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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Shepherding Congregations through Grief Storms

Sylvia's husband died in a tragic hunting accident. Ten years later her friends described her as angry and bitter. "She never got over it," one said. "Stuck in the unfairness of her loss...can't move beyond it."

First Church's much-loved pastor retired. His replacement was an equally effective speaker, a caring pastor, and a far better administrator. But many long-term members did not like him. After four painful years, he relocated to another congregation.

Any significant life change (whether positive or negative) can cause feelings of loss and grief. As with individuals, a congregational grief experience often unfolds in the five stages that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlined decades ago: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and eventually—with the passage of time—resolution and healing.

But the way congregations experience grief makes it more difficult to recognize. Church members adjust to the grief of loss like a flotilla of ships moving through a storm at sea. Some ships move safely and quickly through the wind and waves, others slowly. A few ships do not survive the grief storm and are lost at sea: they stop attending or transfer to another congregation.

What Causes Grief Storms?

During significant change some church members get stuck in one of the first four stages of grief (denial, anger, depression, or bargaining). Examples:

New building— "My parents were married in that beautiful sanctuary! Why do we have to tear it down?"

Relocation to a new site— "It may be a better location, but it just doesn't feel like church!"

New senior pastor— "I know she is a good preacher, but I think ministers should be men!"

New choir director— "Why does he have to change everything?"

Significant growth in attendance— "I feel like I don't know anyone anymore!"

Significant decline in attendance— "I remember when the sanctuary was packed! Why can't our new pastor make it that way now?"

New adult Sunday school class— "I think its ridiculous! We would like to have those new people in *our* class!"

Stuck in One of the Grief Stages?

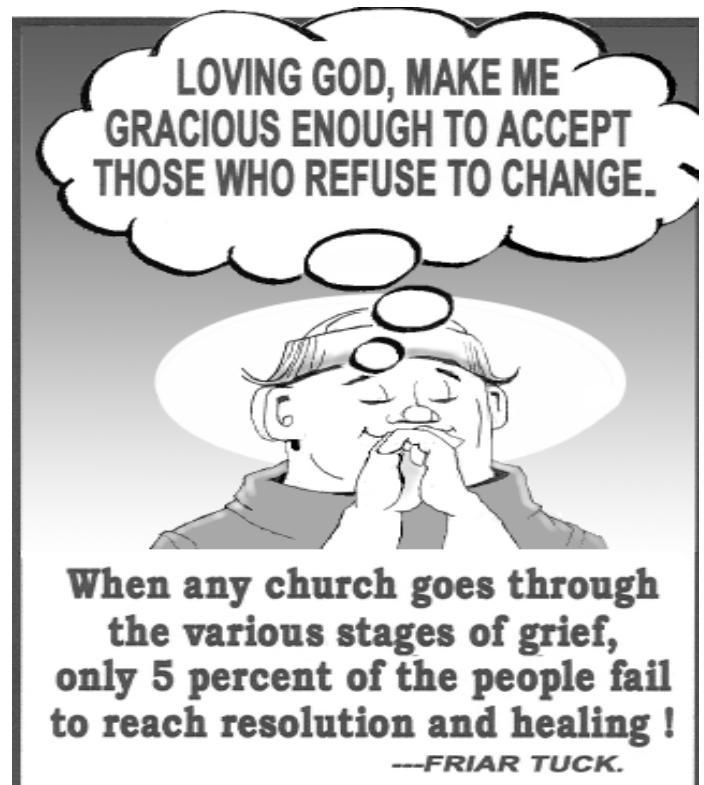
During major staff changes, some members respond with *denial*. "This can't be happening; our church cannot survive without this person!"

Members in the *anger stage* often look for someone to blame (the pastor, the personnel committee). "They just wanted to get rid of him!" Angry comments sound like pounding waves on the sea. "This will not solve the *real* problem!" "You are just jealous of her abilities!" "A good Christian wouldn't permit this!"

Some people express *depression* by avoiding people they perceive as the enemy, or by not attending worship.

People in the *bargaining stage* may think or say to God or a church leader, "I'll do this noble deed if you make things go back to the way they were."

