

Making Change

Monte Wolverton

Young man, it's time you learned about money and business, declared my frugal grandmother one day, after I had misplaced a quarter. Sure, I was only six years old, but it was never too early to start learning the basics of commerce. So for Christmas that year she bought me a shiny red toy cash register, made of solid metal. Like most toys in the mid '50s, it had no batteries or electronics. I poked a mechanical key marked with an amount of money, and a little white tab with a corresponding amount popped up in a window atop the machine, while a bell rang and a cash drawer full of play money popped out. *Whee!*

But to my grandmother's dismay, at the age of six I was far less concerned about finance than how my new toy functioned. My big takeaway was that only one key could effectively be pressed at a time. Press another key and the first one popped back up. Press the first key again and the second one popped up. I wanted to press them all them at once, but it didn't work properly that way.

Whenever I hear about organizations that are trying to "make change," I think of my cash register. Institutional leaders bravely decide to improve things. They correct one issue. Encouraged, they

correct a second issue, only to have the first one pop back up. When they re-correct the first one, the second one pops back—and so on.

So should they push all the buttons at once? Can the directors rewrite the constitution and bylaws? Can they revise their mission statements? Sure they can—but they often don't, because it's dicey. *The Harvard Business Review* suggests that 60-70% of all organizational change initiatives fail. And by fail, we mean customers/members/donors stumbling over themselves to get out the door. So leaders often opt for a gradual approach to change.

But enough talk about institutions in general. Let's get specific. Churches are institutions (in this context we mean denominations and congregations, as distinct from the collective body of all believers).

In churches, marginal issues and teachings have a way of popping up anytime, growing like barnacles on the hull of a ship, slowing it down and causing it to veer off course. Meaningful change in a church, therefore, should involve periodically and proactively scraping the barnacles off and steering the organization back toward Christ-centeredness.

Even so, despite best intentions, sticky issues have a way of becoming embedded in



institutional memories. Which buttons might be popping back up on your institutional cash register? Beware—because they may not be obvious. They may disguise themselves with the best of intentions. Here are just a few. I'm sure you can think of others.

* * * * *

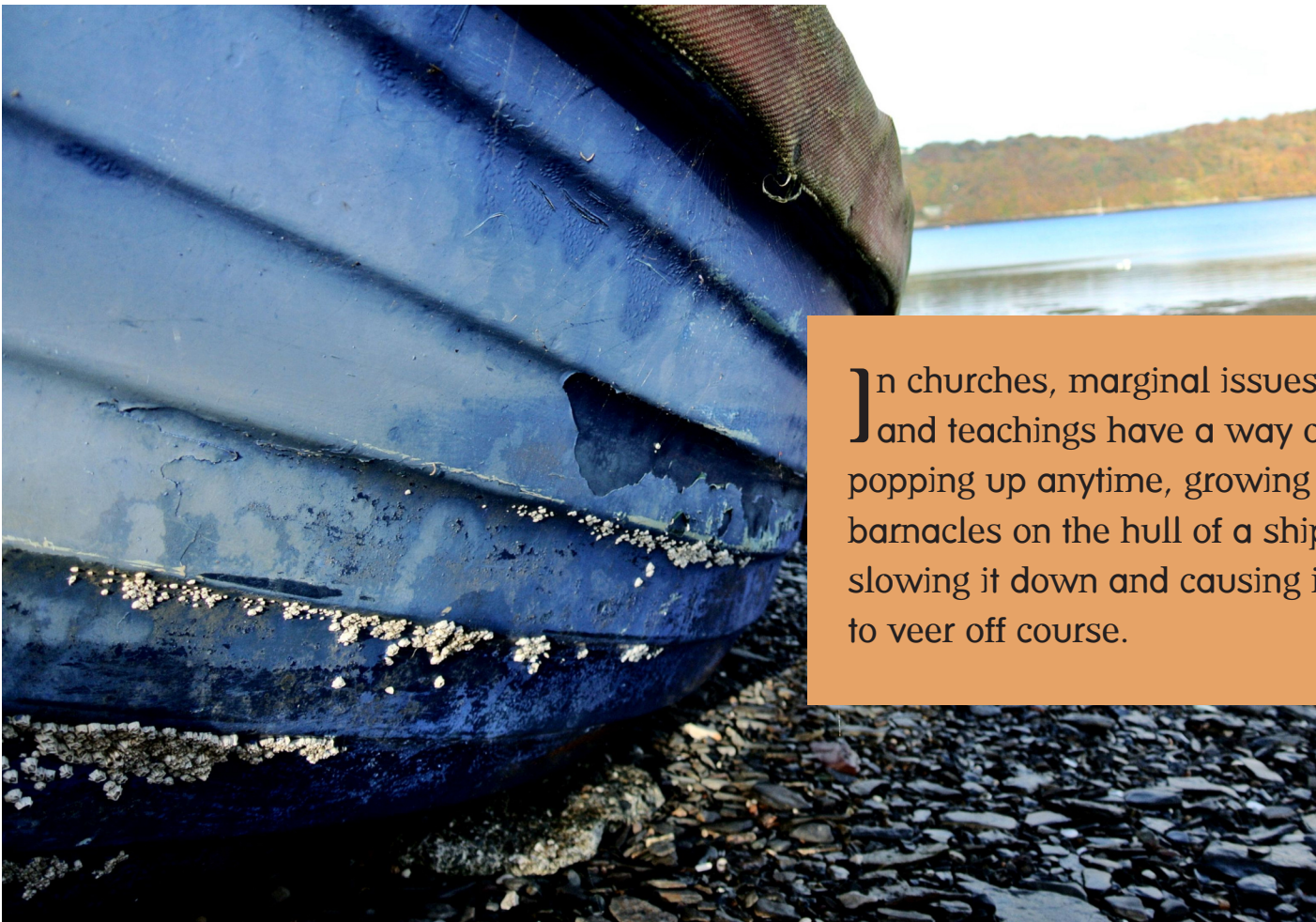
Kelsey slammed her coffee cup down on her dining room table. Her church of 16 years had just changed its worship services from 10:30 Sunday morning to 2 in the afternoon. But that was her family time! She was livid, and she wasn't the only one. At least half a dozen of her friends were disgruntled—not as much over the change itself as the way it came down. Pastor Kevin had made an arbitrary decision for reasons

