

WHO MOVED MY PULPIT?



LEADING CHANGE
IN THE CHURCH

THOM S. RAINER

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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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INTRODUCTION

AN E-MAIL OF DESPERATION



Through social media, blog comments, e-mail, and other means, I receive several hundred requests for advice and counsel every month. I am humbled so many people would ask me for my counsel. But I am frustrated that I can't get to all of them.

But it was something about this e-mail that caught my attention. Indeed, there was something about this e-mail that prompted me to write this book.

Subject: A Plea for Help

Dr. Rainer—

I am a pastor and I'm about to give up. I have incredible seminary training where I learned about theology, the Bible, Greek, Hebrew, etc. But I know zero about dealing with conflict or leading the church to make some changes. Every time I try something, I get hit hard by critics and bullies.

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My wife wants me to quit. She feels the pressure too. Some of the critics go after her, but most of her pain comes from watching me get hurt. She has cried herself to sleep too many nights. When we got married, she didn't know I would be a pastor one day. I didn't either. I'm not so sure I should be now.

I'm not sure how to ask for your help. I have too many questions. About all of my practical ministry training has come from the school of hard knocks and your blog and podcasts.

I guess what I need most is an A to Z plan on leading change in my church. Okay, I know that's asking too much. But maybe you could write your next book on this topic. I know many of us in ministry would benefit from it greatly. And I know I could share it with my elders so they would know what we are trying to do.

Yeah, this is a pretty bold request, but please prayerfully consider it. I'm not sure how long it takes you to write a book and get it on the shelves, but I know I don't have much time left. It looks like I could be facing three possibilities in the next couple of years. The likely change is we will continue to decline to the point the church can't afford to pay me a salary. Another possibility is I will get fired. Right now I have more supporters than adversaries, but I don't know how long it will last. The most likely option is I will just give up.

I am tired. My wife is tired. I never thought church leadership would be like this.

Please, please consider helping us church leaders understand how we can lead a church to change when we have so many obstacles.

Please help me. I think you can help a lot of us. Please help us before it's too late for many of us.

Thank you.

This book is for that pastor. This book is for all pastors seeking to lead their churches to change. This book is for church staff and lay leaders who want to make a positive contribution toward leading change in the church.

Now let's dive into the book and to that fateful Sunday when a pastor cried out:

“Who moved my pulpit?!”

CHAPTER 1

WHEN THE PULPIT GETS MOVED



Derek is the kind of guy you like to be around. He has a contagious laugh. He has a personality that draws people to him. And he is a pretty good leader.

He is also the pastor of Redeemer Church, a congregation of about 250 in the Midwest. Derek had been a pastor for twenty-three years, so he was no novice in leading churches. He had been at Redeemer Church for eight of those years, and he was respected and well liked by almost everyone in the congregation.

Derek understood the issue of change in established churches. As a leader, he was both methodical and incremental in his style. His approach to church leadership contributed significantly to his longer tenure in the church and in ministry in general. He did not fear conflict, but he felt too many church leaders create unnecessary conflict.

As pastor, Derek noticed a changed in his own ministry. His sermons were becoming more conversational in their

approach and tone. He had not made that move as any grand strategic plan, but it was certainly a noticeable change from his style several years ago.

Derek surmised that the increased number of Millennials in the church had influenced his approach to preaching. These young adults included professionals in a growing technology company in the community, and others of them were coming from a nearby university.

It was obvious the Millennials preferred the conversational style of preaching. The most positive feedback to his sermons came when he shifted to the more informal approach. He was therefore certain his change in preaching style was a direct result of the increasing number of young adults in the church.

The pastor had also noticed the older congregants embracing his changing preaching style. He knew they were okay because his changes were incremental. He would preach a conversational message on one Sunday, and then go six weeks with his more formal and traditional approach. He slowly added the informal approach with greater frequency until the congregation became accustomed to it and comfortable with it.

Life and ministry were good for Derek. He could see staying at Redeemer Church for the rest of his ministry. He was so thankful that he had the total and unequivocal support of the church members.

