

Mike
Bonem



The
rt
of
Leading
Change

Ten Perspectives
on the Messiness
of Ministry

Praise for *The Art of Leading Change*

“*The Art of Leading Change* is a tour-de-force of leadership wisdom and demonstrates why Mike Bonem is a trusted advisor to leaders all over the nation. With creativity and humility, honesty and candor, Bonem brings together decades of leadership wisdom and memorable maxims for navigating the most delicate part of the change process—the *art* of leading people through it. Mike’s ten perspectives on the art of leading change will become as cherished to readers as Mike’s own coaching is to leaders.”

—TODD BOLSINGER, author of *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* and *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*

“In *The Art of Leading Change* Mike Bonem opens leadership up as an aesthetic act. Like art, leadership is messy, each element a conversation between a tightly woven organizational culture and the brush strokes of meetings and conversations. He challenges us to dig deep and balance that by taking a step back to consider the work underway. This book offers solid advice for both the right- and left-brain leader.”

—RT. REV. C. ANDREW DOYLE, the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Texas, and author of *Citizen* and *Embodied Liturgy*

“I’m not sure there is a more important book coming out of a world-wide pandemic and an intense season of political and spiritual unrest. Get ready to mark up every page. Few leadership books on change must be read by everyone in a position of influence. This one is on that list. Read it as soon as possible.”

—JUDY WEST, pastor of staff & leadership development at The Crossing, St. Louis MO, and leader of WXP, an international group of Women Executive Pastors

“The need to navigate massive change is a crucial competency for spiritual leaders. Especially now with the church’s critical need to move from church-as-institution to church-as-movement. I am glad that Mike Bonem has decided to distill and distribute his many practical suggestions about how this is done in *The Art of Leading Change*. I can’t imagine a ministry team that would not be helped by processing this book together.”

—REGGIE MCNEAL, best-selling author of
Kingdom Come and *Kingdom Collaborators*

“In *The Art of Leading Change*, Mike Bonem hits a brilliant balance of the complexity *and* potential for leading change today. He masterfully draws from the wisdom of family systems theory and organizational dynamics along with his own insights from years of experience with congregations to produce actionable guidance for navigating change. In a season that can feel overwhelming for leaders in the church, this book offers practical handholds. As I read it, I found myself feeling genuinely hopeful.”

—LISA GREENWOOD, vice president for
leadership ministry, Wesleyan Investive and
Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF).

“Leading change is never easy, and it’s not an option. Mike Bonem offers invaluable insights on how to better understand and practice the art of leading people through change. Throughout this book, you will find deep thought, helpful stories, biblical foundations, and perhaps some of the best wisdom and advice you can receive on leading change.”

—DAN REILAND, executive pastor, 12Stone Church,
Lawrenceville, GA, and author of *Confident Leader!*

“He’s done it again. I had the privilege of working with Mike on a couple of his titles while I was at Leadership Network. This new book, *The Art of Leading Change*, will become a staple of every leader’s library, much like his earlier title, *Leading from the Second Chair*. Having known Mike now for over twenty years as leader of change, I can say with confidence that not only are the principles he shares accurate, but they flow from his experience of leading change so well in so many contexts. Whether you lead a church, a corporation, a nonprofit, a team, or your family, you need this book.”

—GREG LIGON, president, Ligon Group

“I once saw a little comic in a magazine. The top read, ‘Church plant week 2.’ In the picture of people sitting in church, one man is leaning sideways to say to his wife, ‘That’s not how they did it *last* week.’ The point is, change resistance happens in every organization regardless of how old or young it is. So, stewarding change is a part of every leader’s job description. Mike totally gets this, and he’s been leading churches and organizations through seasons of change for several decades. This book brings together what he’s learned in all his experience, and it does so with his trademark ‘boots on the ground’ wisdom. The value here is the life and ministry experience found scattered throughout the pages of this book. It is money and time well spent.”

—PHIL TAYLOR, coach, consultant,
author at Backstage Pastors


“Mike Bonem knows what he’s talking about in ministry and in leadership. As anyone in a position of leadership knows, there are challenges. If you are a minister, you know it’s not always easy. Leading as a minister can and will get messy. Fortunately, help is available and it’s right here in Mike’s new book. You’ll be encouraged, motivated, and blessed as you read and apply the principles he shares.”

