. This suggests, the wise approach is to use as many of them in your situation as possible because the secrets reinforce each other.

**SECRET #1: LET THEM
KNOW THEY ARE VALUED**

By the time the ship became frozen in ice, the crew had lived together for about five months. This may seem like a short period of time but they were together every moment. During that time, the crew learned Shackleton had their best interests at heart.

A follower is far more likely to go where you lead if they know you care about them.

In leading an older congregation through change you must never value plans above people. Don't make the mistake of falling in love with your plans at the expense of your people. Leading a church isn't all about plans. Nope. Don't fall for that kind of thinking. Leading a church is all about people.

During leadership challenges, if you are going to make a mistake, fall on the side of loving people more than your plans. And that means you refuse to beat people over the head with your mission statements and visions of grandeur.

You can build your church by loving people and having no plans. But it is incredible difficult to build your church by loving your plans and having no people.

During times of change it is critical that you let the older crowd know you value them. How do you do that? Thank them from the pulpit for their years of service to the Kingdom. When they speak give them your full attention. Honor them with your words and attitude. Let everyone know how much you respect and love the seniors in your congregation. Say it often and with sincerity.

Caution: don't pander to this group of people. They will see through your phony words and only make matters worse. Sincerity is a requirement if you are going to affirm them. They have invested their lives in the church. It has been their focal point for decades. Some of them really did put a second mortgage on their home to construct the building where you lead. There is a real sense in which, as their pastor, you are in their debt.

If you are going to survive the sea of change you must let the older saints know you value you them.

SECRET #2:
SET THE EXAMPLE

Shackleton knew the power of setting the example. When faced with the decision to leave behind all non-essentials he grabbed his prize family pocket watch and threw it on the ground. Regardless of the setback, he portrayed optimism and confidence.

Crew member Frank Worsley wrote:

“Shackleton’s spirits were wonderfully irrepressible considering the heartbreaking reverses he has had to put up with and the frustration of all his hopes for this year at least. One would think he had never a care on his mind and he is the life and soul of half the skylarking and fooling in the ship.”

He was loved by his crew because he set the example and inspired hope.

It is remarkable how similar leading a church through change is to what Shackleton accomplished. Both are dangerous endeavors which threaten to demoralize everyone involved. This is why setting a positive example is so critical to survival.

This is especially true for the older saints in your church. They are watching the leader. And because of their maturity they can tell if the leader is setting a true example or putting on a show.

Before leading a church through change think through what you are asking people to do. What sacrifices will they need to make? What changes in attitude will be necessary? How much more time will be needed? What feelings will need to be shoved aside?

Once you determine the answers to these and similar questions, be the first person to make those changes. For example, if the change is going to need money you might say, "I'm asking that everyone give an extra \$10 a week toward the project. I started giving my extra ten bucks a couple of weeks ago."

You must set a positive and cheerful example. Refuse to become negative. Lift up the good. Smile when you don't feel like it.

When the sea of change gets rough, people will watch to see how you handle the waves. As they look, let them see a confident leader who sets the example.

**SECRET #3: FIND WAYS FOR THEM
TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION**

Shackleton was a master of getting his stranded crew members involved in the task of survival. Each were assigned duties to be performed for the benefit of the crew.

Go out of your way to involve the older folk during any planned changes. People who are part of the change process will buy in to those changes. It creates ownership. Can you imagine anything sweeter than having the mature saints of the church take ownership of the changes you are trying to implement?

The key to getting them involved is to find ways to plug them into the implementation process. Discover their gifts and passions. Then show them how they can use those assets to help make the needed changes. Help them become part of the solution.

Seasoned pastors who employ this leadership lesson recognize this is the time to emphasize team-building. A sermon series on the unity of the church and teamwork would be one tool to pull people together.

This is also the time to emphasize spiritual gifts. This is another great theme for building unity. Be sure to emphasize that every believer has a spiritual gift and they are duty bound to use that gift. Lead your congregation in a time of discovering their spiritual gift. Seniors might balk because they've done this before.

