

# How can leaders in the local church deal with resistance to change

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## ABSTRACT

Changing an organization is difficult. Changing a church may even be more challenging since it is often deeply rooted in traditions and its theological-spiritual dimension is shaped by narratives, norms, and values. Nevertheless, to reach people with the gospel today, change is necessary. Resistance to change, however, is not foreign to church leaders.

The research questions in this paper are: What causes resistance to change among congregation leaders and members, and how can leaders respond to it? The basis for their discussion is a review of the research literature on resistance to change.

Most studies of this kind are conducted in contexts other than churches. Nevertheless, researchers studying Christian leadership conclude that most of this research is relevant to change management in local churches. Still, some of the conclusions must be adjusted to the specific context of churches, such as their theological traditions, spiritual practices, volunteering, and reduced positional influence.

This paper identifies the causes of resistance to change. Leaders may themselves unintentionally contribute to such resistance when change is implemented without sufficient participation, empathy, or transparency. Resistance is framed as both a challenge and a way for people to make sense of change and seek to preserve what they hold sacred. We suggest viewing resistance as part of a meaning-making process, using transformational leadership practices, fostering dialogue, and allowing space for resistance as a means of reducing it. Humility, attentiveness, and discernment can help leaders foster deeper trust and co-create sustainable transformation. Change in churches requires more than structural adjustments; it calls for wise, relational leadership that honors both the past and Spirit-led renewal.

**Keywords:** Change resistance, turnaround churches, transformational leadership, resistance in ministries

## PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

For churches and denominations, growth is important for several reasons. Jesus commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Growth is often viewed as the work of the Holy Spirit, and many Christians understand church growth as God's plan to extend his Kingdom on earth.

But there are also practical reasons for church growth. Churches need people to continue functioning; growing churches need more leaders, fostering discipleship and maturity, and a growing congregation increases its capacity to support missions and community services.

This article aims to provide a literature review on resistance to organizational change, exploring how leaders and members of churches and congregations can effectively respond to and navigate such challenges.

Much modern research and knowledge is typically applied to a secular context. In this review, however, these insights are examined through the lens of churches and congregations. Although research conducted in a Christian or religious context remains limited, parallels – and some key differences – notably emerge between general findings and faith-based practices.

In the conclusion, selected practical recommendations are synthesized and presented to the reader.

## BACKGROUND

Change initiatives frequently encounter resistance due to divergent perceptions (Bruckman, 2008; Connor, 1995). Such resistance is understandable, as transformations impact both the leaders and members of congregations, challenging their beliefs, roles, and sense of stability.

If, e.g., church organizations are to reverse a downward trend or stagnation, both their leaders and members must want to grow (Jenssen & Randøy, 2002; Jenssen & Randøy, 2006; Kotter, 1995). As we will see, various structural and attitudinal forces may hinder growth.

This paper is based on a few fundamental ideas. The local church's identity, or true nature, is theological-spiritual, but it also has a human-sociological side. Together, these two sides make up the local church. The spiritual-theological side creates premises that the outer or organizational side must facilitate through good leadership. In this way, the spiritual-theological side must take center stage in developing the church. We will discuss what this means in what follows. A more detailed discussion of the two sides of a congregation is given by Jenssen (2018) and Råmunddal (2011).

When leaders want to implement changes in congregations, their members do not necessarily react simply positively. However, the early research on resistance was too often based exclusively on the leader's experience and perception of a situation. The leader is essentially correct, and the leader must overcome the obstacles thrown up by opponents. Ford et al. (2008) point out the need to view resistance not only as an impediment to be overcome, but also as a positive energy that can be transformed into a power for change. Resistance to change should therefore not be seen only as something leaders must overcome. Co-workers' and members' perspectives must be taken seriously, and their engagement, even when critical, can be viewed as an opportunity.

Formulating goals is the first step in a planned change process (Ajzen, 1991) and aims to create the firm intention to achieve them within an organization. Church leaders and

members consistently emphasize their commitment to the goal of fostering conversions and expanding membership. However, sometimes it may seem that many have stopped expecting this outcome. Energy and effort are mostly focused on maintaining current activity.

The popular literature primarily focuses on how leaders, using various methods, can overcome employee resistance to change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). The leaders believe they know what is right, and their opponents represent challenges or obstacles to overcome. Other directions in the research literature draw attention to the ways the leader contributes to the emergence of resistance, and how resistance also can represent a positive force in change processes (Ford et al., 2008).

## METHOD

The method applied in this study is a systematic review of the relevant research literature, including a narrative synthesis approach to finding relevant evidence to summarize and build a general body of knowledge that can benefit leaders and members of congregations (Booth et al., 2016). This review has evaluated several hundred papers using numerous search terms on the EBSCO host database and approximately 60 articles have been selected based on their relevance for the purposes of this paper. The database includes ATLA and all significant leadership and management journals. The bias is minimized through an extensive search and a transparent presentation of the research (Bryman, 2008). In addition, church growth literature was reviewed for discussions relevant to the purposes of this paper.

The review relies on textual analysis to summarize and explain findings. This includes both qualitative and quantitative studies. The generalization of qualitative research is problematic as such research is not based on a representative selection of cases, etc. This study further reviews literature from contexts other than churches, along various dimensions, such as purpose and what they produce. Therefore, the aim is not to draw generalized conclusions but rather to build a basis for further investigations in the context of churches.

## REASONS FOR RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

### **Introduction to resistance to change**

The research on change indicates several reasons for people's opposition to change in organizations (Bruckman, 2008; Connor, 1995). It can threaten the status quo and give rise to anxiety about negative consequences, such as personal security and the ability to master the work. Fear of not being able to meet the expectations of the new situation brought about by the change can also prompt resistance.