known only to him and his yes-man board. He had not even taken a poll of the congregation. Kelsey honestly wanted to do the right thing, but now she was wondering. Well, she thought, he certainly isn't the only Christian show in town....

Authoritarianism—strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom. It can pop up at any time—but more often when institutional leadership is stressed or challenged. Administration and members alike revert to the comfort of pat answers and top-down command. It may seem innocent at first, but unchecked, it can morph into religious dogmatism, extra-biblical religious requirements, rules, regulations, routines and regimentation.

* * * * *

Lester had always admired his Uncle Ed—always generous, never judgmental, ready with a sympathetic ear and words of encouragement. Ed's only fault, as far as Lester could tell, was his church—one of those mainline groups. Lester had invited Ed to his church, but Ed always politely declined. Lester's Pastor Todd readily admitted that there had been doctrinal misunderstandings in the past, but now he claimed God was taking this church in a new direction. God had huge plans for this church. A massive move was in the offing that would set the world on its ear. If members wanted to be a part of it, they should remain "steadfast." Lester was convinced—this group was indeed special. He would set Uncle Ed straight the next time he saw him.



In churches, marginal issues and teachings have a way of popping up anytime, growing like barnacles on the hull of a ship, slowing it down and causing it to veer off course.

Exceptionalism—being different from, or somehow better than, the norm. It’s an easy tactic for leaders to fall back on. It provides a sense of identity and serves to keep a group together. Just keep telling them they have features that make them better than all the others. Sure, God may love the world, but he loves us more. Unfortunately, exceptionalism is only a step away from exclusivism.

* * * * *

Mitch and Sally were feeling restless. They liked their little congregation, and they loved the people, but they were looking for something more. For one thing, there wasn’t much of a youth program, and it was nearly impossible to drag their two teens, Ashley and Brent, to services. Last week Mitch and Sally visited a big congregation just two miles away. It had a dynamic pastor, great music and a special service for the kids with a live band! Should they move—or maybe even take a



Meaningful change in a church should involve periodically and proactively scraping the barnacles off and steering the organization back toward Christ-centeredness.

break from services entirely? Mitch and the kids were ready, but Sally had cold feet. “God has planted me here,” she thought, “so shouldn’t I remain where God has planted me?”

Determinism is the idea that all events are determined by causes outside the human will—more to the point, things that happen to you are predestined by God. At its worst, this idea robs believers of their God-given free will. The assumption in the story above is that God has compelled Sally to do something against her will, which is not consistent with New Testament teaching. God invites, never coerces. The reality is that Sally made a decision. The truth is that Christ has made us free to make informed choices in good conscience about what is best for us, our families and friends—and however we believe our God-given gifts and talents can be put to best use.

If all this sounds like *too much freedom*, maybe we need to ask

ourselves why we think it sounds that way. Maybe a button on that spiritual cash register is popping up, and we need to re-examine our relationship with an institution.

* * * * *

Today my 65-year-old cash register sits on a shelf. It still basically functions, although some of the buttons are gone and the others don’t work quite the way they used to. Beyond that, my grandkids don’t even know what it is. It doesn’t look *anything* like the ones we have today.

But isn’t that just like Christian institutions? They need frequent maintenance, changes, upgrades, improvements—sometimes even reinvention. □

Monte Wolverton is Associate Editor of CWR magazine and author of Chasing 120 and The Remnant 1 & 2. Available at ptm.org/books.