As time passes, the congregation progresses through these early stages of grief. Most members arrive at a new understanding and hope. The majority of "ships in the storm" arrive at *resolution and healing*.



How Do We Shepherd during Grief Storms?

The first and most important step is *recognizing who is responsible for guiding a congregation through the grief process*.

With a flotilla of ships in a storm at sea, the admiral is responsible for seeing them through to safety.

In congregations, the senior pastor, staff, and lay leaders are responsible for grief-process shepherding.

Prepare mentally and spiritually. The pastor asks himself/herself biblically based theological questions such as the following:

“Shall I respond to these pounding waves of negative comments and actions with Grace or Judgment?”

“Shall I respond by feeling personally attacked?”

“Or shall I, with God’s Grace, rise above the wind and storm by recognizing that many of the inappropriate comments and actions arise out of the normal grief stages?”

Communicate, communicate, and communicate. Pastors who effectively lead congregations through grief storms repeatedly communicate four concepts:

1. Because of these events, we are entering a time of congregational grief.

2. Various members move through the five grief stages at different rates of speed.

3. Emotional responses arising from grief may seem like personal attacks; we have the privilege and responsibility of responding with Grace, not Judgment or anger.

4. We are responsible for providing tangible tools that encourage members to express their grief in appropriate ways.

Provide tangible ways to grieve.

The first reaction to a painful change is usually *denial*. For example, one church razed a beloved old sanctuary and classrooms to build a new fellowship hall, kitchen, and classrooms on the site.

The *denial stage* began long before the congregation approved the project. Some people said, “This building is sound; we can’t tear it down!”

Others said, “We remember all the baptisms and weddings and can’t bear to think of losing this building. Surely, we aren’t going to tear it down!”

Effective *denial-management strategies* flood the congregation with accurate information. In one church, this included a presentation by the fire marshal, who said, “A fire in the old building would also destroy the new sanctuary and classrooms—in less than ten minutes.”

Another strategy was a video presentation by the Trustees, showing water-damaged floors and stairways that no longer support even a child’s weight. Such strategies can lead congregations to move more unanimously toward joyfully launching the razing and rebuilding.

Examples of strategies for reducing *anger* and *depression*: A monthly *Building News Bulletin*, in addition to the church newsletter, that focuses on major changes the congregation is experiencing. The bulletins remind members of the creative means they used to maintain unity during previous challenges—like moving from the old sanctuary forty years ago. The *Building News Bulletins* include pictures of the project’s progress and examples of new opportunities the new facilities will provide.

One church gathered all the available wedding photos, showing happy families at the old pulpit area and altar rail. The monthly *Building News Bulletin* invited all members to see these photos, prominently displayed on a large bulletin board.

Another church lessoned *anger* and *depression* with a report explaining plans to use some of the pulpit furniture and altar rail, as well as portions of the stained glass windows, in the new facilities.

Another strategy: Invite members to come to the site of the beloved old building, pick up one of the discarded bricks, and take it home as a memento.

A special event or worship service sometimes allows members to say, “Most of us have made it through the storm, and we are now ready to move on.”

Through such strategies, leaders can encourage members to move through denial, depression, anger, and bargaining, as they progress toward resolution and healing.

Do We Understand the Five-Percent Principle?

A small number of people do NOT progress to *resolution and healing*—no matter how effectively the pastor and leaders shepherd the congregation through the first four stages of grief. Up to five percent of a congregation’s members sometimes get stuck in *anger* or *depression*!

The wise pastor prepares for this common phenomenon through prayer and dependence on God’s grace. He or she resists self-blame by remembering that this five-percent group is typical across the nation.

He or she may want to orally share (do NOT print it!) this “five-percent principle” with church leaders and staff, so they also can mentally and spiritually prepare to offer grace to people in this almost inevitable group.

The Bottom Line

A storm of congregational grief—like the grief we experience at the death of a loved one—is a *process*, not an event.

Capable church leaders recognize that grief is a process and take responsibility for shepherding the congregation to safety and fair weather.