At least he thought he did.

The Shocking Conflict

Derek had become increasingly uncomfortable with the pulpit he had used for all eight years at Redeemer Church. It had served him well when he was preaching more formally from a manuscript. But now he liked to get closer to the congregants. He saw the pulpit as a massive wooden barrier. It did not complement his newer preaching style. The pulpit, in his mind, cried out “traditional” and “formal” and “barrier.”

He made a decision. The pulpit had to go.

On Friday of the next week, Derek asked the two custodians to move the massive old pulpit out. He replaced it with a new style of pulpit, a small lectern that was barely noticeable. *Now*, he thought, *the pulpit will complement my preaching style.*

In hindsight, the pastor now realizes he should have expected the explosion. And he admits he entered the worship service that Sunday with a bit of naiveté. He should have noticed the tension among some in the room. He should have seen the quiet conversations taking place before and after the services.

“I was both blind and blindsided,” Derek confessed. “I did not notice the rumblings and the murmurings that Sunday morning. I guess I had become overconfident in my leadership style.”

It began that Sunday afternoon.

First, there were a series of e-mails. All of them were negative, though the tone varied in intensity. One member of five years kindly suggested, "You should have given us a bit of forewarning." On the other extreme, a seventy-something member went right at the pastor: "What you have done is heretical! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I think we need to call a vote of confidence about you."

The rest of the e-mail was another eight hundred words, but you get the point.

It was bad. Real bad.

Derek lost count of the e-mails, the meetings, and the phone calls that week. There was not a supportive voice among them. He stopped looking at Facebook after he saw several posts blasting him.

The pastor knew he had messed up. "I violated my own leadership principles," he said. "I have always led change incrementally in the established churches I served. I have tried not to surprise people. And I tried to get as much buy-in as possible." He paused for a moment. "I guess I had a period of temporary insanity," he concluded, but only partially in jest.

Derek knew what had to be done. It was too late, he surmised, to move the old pulpit back. The damage was done, and he really wanted to accentuate his more informal style. He determined he would offer the congregation a formal apology the next Sunday.

The pastor entered the worship center the following Sunday with some trepidation. He was not surprised to notice the huddled conversations. He was not surprised to feel the tension in the room. And he was not surprised to see many eyes glancing at the pulpit.

But he was *really* surprised at what he saw when he looked to the spot where the pulpit stood.

When he followed those glances toward the podium, Derek gave forth an audible gasp. Much to his surprise, he saw the reason for the murmurings this Sunday.

The old pulpit was back.

Many members contend that the following response really happened. In fact, they say it was so loud the entire congregation paused in quiet shock. Everyone said they heard it. In fact, some of the members said the pastor's question sounded more like a wail of agony.

"Who moved my pulpit?!"

The Aftermath

When I spoke with Derek about this incident, he was in his ninth year at Redeemer Church. He had survived the crisis, but barely.

"What is really disheartening," the pastor told me, "is that we've probably lost two years of effective momentum and ministry. We have been so inwardly focused dealing with this issue."

The pastor is still processing the issues. “On the one hand,” he said, “I really can’t believe the members were so preoccupied with something like a pulpit. I don’t think they would have been as upset if I had preached heresy in my sermon. It just makes no sense.”

We asked Derek what he did immediately after the old pulpit returned. His response was quiet but honest: “I sulked and pouted.” We could tell there was still pain and regrets though two years had passed. “I thought I had earned a right to do something as small as moving a pulpit,” he lamented. Derek took a deep breath and continued, “It wasn’t as small as I thought it was.”

First Failure: Not Praying

Derek was more than willing to conduct a diagnosis on this crisis. The pastor was an ongoing learner. Now that Redeemer Church had begun to regain momentum, he was glad to assess what went wrong.

“I can tell you easily what my first mess-up was,” he began. “Every other time I have led change in this church, I have initiated it with prayer.” We asked him to elaborate. “In all the other changes,” he told us, “I spent about two weeks praying about it before I even mentioned it to someone else. This time I acted without prayer.”

