

# Leading Positive Change in Congregations

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## by the Rev. Dr. David Peter

Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) is a collaborative effort of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Pastoral Education department and LCMS districts to help pastors and their wives in the transition from seminary to congregation. To learn more, visit [www.lcms.org/pals](http://www.lcms.org/pals).

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Peter's primary focus is on the dynamics of pastoral leadership in congregations of different sizes. He has a special interest in helping pastors and lay leaders of midsize congregations (average weekend worship attendance of 150 to 400) engage in the challenges and opportunities distinctive to that size. He is currently writing a book on this subject. Peter is interested in helping the organizational structures of congregations and their strategic direction become more missional while remaining faithful to the Gospel. Peter also is concerned about good preaching, especially that which demonstrates the characteristics of solid biblical exposition. He has published Advent and Lenten worship resources (sermon series and worship materials) through Concordia Publishing House, Creative Communications for the Parish and the Concordia Seminary Press; Bible study resources for congregations through The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; and several specialized sermons and devotional resources through Creative Communications for the Parish. He has published articles in *Concordia Journal*, *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, *The Servant* and *Issues in Christian Education*.

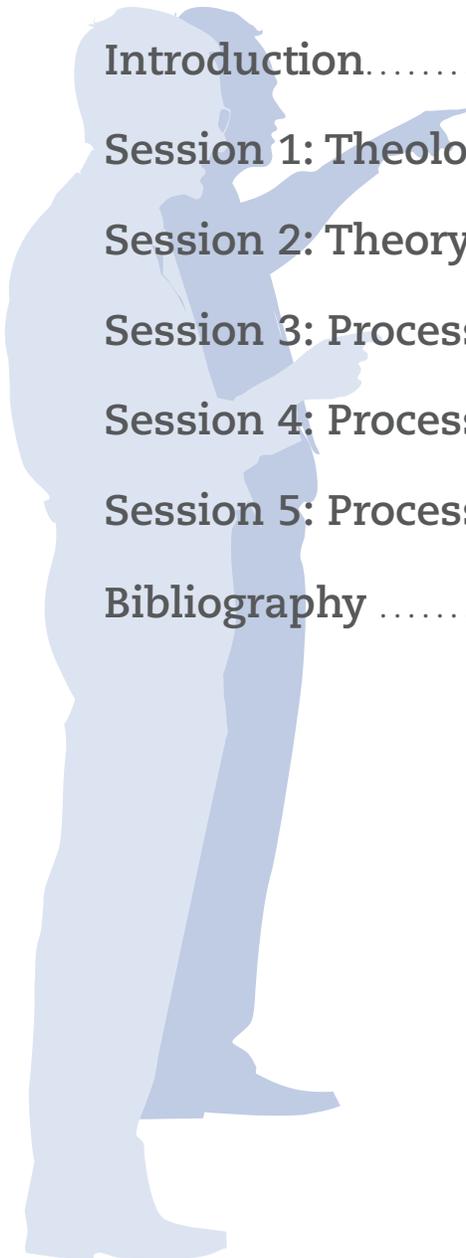


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## Introduction

“This needs to be changed! But how can we make the change happen?” This is the question asked by pastors as they face issues in ministry. It is a pressing matter in the pastor’s effort to facilitate change in the organizational behavior of the congregation and especially of its leaders.

This PALS course will consider a proven process for leading positive change in congregations. It will utilize the insights of the social sciences, especially of researcher Dr. John Kotter, and integrate these into the theological and ecclesial context of a Lutheran congregation. As a participant, you will reflect upon one specific area needing change in the congregation you serve as you are guided through the process. With collegial counsel from your PALS brothers, you will identify a strategy to facilitate change in that area of need so that this workshop will have a specific, practical application in your context of ministry.

*Note to the participant: The following three steps should ideally take place before you arrive at the PALS meeting in order to get the most benefit out of your time together.*

### In preparation for this course, you should:

1. Identify one specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed. Identify the outcome that you hope will be realized as a result of the change process. Identify the obstacles to the change that you observe. Provide theological and sociological rationale for the change. Record these identifications in writing and bring them to the gathering.
2. Take the “Tolerance of Change Scale” self-assessment tool at [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0073381225/student\\_view0/chapter14/self-assessment\\_14\\_2.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0073381225/student_view0/chapter14/self-assessment_14_2.html). Bring your score from this inventory to the gathering.
3. Optional: Read the book *Leading Change* by John Kotter.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996 and 2012).

