

Becoming a Change Agent

Dwight Baldwin was a Christian missionary and a graduate of Harvard Medical School. In the early part of the nineteenth century he set sail on a long journey that took him down the east coast of the United States, along the east coast of South America, around the Horn and into the Pacific Ocean. He eventually arrived at the rough-and-tumble fishing village of Lahaina on the island of Maui in what was then called the Sandwich Islands.

Lahaina was a place of great turmoil because the people of Maui and the nearby island of Molokai were being decimated by an epidemic of smallpox. Baldwin considered himself to be first and foremost a Christian, and especially a Christian missionary, and only secondarily to be a medical doctor. However, he recognized that the people around him were dying both physically and spiritually and he was God's agent for change.

Today in Maui there is a museum to his memory. Historians consider him to be God's agent for bringing great change to the Hawaiian Islands. He saved many people from disease as well as introducing them to the God who could save them from sin. He was God's man in God's place . . . a change agent.

In a very different time and place Nehemiah was also a change agent. He lived in the 5th century BC in the capitol city of Babylon. He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, but he sensed that God was calling him to be a change agent to God's chosen people, only a remnant of which were left in the small population center that had once been Jerusalem, the capitol of Israel.

Nehemiah came to a people and a place that was very difficult. Opposition was great. The wall of the city had lain in rubble for generations. But he was convinced that God had called him to lead those people to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, something that others before had failed to do, something that very much needed to be done.

Because Nehemiah had great skills as a leader he is often studied to this day as one of the best examples of leadership in the Bible. Under his

leadership the rubble was changed into a new wall within fifty-two days and the hope of the people was resurrected. New direction was brought spiritually and physically to the people of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a change agent.

While these were individuals of other places and other centuries, today we, too, need change and we need the help of change agents. There is a sense in which no one should be more of a change agent than a Christian. Christian change agents should be proactive rather than reactive. We should be men and women and boys and girls who bring positive change wherever we are, whether at school, the workplace, our community, church, government or family.

Let's look at some practical suggestions of what we may do in order to be God's agent to change others. Leading that list is to decide our destination. Before making any great change in life, whether it's from being single to being married, married to being single, switching churches or quitting a job, we should at least have some idea of our destination. Now, it's easy to say that, but it's not always an easy thing to do. It can be hard work. It takes a great deal of prayer and an enormous amount of thought to try to figure out the destination to which God is calling us as agents of change.

Change always begins with discontent because if people are content they will be very reluctant to bring about or respond to any change.

Several years ago the leadership of Wooddale Church sensed God's call to change, but didn't really have an idea of what direction to take. So, over the course of a year the leaders met twenty-five times in extended meetings. These meetings included a great deal of prayer and Bible study. The result was that after twelve months there was a sense that God was leading Wooddale to become an outreaching church.

Once the destination was determined we began to see the great implications of how this would impact the whole church. It would affect staff, programs, constitution, perhaps the name of the

church and eventually the location of the church. We did not know exactly how we would get to our destination but we had a clear idea of what the destination was to be.

Whether it's our church or our family or our business or whatever it may be, if we are to be God's change agents, we need to begin with some sense of where we are to end up; otherwise, the change merely becomes change for change sake.

A second suggestion, though clearly related to the first, is that we understand the other people who are involved in the changes that we hope to have happen. That's because change always involves people. We never do it in isolation. And we need to avoid the major mistake of being so engrossed in the change we want to happen that we forget those other people.

One of the saddest examples of this is missionaries who genuinely love God and have a deep passion for evangelism but fail to take time to get to know the people to whom they will minister and to learn their culture. That can have tragic consequences because change is never independent of the people who are to be changed. Therefore, we need to understand the people we want to evangelize. We are not likely to have a great impact upon others until we genuinely see them as they see themselves.

A third suggestion is to begin with discontent. Discontent is a powerful motivator—and it's always there. For Dwight Baldwin, the medical missionary, it was the discontent of the people of Maui and Molokai over smallpox and what it was doing to their families and their community. For Nehemiah, it was the people's discontent that the wall had lain in rubble for generations. In our time, Mikhail Gorbachev functioned as a change agent in the Soviet Union because discontent was so great within his country. Had that discontent not been there it would have been impossible for him to bring about the necessary change.

In terms of evangelism we need to reach people at the point where they are discontent with their lives. Likewise, if a marriage is to be changed and repaired that, too, has to start with discontent. The discontent may be different for a husband or a wife but where there is discontent there is openness and willingness for change. This applies to churches, jobs, relationships and health.

Change always begins with discontent because if people are content they will be very reluctant to bring about or respond to any change. What we, as change agents, need to do when seeking to win people to Jesus Christ or to conform them to God's best for their lives is to find where they are discontented and use that as a starting point to bring about the change that will bring the greatest glory to God and the greatest benefit to those people.

A fourth suggestion is to include circles of influence. Most people function in a setting of relationships. We don't change in isolation; we change only as we are related to other people. In fact, it can be very difficult to make a change independently, to be different from the others in our group. While it is difficult to change a marriage or a family or a societal group of any type if we work only with individuals it is far easier if we work within the context of the system.

Before changes are made at Wooddale Church the ideas are typically run by the Board of Elders and the staff and then perhaps through larger groups of the leadership. Eventually, Open Forums for the whole church body are held so that the ideas can be discussed.

