

Fourth Mark: Faces the cost of change and growth

rather than resisting change and fearing failure

- **while embracing the past, it dares to take on new ways of doing things**
- **takes risks: admits when things are not working, and learns from experience**
- **crises: responds creatively to challenges that face the church and community**
- **positive experiences of change: however small, are affirmed and built on**

Healthy churches face the cost of change and growth rather than resisting change. They are prepared to take carefully considered risks and act, and do not fear failure.

Change is a sign of life and growth – and a fact of life.

Many people misunderstand change. They think it is all about changing some organisational aspect, i.e. the liturgy, the times of services or the church building. Changes may be needed in all these aspect of a church, but it is not 'real' change. Real change is a change of heart – a change of norms, habits, skills and beliefs.

Change requires a willingness to reflect on the value of what we are doing, hence this mark connects with seeking to find out what God wants, and doing a few things and doing them well. Doing lots of

things – busyness – does not necessarily bear fruit and can be a way to avoid the pain of learning and change.

While embracing the past, it dares to take on new ways of doing things

David Ford, retired Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, said at a conference:

'our calling is to improvise in ways which surprise and delight and yet ring true with the past.'

Improvising works in two ways – it is evolutionary and revolutionary. It comes about by taking what is and reworking it or seeks to begin again. We can observe this in the life of the Church today. The evolutionary model takes 'inherited church' work in today's changed and changing setting. The revolutionary way is to start with a new group in a new setting and work out how to nourish and express our faith. Often a combination is required.

Takes risks: admits when things are not working, and learns from experience

There are no guarantees of success in this life, so faith shows itself in a willingness to follow a hunch or conviction.

When church plants 'fail' – if you can call it that – it is often a necessary part of the journey towards planting a church that 'works'. The example below might resonate:

One church, aware that no-one from a large council estate in the parish came to church, decided to do a 'church plant' on the estate. Ten people agreed to form the church plant and to report back within three years. When they reported back they had to admit that no-one had been added to the life of the church through the church plant so they recommended it to be closed. Six months later the local pub was closed and the church seized the opportunity. They bought the pub through a Church Urban Fund grant and turned it into a youth and community centre. Out of this, a group of people emerged who wanted to explore the faith. Having done so, they discovered a personal relationship with God, met weekly to pray, worship and support each other. Once a month a priest came to celebrate a Eucharist. With hindsight they realised that, without noticing it, they had planted a church.

Humans make choices as they adapt to changed circumstances. So do healthy churches. They are responsive rather than rigid.

Open Doors, Open Minds, is a story of a church that was known as a 'preaching shop' and saw the pulpit as the focal point in evangelism. However, they noticed that the local community contained a growing number of bedsits and an influx of people on benefits, often with drug or relational problems or suffering from mental or emotional disturbance. They came nowhere near the church. Courageously the church faced up to this situation. They reordered the back of the church to create a meeting point where drinks, light refreshments and

conversations were available. They thought they had done their part by opening their doors. But, once people from the community started to come for drinks, the church found that the conversations, indeed the conversions, were two-way. They came to realise that relationships rather than pulpits are the key to communicating the faith. Here was the creative, costly response to a changing world.

Positive experiences of change: however small, are affirmed and built on

The truth is that many churches have stories to tell of experiments that came to nothing and good ideas that fell flat. They were able to admit when things were not working because of the positive credits in the church's 'memory bank of change'.

Sometimes churches do not have a positive 'memory bank of change'. If this is the case, it might be helpful to air past negative experience and to explore what the church has learned, or could learn, from those experiences.

It could be argued that there are three broad types of church:

- Some are simply heading in the wrong direction. This will include churches going nowhere.
- Other churches are on the journey to health, bearing in mind that health is a journey, not a destination we arrive at.
- The third type are those that have been on the journey to health but have become stuck or have ducked some issue without which the journey cannot be resumed.

Certainly churches on the journey to health are ones that have come up against costly experiences of pain, puzzlement, change and conflict. They have the capacity to face uncomfortable truth and real obstacles, but also the ability to keep going. They are the churches that reap the rewards of staying faithful to the costly call to follow Christ.

Study Passages

Matthew 5: 17-20; Acts 6: 1-7

Why do we find change difficult?

What needs changing?

What helps us to change and be changed?

Can you think of a change for the better that has taken place in your church and what lessons can we draw from that?

Exodus 18: 13-27: What helps to bring about change?

Meditation

The church is called to express the life of Jesus Christ, who lived the truth that

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (John 12:24)