Furthermore, one must expect resistance when change threatens an individual's way of creating meaning in life, their values, and rationality. Such a threat often provokes efforts to justify and defend their own way of thinking. Church members may also perceive change as an attempt to break with important traditions or alter biblical understanding.

Organization members who lack confidence in their leaders will often oppose change. Lack of trust can induce the fear that change involves problems hidden by management. If members have a different understanding of the situation than their leaders, this can potentially create resistance by leading to mismatched perceptions of reality, distrust, or conflicting

priorities. Resistance may also come from the fear of losing established social relationships, especially if these are tied to a person's sense of identity, belonging, or emotional security.

Reluctance directed toward leaders can give rise to resistance and may result from leaders forcing change on organization members or manipulating them to accept it. Resistance may also be caused by the failure of members to acknowledge or understand that change is necessary if it disrupts routines, expectations, and the known comfort of the status quo. Leaders may be tempted to think that if the change methods had positive results in the past, the same recipe would work in the present as well. This may not be the case.

In the initial stages of organizational transformation, signals can be hard to detect, and the need for change may be contested. At this point, the signs may be subtle, and may even be downplayed or obscured by structural and cultural factors. This combination makes it easier to challenge or dismiss the need for change. For change to be successful, recognizing and responding to these early signs requires open communication, critical thinking, and a culture that encourages proactive adaptation. Leaders' and members' different interests, or differences between groups within the organization, may also cause resistance. There is no single correct way to describe changes, necessarily, partly because their consequences would be different for different interests and individuals in the organization. In addition, it's possible that inaccurate rumors will spread when management discusses changes. Rumors tend to be vague, incomplete, or lag in timing, and employees would naturally fill in the gaps themselves – often inaccurately. This will often trigger financial uncertainty and anxiety about job security.

Fear of losing job security and financial benefits can give rise to resistance to change, for instance when there is a loss of high-ranking members or a visible service. However, this is not a widespread problem in the case of congregations since much of the work is voluntary. Changes can also entail high costs or challenges, such as canceling old routines, developing new ones, and requiring the acquisition of new resources for the change work. Knowledge and skills developed by organization members over time often represent a significant investment. In a church, this may, e.g., be related to singers and musicians. Resistance may be caused by organization members being anxious about becoming redundant and losing their sense of mastery of work. After all, new ways of working mean that members must learn something new. Changes may also involve double the work during the time-consuming transition phase from old forms of work to new ones.

Earlier in this section, we primarily viewed resistance as a problem for leaders, but according to Ford et al. (2008), and as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, this is only one side of the story. The leader is not always a victim of irrational and dysfunctional resistance from subordinates. Resistance can be a sensible response to poor change management (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). In this context, resistance represents feedback and is often a signal of organizational pain, a desire for better leadership, or a defense against risk. It happens when people are not trusted or given sufficient time to adapt. In some cases, leaders' talk of opposition may become self-fulfilling prophecies or even convenient excuses for the leader's poor management (Ford et al., 2008). In such cases, management predicts failure through distrust, lack of communication, and disempowerment. When these practices grow into resistance, they confirm negative expectations and create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nor is all resistance negative. Where there is no resistance, there are often no committed people either. An ongoing discussion on strategy and possible solutions to challenges is thus positive. It may increase the chance of choosing the best path forward. However, open discussion can also place pressure on management to find answers to everyone's liking. In a situation where there is solid and high organizational commitment, it is essential for confident

leadership to make courageous decisions. Ford et al. (2008) expand knowledge about resistance in three directions. Resistance can be considered as:

- the leader's effort to assign meaning to recipients' reactions, rather than an objective description of reality (as we demonstrate below, this can lead to employees being wrongly blamed, which in turn fosters resistance among them)
- a function of the quality of interaction between the leaders and the recipients (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004); and
- a positive force that the leader can trigger under certain conditions in favor of change (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

### **Resistance to change caused by leader behavior**

Poorly justified change measures, which cause resistance to change, may be related to the leader's values, personality traits, and leadership style. Oreg and Berson (2010) believe that the following reasons contribute to resistance:

- the leader's conservative values are transferred to employees and hinder change. The leader has personality traits that make him react negatively to change (see also Folger & Skarlicki, 1999), which may affect employees' attitudes.
- the leadership style does not promote change.

Several studies argue that a lack of transformational leadership can create resistance (Bommer et al., 2005; Nemanich & Keller, 2007; Oreg & Berson, 2010). When transformational leadership is lacking, change can feel imposed, unclear, and threatening. These are conditions that foster resistance. Transformational leadership counteracts this by creating a shared vision, building trust, and empowering people to move forward. Ford et al. (2008) identify three leadership failure factors that contribute to opposition among the recipients of change: agreements that are not kept and trust that is destroyed; lack of or poor communication; and resistance of the leader to proposals from those affected.

Violations of agreements relate to both formal contracts and informal psychological agreements (Rousseau, 1998). Such violations may, e.g., involve allocating resources to various groups. An agreement violation occurs when a leader consciously or unconsciously breaks a promise or disrupts an expected pattern of cooperation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). When members of an organization receive fair treatment, they may develop more positive attitudes to change (Cobb et al., 1995). If treated unfairly or betrayed, however, anger can build anger and foster a desire for revenge and reduce the willingness to cooperate (Robert et al., 1999).

Some forms of reactions triggered by breaches of agreements or promises have been counted as resistance (e.g., Caruth et al., 1985). Ford et al. (2008) argue that there is a greater probability of breaches of agreements during periods of major change. According to Tomlinson et al. (2004), those wronged by broken agreements are willing to step up if given an honest, formal apology in a timely manner. Leaders who restore relationships and trust seem to experience less resistance than those who do not (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

Communication can also affect resistance. Changes include conversations, discussions, and texts (e.g., Ford, 1999). To establish legitimacy for change, leaders must develop an understanding of how and why change should take place. In Paul's letters to the congregations, he frequently explains the need for change, centering his messages on spiritual transformation through Christ. This transformation affects every aspect of life, including identity, behavior, relationships, and purpose. The key components of this transformation include a new identity

in Christ, freedom from sin and the law, transformation of the mind and heart, living in love and unity, and living a life imitating Christ.

