

Deep Change or Slow Death  
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Every month the headlines declare another major change in some North American Company. United Airlines declares bankruptcy and reorganizes, slashing the workforce and reducing benefits to those who remain in order to stay in business. Delphi Automotive and General Motors are just two of the most recent very large companies to join the parade making deep changes in response to changes in market conditions. As someone once said, "change is inevitable; growth is optional." As result, many organizations are simply and quietly disappearing from the North American landscape.

Faith-based schools are not exempt from these changes. Christian schools (and many churches) are also struggling with these issues in a number of places. Grand Rapids Christian School, a mostly urban school system, is seeing a continual erosion of enrollment to outlying suburban Christian schools and has recently decided to close a building and combine other parts of their operation. Cutlerville Christian Schools and Kelloggsville Christian Schools have just voted to merge as a plan to deal with their declining enrollments. The Denver Christian Schools are facing tremendous upheaval and struggle over a deep change gone wrong. The road to change is perilous and difficult, but it is the only path to survival in a changing world.

Christian schools with steady enrollment still struggle with rising costs, especially health care in U.S. schools. When these costs, which exceed the rate of inflation, are passed on to parents, more parents leave, some to home schooling, some to charter schools, some to other less expensive Christian schools in the area. In schools where administrators and boards attempt to deal with rising costs by cutting benefits and sharing the costs with staff, staff members become disenchanted, frustrated, angry or cynical about this erosion of their compensation.

Some schools, such as Manhattan Christian School in Montana, and Eastern Christian Schools in New Jersey, struggle with another challenge: the steep increase in land and housing costs, which makes it harder or impossible for teachers to afford rent and puts purchase of a home out of reach. The result is a much smaller pool of teacher candidates, and more frequent turnover of staff, both of which potentially destabilize a school, and place increasing demands on administrators.

The rising tuition rates in many Christian schools are driving away more and more parents who say they simply can't afford it any more, and the result is that more and more Christian schools are becoming schools for the relatively wealthy, a contradiction of most school's intent and mission.

### **Deep Change or Slow Death**

In this article I want to challenge the leadership of schools to consider the need to face a serious dilemma: deep change or slow death. Deep change means sacrifice and suffering for everyone in the short term. It also means engaging in conflict. It is not very pleasant. As a result, too often the leadership will create an alternative scenario, the painless fix. It is an early stop on the road to slow death.

In order to survive, and even to thrive, schools will need to look at the world differently. Boards and administrators will need to get past the tendency to stick with fiduciary matters (minding the store) and begin to learn to do the serious work of planning for the future. Christian communities will need to recover their passion to be pioneers, blazing new paths and overcoming their instincts to be careful, to be cautious, to hang on to our traditions. Christian schools and churches tend to be conserving organizations, content with the status quo, fearful of the risks and conflicts of change.

But school cultures are changing. In September of 2001 I presented the board of the Kalamazoo Christian Schools with a report that identified the shifting constituency of our schools. The data was taken from annual surveys of parents and many conversations with people inside and outside the organization. This shift in constituent attitudes and values is not unique to the Kalamazoo Christian Schools.

The Shifting Culture of the Kalamazoo Christian Schools  
A Continuum of Change  
September 2001

*Old Culture*

Predominantly CRC  
40 churches  
Strong church support (students and \$)  
Dutch, middle class  
Mostly white  
Blue collar predominates  
Large families (6-10 kids)  
Attend out of duty, loyalty  
Neighborhood schools  
Very loyal  
Making do  
Getting by (limited program)

The dollars we save  
Intact two-parent families  
Unwritten codes and expectations  
Volunteer culture  
Bible study and doctrine

*New Culture*

No Reformed background  
108 churches  
Declining church support  
Non-Dutch, all classes  
A slowly growing # of families of color  
Mix of blue and white collar  
Small families (one or two, four at most)  
Attend out of choice  
Regional schools  
Loyalty untested  
Making new  
Demanding more (preschool, after school, hot lunch, sports, music, special ed)  
The dollars we can make  
One-parent families, guardians  
Explicit expectations, explanations  
Professional staff culture  
Spontaneous spirituality.

It was once true that “if you always do what you always did, you’ll always get what you always got.” But that is no longer true. If schools persist in always doing what they always did based on unexamined assumptions, they will die a slow death.

**Change Avoidance**

Robert Quinn in his book *Deep Change* identifies three common strategies when organizations confront the problem of slow death. The first strategy is “peace and pay.” “Peace and pay” means maintain the status quo, don’t rock the boat, don’t take risks. Vast numbers of people cope with change by choosing slow death because the prospect of conflict strikes fear in their hearts. Quinn

describes this peace and pay strategy as a form of mental illness. He says, “Actively choosing peace and pay means deliberately joining the legions of the walking dead. Making deep changes in ourselves is not something we do for organizations; we do it for ourselves. It is a choice to be alive.” P. 22

A second strategy identified by Quinn is “Active Exit.” This is a strategy found among administrators and board members as well as teachers. It involves four mental steps: stay physically healthy, maintain a mental picture that accepts the probability of leaving (or for board members, going off the board), stay in touch with the CSI Administrator and Teacher Vacancy lists or think creatively about alternative career paths (starting your own landscaping or painting business) and when feasible, change jobs (or if you’re a board member, ask to be assigned to the Building and Grounds committee). This strategy is proactive, involves an attempt to actively manage the stress and threat of burnout, and includes the courage to make a career change. The thought process goes like this, “In one or two more years, I’m outa here and this will all be someone else’s problem.” The problem with this strategy is that it is focused on personal survival and not on the service of and survival of the organization. Administrators and teachers who move frequently to avoid the stress and conflict of deep change will more likely than not discover that the winds of change blow everywhere, and the new situation in which they find themselves looks remarkably like the one they just left.

