



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

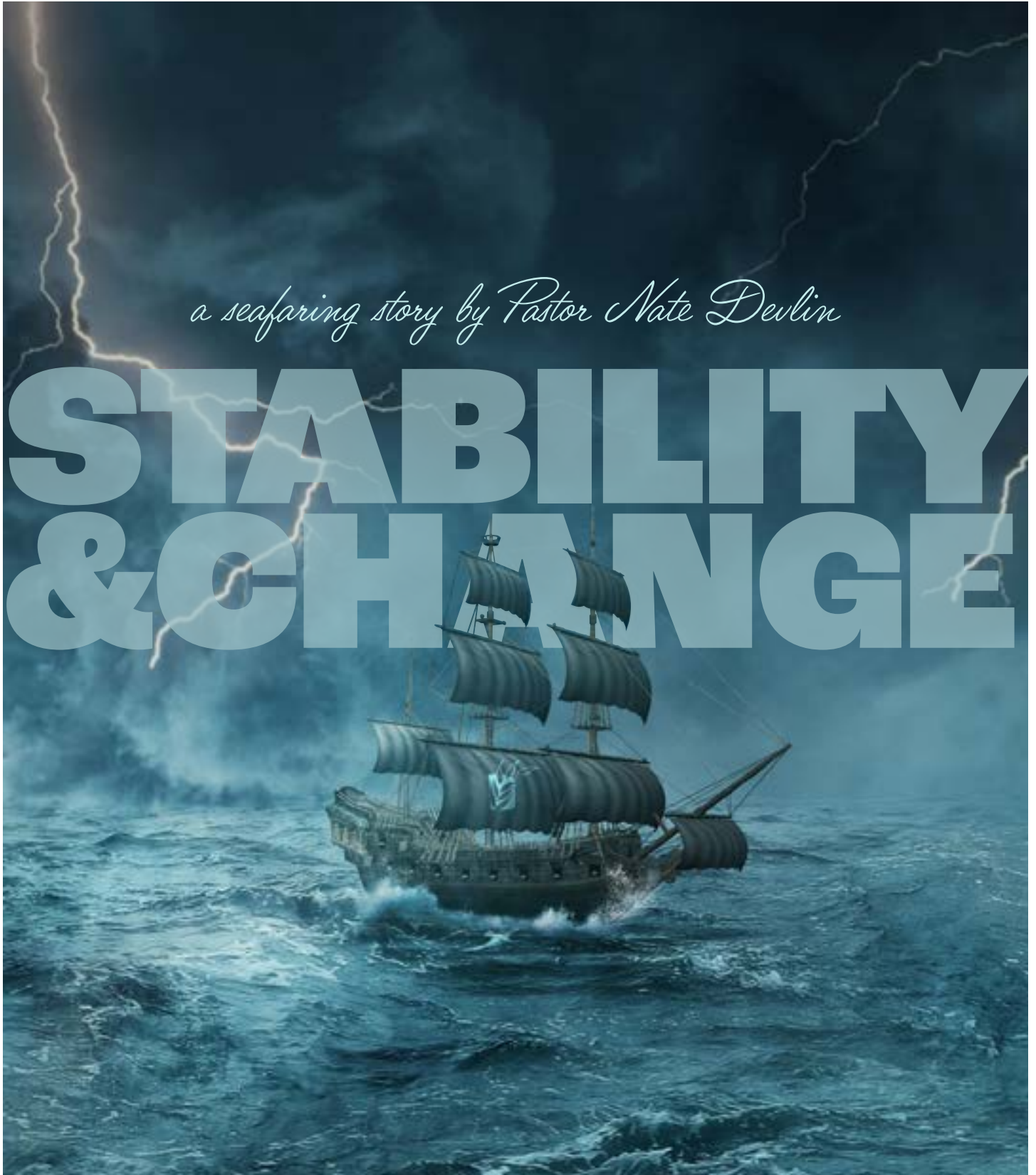
scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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a seafaring story by Pastor Nate Devlin

STABILITY & CHANGE



stability & change

when a church sets sail on the open sea

For the last 10 years, our family has vacationed at Lakeside, a historic community in northwest Ohio and part of the Chautauqua Institution. It is known, among many things, for its vibrant sailing program.

Our children have learned to sail on Lake Erie while at Lakeside, and they have become quite accomplished sailors. I, however, have not. It's not that I'm not interested in sailing; the problem is that I easily and quickly get seasick.

