

## THE STUCK SYNDROME

### ARTICLE 6: DEEP CHANGE OR QUICK FIX

Christianity is exploding as never before! The last five years have seen the greatest growth of the Church ever. Incredible things are happening globally. Not only are there between 80,000 to 100,000 new believers every day, but also 3,500 churches are planted every week! Unfortunately, not every country is a part of this. Most churches in the US, as well as Japan, are experiencing something very different, they are either stuck or regressing. (“Stuckness” = the love and life giving energy of God is blocked.) In the last decade, the number of Americans believing God exists has increased 11%, but in the same period the Protestant church has declined 9.5%! Growth has not just stopped, the numbers are actually declining about 1% a year. Of course, the situation in Japan brings us concern as well. The Church of Japan is at a near standstill. This is a dire situation. It is a time for deep change.

Do you remember the old television drama *Mito Komon*, the longest running TV series in world history? We always knew what would happen because nothing really changed. It was the same for *Abaremo Shogun*, and *Kamen Raida*, *Ultra Man* and a lot of other shows. (I guess I watched a lot of *henshin* and *chambara* when I was growing up.) At the end of each episode the hero always pulls out his power and nails the bad guy. The story was always safe, if not a bit dull. When my wife and I go to a favorite restaurant we use a code word. One of us will ask, “Watcha gonna have?” and the other will typically reply, “*Mito Komon*”. Which is our code for “The usual.”

We want to know what is coming. We want to be safe. This works great with a *ramen teishoku* but not with church. All living organisms must change continually. If they avoid change things start to build up deep down. God alone does not change, because He is perfect, but we have a long way to grow before we can use that excuse. Churches cannot play *Mito Komon*, but they generally do.

In the second article of this series we talked about the big power of small changes, but there come times when something much deeper is needed. One of the times that deep change is needed is in a period of significant paradigmatic shift- a time when there are major changes in the outlook on life and reality. It is said that the world has changed more in the last 20 years than in the previous 2000 years- the paradigms are moving all over the place! The other time that significant change must occur is when severe stagnation has set in. Small changes and surface level adjustments will never answer the needs when stagnation has a grip. Something or maybe everything must go through a

fundamental change, which is needless to say, incredibly difficult.

But what typically happens when a church finds itself stuck? I have noticed three common reactions of churches that need deep change. The first church merely denies that they need to make changes. This church or church leader lives by fear; they are afraid to face the crisis of their situation, want to stay stable and comfortable in their current patterns, and so they settle for the status quo.

The second type of church, after sensing a need for change, begins trying things, the wrong things. Usually these wrong things are four “p”s- People, Policy, Program, and Place. Changing the people might mean getting a new pastor. Changing the policy might mean putting more regulations on leaders. Changing the program might mean adopting a new worship style. And changing the place might mean building a new facility, or a new くらげ. The outcome of all these quick fixes is the same, continued stagnation, and now with even less energy.

The third type of church is the church that does accept the fact it is stuck, it does focus on the right changes, but for some reason it fails to maneuver through the change successfully. In this church there has been a great expenditure of energy without a successful change. This is, of course, very discouraging, and once open minds become closed and guarded. Sad to say, they will stay just as stagnant as the other two church types. In fact, the outcome of all three churches is the same; they are stuck in the status quo.

Successful change requires great wisdom and time. There are stages and dynamics which must be honored. One model that proves helpful is from John Kotter in *Leading Change*. Kotter delineates the process of change through eight critical stages, which can be described as;

1. Establish a sense of urgency. (Hopefully the first paragraph in this article was an example of this.)
2. Creating a guiding coalition.
3. Developing a vision and strategy.
4. Communicating the change vision.
5. Breaking down the obstacles.
6. Generating short-term wins.
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change.
8. Anchoring the change in the culture.

Insufficient attention to any one of these steps ensures that the change will not be lasting.

This change process looks very orderly, however, on the other side of the coin deep change may be very messy. In fact, for needed change to really occur, there might be a need for chaos. Gilbert Kendle (*Leading Change in the Congregation*) describes chaos as place where boxes are broken and a new creative space is achieved. A system that is in chaos will eventually reach a threshold of substantive change and become renewed, transcending its former condition, and able to live more fully and effectively.

But entering into this chaotic and newly creative space can be painful, just as passing through a blistering desert. Unfortunately, in our success-oriented world-view, we usually do all we can to avoid the desert, and settle for a shallow existence. I am well acquainted with a group who illustrate this chaos-growth experience very well. The group is specifically; special needs families, my own family included. When a family has a child that is born, or becomes, handicapped they are hit full force with chaos. The previous life comes to an abrupt stop. There is the grievous sorrow of the desert. Patterns of existence, and life view are painfully adjusted. And eventually a new, richer, albeit not easy, life can begin. The deaf church also has this quality. Most deaf believers have struggled much, but have also entered into a very special realm. A realm that we in the hearing world can hardly fathom. That is why they are often proud to be deaf.

Deep change is not an easy matter. Deep change does take time. But without it we will be stuck in our old ways of thinking, being, and doing. We will be left behind by the world, and living a shallow and stagnant life, and our churches will be devoid of vibrancy. Had the Israelites entered the Promised Land after a quick jog through the desert they would not have been purged of their deeply engrained slave mentality. They would never really be free. And had they never been tried in the desert they would not have known the God of the desert. The God who is all-sufficient. The God who is unhindered by any obstacle that lies ahead. The God who re-creates us from deep within.