—DAVID HARDAGE, executive director, Texas Baptists

“What an invaluable resource on leading change from someone with seasoned expertise to speak with authority on the subject. Mike Bonem has written a fabulous book with exceptionally helpful insights on the courageous artistry of leading people through ministry-related change, however messy it may be.”

—LEO SCHUSTER, lead pastor, City Church Houston

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Fortress Press
Minneapolis

THE ART OF LEADING CHANGE
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To our grandsons,

Theodore and William,

and the grandchildren we
have yet to meet.

May the church always be willing to
change so that you and future generations
experience the love and grace of Christ.

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The Challenge of Change

I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first? Whenever I'm presented with this question, my response is, "Let's get the bad news out of the way." I hope you agree, because this chapter contains the bad news: *change is difficult*.

You may be saying, "That isn't news." You already know that making any kind of meaningful change is difficult, personally or organizationally. At the individual level, think about an exercise program or diet that you tried to start. Or a relational reset that you attempted. It's not easy to break out of old habits and establish new patterns.

Organizational change takes the challenge of individual change and multiplies it across an entire group of people. When it's done well, you can harness the energy of a few people to change an entire organization—but now I'm jumping ahead to the good news. The negative side is that group dynamics often create a complex web that snares even well-designed change efforts.

So before we can dig into the good news that change is possible, we need to understand the bad news better. Why is change so difficult, especially when it's obvious that change is needed? And why does it seem to be especially difficult in church and ministry settings?

Go back to the challenge of making personal changes. One of the biggest obstacles is that the "cost" of making the change is high on the front end, and the benefits are generally less certain and further down the road. Starting an exercise program means sore muscles. If your plan involves a fitness class or some other group activity,

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another cost may be the embarrassment of appearing out of shape in front of friends or strangers. And the benefits? You hope you will feel better in a few months and will have better cardiac health in future years.

Personal changes also require an investment of time and energy on the front end. You may be convinced it would be good to learn a second language, but you know it will take hours and hours to become proficient. Those hours will need to be taken from some other activity, presumably something that you enjoy or believe to be important.

Expand from personal to organizational change and the same obstacles will exist, whether in a business or school or church. And the involvement of more people translates into additional barriers that change leaders must navigate. One of the biggest barriers to change in any organizational setting is a *desire for stability*. Most people want a certain degree of predictability in their lives. The bigger the change, the more instability and chaos they will experience. If they anticipate disruption on the horizon, they are likely to resist.

Have you noticed that younger people tend to be more open to change? *Past experiences* are one reason that resistance goes up with age. The longer we are alive, the more likely we are to have endured a promising change initiative that went awry. Bad memories from those past experiences will become the fuel for future resistance.

Even if change doesn't bring up bad memories from the past, it may represent a future *threat to power* for some people. The only reason to undertake significant organizational change is because of the expected benefits. But not everyone benefits equally. When people in the organization do the math of change and conclude they will lose, they push back. The "loss" may relate to influence, prestige, finances, employment, or other factors.

One of the most significant losses can be reputational damage if a proposed change *implies past mistakes*. People with long tenures in an organization, especially if they've been in leadership, often hear

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a proposal for change as an indictment of their past contributions. When blame is in the air, defensiveness and resistance are quick to follow.

The common denominator of these four barriers is *people*. None of the obstacles is due to bad ideas about the kind of change to make, even though that can certainly sink the effort. Even when an idea is brilliant, it's the people and their response to proposed changes that make the difference between success and failure.

This chapter started with the statement that change is difficult, but that is only the first part of the bad news. The second part is that change in churches and other ministry settings is more complicated and more difficult than in business. You may have sensed that intuitively, but do you know why?

The ministry of the apostle Paul provides a clue to this difficulty. In city after city, his proclamation of the good news of Jesus began in the synagogue. And in city after city, he found the message rejected by religious leaders who couldn't imagine making such sweeping changes in their lives and their religion. In each case, Paul walked away from the religious establishment, finding gentiles who were more open to the message and the change it entailed.