## Session 1: Theology

**1.** Change is integral to our existence and experience as human beings. We see change occurring in the following elements of God's working in history:

- › Creation — In Genesis 1 and 2, God used a process of change to bring all things into existence. The created order continues to manifest the process of change in a multitude of ways.
- › The fall — Not all change is good, and the fall into sin demonstrates this supremely. The perfect creation was plunged into brokenness by the first humans. God pronounced judgment upon human rebellion and sin. But He also promised restoration that would come through the Messiah.
- › Repentance — Through the message of the Law, the Holy Spirit works the conviction of sin, which causes humans to acknowledge guilt.
- › Restoration — God the Holy Spirit works new life in those who repent and believe the Gospel. He does this through the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.
- › Sanctification — Those who are regenerated by the Spirit grow in faith and the fruits of faith. A process of increasing spiritual maturity takes place in the Christian who is nurtured in God's Word and Sacraments.
- › New creation — When Christ returns in glory, He will restore creation to a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). All those who are made righteous by God's grace through faith in Jesus shall dwell therein.

**2.** Christians participate in these changes and are used by God as agents of change as they exercise the Means of Grace and carry out their vocations. Christians also live in contexts in which change is a constant. Some change is beneficial (this is what is meant by “positive change”), while other changes are not God-pleasing. While many changes *could* take place, the Christian leader seeks to discern which changes *should* be promoted. (See 1 Cor. 10:23–24.) He differentiates these by identifying what shouldn't be promoted (i.e., those that hinder the mission, ministry and message of the Gospel and that obstruct the work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace), which changes can be advanced but not by necessity (i.e., *adiaphora*), and which changes must be advocated and executed according to God's will (i.e., those that advance the mission, ministry and message of the Gospel).

**3.** There are four broad reasons or needs for change:

- › Growth — To increase in maturity and capacity according to God's design.
- › Repair — To restore that which is broken.
- › Detour — To pursue a desired end by following an alternate means or route.
- › Transformation — To convert from one form to another, such as bringing from death to life.

**Discussion:**

**1.** Describe to the other participants in your PALS group the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed, identifying the outcome that you hope will be realized as a result of the change process. Provide theological rationale for the change by demonstrating how the change may, according to God's will and the work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace, advance the mission of God and promote the message of the Gospel.

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**2.** Four broad reasons or needs for change were identified in the video presentation. Identify the category or categories of the change you propose:

- › Growth — To increase in maturity and capacity according to God's design.
- › Repair — To restore that which is broken.
- › Detour — To pursue a desired end by following an alternate means or route.
- › Transformation — To convert from one form to another, such as bringing from death to life.

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## Session 2: Theory

**1.** As seen in the first session, the Bible both describes and prescribes change. But the Bible is not the only resource for leading positive change in congregations. Insights from the social sciences, especially in the fields of sociology and organizational theory, can be of benefit to Christian leaders who use these First Article gifts with sanctified discernment and ministerial reason.

**2.** The social researcher who most pioneered the study of leading change in organizations is Kurt Lewin.<sup>2</sup> He identified **three broad stages in the change process**: 1.) **unfreezing the status quo**; 2.) **cognitive restructuring or visioning**; and 3.) **freezing the change**. This three-stage process has been widely accepted by architects of change and is the theoretical basis for the methodology advocated in this presentation.

**3.** Lewin argued that one of the most effective means to unfreeze the status quo is to introduce guilt into the social consciousness, such as by convincing the group that it is not achieving its purpose or potential. As Christians, we recognize that this is a function of the Law. The next step in Lewin's process, which he called "cognitive restructuring," would be an appropriate time for the pastor to communicate the forgiving and empowering message of the Gospel to people who have repented of their failings and who now must be given a vision of God's gracious promises.

**4.** Congregational consultant Lyle Schaller adapted Lewin's approach to efforts of leading change in the church, expanding the three stages to six.<sup>3</sup>

**5.** LCMS Pastor Jock Ficken presents Lewin's basic theory in a user-friendly format for pastors and church leaders. He depicts the stages as **three keys — discontent, hope and leadership** — and applies these dynamics to typical congregational realities.<sup>4</sup> Lutheran pastors will apply the message of the Law to cultivate appropriate discontent, the message of the Gospel to form revitalizing hope and the ministry of leadership to guide the congregation to its preferred future.

**6.** Dr. John Kotter of the Harvard Business School emphasizes that, in order to be effective and lasting, the change process must engage not only people's thinking but also their emotions.<sup>5</sup>

**7.** Research has demonstrated that people's tolerance to change varies widely and that their dispositions to accept change are organized into a bell curve distribution.<sup>6</sup> Participants in this PALS course are encouraged to take a self-assessment tool to help them be aware of their personal dispositions to change.