If this happens, cheerfully inform them that our particular spiritual gift can change over time.

Once you've helped people in your congregation discover their spiritual gift, then it's helpful if you provide a list of ways to use each spiritual gift. For example, if you are leading the church to become more outward focused find ways for people to use the gift they've discovered when taking a spiritual gifts test.

Your challenge is to find a way for everyone to be involved. And if some of your senior citizens say that can't do anything, then ask them to do the most important work: pray.

SECRET #4:
COMMUNICATE EVERYTHING

During the crisis facing the crew of the Endeavor, Shackleton often had meetings to update them. He communicated with them the tasks which needed to be accomplished for the day. He also let them know of the dangers they faced and the plans to survive. Communication was an important leadership tool used by Shackleton to lead his entire crew to safety.

In working with churches in transition, I've discovered it's impossible to exaggerate the importance of communication.

If you fail to communicate, people will face the temptation to make things up. They will trade conjectures. Conspiracy theories will emerge. I've read that the human brain automatically struggles to connect the dots. This explain why a person with a headache and a backache try to figure out if the two pains are connected. There is a need to make sense out of what is happening by linking events together.

You cannot over communicate, especially during times of change. Communicate everything. And if there is nothing to communicate, then communicate that there is nothing new to communicate!

Talk about coming changes when you are up front. Put information in your bulletin. Have a bulletin board where you post information. Gather email addresses and do a weekly email update to the people in your church. Consider using a member of the seniors group to make important announcements during the morning service.

Here's the extra step in communication that many leaders miss: repeat the same information more than once. Use different times and different methods to repeat the same news. Why? Because few people pay attention the first time. (You do know that no one reads the church bulletin. Right?)

Consider appointing a "Communication Czar" who will keep you on track with the important task of communication during change.

Everyone will appreciate your efforts in keeping them informed.

SECRET #5:
BE WILLING TO CHANGE COURSE

Circumstances dictated a change of goals for Shackleton. He recognized the goal of walking across the Antarctic continent was now unrealistic. When disaster struck he sized up the situation and changed goals. Survival became his new direction.

Let's be honest. You are not infallible. Your education and academic credentials are no guarantee that you will always lead in that right direction. And you are not the only person in your church with a good head on their shoulders.

How many times have you heard of a pastor who decided to lead his church on a particular course, only to have a mutiny? It seemed like a good idea to relocate or to hire an associate or to build a fellowship hall. But as your lead in that direction no one followed. And to make matters worse, fierce opposition arose. Only a fool would forge ahead without pausing to assess the situation.

Don't be a fool. In spite of the opposition, you might be tempted to use your

power and influence to move forward, but that is the hallmark of a fool.

As you face opposition, regardless of the age group, do something different. Why not meet with those who oppose you? Give them the opportunity to have a voice in the process. Often people, especially the older crowd, just want to be heard.

Listen with care. Perhaps your opposers have seen something you've overlooked. They might have a keen insight. Or because of their years of life experiences, they have a better grasp on the situation than you do.

There is no shame in changing the direction in which you are leading if the circumstance demand it. If you are willing to rethink and refocus your direction, people will applaud you for it. And the older crowd will adore you. Your decision to change course is a sign of maturity which will put money in the emotional bank account.

Don't be a fool. Be willing to change course.

**SECRET #6:KEEP FOCUSED
ON THE FUTURE**

Shackleton kept reminding his weary travelers there were better days ahead. He knew that if they focused on their present misery all was lost. Even in the face of what seemed to be certain death, he pointed to the future and kept hope alive.

Older folk have grown comfortable in their routine and surroundings. Efforts to change either of those two things will be met with resistance. You will start to hear things like, “I don’t know why we need to...” Do you hear what they are saying? They saying they are comfortable with the status quo.

Think of implementing change in terms of turning ice into water. The only way to make that change is when the temperature rises. Regardless of your plans or enthusiasm, ice will not melt until the heat rises. The same is true of making changes in your church.

