

A FLYING 'LEAP' AT CHANGE

BY MICHAEL FINLEY

It is a sore point with almost every pastor – the parishioners who just don't like all the changes that have gone down in recent decades, and have never given their hearts to them.

"When I heard changes were coming, back in the 1960s, I didn't like it at all," said Elaine S., of rural Monroe County, New York. "I didn't like that the priest was now facing the people. I didn't like switching from Latin to English. Shaking hands with people – ugh. Then, when people began taking the host in their own hands, I hated that."

In the end, it was a minor change – changing Mass from 10 AM to 10:30 AM – that caused Elaine to bolt the parish altogether.

And so a kind of civil war has engulfed many parishes, between people who are anxious to see things evolve, and those who are offended by change. Pastors are caught in the middle, wondering what they can do to bring people along. With the number of priests dropping, new changes are coming. However will we absorb them?

Not long ago, Fr. Tim O'Sullivan, for 24 years the pastor at St. Irenaeus in upstate New York (names changed at the parish's request) announced his retirement. Parishioners were not happy to be losing a beloved figure. They were deeply disturbed by the news that Fr. Tim's replacement would not be a priest at all, but by a nun who would act as pastoral administrator and a priest who would minister the sacraments, but wouldn't be an actual pastor.

"We were prepared for a change, but not for that great of a change," said Mary Williamson, a 15-year parishioner at St.

Irenaeus. So Fr. Tim placed a call to Dr. Richard McCorry, an expert at coaching people of faith through the challenges of change in the church. McCorry has dealt with congregations, as well as parish staffs and Diocesan leadership, around the U.S. that have had to wrestle with such problems as succession, clustering of parishes, collaborative ministry among adjoining faith communities, and even the closing of parishes.

"It's kind of a paradox," McCorry said. "Historically the church been a shelter for people. Protecting them to a large degree from the pain of a changing world. But often times today, it is the church itself that is changing. Some people feel betrayed, and they wind up angry at the church they have always loved. So our task is to talk these things through, and to look for ways to loosen our own grip, and let God take us where God wants."

McCorry spoke during Sunday liturgies at St. Irenaeus, and he met with over 20 staff persons and parishioners in a special workshop on spiritual ways of adapting to change that McCorry calls the LEAP of Faith – LEAP being an acronym for Learning, Experience, Action, and Prayer.

"Change never comes easy," McCorry said, "because it doesn't happen externally, but inside oneself, where all the fears and uncertainties reside. So this program requires honesty with ourselves from the outset. We must admit that there are things that bother us, and that the reasons run deep. So we commit



Dr. Richard J. McCorry

to understanding ourselves as deeply as we possibly can – and it is this understanding that provides the leverage for change."

The LEAP workshop leads people through four important themes. The first is Learning. "We know that spiritually mature people are open to conflicting information, faith many times leads us into ambiguity," McCorry said. "Expecting to always feel comfortable doesn't take us anywhere. Is our identity tied to the Sunday 11:30 A.M. Mass at St. Mary's Church? Is it tied to a particular building or pastor? Or is our identity rooted in the deep, rich, productive soil of faith in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord? Is our parish church's identity tied to surviving at all costs? Or can we enter into the Paschal Mystery of dying to ourselves in order to rise with Christ, which is proclaimed every time we celebrate the Holy Mass?"

The first order of change is

understand our own fundamental identity. The LEAP Workshop lays it on the line: our identity is not with external details, but in the saving grace of Christ.

“Sometimes, when all the facts are known, what initially looks like a ‘bad’ change turns out to have positive possibilities. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus he made it plain that our task as people of faith is to change, to be born again. Our goal is to rekindle that understanding.”

The second theme is Experience. Change prompts us to go into an emotional tailspin. Without help, many of us plateau at that level. “I have seen parishioners like Elaine who was so upset about the time change on Sunday mornings, that they break down and cry during our first session. Why? Because they really loved the things that were going away. Losing these things tears them up. So our task is to honor these feelings, but to gently, patiently walk people through them to show them what is on the other side.”

The third theme is Action. Change begins in attitude but blossoms into deeds. Once we have quieted the emotional storm we are ready to give ourselves to the change. At St. Irenaeus, one of the men most opposed to losing Fr. Tim volunteered to be part of the welcoming committee for the new team. Months later, he emerged as an important assistant to Sr. Dorothy, the new administrator.

“By acting in accord with the change, something remarkable

happens,” McCorry said. “We become change agents, rather than change victims. In a profound sense, we change sides. And by doing so, the action has a ripple effect inside us that ratifies and accepts the change.”

The fourth final component of LEAP is Prayer. McCorry relies on The Serenity Prayer, composed by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1943, and used in thousands of 12-step groups every day around the world:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

“It is really the perfect prayer for summing up the challenge of change,” McCorry said. “I have used it at many of my workshops. Most people already know it. Some are surprised to see that others also know it too. And all are affected by the heartfelt request that God guide us through these difficult channels.” Also, McCorry notes, the second line of the prayer contains a crucial paradox. “One of the things we can never change is that change is always coming. To be human is to stand in moving water. How can we stand against it, and even walk into it? With the power of the Holy Spirit moving inside us, we can go with the flow, trusting that God will never abandon us.”

McCorry has been doing the LEAP Workshops for several years, as one of the outreach actions of his Rochester, NY-based consulting firm Embracing Change. He has even

written a book on the topic, *Dancing with Change: A Spiritual Response to Changes in the Church*. He has served as pastoral associate, campus minister, director of pastoral care, hospital chaplain, and senior ministry associate in the Rochester area.

He says that the four themes of his LEAP program work because they point in a single direction, upward, to deeper faith in the promises of Christ.

“Faith isn’t something we understand, or master. It is an act of the will to deny the will. By deciding to trust in God, all these fears and disappointments crumble and blow away. Doubts may persist. But faith – good faith, let’s call it – allows us to set them aside.

“After one of our workshops, at a parish that was updating its approach worship, to appeal more to younger families, an older man, who was one of the most resistant persons, affirmed this truth to me.

“I told myself, The God that raised Christ from the dead will make peace between me and these guitars.’ And you know what, Richard? He did!”

Michael Finley is author of *Why Change Doesn't Work*, and other books about group process. He lives and writes in Saint Paul, Minnesota.