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<sup>2</sup> Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method, and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria, and Social Change," *Human Relations* 1:5 (1947), pp. 5-41.

<sup>3</sup> Lyle Schaller, *The Change Agent: The Strategy of Innovative Leadership* (Abingdon, 1972), pp. 78-120; *Strategies for Change* (Abingdon, 1993), pp. 90-100.

<sup>4</sup> Jock Ficken, *Change: Learning to Lead It and Living to Tell About It* (Fairway Press, 1999), pp. 57-97.

<sup>5</sup> John Kotter, *The Heart of Change* (Harvard Review Press, 2012), p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Budner, "Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable," *Journal of Personality* 30 (1962), pp. 29-50.

## Discussion:

**1.** You should have taken the “Tolerance of Change Scale” self-assessment tool at [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0073381225/student\\_view0/chapter14/self-assessment\\_14\\_2.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0073381225/student_view0/chapter14/self-assessment_14_2.html). Present to the gathering your score from this inventory. The purpose of this self-assessment instrument is to increase your self-awareness about your predisposition to change and to equip you to better manage change in your life. Identify where in the following categories your score falls: low tolerance of change (16-62), moderate tolerance of change (63-80) or strong tolerance of change (81-112).

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**2.** Those whose tolerance of change is strong correspond to the proportion of the general population regarded as the “innovators” and “early adopters.” This group can be regarded as the *pioneers*. If your score identifies you as a pioneer, reflect on whether or not you are, in fact, strongly predisposed to change. If so, what are the benefits or advantages of this orientation? What are the risks or disadvantages of it? How must you interact with others who are less favorably disposed to change?

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**3.** Those whose tolerance of change is moderate correspond to the proportion of the general population regarded as the “early majority.” This group can be regarded as the *pragmatists*. If your score identifies you as a pragmatist, reflect on whether or not you are, in fact, moderately predisposed to change. If so, what are the benefits or advantages of this orientation? What are the risks or disadvantages of it? How must you interact with others who are pioneers as well as with those who are less favorably disposed to change than you?

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**4.** Those whose tolerance of change is low correspond to the proportion of the general population regarded as the “late majority” and “resisters.” This group can be regarded as the *protectors*. If your score identifies you as a protector, reflect on whether or not you are, in fact, unfavorably predisposed to change. If so, what are the benefits or advantages of this orientation? What are the risks or disadvantages of it? How must you interact with others who are more favorably disposed to change?

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**5.** How will you as a Christian pastor use Scripture to initiate and guide change? How will you employ the message of the Law (in its various functions) and of the Gospel in this process?

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## Session 3: Process of Unfreezing

1. The three-stage process for intentional leadership of change in an organization, as originally espoused by Kurt Lewin, involves: 1.) unfreezing the status quo; 2.) cognitive restructuring or visioning; and 3.) freezing the change.
2. John Kotter has expanded this process into eight steps in his seminal book, *Leading Change*.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps the foremost guide to proactive leadership of major change in organizations used today, and it will serve as the framework for these PALS sessions. The current session focuses on the first two steps, which correspond with Lewin's first stage of unfreezing the status quo.
3. The biblical book of Nehemiah illustrates most of these eight steps in the efforts of Nehemiah to bring about change among the Jews who had resettled Jerusalem and Judah in the fifth century B.C. Examples from this account will be highlighted in the presentation of these steps.
4. Kotter affirms that it is possible to lead positive change in organizations, but this occurs only if an intentional multi-step process is utilized and driven by excellent leadership. (Quotes are from Pages 18 and 21 of the first edition.)
5. The first step in unfreezing the status quo is to **establish urgency**. People need to be roused from their comfort zones. High levels of complacency must be challenged so that people are no longer content with the current situation. (Quote is from Page 5.)
6. Like Lewin, Kotter affirms that one of the most effective means to establish urgency is to introduce guilt into the social consciousness of a group, such as by convincing the group that it is not achieving its purpose or potential. As Christians, we recognize that this is a function (second use) of the Law. The pastor should speak the Word of the Lord in this regard by expounding scriptural passages that hold up the "mirror" to the congregation's failure to advance the mission and will of God.
7. This step in the change process is illustrated in Chapters 1–2 of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is struck by the urgency to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (1:1–4). He communicates that urgency to the king (2:1–3). And he seeks to impress the level of urgency upon the officials in Jerusalem (2:11–17).
8. In establishing urgency, those who promote change must address barriers to change, including too much past success, a lack of visible crises, low performance standards and insufficient feedback from external constituencies. (Quote is from Page 5.) In the case of low performance standards, the pastor will hold up the standard of God's Law by directing the group to the Word of God.
9. The second of Kotter's steps is to **create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition**. These are supporters of the change who identify with the change effort and will invest their energy and resources in promoting the change. Frederick the Wise and other German princes in the 16th century worked with Martin Luther to become the guiding coalition for the Reformation. (Quote is from Page 6.)