Well-founded changes tend to be accepted, whereas weakly justified ones seem to be rejected (e.g., Green Jr, 2004). Inoculation theory suggests that when leaders proactively address potential counterarguments—by presenting and refuting weakened opposing views—they may inadvertently strengthen opponents' resistance, effectively 'inoculating' them against the proposed change. (Ford & Ford, 2009; Knowles & Linn, 2004a).

Ambivalence in the rationale for change may also contribute to resistance. If leaders praise what is and has been, and at the same time justify change, opponents can use such claims of how good things are now to fight change (Quereshi & Strauss, 1980). Ambivalence can be described as the coexistence of opposing attitudes or emotions with respect to a situation, and this is common during times of change. Ambivalence is not resistance. Rather, it is a normal and potentially constructive stage in the process of change. Working through ambivalence helps people clarify their values and motivations. When explored rather than suppressed, ambivalence can help deepen insight and understanding, contribute to self-motivation and lead to meaningful transformation (see Burnes, 2020; Lewin, 1951).

Leaders may also attempt to misdescribe a change to get employees involved, appear in a positive light, and avoid losing face (DePaulo et al., 1996). If the change occurs in a situation under pressure, it may be tempting to underestimate costs, overestimate benefits, and exaggerate the chances for change to succeed (Tenbrunsel, 1998). Incorrect information may be unconscious, and excessive optimism can lead to overselling the change. The consequence is reduced trust in managers, with recipients expecting similar oversells in the future (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004).

Communication may also mobilize action. Ford and Ford (1995) distinguish between conversation for understanding and conversation for action. If you only converse to create understanding, this will not affect behavior to any great extent. Communication that describes actions or execution contributes to action.

### **Resistance to change as a meaning-creating process**

Resistance can, in some situations, be understood as the leader's attempt to assign meaning to recipients' reactions rather than as describing reality. This may be caused by the quality of the cooperation between the leader and the recipients (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004). While this may show leaders' incorrectly shifting the blame onto co-workers, it also highlights that resistance to change is a meaning-making process in which people interpret, negotiate, and confirm what matters to them. This is where the quality of cooperation comes into play. It becomes a process that offers insight into people's values, beliefs, and identities, which are expressed and form the bases for transitions, thereby becoming a positive force for change (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

Organizational changes disrupt the usual processes and routines, creating new ones. This happens through the interplay between thoughtful and emerging processes, which can be ambiguous from the outset (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Both the leader and the recipient will do everything they can to create meaning out of what is happening. The leader will be particularly concerned about how to implement the change, while the recipient will try to understand what will happen to them as an individual (Gioia et al., 1994).

Creating meaning in a situation is an active process of seeking information, developing meaning, and responding adequately (Thomas et al., 1993). In this interactive process, events and meanings are mixed, resulting in a unity intertwining events and opinions. Bohm (1996) calls this net presentation. On this basis, leaders may act as if this were an accurate description

of reality, creating expectations of what is happening that can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies (Eden, 1984; Veestraeten et al., 2021).

These expectations start with the belief that something specific will happen, such as resistance to change. The leader or another change agent acts and communicates as if this were an inevitable event. In this way, e.g., the leader facilitates and describes a course of events that must necessarily come rather than resulting from expectations, subsequent actions, and their own communication (Veestraeten et al., 2021; Weick, 1969). Studies indicate that leaders will get resistance if they expect resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 38; Kanter et al., 1992).

Also, resistance can be used to cover up one's own poor leadership. When a change process fails, it is tempting to find explanations that put the leader in a better light (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). This is a way to create meaning in a difficult situation, regardless of whether it is an accurate description of reality. It also corresponds to what most people assume to be particularly effective tools in such a situation (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Of course, this is not an honest reaction and, therefore, not an ethically correct course of action.

### **Resistance caused by culture, tradition, conformity, and barriers to change**

The reasons for resistance to change mentioned above occur primarily at the individual level. There are also structural barriers to change. Organizational culture consists of values and attitudes developed over a long period of time. This culture is often conservative, and any change that represents a break with it is difficult to implement (Schein, 1985). In business, a lack of positive competition can often hinder change. This mechanism is also relevant to consider in the case of congregations.

In an environment of dynamically growing congregations, there may be better opportunities for change than in a static situation where little is happening. Dynamic churches create a climate where change feels natural, necessary, and beneficial. People in these environments are used to growth, trust leadership, see tangible outcomes, and are often actively involved. These factors all contribute to lower resistance to and contribute to higher acceptance of change. For these reasons, churches that flourish will challenge other churches to achieve renewal.

For organizations, contact with their customers and potential markets is vital. Without this, they will eventually die. The leadership of a regular congregation usually has a good relationship with its members. However, they may not get sufficient information from outside sources. As a consequence, the need for change may be underestimated. As long as everyone is happy, change is unnecessary.

Pressure from the local community may also act against change as people may fear being marginalized. The church community's traditions, forms of governance, and degree of conformity will also probably impact resistance. As concerns governance, e.g., a Presbyterian structure entails that someone outside the church (e.g., a bishop) decides certain matters. Such a governance may slow the process of change. The same may happen internally if many decisions, e.g., require a cumbersome voting process. Changes may be implemented faster in congregations where the day-to-day leadership makes decisions (e.g. Jensen, 2020).