I've always been prone to motion sickness and a small vessel like a Sunfish sailboat out on an active Lake Erie is susceptible to much bobbing, rolling and pitching. The constant motion and changing sightline tend to make me sick, and so I determined years ago that my time was better spent on land.

Just as too much motion on the water can make you sick, so can too much change in a community. When a community changes too much too fast, people get disoriented and dizzy. Things look different and it's hard to get your bearings.

Change is something I've been thinking a lot about when it comes to our congregation. We've experienced much change in our church

over the last few years, some necessary and some unintended.

As your pastor, my concern is for stewarding the ministry and caring for the people, and so I know there are some changes we simply must endure, and yet I don't want us getting seasick!

Sometimes the best remedy for seasickness is simply getting your bearings and knowing where in the world you are. If you don't get your bearings, you become fixated on the waves. That was Christ's lesson to Peter. In dark times, it's tempting to feel as if you're totally lost at sea, and a glimpse of the North Star can offer great hope. As your pastor, I want to help. And the best help I can provide is to point us to the fixed things above the waves that will calm our hearts.

And so, I've been asking myself, "How do we keep things stable as we grow and change together as a church?"

Several years ago, I read Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's insightful book, *The Wisdom of Stability*. I was attracted to the book, I suspect, because my upbringing lacked a distinct sense of constancy, creating in me a longing for more permanent things.

After age 13, things started changing. Our family moved several times, changing residences and school districts. In addition, we began to change churches every few years. The one constant was that the new church was always charismatic, which meant that you could always count on the service being unpredictable, having been taught that we don't put God in a box, and with the Holy Spirit, you expect the unexpected.

During college, things changed again, but this time with a turn toward the more anchored. I began to yearn for stability.

I wanted a long and healthy marriage to a godly woman, and I wanted to be part of a church that had a sense of history and tradition, worshipping among people who saw themselves as stewards of precious things handed down through generations. And I wanted to have a long career in one place, within a community that was committed to formation and fidelity.

When I read Hartgrove's book, it seemed to be tailor-made for me. He touched on something deep in my heart. But he is also honest in his book, informing readers that while stability is indeed a good thing, it is difficult to achieve.

"We find the stability we were made for as we


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come home to life with God in community with other people," he writes. "This is our true home. But settling in isn't easy."

Settling in isn't easy because doing so is an act of faith and even defiance. Hartgrove continues by saying, "The wisdom of stability suggests that we can only begin to grow spiritually by accepting the gift of faith in the place where we are. We choose neither to flee to a better place on earth nor to despair in the face of demons that taunt us where we are. By God's grace, we stand and sing, 'Just like a tree planted by the waters / I shall not be moved.'"

Hartgrove further observes that our culture is prone to change. All of this means that achieving stability takes commitment, sacrifice and wisdom.

In this edition of our monthly publication, I want to share insights with you for a long-term, long-lasting stability here at Beverly Heights Church: how we might achieve that, and how embracing change is also a necessary ingredient for achieving stability.

In the end, I want our congregation to hold fast, not to what makes us comfortable, but to the permanent things, to the good, and above all, to the Lord. 

stability through covenant

how covenantal relationships make stability in the church possible

Stability is a personal value I hold dearly. In fact, my affection for stability explains what I found so attractive about Beverly Heights Church when I came here in 2004.

When I arrived, I met Rick Wolling, a pastor who had been here for close to 20 years. He often shared with me his admiration for the long legacy of pastors who had served at the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

Several years later, I began to immerse myself in the books of Eugene Peterson. Best known for his translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Peterson also had been the founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church, in Bel Air, Maryland, where he remained for 30 years.

Peterson would write vigorously about the church's need for stability and the pastor's need for commitment. Later, I had the opportunity to visit Peterson in his home in Montana. There he shared with me his conviction that every time a pastor leaves

his post, all churches suffer.

Another well-known pastor who has had a long-term pastorate is Alistair Begg, who has been the senior pastor of Cleveland's Parkside Church since 1983. In a lecture he delivered at The Gospel Coalition after reaching 30 years of ministry at Parkside, Begg articulated both the blessings and challenges that stem from long service to one church. He joked that he wanted to title his lecture, "The Dangers and Delights but also Disappointments and Duties and Difficulties – and frankly, potential Disasters – that are part and parcel of a long ministry in one place."