Paul's experience underscores the obstacles listed previously, but the roots of the challenge go even deeper in his story, and probably in yours as well. If you're going to lead a significant change effort in your church or ministry, you need to understand the unique, hidden barriers that stand in the way. The rest of this chapter shines a light to help you see them more clearly.

Untouchable Traditions

The Christian faith is rich in traditions and rituals. These traditions are deeply meaningful to the individuals who comprise each faith community. Some traditions are practiced across a broad spectrum of the church, such as a candlelight worship service on Christmas

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Eve. Others are unique to a particular congregation, such as singing a particular song as a benediction each week.

If you're thinking that "traditions" are challenges only for old or mainline congregations, think again. Even a congregation that was started relatively recently or that isn't part of a denomination can quickly develop untouchable traditions. Any activity to which someone would say "That's just how we do things here" is a tradition. It can be the way that children are involved in worship just as easily as a specific communion liturgy.

A new pastor created an unintentional firestorm on his very first Sunday when he walked down the center aisle at the end of the worship service. It seemed like a simple and reasonable thing to do. He had been told that the congregation liked to greet their pastor at the door after the service. But the previous, long-tenured pastor always exited down the side aisle. The retired pastor frequently told the congregation that God should be the focus of their attention at the end of worship, and he didn't want to distract from that. The unfortunate new pastor hadn't been given that valuable nugget of information, which resulted in his violation of a "sacred" tradition.

In *Built to Last*, authors Jim Collins and Jerry Porras say that the most effective organizations "preserve the core and stimulate progress."^{*} They explain that a well-defined core is essential and must be protected. But anything that is not at the core of an organization's identity can be changed if needed to build a thriving organization.

Most churches, if they heard this concept, would have difficulty identifying their "core" that must be preserved. If you leaned into this exercise by asking what must not be changed under any circumstances, the resulting list would be long and discouraging. Almost everything they do would be on their "must not change" list, leaving very little room to stimulate progress. The leadership team of a church rarely says this directly. In fact, they often say they're willing

* Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1997), 80.

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to make whatever changes are necessary. But when a specific change is proposed, the challenge of traditions will be felt quickly.

Theological Overlay

Overcoming resistance anchored in traditions can be a challenge in any organization. But in churches, traditions are often infused with theological rationale that gives them even greater power. It's one thing to say "We've always done it this way" and quite another to say "The way we've always done it is God's way."

Sometimes the invocation of God's name is explicit. Often it is just implied. At times, people who want to preserve the status quo will point to a specific Bible passage to support their point of view. In other cases, they can't find the supporting verse but they're certain it exists. In all these situations, the theological overlay creates an additional obstacle to change.

Many churches celebrate the completion of high school with a "senior Sunday" for their students. There's no question that this is an opportunity to honor the work God has done in the students' lives and to encourage them to continue walking with God as they enter adulthood. But is it necessary to have this celebration on a Sunday morning? Does it need to be done the same way every year? Sure, that may be the tradition, but there are many ways to honor God as a church celebrates its seniors. Imagine suggesting that the event be moved to a Sunday night to allow more time to truly celebrate the seniors. The change conversation might suddenly take a theological turn when a group of parents objects that the celebration is becoming "just another secular event rather than the holy moment that occurs in the morning worship service."

Whenever a church or ministry is considering a significant change, the decision should be guided by prayer and by the Holy Spirit. This is true whether the final decision is to proceed with or pause a change. But remember that some of history's biggest

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opponents of change—the Pharisees—claimed to be obeying God even as they resisted the coming of the kingdom.

Dependence on Volunteers

Volunteers are the lifeblood of every church and most other ministries. By itself, that's a good thing. Think of how little we'd accomplish if all the work had to be done by paid staff. Can you imagine not having volunteers to teach Bible stories to children or to welcome visitors or to package and distribute food for people who need a meal?

Volunteers are essential, but reliance on them creates additional obstacles to leading change. A change initiative in business ultimately requires buy-in from employees. But business leaders have two extra tools to use: the power of the paycheck and the presence of the workforce.

If resistance arises, a business leader can resort to a top-down approach: “Make this change or else.” The “or else” phrase is understood to mean a demotion or even termination of employment. This isn't the best tool to use, but it is available. In addition, the business workforce is on the job for 40 hours a week, which gives leaders ample opportunities to explain the whys and hows of a proposed change.