Organizations, including churches, are made up of traditions, expectations both inside and outside the congregation, and fashion trends such as worship styles, leadership models, church growth strategies, a theological or social emphasis, communication and outreach, etc. These conditions trigger a pressure toward conformity in churches. General societal norms and legislation also add to this pressure.

A central claim of life cycle theory is that organizations go through specific phases. In the transition between phases, a crisis occurs. Growth will cease if transitions are not addressed appropriately. These barriers to change constitute a structural resistance (Jenssen, 2020). Barriers to growth are discussed in the literature on church leadership (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020; Jenssen, 2020; Searcy, 2012). These accounts are not identical to the cycles described in life cycle theory, but there are notable similarities.

## DISCUSSION AND STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH RESISTANCE

### **Introduction to strategies for coping with resistance**

Knowing the causes of resistance allows leaders to better understand the patterns of reaction they encounter. It can help them to become more aware of their own patterns of action, and to improve the methods used to promote change in, e.g., congregations. Developing a sensitivity to change resistance can also help leaders avoid trying to defeat resistance with primitive methods and instead view resistance as a resource to improve change strategies, transforming resistance energy into a force for change (Ford et al., 2008). Was it this energy that God transformed in Paul when he called him to be an apostle in Acts 9?

Several of the above-mentioned causes of resistance violate general norms of Christian living. When organizational members, e.g., are afraid of losing their position, their attitude is not one of humility. This does not mean that it is always wrong to fight for a role. It is legitimate to advocate for a position for the sake of a cause, but not for personal ambition. Such ambition may violate biblical norms when, e.g., organization members evince an unjustified lack of trust in the leadership. At the same time, the causes of resistance can also reflect unethical managerial behavior when leaders, e.g., try to manipulate employees into a change they do not want to be part of. On the basis of (unsystematic) experience, these are also not uncommon patterns of reaction in congregations.

Promoting one's personal interest does not reflect good Christian values. However, it is not always easy to know if our attitudes are determined by our interests, caring for others, God, or a mixture of several factors. Personal interests make up at least a part of the many attitudes promoted by either members or leaders.

When considering the reasons for change, especially in personal or organizational contexts, we can be driven by either rational or irrational motives. The rational ones will be logical and fact-based, and the irrational ones will be belief- or fear-based. It is important to understand both since this will help to clarify why change happens or is resisted.

The reasons for resistance can have a human-sociological side and a theological-spiritual side (Råmunddal, 2011). Leaders may initiate changes because they believe they have "received" divine instruction that something is right to do. Also, in such situations, leaders can give a reasonable justification for what they perceive as divinely inspired change. In this sense, the instructions differ little from purely human arguments. Yet, since they come are understood as revelation, it is conceivable that amendments of this type are not always easy to justify. The legitimacy and trust of the leaders in the church and the testing of the revelation among leaders and/or the congregation (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 John 4:1-2) would then be relevant (Jenssen, 2018).

Poor leadership or improper resistance can cause things we do not want to see in the church. At the same time, it is necessary to urge caution about labeling something as a spiritual struggle. It can quickly be abused and lead to unhealthy leadership behavior since it can mask personal or organizational dysfunction, serve to justify control, deflect critique, suppress

transparency, or create emotional and spiritual harm under the cover of piety or mission. At the same time, the phenomenon is part of church life, and should be met with wisdom. Recognizing that a leader is also affected by the same struggle is essential in this context.

### **Phases in the change process**

A better understanding of change processes may reduce change resistance. This helps leaders initiate the necessary processes to “push” the church through the various phases at a reasonable pace. A classic description of a change process was given in the early 1950s. Lewin (1951) distinguishes between thawing, change, and freezing.

In the thawing phase, the organization’s members begin to understand why the organization must change. Such an understanding may arise from the leader’s description of the organization’s challenges or crises. If a company loses market share and money, the employees will experience the crisis very sharply. Such a sense of emergency may be uncommon in churches. Congregations may shrink gradually over time, and often the situation is not regarded as a crisis until very late. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze development trends and forecast prospects to understand the need for change.

Organization members’ reaction pattern, when change is forced on them, often goes through some phases. The research on the reactions to traumatic experiences (Lazarus, 1991) includes four phases: denial, anger, grief, and adaptation. In the denial phase, change is unnecessary. Then comes anger and the search for scapegoats. Then the employees begin to understand that change is necessary but feel sad about it. The need for change is accepted in the fourth phase, and the organization members adapt to the situation.

The pace of the change process varies. If there is strong resistance, the thawing and change will require more time. The central point in Lewin’s (1951) model is that leaders must initiate measures to resolve the frozen situation before implementing change measures. Understanding the reaction pattern is vital in order to meet people in the different phases and take the time necessary. The reaction pattern will vary. For some, it goes fast; for others, it takes a long time. Leadership requires good judgment to take the process forward at the right pace.

Allowing an idea to mature and progressing step by step is important, but it can also become an excuse to delay necessary changes. For things to happen, it is sometimes necessary to risk a few confrontations. Boldness is crucial. However, one should not proceed so quickly that recruiting people to implement the change becomes impossible. Getting a critical mass of organization members before implementing the change is necessary (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

### **Resistance as a resource for change**

Change requires that conversation within the organization follow novel patterns. The new way of talking competes with the old. The new form of conversation can easily lose this contest because it is unfamiliar, and organization members do not have relevant experiences (Barrett & Thomas, 1995). In this context, it is important for leaders to listen to all parts of the organization. Resistance helps to keep the conversation alive. Thus, resistance is a resource (Knowles & Linn, 2004a), and leaders find opportunities to justify the change (Barrett & Thomas, 1995).

If the organization members want a change to fail, staying silent may be their best strategy. That is, the recipients may choose to refrain from talking about the change so that it suffers a quiet death rather than keep the idea of change alive by talking about it (Ford & Ford, 2009).