Pastors who value long-term ministry do so not because they are change averse or lacking in ambition. They stay in one place because that is what God expects of them. They are obedient to the call God has placed upon their lives.

Stability is a leadership value that originates in God and is affirmed often

in the Bible. Our God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, who established his covenant with his people for generations.

God makes a covenant with Abraham saying, "And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations'" (Genesis 17:9). God then leads his people by creating stable leadership, as he promises David saying, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

God makes a covenant with Abraham, with David and with his church. The church is the new covenant community of God. Pastors take vows to shepherd the flock as they enter into covenant with God and their congregation.

Congregations take vows to support parents as they enter into covenant at

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every infant baptism. Likewise, members take vows to promote the unity, peace and purity of the church as they enter into covenant with the local church.

God expects stability from both his leadership and the covenant community. Yet there is little in our culture today that encourages such stability, either in general or in our churches.

Begg, a Scotsman by birth, later observed in his lecture: "You know, I've seen how things work here in America. If things get a little bit rocky, they get unsettled, there's some changes put in place, there may be things that are disconcerting for the church family. And what almost inevitably happens is that [someone] leaves."

Stability is hard to achieve. It takes a covenantal God to make it possible. And it takes members who understand the church's identity in covenantal terms. It is the commitment to this covenantal principle that is the glue that holds a church together amid the sometimes rocky seas of change. ⚓

changing stability

*a changing of the guard and
what other changes that might mean*

When I arrived at Beverly Heights in February of 2004, I learned the church recently had endured a difficult change that had wide reaching impact on the ministry. The former associate pastor unexpectedly left the church. With him, many families from the congregation departed.

I also soon learned that Rick was actively preparing the congregation for yet another significant change as he and the Session were monitoring the slow but inevitable theological demise of the PCUSA.

Shortly thereafter, Rick would announce that due to specific actions taken at the General Assembly, the PCUSA could no longer be considered an orthodox communion and his conscience would no longer allow him to remain in the denomination. Beverly Heights prepared to leave, even at the risk of losing our building and endowments. It was a scary

and uncertain change that tested the faith of us all.

As I spent more and more time with Rick over the years, I became aware of how he was leading the congregation through these difficult times. He would share insights with me like, “Don’t forget to fly the plane,” an expression which meant, “Don’t forget to keep your focus on what’s most important.”

“Keep people’s eyes fixed on Jesus through worship” was the overarching message. Rick also shared with me the need to communicate: “Anticipate questions and answer them,” he’d instruct, “and give answers to the other questions they didn’t think of but are glad that you did!”

And so, in keeping with the good training I received in pastoral leadership, I want to anticipate a few questions that you might have about stability and change.

Are the changes we’re experiencing around here at Beverly Heights normal?

The short answer is yes.

Lyle Schaller, in his book *Survival Tactics in the Parish*, has a chapter entitled, “Following the Long-Term Pastorate.” Schaller contends that pastors following a predecessor’s long-term pastorate must recognize that he and the church must pass through several chapters together.


The first chapter is the “interim phase,” the transition between the past and the future. This phase is short (around a year) where both benefits and frictions generated by the transition begin to become visible.

The second chapter is the “change phase.” This chapter usually lasts two to five years and is characterized by the dynamic of change within the ministry. Schaller writes: “The congregation that

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can understand that when they called a new minister to follow a long pastorate they also called into the church a different set of priorities for both the minister and the congregation, [that congregation] will be able to avoid a lot of unnecessary and unproductive conflict.”

This change phase, Schaller admits, is a challenging time in the life of a congregation as they transition from the previous period to the present. But he also reassures his readers (and those pastors in the change phase!) that this period is common, necessary and survivable. It is survivable so long as pastor and congregation keep their focus on what’s most important: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Schaller concludes, “The emphasis must be placed on faithfulness and obedience to the call of the Lord today, not on loyalty to the past or on attempts to perpetuate or re-create yesterday.” 

stability through change

understanding where we are and setting new priorities

If a new pastorate means new priorities, then another question worth addressing is: **What are your priorities as Senior Pastor?**

When I first accepted the call as Senior Pastor at Beverly Heights, I believed that God's mandate for my ministry was to lead in such a way that would maintain the standards of excellence at Beverly Heights that were hard fought, won and handed down.

When I first took the job, I had very little change in mind for the ministry. I wanted to keep things stable as we steadily moved in the direction we were accustomed to, and had enjoyed for so long.

Then in March of 2020, Covid changed everything.