Perhaps you are familiar with interventions that are done when someone has a problem such as alcoholism. When other methods of change have not been effective an intervention seeks to bring the significant people in that person's life together—parents, children, husband, wife, employer, neighbor or best friends—and these people together become involved in the process of challenging the individual to make significant changes.

If we want to bring change to a community it is necessary to work with community leaders from government, education and religion before a final vote occurs because we are all interconnected. So it is important as change agents to include the circles of influence.

The fifth suggestion is to keep the issues simple. A major reason new ideas often fail is that they are too complicated.

Some years ago several far-reaching changes were proposed in the life of Wooddale Church. They involved changing the name of the church, revising the constitution and possible relocation. By-and-large the reaction of the church body was negative. The reason the reaction was negative was probably because it covered too many changes.

Although most of the changes were eventually adopted, it only happened when they were easier to understand.

That same principle applies to those who want to make a church more effective at outreach, impact a group at school to have more influence for good or change a family or a marriage. Keep the issues simple.

In the 5th century BC Nehemiah brought about great changes to the Hebrew people. These changes had to do with military defense, economic stability and spiritual renewal. Yet he summed it up in a way they could grasp and understand. He kept it simple. He merely said, "Rebuild the wall." And when the wall was rebuilt it brought change to their economy; it renewed them spiritually; and it enabled them to better defend themselves militarily . . . all because Nehemiah, an effective change agent, kept the issue simple.

A sixth suggestion is to stay open. Leaders and change agents are not the only ones who have good ideas. In fact, a frequent cause for failure in effecting change is that often leaders are inflexible. We see it our way and

sometimes think that's the only way. As parents we may think we have all the ideas and our children don't have any good ideas. But, we need to listen to them.

A very good example of staying open to change actually took place at Wooddale Church. A business meeting was held to discuss the proposal of a new addition to the church building. The plans were shown on a screen so that everyone could see them and small drawings were handed out. It had been worked through by architects and the building committee and reviewed by staff and elders. There had been an Open Forum and all the plans and preparations had been done. All we intended to do that night was finalize the decision.

Someone in that meeting raised their hand and said, "Why don't we put in another stairwell?"

That person wasn't an architect and probably the suggestion should have been made a lot sooner by the people who had been involved in the planning but, frankly, no one had ever thought of it. So, there on the spot in the middle of the meeting the decision was made to change the drawing and add another stairwell. If that suggestion had not been made and that stairwell had not been added the building would probably never have worked adequately. But I think it was a tribute to the leadership of the building program and Wooddale Church at that time that they had openness to the ideas of other people.

When we function as change agents in family, community, church, business or wherever, we ought to have good ideas and we ought to propose them. But we need to stay open to the ideas of others and give them an opportunity to own what's happening.

A next suggestion is to celebrate progress along the way. Good change agents are great at throwing parties. They celebrate every step of the journey. This gives those who are involved affirmation and encouragement. People begin to believe they can do more.

I enjoy watching television news reports of various marathons. What I enjoy watching most is not the runners

but the spectators along the side. There's something about marathons that draws spectators who don't run themselves but are great sources of encouragement. Have you ever noticed that? They have more thumbs up than you'll ever see anywhere else. They offer drinks of water. They clap and shout. They say, "You can do it!" They celebrate what's already been run and that becomes a boost of adrenaline that enables the runners to go the next step along the way.

Change agents know that progress is to be celebrated. They give encouragement to others so that more changes can take place.

A ninth and final suggestion for those of us who want to be change agents where we are and in the relationships that we have relates to the process. Under most circumstances, wise change

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agents seek process rather than crisis. People who want to bring about change move others in an orderly and a progressive manner.

Whatever is suggested in business meetings at Wooddale Church is almost always approved. It isn't that everything is rubber-stamped or railroaded through. It isn't that members of the church kowtow to the leadership. Actually, it's quite the opposite. In a good change process the process is long and the final decision is really only the ratification of all that has happened before. That is a far superior way to bring about change than having it all happen at once which often results in a crisis.

Think about it. When new ideas are presented to us most of us react negatively at first. But when we have time to process those ideas we are much more likely to buy into them. So those of us who are change agents in our homes and other places need to allow others to be involved in the process, as well, before the final decision is made.

Marriage is one of the biggest changes anyone can have in life. Yet, in all the wedding ceremonies I have performed I have never had a couple say "No" when they were asked if they would marry each other. The reason is that the ceremony is simply the culmination of what has been a lengthy process of change. First, the couple met; then they dated. They included families and friends in their activities together. Sometimes the

results were favorable, sometimes unfavorable. Then they went through counseling and a premarital seminar, meetings with a wedding planner and the wedding rehearsal. So, when the actual wedding occurs it is merely a ratification of what already has transpired throughout the process.

In the same way when we are change agents helping others to bring about change we shouldn't present it to them all at once; we should allow them to go through the process so that when the final decision is formalized they have had time to buy into it.

None of these nine steps is particularly easy, but change is seldom easy. Yet change is what Christianity is all about. God has called us to be change agents. Some of us may be change agents often; some of us may be change agents only on rare occasions. For some of us change may be uncomfortable; others may find change to be more comfortable. But how can we be anything but change agents when we live in a world where most people are not Christians and we are committed to sharing Christ with them?

This week—at work or at home or in our community, in leadership roles or as followers—let us be God's change agents to change the world into what God wants it to be so that people can be more like Jesus Christ!

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 Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
 6630 Shady Oak Road
 Eden Prairie MN 55344
 952-944-6300
 www.faithmatters.fm
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