How do you raise the temperature in your church regarding needed changes? You do it by creating dissatisfaction with the present condition.

I worked with a church that had a great facility and contained a majority of people satisfied with their present state. But as I analyzed the numbers I made a startling discovery. In the last ten years they had spent about three million dollars and lost an average 200 people in morning worship attendance. I printed out the attendance graph and shared it with leaders and placed it on bulletin boards. This helped create a sense of dissatisfaction. The hard embrace of the status quo began to loosen. They recognized that the future could be better than the present.

As you lead into the future, remind people that it will be better than the current state of the church.

Remind your older attendees you are making changes so that their kids and grandkids will want to come to church.

Remind them that their congregation cannot continue to sustain the current rate of attendance decline.

Paint a picture of the preferred future of the church. Hold the picture up often. Find a catch slogan or a Bible verse that will bring that picture to their mind. Use it often. For example, use Isaiah 43:18-19 which says,

“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 wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Place those verses in your bulletin. Add them to your email signature. Preach a sermon series on a “new thing.”

Keep everyone, especially the older saints, focused on the future.

SECRET #7: DEAL WITH CONFLICT

Shackleton knew that in times of crisis conflict would arise. Try to imagine the high level of conflict generated in a group of 28 people who are facing death. Everyone has their own opinion. The self-preservation instinct kicks in and individualism starts to dominate, forcing the best interest of the group into the background.

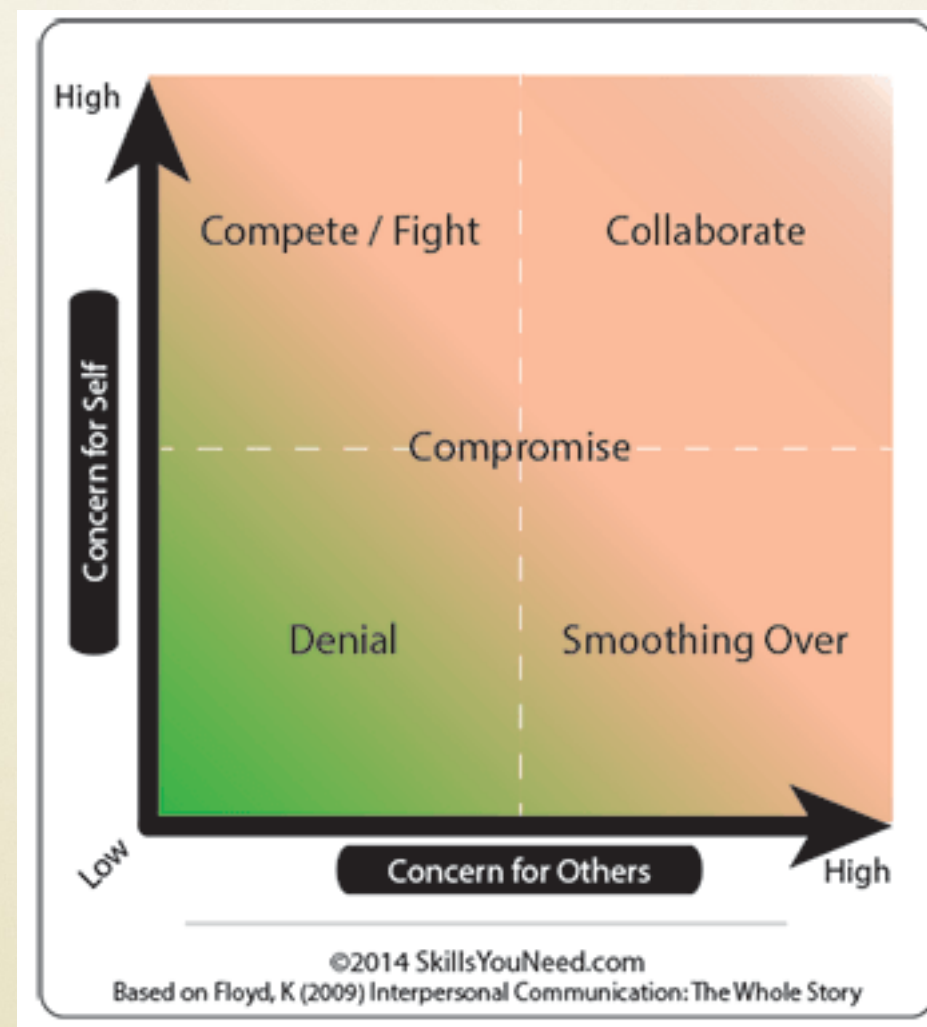
When you read the literature about this incredible story, you will see that Shackleton quickly stepped into any spark of conflict.