Compare this to a church. How many times has a member complained “I didn't know anything about that”? You know the information has been widely communicated, but you can't make meetings mandatory, and there are no real consequences for the member not reading their email. Even more challenging is that volunteers often feel free to do what they want, regardless of the new direction that is proposed. They may quit when asked to change. An even worse scenario is when they continue in their roles without making the requested changes.

A church decides to shift its emphasis from giving money for missions to engaging people in hands-on mission work. Their strategy is

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to mobilize people through the existing small groups and Bible study classes. So what should the pastor do if a small group leader decides not to participate? The leader might even tell the small group that the shift is a “stupid idea,” thereby infecting others with the germ of resistance. When dealing with reluctant volunteers, especially ones who are long-tenured or dearly loved, the solution is never simple.

Multiple Motivations

Let’s be honest. People are not always honest about their motivations. Sometimes they have not done enough soul-searching to even know their true motivations. And in Christian organizations where everyone knows how to give a “Sunday school answer,” this can be confusing and can hinder change.

This sounds judgmental, but think about the most recent moment in your church when people were not on the same page about an important decision. There’s a good chance that each leader would say they were advocating for a position based on prayer and following God’s guidance. I doubt anyone would admit that their motivation was personal comfort or the happiness of a group of friends. And yet those more human and less spiritual motivations may be just below the surface.

The contemporary worship service at a church has grown steadily, but the 8:30 a.m. start time is seen as a deterrent to attracting first-time visitors. The pastor proposes changing the Sunday schedule, swapping the contemporary service and the 11:00 a.m. traditional service. Those objecting to the change say things like “Those young families are up early anyway.” They also say “I don’t sense God leading us to make this change.” What you won’t hear is “I like things the way they are” or “My spouse will be angry if I vote in favor of this change” or even “I don’t really want to reach a lot of new, younger families.” They may be harboring these thoughts, but they are rarely voiced.

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When leaders are less than honest about their motivations, it becomes even more difficult to make decisions. We may wonder what they're really thinking, but no one wants to ask, "Did you truly pray about this? Are you confident that this is God's prompting and not just a personal preference?" And in truth, most leaders genuinely want to make decisions that are best for the church and in accordance with God's will. But that desire may be swept away in a flood of competing emotions and motivations.

Confusing Governance

A new pastor typically asks for a description of the church's governance structure. How many people are on the board? How are they selected? What committees exist and how much authority do they have? A seasoned pastor goes deeper, asking how decisions are really made. That's because what happens in practice may not resemble the official process.

In one church, the facilities committee has an outsized influence on strategic, board-level decisions. They have wielded this influence for so long that no one even questions it. When a new ministry initiative is being considered, board members say, "That's an interesting idea. Let's see if the facilities folks will support it."

This kind of confusion over governance and decision-making authority inhibits change in more than one way. The obvious problem is when change can be blocked by a shadow group that operates outside of the official process. But equally troubling is the way that this behavior discourages change champions and squelches the momentum for change.

Long Reach of History

The past is always present. This simple statement is one every leader should keep in mind. It often explains why one church is enthusiastic about trying new things and another seems to resist even the smallest change.

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Organizations—churches in particular—have long memories. When a church has a history of successfully navigating change, people are more receptive to proposals for future shifts. “Success” in this context is multifaceted. It’s not just about the overall outcome of a decision. People’s recollections of success may include whether their voices were heard in the process, whether disagreements were handled in healthy ways, and whether they saw God at work in the changes. The negative side is equally powerful. A church’s history with change might include a charismatic leader who was able to get a yes vote but didn’t listen well. Or a proposed change that resulted in a small, vocal group angrily leaving the church. Or an expensive program that was “guaranteed to revive our church” that fell far short of its promises.

By all traditional measures, the launch of the church’s first satellite campus had been an incredible success. A launch group of 50 people had grown to over 200 in worship attendance in less than 18 months. Offerings at the satellite were already covering its expenses. There was a buzz in the community about the new church. And yet when the opportunity arose to add a third campus, church leaders were surprisingly hesitant. In meetings, the verbalized concern was “We’re not quite ready.” In private, those leaders felt that the earlier campus decision had been pushed primarily by their pastor and had killed the momentum at the main campus.