Resistance can express both commitment or ambivalence (Piderit, 2000). In some cases, it may reflect a deeper dedication, rather than passive acceptance, as this requires reflecting on one's words and actions. According to Brunsson (1985), treating resistance as an irrational phenomenon entails claiming that resistance violates good norms of decision-making behavior, since it comes from poor information and ill-considered attitudes. Changing the attitudes of people who mount intelligent resistance may provide more significant gains in motivation than "winning over" people who lack such well-thought-out insights (Duck, 2001; Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995). Firmly committed organization members who disagree tend to express commitment (Brehm, 1966). By listening carefully to their arguments, the leaders can get information to improve the change measures and increase their likelihood of success. Therefore, it makes sense to view resistance as rational and an indicator of commitment, rather than as irrational (e.g., Amason, 1996).

Ford et al. (2008) point out that discussions can improve decisions and increase engagement (Amason, 1996). Intense discussions create conflicts. It is challenging to distinguish between functional and dysfunctional conflicts because, among other reasons, they may occur simultaneously. Functional conflicts can, e.g., be factual, while dysfunctional ones can, e.g., be linked to emotions. Emotional conflicts are contagious (Hatfield et al., 1994). Above a certain level, conflicts can be devastating (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). It is, therefore, understandable that leaders perceive conflicts as dysfunctional. Nevertheless, Ford et al. (2008) believe that treating resistance as dysfunctional reduces one's ability to draw on the benefits of functional conflicts.

These researchers argue that lasting change is unlikely to occur without some form of resistance. Without conflict or opposition, even harmful proposals could be accepted without scrutiny. In fact, conflict may play a constructive role in shaping and strengthening changes after they have been implemented. In this context, Ford and Ford (2008) point out that emotional conflicts are not necessarily linked to ongoing change but rather to prior changes. In such cases, it is often appropriate to return to recipients to rebuild trust and strengthen relationships. The researchers also point out that expectations of resistance should motivate leaders to invest in a style of leadership that reduces resistance and strengthens change. Such a style would involve a lot of communication and an invitation to participate, as well as supply necessary resources and build solid relationships with subordinates (Caruth et al., 1985; Kotter, 1995).

### **Transformational leadership as a strategy to handle resistance**

The above-discussed strategies for dealing with resistance imply that it is advantageous to explain change proposals thoroughly, listen to organization members, understand their counter-arguments, and make necessary adjustments. These pieces of advice have similarities with change- and relationship-oriented leadership styles (Yukl & Gardner, 2019) in that they, e.g., emphasize communication and the need to explain the changes. They also contain elements of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006), including explaining and providing information that can create understanding and paying attention to individuals when trying to understand their arguments.

Oreg and Berson (2010) and Bass and Riggio (2006) believe that transformational leadership influences organization members' attitudes to change by providing a motivating vision and intellectual stimuli. For a church, linking the reasons for changes to the foundations of the church would probably be essential. Paul, in his letters, and John, in the Book of Revelation, link the need for change directly to matters of the faith: advancing the gospel, a moral

failure in the church, unhealthy disagreement, and the like (e.g., Eph. 4:3ff, 2 Cor 5:1ff, Rom 15:20ff, John Rev 2:14ff).

Some studies have shown that transformational leadership can influence change processes by reducing employee cynicism regarding change (Bommer et al., 2005), improving the climate in a way that reduces resistance (Nemanich & Keller, 2007), and increasing commitment and engagement toward the change effort (Herold et al., 2007).

Oreg and Berson (2010) point out that transformational leadership indirectly influences resistance to change by moderating the personality traits that prompt resistance. Transformational leadership motivates organization members to overcome their normal personality tendencies in their work, e.g., by engaging in the proposed vision and focusing on collective goals.

### **More strategies to reduce resistance**

When dealing with those affected by change, it is necessary to show understanding and address their fear. Leaders must make an effort to understand different individuals' and groups' stakes in either maintaining the current situation or promoting a particular change. When leaders understand the underlying interests, it is easier to develop a change strategy that avoids creating unnecessary conflicts of interest.

Over time, open and frequent communication, good reasons, realistic and truthful accounts, openness about risk, etc., will build trust (Ford, 1999). Bruckman (2008) argues that demonstrating integrity by building trust is the most critical factor in reducing resistance. It is also vital to build relationships with opinion leaders who may oppose change (Schaller, 1993). These suggestions are especially crucial for new, young pastors who want to break with a period of stagnation (Schaller, 1993). Developing trust is not only justified by the positive effects on change, but constitutes a Christian foundation for leadership.

It is essential to link the reasons for change to one's primary purpose. This helps to ensure that the change is strategic, supported, well-communicated, and beneficial in the long run. To start by trying to persuade others does not make sense when the aim is to build trust. By listening and asking questions, one can gain helpful information to create a change strategy and obtain the necessary support.

Bruckman (2008) points out that leaders who want change should not make final decisions before discussion with subordinates. A willingness to revise your own proposal is often essential. Measures can then be improved, and the participation will contribute to ownership. The challenge here is that one must not end up in mediocrity when implementing change.

If leaders set out with grand ambitions but do not follow up regarding the measures of implementation, there is a greater probability that employees will not fight for change. Bruckman (2008) also emphasizes the need, early in the change process, to reward new behaviors among employees such as, e.g., attention, praise, and encouragement. On the basis of a study of William Bratton's remarkable restructuring of large police stations in the US, Kim and Mauborgne (2003) emphasize the need to ensure that a critical mass of organization members actively support the changes.

Schaller (1993) points out that if voting is necessary, it does not make sense to propose something that is unlikely to gain a majority because that could reduce the leader's authority. On the other hand, resistance and temporary setbacks must not diminish the zeal for change. How leaders and members experience a challenge is often decisive for their reaction. It is essential to define the topic being discussed sensibly. For example, leaders should not confront the congregation with a choice between relocation/new construction or no change. Instead,

leaders should help the congregation recognize the problems associated with current venues (such as maintenance costs, limitations on activity, renovation costs, and lack of attractiveness to newcomers). Once the problem is understood, the question of relocation can be addressed.