Derek was not done explaining. “I then asked a few of the true prayer warriors in the church to put it to prayer,” he continued. “There are about eight of these men and women who have a heart and passion for intercessory prayer. I skipped over them this time.”

He paused. It was as if Derek caught the severity of the mistake he had made. “I began in my own power,” he said nearly in a whisper. “I had become so confident and cocky about my own leadership, I guess I thought I didn’t need God this time.”

“That’s insane,” the pastor said. “That’s absolutely insane.”

Second Failure: Not Assessing Unintended Consequences

Derek admitted he knew the old pulpit was an emotional issue for many church members. “What I can’t believe,” he said, “is that I never asked myself how people would respond to this change. I should have known better.”

One of the principles of leadership in any organization, particularly a local church, is *the law of unintended consequences*. It points out that *any significant change in an organization will have reactions that extend well beyond the change itself*.

The pastor had failed to consider the consequences of moving the pulpit. Even though he knew there were deep and long-standing emotional ties to the pulpit, he did not consider how

the reactions might impact the church. Derek thought he could win the day with the power of his personality.

Third Failure: Not Communicating

A pastor once asked me how much he should communicate an important issue in the church. My response was “a lot more than you’re communicating now.” To be clear, I did not know how much he was actually communicating to the congregation. I simply know that if something is important to the church, it really cannot be over-communicated.

Derek never communicated about this issue to the church. He never explained his rationale. He did not share with the people about his evolving preaching style.

He just did it.

And he paid a great price.

Fourth Failure: Not Dealing with People Issues

“If I had to assess my biggest blunder,” Derek shared, “it would be my failure to deal with people issues. I messed up on the front end, in the middle, and in the aftermath.”

Though I thought I knew where he was headed with this discussion, I asked him to elaborate.

“I did not get buy-in on the front end,” he responded. “I know who our key influencers are in the church. I just

bulldozed ahead.” Derek then told me where he fell short further in the process.

“I had my opportunity when I walked in the worship center that morning,” he began. “Because I was so focused on myself, I had that visceral reaction. I cried out, ‘Who Moved My Pulpit?!’ I should have taken time to admit my errors that morning, and to share with the congregation why I changed the pulpits.”

I anticipated his conversation about the aftermath. He confirmed it. “Yep, I really blew it in the days and weeks that followed,” he confessed. “I was getting beaten up on social media, by e-mail, in meetings, and by telephone. Man, church members can really be mean. But instead of leading, I went into emotional retreat.”

That brings us to the fifth failure Derek acknowledged.

Fifth Failure: Not Modeling Positive Leadership

“I was ready to leave the church,” he told me emphatically. “Make no mistake about it. I wanted out!”

Well, my conversation with Derek was two years after the incident. He obviously did not leave. I was curious to know more.

“My attitude stunk for about three months,” he admitted. “I wanted out, and I was mad at my church. I went into a mode of pouting and withdrawal.

“Toward the end of that third month,” he said, “I was reading Nehemiah in my quiet time. I became aware, painfully aware, how much opposition, threats, and problems he had. But he was a positive model of leadership. He provided the role model the Jews needed to build the wall around Jerusalem.

“It hit me like a sack of bricks in the head,” he said metaphorically. “Church members were looking to me and my example. I had to change first. I had to get my head screwed on straight. I had to have the right attitude. Healthy change had to start with me.”

Leading Change in the Church

We will hear from Derek again later. He made big mistakes. He admitted his poor leadership cost the church two years of momentum.

But there’s another side to this story. It’s the story of church members who are so focused on “my needs” and “my desires” that they resist change at every turn.

To that perspective we now turn.

Diagnostic and Study Questions

1. Why can something seemingly as minor as changing pulpits create conflict in the church?

2. Read Nehemiah 1:4–11. What does Nehemiah's prayer tell us about the relationship between prayer and change?
3. Pastors and other church leaders tell us that church members are more critical than ever today. What has changed in the last twenty years to bring on this negative reality?
4. What can we learn from Philippians 2:1–11 about the right attitudes for church leaders and church members?