This secret is difficult for some ministers to implement. The preferred method for dealing with conflict is to pray about it. I'm not sure if this method is based on a great faith in prayer or a great cowardice of character. Regardless of the reason, failure to deal with conflict as soon as it arises is potentially fatal.

Think of conflict as a splinter. At first it can be ignored, hoping it just goes away. But when it doesn't infection sets in. And when that happens treatment is more difficult than simply removing the splinter.

If you are going to survive the challenges of change deal with any signs of conflict immediately. If you don't, you will have a bigger and more painful challenge ahead.

It's beyond the scope of this ebook to work through various methodologies for handling conflict. But check out this graph to point you in the right direction:



As you look at the graph you can see that there are five ways to deal with conflict. The best way is to collaborate. The key is to have a high regard for self AND for others.

While you work through conflict here's my best piece of advice: if you are on your high horse, dismount and throw away the saddle. You cannot handle conflict with a self-righteous attitude. Be willing to admit you are wrong. Remind yourself that the goal isn't to keep you ego intact. The goal is to keep the church intact.

Whatever it takes you must deal with conflict.

EPILOGUE

Many people in your congregation welcome change. Some are dying for things to change. But be extra sensitive to those who do not share the enthusiasm. Work to bring them along. Don't push them in the corner and view them as collateral damage. Use these leadership tools to bring them along for the journey.

Years later, crew member Raymond Priestley, wrote about the miraculous survival adventure. He made this stirring observation:

"For swift and efficient travel, give me Amundsen; for scientific investigation, give me Scott; but when you are at your wits' end and all else fails, go down on your knees and pray for Shackleton."

As you lead your church through change and turn your older crowd into the golden crowd, hold steady. You can do this.

It is my prayer that as you safely navigate the sea of change, that the older folk in your church will someday say to their friends, "If you must go through change, get down on your knees and pray that you have a pastor like ours."

THE NEXT STEP

For more leadership helps please check out my book Tom's List: 50 Commandments to Transform Your Life. It's available in paperback or Kindle format.

MEET THE AUTHOR



MINISTRY

Randall Hartman has invested 35 years serving successfully as a lead pastor in churches located in Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan.

Now he is a writer, speaker, and a professional interim pastor providing assistance to people and churches in transition. In this role he has served in Oregon, Arizona, Idaho, Indiana, and New Jersey.

He has served as a contributing writer for the Huffington Post, The Good Men Project, and as a featured contributor on Sixty and Me.

His 2016 book Tom's List: **Tom's List: 50 Commandments to Transform Your Life** is available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and select bookstores.

PERSONAL

Family:

He's been happily married for 43 years to his wife Jacquie. They have a son and daughter who are both married. They have seven grandchildren.

Education:

Bachelor of Science: Olivet Nazarene University; Kankakee, IL

Master of Divinity (Cum Laude): Nazarene Theological Seminary; Kansas City, MO

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Men Wanted for Dangerous Expedition:
Low Wages for Long Hours of Arduous
Labour under Brutal Conditions; Months
of Continual Darkness and Extreme Cold;
Great Risk to Life and Limb from Disease,
Accidents and Other Hazards; Small
Chance of Fame in Case of Success.

— *Ernest Shackleton* —

AZ QUOTES