The general advice we can draw from this is not to let chance control the formulation of the problem. It is important to identify possible issues early in the decision-making process and consider how they are formulated and presented to leaders and the congregation.

Introducing a new measure as a pilot scheme is usually easier than proposing a permanent arrangement, and likely to encounter less opposition. It is generally easier to bring about a gradual transition than a single significant change. When proceeding step by step, it is necessary to have a clear strategy about where you want to go so that the small changes lead in the right direction.

In some congregations, many questions have to be processed by the board or the plenary congregation meeting. A delegation regulation may create space for change. It should clarify who decides what and ensure there is a proper delegation of decision-making authority to the board, the pastor, and the pastor's subordinates. This regulation will not remove all questions about the decision-making authority, and it is advisable not to ask permission for everything. Taking the initiative as a leader is essential to build authority. Here, however, leaders must exercise good judgment.

Several studies indicate that older, more established congregations become hidebound and lose the ability to change and grow (e.g., Visser, 2010). In such situations any restructuring is deeply challenging; and, in many cases, it is necessary to introduce changes even when a significant part of the congregation is opposed. In such situations, all of our advice thus far will be important, but the leader(s) will depend more on using their formal influence, both that assigned to their role as leader(s) and that given through participation on the board. In such situations, it is necessary to be tactically wise and exercise good ethical judgment to ensure fair play and a meaningful process.

## **Influence and change processes**

Leadership can be viewed as a kind of influence (Van De Mierop et al., 2020), and it is necessary to understand how influence is achieved. The concept of power, which is often used as a synonym of influence in the literature, is impossible to escape. It is getting someone to do something they otherwise wouldn't do. In a church context, power is often associated with rude and manipulative behavior and thus mistakenly assumed to be unethical. Power is a necessity for leaders, but not all ways of exercising power are ethical (Cox, 1986).

In the Bible, leadership is often the exercise of an authority conferred by God, with God as the source of that authority. However, power is not something one should hold onto for its own sake. When Paul exercised leadership, people were saved and transformed and then sent out to lead (1 Cor. 5:3-5, 14:29). Strawbridge (2009) argues Christians are afraid to lead because they mistakenly think they're taking power away from others. He suggests that leaders must exercise influence to complete their mission and to equip new individuals to take on leadership responsibilities.

## **Sources of power and influence**

Handling resistance requires the leader to exercise power. A thorough discussion of this topic lies beyond the scope of this paper. We will mention only a few key points.

One purpose of building trust is to allow the leader to increase influence. The following sources of influence or power are often distinguished: Legitimate and positional power, expert power, information power, personal power (charisma, etc.), reward power, coercive power, referent power (personal identification), and information power (Yukl & Gardner, 2019).

Positional and legitimate power are related to the formal position one holds. In an organization, a superior possesses what we like to call instructional authority. This means that a leader can instruct a subordinate to perform specific tasks in a certain way. Such instruction applies to a congregation's employees, but it is rarely possible or appropriate to assign volunteers tasks they do not want to do. Even in the case of employees, there is often an attempt to avoid using instruction authority, but sometimes it is needed.

Expertise in a specific area is also an important source of influence. Insights into the Bible and the ability to apply it in practice will perhaps be particularly sought for in a congregation and provide a basis for influence. If others can use the expertise that a person has in an area, this contributes to influence. The same reasoning can also be applied to the sources of power. If a leader has charisma, or resources that others need, or good access to information, or good opportunities to spread information, this becomes a source of influence.

In an organization where volunteers are necessary, the ability to use several different sources of influence would probably be even more crucial than in other organizations since it is more difficult to use the formal power that comes with one's position.

### **Strategies to reduce structural resistance to change**

Building and changing an organizational culture is difficult and time-consuming. The deeper that culture is, the more difficult it is to change. It is easier to change artifacts than values and world views (more about these concepts in Schein, 2010). The internal organizational measures prescribed in the literature are role modeling; leadership behavior; attention, and reactions to crises; recruitment and removal of members; socialization of new members; formal statutes, statements, visions, and objectives; expressed values; distribution of rewards and status; rituals, stories, and material symbols (Larson & Gray, 2020; Yukl & Gardner, 2019). These represent variables that are involved when implementing change in a culture.

According to the life cycle view of change, an organization that wants to change and grow must develop planning, administration, delegation routines, etc. (Jenssen, 2020). George and Bird (2017) believe it is crucial for congregations that wish to grow to develop their governance and management structure. This lays the basis for healthy and faithful congregations and contributes to growth. Without it a growing congregation may find itself overwhelmed and unable to respond to opportunities and challenges.

George and Bird (2017) and Jenssen (2020) argue that the board should increase its concentration on overarching and principled questions. It should be responsible for designing and proposing frameworks and policies for the congregation's activities, i.e., rules and procedures for how investments are to be made; when and how budgets, accounts, and plans are presented; and how to carry out appointments. The board may be responsible for nominating people to various boards and committees. It may also be responsible for proposing the appointment or dismissal of the senior pastor. As the staff grows, the senior pastor should take on greater responsibility for visions, plans, budgets, and for recruiting new staff to prevent bottlenecks. The pastor and staff must be given sufficient leeway to conduct changes. The board should also be responsible for grievance procedures, resolving employee conflicts at different levels (George & Bird, 2017).

Furthermore, the need for leadership training increases with a congregation's growth (George & Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020). The essential requirement when recruiting new pastors is their ability to train leaders. The pastor is the congregation's shepherd; a metaphor used in the Bible when discussing the pastor's function. Being a shepherd means leading the flock while at the same time showing great care for the individual (Luke 15:3-6). Such a conception can confer on the pastor an exclusive responsibility for preaching and pastoral care.

