

# Growth Points

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## Adopting Change

To lead a church effectively, it is helpful to understand how people adopt change.

When visionary leaders latch onto a new idea to expand a church's ministry, they make the mistake of thinking that the majority of the congregation will adopt the new idea quickly. However,, it usually takes at least two years for a major concept to be adopted in a congregation.

Research divides people into five types of adopters.

It usually takes two or three years for major ideas to be accepted in a congregation.

### Five Types of Adopters

Innovators are found in church plants or in churches that vibrantly innovate new ways of ministry. They love new ideas, relish trying out fresh programs, and quickly latch onto any new vision proposed by church leaders, say, within hours or days of hearing the vision. No more than two or three percent of church attendees are innovators, except in new church plants which may have an unusually large number of them for the first year or two.

Early adopters take a little longer to adopt new approaches for ministry than innovators, but are easily persuaded within one to three months. They know a good idea when it comes along. Others in the church respect their opinions allowing them to be highly influential in moving the church forward. Somewhere around fifteen percent of church attendees are found in this group.

Middle adopters and later adopters make up the largest portion of worshippers.

About seventy percent of a church is in these two groups, most often evenly divided. Middle adopters are easily influenced and can go either direction when new ideas are introduced. Later adopters are usually the last people in the church to accept a new idea. They may never verbally acknowledge acceptance of a new direction. It takes between one and two years to convince later adopters of the needed changes, but only three to twelve months for middle adopters.

The last group (Laggards) often lag behind the rest of the church. It requires a great deal of patience and communication to win these people over to the new changes, and some never adopt the changes.

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# Church leaders must plan to communicate to all members.

## People need time to accept major changes.

When an idea is first introduced to a congregation, there is an initial excitement. As innovators and early adopters quickly buy in to the suggested changes, church leaders are lulled to sleep by the apparent lack of resistance. This doesn't last for long, for soon the leaders encounter the middle adopters and momentum slows down. If church leaders do not plan how to communicate to all segments of the church, change will most likely fail to materialize, or it will take a long time to happen.

First, communicate on many different levels and through multiple means. At least five forms of communication should be used, and plans made to communicate to every level of the congregation.

Second, study the personal dynamics that are likely to occur, that is, who will experience the most disengagement? How many people and who will be affected by the changes? Who is most likely to suffer feelings of loss in the transition? Who will experience the greatest sense of disruption in their ministry and self-esteem? For change to be adopted, those who will experience the greatest disruption in their lives must be helped to find new roles and identities in the church.

Third, educate the congregation as to how the changes will affect them. Hold meetings to discuss the endings and encourage others to share their feelings. Remind people often that (1) change is taking place all the time; (2) of all the things that will not change; (3) that change may involve discomfort. Inoculate people against coming changes and the discomfort will not be a bad as you say.

Fourth, for substantial changes to happen, plan on communicating in numerous ways over a two-year period of time. It takes

middle adopters and later adopters that long to get on board, so leaders should just plan for it. Communication must include sermons, announcements, listening meetings, small group discussions, emails, blog discussions, articles in newsletters and on the church website, and one-on-one discussions.

Fifth, a team or task force should monitor the communication and process of adoption. The team must listen to what people are saying, and be willing to tell the pastor and leaders, "That message didn't get through." Or, "That communication didn't make sense." Or, "The people don't understand." The team also needs to help the pastor and other leaders to think through ways to help those most affected by the changes to move on with their lives in the new environment.

Most of all, leaders must realize that nothing has happened just because the innovators and early adopters have bought in to the proposed changes. That is just a start. The hard work is getting the buy-in from the middle and later adopters.



Adapted from Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn's best selling book *What Every Pastor Should Know* (Baker Books. 2013).

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