History, as it relates to change, is tricky because it tends to be exposed in fragmented spurts. Pastors may try to understand the history at the start of their tenure, and they will typically learn a great deal. But they should never assume they know the entire backstory and the shadow it may cast over future decisions.

Lack of Meaningful Evaluation

The final factor that makes change more complicated in churches is the difficulty in evaluating results. Every business looks at the “bottom

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line,” its profitability, as a measure of success. But churches often disagree on what their bottom line is. Attendance in worship and in small groups, the number of new members, and giving are important metrics, but leaders admit that these are incomplete indicators of fruitfulness. Their dissatisfaction, however, rarely becomes a springboard to create more meaningful metrics or to develop a deeper understanding of the factors driving their desired outcomes.

To be clear, I do not believe that the important work of a church can always be expressed in numbers. Our ultimate desire is for people to have a relationship with Jesus Christ and to continue to grow spiritually. Our expectation is that spiritual growth will be manifested in a variety of ways, only some of which are quantifiable or at least measurable.* I also know that a church’s efforts are only part of this equation. The more important part is the work of the Holy Spirit, which we certainly cannot control.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the absence of metrics undermines change efforts. Change will always be met with resistance, and one way to overcome that resistance is to paint the picture of the anticipated future results. The right metrics can make the picture clearer. If a church plans to partner with a local elementary school by providing tutors to improve reading scores, they could say, “Many kids at our partner school are not reading at grade level.” But if they want to move more people to act, they will explain, “Over 150 kids at our partner school are at least two grade levels behind in their reading. We want to reduce that number to less than 50 in the next three years, but we can only do that if we have 100 people from our church who agree to serve as tutors.”

The lack of meaningful measurement exacerbates a related problem: reluctance to give honest feedback. A culture of “niceness” permeates most churches. It prevents individual conversations about job performance and realistic evaluations of ministries. Not giving

* My book, *In Pursuit of Great and Godly Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), includes an entire chapter on “Do You Measure What Matters?”

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negative feedback may seem to be Christlike behavior, in contrast to the “heartless” world of business. But a lack of honesty about shortcomings leads to poor stewardship of resources and deprives people of the opportunity to improve.

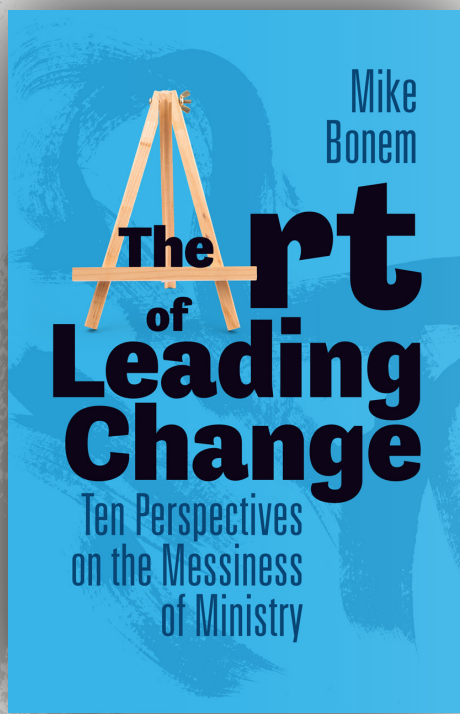
Without honest feedback, one of the major motivators for change will be missing. You’ve heard the expression “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The lack of meaningful evaluation in churches begs the question, “If it is broken, how will we know?”

I began this chapter by saying, “Let’s get the bad news out of the way.” You already knew the difficulty of leading change, and this chapter confirmed it. Perhaps you gained some new insights into the specific factors that obstructed your past attempts to lead change. You may be discouraged by a greater awareness of the height of the mountain that you need to climb for your next change journey.

But remember that this book contains good news. Change is difficult, but it is not impossible. Leading healthy change cannot be boiled down to a simple recipe, but you can gain new perspectives and learn principles that will increase your effectiveness and lighten your load. Change leadership will always be an art, so let’s take out a canvas and begin the first lesson.

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