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<sup>7</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996 and 2012). These steps also are summarized and illustrated in Kotter's companion book, *The Heart of Change*.

**10.** This step in the change process is illustrated in Chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah gains the support of the emperor (2:4–8) and the nobles and leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem (2:18), while also recognizing those who will not give their support (2:19–20).

**11.** The step of creating a guiding coalition aligns with the principle of “who first” espoused by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*.<sup>8</sup>

**12.** One who is leading change is wise to invest his attention with those who are innovators and early adopters in order to develop a guiding coalition. Too often, leaders invest the majority of their attention and energy on trying to persuade resisters and the late majority.

**13.** Many times, initiatives for change fail because the leader neglects to form a strong guiding coalition. Even when a guiding coalition is formed, it will need to be guided by strong leadership. (Quote is from Kotter, Page 7.)

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 13-17.

**Discussion:**

**1.** Regarding the step of **creating urgency** in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› How would you rate the sense of urgency for this change in your congregation?

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› How can you increase the sense of urgency for this change?

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› John Kotter identifies four hindrances to the cultivation of a proper sense of urgency. Which of these does your congregation struggle with regarding your proposed change?

- Too much past success.
- A lack of visible crises.
- Low performance standards.
- Insufficient feedback.

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**2.** Regarding the step of **creating a guiding coalition** in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› Who are the specific people or groups of people that you need to join you in pursuing this change?

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› How will you get these key people involved in the initiation of this change?

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**3.** How will you appropriately apply the second function of the Law (mirror) to create urgency for this change? How will you appropriately follow with the message of the Gospel?

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## Session 4: Process of Visioning

1. The three-stage process for intentional leadership of change in an organization, as originally espoused by Kurt Lewin, involves: 1.) unfreezing the status quo; 2.) cognitive restructuring or visioning; and 3.) freezing the change. The current session focuses on the second stage. This stage is addressed in John Kotter's book in Steps 3 and 4, both of which deal with visioning.
2. The third step in Kotter's eight-step process of leading change is to **develop a vision and strategy**. Kotter states: "Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people" (p. 7). Vision provides an image of a hopeful future that aligns people to move in a shared strategic direction.
3. One caution should be noted here. The use of the term "vision" is misappropriated by some Christians to essentially equate with a direct revelation from God about specific strategic actions that they think should be taken. This is presumptuous and dangerous. The Lutheran pastor will clarify that the term "vision" in this case refers to an image of the hopeful future that the community of believers has come to embrace after studying the Scriptures and by seeking to accomplish the revealed will of God in the Scriptures. Furthermore, sinful humans fail in accomplishing God's will. So at this stage, the message of the Gospel will be lavishly delivered to comfort the repentant and to empower them to pursue that which God desires of them.
4. At this stage, it also is important to differentiate between a hopeful future that is *adiaphoron* (neither divinely mandated nor forbidden) and one that clearly advances the purposes of God as revealed in Scripture. The pastor plays a key role in guiding the members of the congregation to make this theological distinction by helping them to understand the messages of the Bible.
5. The vision needs to be articulated in a concise and clear manner that engages people's imaginations and inspires them. Uninspiring plans and programs do not fit the bill for a vision. (Quote is from Page 9.)
6. This step in the change process is illustrated in Chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah first presents his vision and strategy for rebuilding Jerusalem to the emperor (2:4–8). When he arrives in Jerusalem, he lays this out to the nobles and leaders there (2:17–18).
7. The vision needs to be communicated well in order to create broad ownership of it. This is the fourth step in Kotter's eight-step process. This communication needs to be trustworthy, robust and plentiful. (Quote is from Page 9.)
8. Kotter identifies three common symptoms of a vision that has been ineffectively communicated. First, people's hearts are not engaged — they have no emotional buy-in. Second, their heads are not engaged because they fail to sufficiently understand the vision. Third, they behave antithetically to the vision even though they may give lip service to it. (Quote from Page 9.) In contrast, good communication of the vision will result in people understanding it, embracing it with their emotions and will, and behaving accordingly.

**Discussion:**

**1.** Regarding the step of **developing a vision** in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› What is the ultimate outcome that you envision will result from this change initiative?

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› Is the vision for this change initiative merely a set of plans and programs, or is it articulated in a concise and clear manner that engages people's imaginations and inspires them?

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› How will you influence leaders of your congregation so that they understand the vision for this change and are committed to it?