When the herd grows, it becomes increasingly difficult for the pastor to care directly for each individual. To exercise this pastoral function, the pastor must perform the service through others. The training of new individuals who can perform a direct shepherding function must become more important for the leader (Jenssen, 2020; Wagner, 1984).

The growth barrier literature also points out that when a "single-cell congregation" reaches 100 to 150 members, it is difficult to ensure spiritual growth and follow-up of newcomers. Individuals tend to feel alienated if the congregation does not contain some type of smaller groups of 5 to 15 people. In addition, the venues must be large enough. Studies indicate that when 80 percent of the seats in a room are filled, a newcomer perceives the room as overcrowded (George & Bird, 2017).

Finally, the congregation must have a staff large enough to sustain growth. Parishioners have grown accustomed to sufficient staffing for maintenance but not for growth. Some have suggested a ratio of one pastor per 100 active members until the congregation exceeds 500 members, while others suggest one per 150. At approximately a couple of hundred active members, administrative tasks become so extensive that either the pastor or the volunteers cannot or should not do this work. The appointment of a part-time administrative secretary should be considered to help the pastor concentrate on other tasks.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Organizational change in churches is both necessary and complex. The need for change may arise from internal dynamics, external pressures, or a combination of the two, but such initiatives often result in resistance. Resistance is not merely opposition, but a meaningful response rooted in identity, tradition, values, and theology.

This article has explored the multifaceted nature of resistance in churches, emphasizing that such resistance should not be dismissed but rather understood as a potential source of insight and growth. It identifies various causes of resistance, including leader behavior; cultural and theological traditions; conformity; and structural barriers.

This article has argued that leaders themselves may inadvertently contribute to resistance when change is imposed without sufficient participation, empathy, or openness. More importantly, resistance has been portrayed not only as a challenge but as a way that individuals and groups create meaning in change and seek to preserve what they consider sacred.

Drawing on both organizational theory and faith-based reflections, this article has offered practical and strategic insights for leaders navigating change. These include recognizing resistance as part of a meaning-making process, employing practices from transformational leadership, embracing dialogue, and even allowing a space for "resistance to reduce resistance." By approaching resistance with humility, attentiveness, and discernment, leaders can foster deeper trust and create sustainable transformation in the community.

Ultimately, this article has suggested that effective change in church contexts requires more than structural adjustments – it demands wise, relational leadership that honors both the past and the potential for spiritual renewal guided by the Spirit.

We have examined several sources of resistance, including leadership styles; culture; faith-based and theological traditions; and structural barriers. This article has emphasized that resistance can be a meaningful and constructive response. Through insights from organizational theory and transformational leadership, it has offered strategies for navigating change wisely, encouraging leaders to view resistance not as a threat, but as an opportunity for reflection and dialogue.

The table below provides an overview of the causes of resistance to change by employees and leaders, along with suggested strategies or methods for addressing this resistance, as discussed in this paper.

**Table :1** *Strategies or methods for addressing this resistance*

From Recipient (Employee)	From Leader	Leadership Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of understanding of the need for change</li> <li>- Does not understand the rationale</li> <li>- Different understanding of the situation from the leader's</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of communication/information about change</li> <li>- Weak rationale for changes</li> <li>- Relevant and important arguments from subordinates are not considered</li> <li>- Employees' input is not understood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Listen carefully to employees. Define the topic discussed in a sensible manner (Ford, 1999; Yukl &amp; Gardner, 2019)</li> <li>- Develop clear and strong rationales and improve communication (Ford, 1999; Green Jr, 2004; Quereshi &amp; Strauss, 1980)</li> <li>- Do not propose changes that lack sufficient support (critical mass) for implementation (Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003; Schaller, 1993)</li> <li>- Use opportunities to explain changes when resistance is articulated (Barrett &amp; Thomas, 1995; Knowles &amp; Linn, 2004a)</li> <li>- Engage articulate opponents to create momentum for change (Duck, 2001; Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995)</li> <li>- Focus on the benefits of new initiatives, but do not hide or exaggerate problems (Folger &amp; Skarlicki, 1999; Tenbrunsel, 1998; Tomlinson et al., 2004)</li> <li>- Understand change processes and adopt the right pace (Hussain et al., 2018; Lewin, 1951)</li> <li>- Communicate not only for understanding but also for action (Bruckman, 2008; Ford &amp; Ford, 1995)</li> <li>- Do not make final decisions before discussing them with employees (Bruckman, 2008; Ford &amp; Ford, 1995)</li> </ul>
<p>Lack of employee participation</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is easier for employees to accept changes they have been involved in (Bruckman, 2008)</li> <li>- Create a wise plan for involvement. Assumption based on reasoning</li> <li>- Reward new behavior early in the change process (Bruckman, 2008)</li> <li>- Use pilot projects. Assumption based on reasoning</li> <li>- Delegate (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020)</li> <li>- Adjust plans based on valid counterarguments (Amason, 1996; Bruckman, 2008)</li> </ul>

