



DESIGN GROUP
International™

PO Box 19, Kohler, WI 53044-0019 | 1.877.771.3330 | Fax: 1.888.845.9996
info@DesignGroupIntl.com | www.DesignGroupIntl.com

***Change Champion: Making Plain and Affirming
Change in the Midst of Organizational and
Congregational Life***

Prepared by: Arlen G. Vernava, M.Div.,PTS
Senior Consultant

CHANGE CHAMPION: MAKING PLAIN AND AFFIRMING CHANGE IN THE MIDST OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

You are a change champion! The organizations and congregations you serve are change champions too. You are all experts at change!

"I don't understand. What do you mean? Change champions? It seems like nothing ever changes! "According to ¹[John Kotter](#), change is an 8-stage process and the first order of business? Creating a sense of urgency [for change]. We have been going along to get along for years! "Once when we tried to change not much came of it. Another time, persons quit with hard feelings and everyone felt upset. Change champions? I don't think so."

I do. Change does not need initiating (though we often do, to poor results). One does not need to create a climate of change nor convince others of its necessity. Rather, one needs to remain attentive to the change in the midst of organizational and congregational life, an attentiveness that affirms, inquires and responds. Change is inevitable, organic and constant.

Change:

- Your predecessor retires, was fired, resigned, transitioned into a new role, or died. You now serve as Interim-time Practitioner.
- Three candidates for a staff position are interviewed and one receives an invitation to take the job. They accept.
- Water floods a storage area. Historical documents and artifacts are ruined.
- Congregational leadership notices a rapid and steady increase of refugee persons in the neighborhood near their building. Worship attendance doubles and youth participation increases four-fold in less than 2 years.

You and the place you serve are change champions because you and your organization experience change every day. It is so constant that all live into much of this change without lament or celebration and often rather unconsciously: "Once it was *this*, now it is *that*." Change: organic, constant, and inevitable, simply describes life. Yet once in a while, often prompted by an event that shifts one's universe, so to speak, change announces its presence. One sees and feels it. It's plain and visible. In the midst of change made plain, I wonder: In what powerful and positive ways do Practitioners continue to make plain the change that already exists? In what powerful and positive ways does a congregation or organization live into the change in their midst?

"I don't think people actually resist change so much as they resist penetration, submission and vulnerability" writes [Karen Maroda](#). "... no matter their behavior...to an outside observer, from [the organization's] perspective they are at least alive... They fear and resist, not change, but the death of [their way of being]... resistance is a matter of survival, not self-sabotage." (The Power of Counter-Transference, pg 34)

Although Maroda addresses analytic psychotherapy practitioners, her observation feels Interim-time accurate:

A congregation described themselves as stuck and diminished and deeply hoping for vibrant and relevant ministry. What programs might they try, they wondered? What could they do to increase participation, grow the membership, sustain the facility, and support a "full-time" minister and ministry? Did they feel a sense of urgency? Yes. Did they have a leading coalition of stakeholders? Yes. Were they living into the change in their midst? Yes, but with great resistance. Seeing and feeling change, "penetration" to use Maroda's provocative image, prompted them to invite my help. My simply being with them for a brief time was acknowledgement of their changed circumstances. What did we accomplish? Lament and hope by naming their abundance, itself a mirror for their scarcity.

Kotter speaks of the frequent failure of change to embed and last. Perhaps you have been, as have I, in service to a congregation that said it desired to engage in strategic transition ministry, but upon closer inspection rebuffed all invitation to intentional work. I wonder, did you redouble your effort and intention to create urgency in the leadership team or did you affirm and support their resistance, recognizing it as necessary and essential for their existence rather than an act of self-sabotage? Some congregations, like the one described above, seem marginal and frail. Although one can feel the urge to assess, expert-like, the necessity for change, and to offer strategy or program in response to an expressed desire for help, simply affirming and supporting the change they experience, without judgment, is enough. Do they know you are connected, that you are with them, not aloof and waiting for them do more or do different?

Do they know you affirm their need to wait, pause and ponder the change in their midst, not provoking them to move, to do, to act other than they are?

Trust that Interim-time congregations and organizations know what is best for them. They are living into change by responding in such a way that keeps them alive. Lead with patience and equanimity. Trust that they will speak up when they feel courage to hope into a future beyond their status quo. Here is evidence of your work: their emotional and spiritual readiness nurtured, in part, by your affirmation and caring.

Another congregation, mostly European-American, middle-aged and older, experienced exponential growth, doubling their adult worship attendance and increasing by four-fold children and youth participation – nearly all non-English speaking refugees from Asia and Africa. Change felt abrupt, overwhelming and fraught with challenge. Leadership quickly grappled with what Maroda calls “submission.” Would the congregation submit to the needs of so many unlike themselves? Would leadership submit to “the leading of the Holy Spirit?” Would refugee and Euro-American leaders submit to collaboration and cooperation? Or would a keen sense of survival; of maintaining and growing a Euro-American congregation into a majority Euro-American congregation create resistance? What did they do? They responded with emotional and spiritual vulnerability by submitting to the needs and challenges of becoming a multi-ethnic, Euro-American minority congregation.

When resistance is low, and survival needs, so to speak, feel supported and fed, change blossoms and blooms. If there is a danger it is this: the dynamic living-into-change can lull Practitioners into euphoric hands-on participation. It can also urge leadership into too quick judgment, judgment that establishes a too soon new status quo. Instead keep asking, “In what powerful and positive way(s) are you, congregation, living into the change in your midst?” Of course the energy and hands-on doing around living into change is contagious. We’ve a toolbox of resources to offer and use. We are viewed as experts and bring expertise. We are being asked to help and we want to help!

Resist getting caught up. Are you in the proverbial high grass, busy with particulars, rather than attuned to the process and strategically helpful at a crucial moment? Does the congregation feel as if you are their cheerleader and their coach, in the sense that you are supporting their work?

We are one of the team, yet we will serve change best by knowing our limitations and by helping key leadership to view all that is going on “from the balcony:” to live into the change in their midst. Trust that the spirit of the place will speak up, seeking balance and equilibrium. They and you will know when their season of change has settled into a new normal. And on that day, change champions all, will know the deep joy of vocation well lived!