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**2.** Regarding the step of **communicating the vision** in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› What ways will you employ to communicate the vision better to the entire congregation?

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› How can you ensure that your message regarding the vision is consistent with the actions that you undertake?

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**3.** How will you differentiate between a vision that is *adiaphoron* (man's will) and one that is biblically inspired (God's will)?

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## Session 5: Process of Refreezing

1. The three-stage process for intentional leadership of change in an organization, as originally espoused by Kurt Lewin, involves: 1.) unfreezing the status quo; 2.) cognitive restructuring or visioning; and 3.) freezing the change. The current session focuses on the third stage. This stage is addressed in John Kotter's book in Steps 5 through 8, all of which deal with refreezing the change. The ultimate goal of this stage of refreezing is to firmly establish the change so that it becomes the "new normal" for the congregation.
2. The fifth step in Kotter's eight-step process of leading change is to **empower broad-based action**. Kotter states: "The implementation of any kind of major change requires action from a large number of people" (p. 10). This is the time to address obstacles that stand in the way of the advancement of the new idea or vision. To avoid confronting those obstacles is to undermine the implementation of the change (p. 11).
3. This step in the change process is illustrated in Chapter 3 of the book of Nehemiah, which describes in detail the actions taken by a significant number of people to advance the vision of rebuilding the walls and gates of the city.
4. The sixth step in refreezing positive change is to **create and celebrate short-term wins**. The creation of these wins must be intentional and active, all strategically designed (p. 11). In order for people to remain focused on the long-term vision, they must be sustained in energy and commitment by the short-term gains (p. 12).
5. This step in the change process is illustrated in Chapter 3 of the book of Nehemiah, which describes a series of successful accomplishments in the rebuilding process.
6. The seventh step in the process of refreezing is to **consolidate gains and produce more**. Simply put, this is to keep the momentum going. It involves integrating the short-term wins into a cohesive momentum and extending the productivity to other areas of the corporate life.
7. This step in the change process is illustrated in the middle chapters of the book of Nehemiah. In Chapter 4, the labor is adjusted to include protection of the laborers from opponents by taking up arms. In Chapter 5, the initiative is expanded to include a kind of social reconstruction of the Jerusalem community. Finally, in Chapter 6, the project is completed (6:15).
8. The eighth and final step in leading positive change is to **anchor changes firmly in the corporate culture**. This involves embedding the change into the warp and woof of the identity and culture of the congregation. Kotter observes: "Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed" (p. 14). The change becomes the "new normal" for all the members of the congregation and, ultimately, is personified by the new generations of leaders (p. 14).
9. This step in the change process is illustrated in the final chapters of the book of Nehemiah, which describe Nehemiah's appointment of permanent leaders in the city (Chapter 7), Ezra's reinforcement of the spiritual health of the community (Chapters 8–10) and the continued settlement of the citizens and leaders of the city and surrounding villages (Chapters 11–12). Note that the wall of Jerusalem — although completed sometime earlier (6:15) — was not formally dedicated until these matters were firmly established (12:27ff). But despite these efforts, Nehemiah needed to return to Jerusalem from Persia several years later in order to attend to matters, which indicates some retreat by the people to earlier problems (Chapter 13).

**10.** Even, perhaps especially, in this final stage of refreezing, the Christian community must remain humble and teachable. After the change has taken place, it is important to be open to the possibility that human “visions” that have frozen into place need to be unfrozen and changed (thus the need to return to the multi-step process). The continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit through

the preaching, teaching and study of God’s Word will be the catalyst for this. Of course, throughout the process the pastor will consistently speak the words of Law and Gospel to the people in order to convict them of error, comfort them in their contrition, and guide and empower them for faithful pursuit of God’s will.

**Discussion:**

**1.** Regarding the step of empowering broad-based action in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› Are there obstacles to this change initiative that you may be reluctant to confront? If so, what are they?

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› How will you address these obstacles?

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**2.** Regarding the step of generating short-term wins in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering this question: Assuming that you have a five-year time frame before this change initiative is fully accomplished, what do you need to do in the area of short-term wins?

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**3.** Regarding the step of anchoring the new change firmly in the corporate culture in the process of leading change, reflect upon the specific present reality in your congregation that you would like to see changed by answering these questions:

› How will you identify potential leaders within your congregation who will be “the next generation” to carry on the vision of this change effort?

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› Who might those leaders be?

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› How might you cultivate their commitment to the vision?

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**4.** After change has taken place, it is important to be open to the possibility that human “visions” that have been frozen into place may need to be unfrozen and changed. In the future, how might you realize that the changes for which you worked are in need of being unfrozen?

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