<p>Reluctance and lack of trust in leaders can create resistance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weak interaction between leader and recipients</li> <li>- Do not be more optimistic than warranted (Folger &amp; Skarlicki, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Open communication, strong rationales, honesty, etc., build trust over time (Ford, 1999)</li> <li>- Show integrity (Bruckman, 2008)</li> <li>- Be willing to discuss the uncomfortable aspects of changes (Bruckman, 2008; Ford, 1999)</li> <li>- Apologize when promises cannot be kept (Tomlinson et al., 2004)</li> <li>- Keep agreements, be fair, etc., to build trust (Cobb et al., 1995; Morrison &amp; Robinson, 1997) – Do not manipulate or force changes on members. Assumption based on reasoning. Can also be theologically justified</li> <li>- Do not make final decisions before discussions with employees have been held (Bruckman, 2008)</li> </ul>
<p>An overly negative approach to resistance</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Paulus mechanism: Consider and use resistance as a positive force that the leader can harness under certain conditions to benefit change. Use engagement to promote change (Ford et al., 2008; Knowles &amp; Linn, 2004b)</li> <li>- Keep agreements, be fair, etc., to build trust (Cobb et al., 1995; Morrison &amp; Robinson, 1997)</li> <li>- Win over articulate and strong opponents to create momentum for change (Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995)</li> </ul>
<p>Lack of understanding of the congregation's overarching purpose and mission</p>	<p>Ineffective formulation and/or communication of purpose and mission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Link the rationale to the church's overarching purpose and values (Råmunddal, 2015; Tangen, 2024, 2025)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal interests are compromised</li> <li>- Expectation of excessive workload in the change process</li> <li>- Fear of losing one's position/job</li> <li>- Fear of the unknown, of not being sufficient capable, or of becoming redundant</li> <li>- Fear of losing established social relationships</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understand and address fear, understand change processes, and use the right pace (Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1951)</li> <li>- Also communicate the uncomfortable aspects of changes (Ford, 1999)</li> <li>- Understand underlying interests, avoid unnecessary conflicts, create a good strategy for change. Assumption based on reasoning</li> <li>- Have clear rules for handling matters related to personal interests. Find others who support change (Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter &amp; Schlesinger, 2008)</li> <li>- Build relationships with opinion leaders who may oppose change (Kotter &amp; Schlesinger, 2008)</li> <li>- Gain enough support to start moving (tipping point) (Kim &amp; Mauborgne, 2003)</li> <li>- Try to increase the resource base (George &amp; Bird, 2017)</li> <li>- Offer training programs. Build confidence (Bommer et al., 2005; Oreg &amp; Berson, 2010)</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create and use leadership influence (Van De Mierop et al., 2020; Yukl &amp; Gardner, 2019)</li> <li>- Reward new behavior early in the change process (Bruckman, 2008)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threat to personal values</li> <li>- Fear of losing meaning in work when personal values are challenged</li> <li>- Conflict with traditions or biblical understanding</li> </ul>	Threat to leaders' own values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Link the rationale to the church's overarching purpose and values. Theologically justified (Råmunddal, 2015; Tangen, 2024, 2025)</li> <li>- Try to help employees find meaning in the changes (Folger &amp; Skarlicki, 1999; Knowles &amp; Linn, 2004b)</li> <li>- Open discussions about what hinders change (Amason, 1996)</li> <li>- Understand change processes and use the right pace (Lewin, 1951)</li> </ul>
Resistance and emotionally charged reactions without strong rationales	Lack of understanding of one's own and others' spiritual counterforces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understand challenges related to spiritual resistance and how to address them without ignoring one's own potential missteps. Theologically justified (Råmunddal, 2011)</li> <li>- Prayer. Theologically justified</li> <li>- Keep agreements, be fair, etc., to build trust (Cobb et al., 1995)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leaders fail to follow through on their own change goals</li> <li>- Desire to hide personal shortcomings when unable to achieve change</li> <li>- Resistance as an attempt to make sense of recipients' reactions rather than a description of reality</li> <li>- Defending personal interests when change does not occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure follow-through on planned changes. Delegate (Bruckman, 2008; Jenssen, 2020)</li> <li>- Do not make excuses or blame others when the necessary change does not happen (Kotter &amp; Schlesinger, 2008; Scott &amp; Lyman, 1968)</li> <li>- Be part of a leadership team where openness about weaknesses is discussed. Theologically related to humility</li> </ul>
	Unconscious expectations of resistance/self-fulfilling prophecies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Try to uncover recipients' reactions before judging (Ford et al., 2008)</li> <li>- Increase awareness of one's own expectations of employees to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies (Eden, 1984; Veestraeten et al., 2021)</li> </ul>
Wrong choice of leadership style		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shift to a more transformative, relational leadership style, or recruit leaders with a different style (Bass &amp; Riggio, 2006; Oreg &amp; Berson, 2010)</li> </ul>
Conservative values – May be passed from leader to employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leader's conservative attitudes and values are not open to change</li> <li>- Leader has personality traits that prompt negative reactions to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Carefully consider which values and traditions are essential to the church's theology and which are not. Change those that are not important. Theologically justified. See also (Schein, 1985)</li> <li>- Know your own personality. Consult trusted individuals with different personality traits (Folger &amp; Skarlicki, 1999; Oreg &amp; Berson, 2010)</li> </ul>
<b>Structural and cultural counterforces to change</b>		

The congregation's "life cycle" and growth barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understand the church's life cycle and make necessary changes in leadership, structure, and organization (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020)</li> <li>- Develop routines for planning, administration, and delegation (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020)</li> <li>- The board should increasingly focus on overarching issues (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020)</li> <li>- Increase leadership training and train more employees to perform direct pastoral tasks (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Jenssen, 2020; Wagner, 1984)</li> <li>- Increase the number of staff and facilities (George &amp; Bird, 2017; Wagner, 1984)</li> <li>- Be proactive in changes (Jenssen, 2020)</li> </ul>
A conservative culture with strong social norms, traditions, and conformity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive competition, contact with outsiders. Understand change processes and use the right pace (Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1985)</li> </ul>
Societal norms and legislation. Fear of being marginalized in society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Build personal and spiritual strength in leaders, employees, and members (Jenssen, 2018; Råmunddal, 2011)</li> </ul>
A governance structure that hinders change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop an adapted governance structure and voting system, etc. (Jenssen, 2020; Mintzberg et al., 2009)</li> </ul>

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