The third strategy is “Deep Change.” Quinn points out that the challenge of deep change or slow death is a very personal issue, and that we all tend not to choose the healthy alternative. “We actually seem to prefer slow death. Slow death is the devil we know, so we prefer it to the devil we do not know.” (p. 24) We need to face our personal tendency to sometimes be lazy and more often, to lack courage to face the hard realities, the “brutal facts” of our situation. When we learn to confront the cost of slow death and decay we can find the discipline and courage to engage deep change.

Our personal lives also reflect the two biggest obstacles to change: fear and pride. Both of these are spiritual issues because they deny God’s power and sustaining grace and prevent us from going forward as his agents of transformation and the builders of his earthly Kingdom. Deep change always requires humble and honest reflection on our own spiritual condition as leaders. Good leadership always flows from the inside.

### **The challenge of organizational structures**

Many schools are structured in ways that hinder the hope of deep change. Administrators are given too much to do with the result that they have no time to lead an organization, only manage the day to day operation. Boards are too often structured for slow death as well. Board members are elected by popular vote, sometimes by geographic districts or by church membership and serve three year terms. Board members are usually selfless volunteers with a passion for the mission of the schools their children attend, but many are not trained for leadership, don’t have the planning skills, and with a three year term, have barely learned enough about the school and issues it faces before they must leave the board.

The deep changes schools must face will not likely be made unless deep changes take place in the way the leadership of the school is chosen and structured. School administrators must have more

time out of the classroom and away from the day to day management tasks to engage in the serious hard work of leading change.

1. Many administrators will need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills of forward-thinking servant leadership and planning.
2. Administrators can't do this task alone; they will need to be challenged to grow spiritually, and to work in teams with others in the school and community.
3. Board members should be chosen for their talent and giftedness for addressing the challenges of deep change, and given a longer tenure in order to be able to carry out the planning process. Some schools have addressed this challenge by simply allowing board members to be re-appointed for an additional three-year term.

### **The Search for Meaning and Direction**

Jim Collins in *Good To Great* identifies a key attribute of the leaders of great companies: “the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” (p. 70) Exercising curiosity and gathering information are relatively easy tasks compared to the challenges of wisely interpreting that information and using it to develop plans for deep change in an organization. The process could take several years, and include some false starts. The search for meaning and direction in Christian school organizations must be bathed in prayer and the search for wisdom.

Proverbs Two describes the search for biblical wisdom with muscular verbs: “turning your ear”, “applying your heart”, “call out for insight”, “cry aloud for understanding”, “look for it as for silver”, “search for it as for hidden treasure.” If we do these things, the passage says, “then you will understand what is right and just and fair---every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (Proverbs 2: 1-11, NIV)

Deep Change is a spiritual journal for Christian School leaders who need to be spiritually renewed and strengthened to deal with the challenges. We often find ourselves crucified between two thieves: fear and pride. But as we remember the past, we recognize that we stand on the shoulders of those faithful servant-leaders who created our schools in very challenging conditions. The pathway to deep change needs always to be marked by celebrations of God's faithfulness.

#### *The Virtues of Adventure*

Deep change is a scary thing. We know from past experience that change always costs something personal and produces pain and anxiety. There is a risk of failure and the prospect of change exposes our vulnerability, our basic cowardice, our aversion to risk, our clinging to what's comfortable and familiar. As we honestly confront our frailty and insecurity we allow God to enter our lives at this point of weakness. Mysteriously God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things to nullify (change) the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. In Jesus, God acted to change the old order by calling ordinary men and women, fishermen and tax collectors, carpenters, tent makers and teachers to be disciples who would “make it down here like it is up there”, (Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.) As disciples we must first surrender ourselves in humility and allow God to get on with our remodeling jobs. We need to demonstrate our dependence, our trust in God every day in

our attitudes, our words, our relationships, our decisions. In all of these things the world should be able to look at us and see that God is busy.

We need to remember that our discipleship comes with a cost. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “those whom God calls, he bids to come and die.” But we, like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, want to hold something back. We need to feel in control of some part of our lives, and the demand to surrender *everything* to God is a daily and daunting challenge. Even when we think we’ve faced it we find ourselves taking back what we thought we had laid on the altar.

God comes to us in this struggle and invites us to trust him. Everywhere in his Word we are reminded that “I will be your shepherd, your rock, your fortress, your deliverer, your shield, your stronghold, your refuge, your light, your salvation, your instructor.” “The Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the person who trusts in him.” (Psalm 32: 11)

Faith grows by being acted upon. Kingdom builders don’t have to be afraid of deep change. When we are afraid, and paralyzed by our fears, we miss the blessings of God. A number of years ago a saying was discovered on a temple wall in India that had the name “Jesus” written under it. It read, “Life is a bridge that we must cross and not build houses upon.” The mission of God’s people is to “sojourn in the land of promise...as in a foreign land.” We must live our lives here as restless “resident aliens” because our true home is in heaven.