As we faced the challenges of Covid, I believe our Session and congregation lived out our Christian convictions faithfully. However, the trials of Covid also revealed to me two important insights:

1) We were not as prepared as I thought

we were to live out our faith in the moment of trial, where there was real and consequential risk.

2) The rate of negative change in the culture was beginning to move exponentially and in order for the church to be faithful in this changing world, it needed to make some necessary changes as well.

With these observations, I have come to a settled conviction around two strategic priorities.

First, the church must become reacquainted with the cost of discipleship. Second, the church must reposition itself and its ministry objectives to better serve God's purposes for *this generation*.

Over and over again, throughout Covid, I shared with the Session, the staff and the congregation Christ's definition of discipleship when he said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will

save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

The cost of discipleship is the cost of laying our lives down daily. It is the cost of losing our lives for the sake of Christ and for our salvation.

Our comfortable lives had not been afflicted for some time and we forgot what discipleship meant. Covid gave us the opportunity to remember. I don't want to be caught unprepared again (personally or as a congregation), and so my priority for the church is to grow in our understanding and obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, so that when he calls us to follow, we are ready to go.

On the second point above, I have grown obsessed with Paul's sermon in Acts 13 where he preached to the Jews in Antioch to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah. As Paul goes through redemptive history, he comes to King David and says, "For David, after he had served the purpose of God in *his own generation* [my italics added], fell asleep and was laid with his fathers" (Acts 13:36).


“WE WERE NOT AS PREPARED AS I THOUGHT WE WERE.”

God wants our church to serve his purposes in this generation. In order to do that, some things will need to change. This is change, not for the sake of change, but born out of a desire to be faithful and effective.

And so, to serve God's purposes for this generation, we are reexamining our understanding of what it means to be the church, as the local, first-fruit and foretaste of the kingdom of God on earth.

We are reexamining what it means to be a church on mission, to form our children after the image of God, and to better communicate our message. We are asking what it means to be faithful in this generation and how to position ourselves for the future.

As our Mission-Vision blueprint has long stated, "As time goes on and God imparts to us new and additional visions for what He wants us to become, the [ministry] will surely be modified and augmented. We view this prospect with anticipation and hope."

And so, I believe that if we make the necessary changes to serve God's purposes, we will enjoy true stability for years to come. 

stabilizing the changes

a sailing metaphor for the church

Chapter 27 of Acts reads like an adventure novel.

A large merchant ship is lost at sea. The ship's captain is eager to leave the port of Fair Havens to deliver his cargo, but Paul advises those in charge to wait. Against Paul's advice, the captain decides to press on.

Though the weather is against them, the crew puts out to sea on the chance they will make it to Crete. But soon after departing, a tempest strikes the ship. They are violently storm-tossed and in peril of running aground.

After several days, the ship's crew is exhausted and starving. It is here that Paul speaks a word of correction and of hope. He tells the crew they should have listened to his advice and remained in Fair Havens. Nevertheless, God will graciously save Paul and all 276 men who sail with him; only the ship will be lost.

For an agonizing fortnight, the ship and anxious crew are driven across the sea, with no end in sight. The men rarely

eat or sleep. Paul eventually serves the crew bread in what is a clear allusion to celebration of the Lord's Supper. After eating, Luke writes that all the men are encouraged.

To lighten the ship's load, the crew cut the lifeboats and anchors and toss their cargo into the sea. The ship eventually strikes a reef, and the vessel runs aground. The bow of the ship sticks to the reef as the stern is broken to pieces by the surf. The men jump into the water, some swimming on planks of the ship, but in the end, all arrive safely on land.

Paul's voyage to Rome is a harrowing account of loss and bravery, folly and faithfulness. In many ways it serves as a metaphor for life's journey. But it also offers lessons to the church about stability and change. Let me share three lessons with you.

Lesson 1: In a sea of change, true stability is found in God's word.

The centurion soldier who transported Paul was determined to fulfill his duty by

risking bad weather in order to deliver him to Rome. The captain was determined to bring his cargo to port and receive payment, and so he too was willing to risk difficult waters. Their commitments were not aligned with the purposes of God. Paul had a word from the Lord and advised the centurion and the captain to wait. Neither listened. Instead, they pressed on with their own agenda and their plans came to ruin. Proverbs 16:9 states, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." God wants stability and a successful voyage, but the best and only way to ensure success is to stand on God's word.

Lesson 2: When things are changing fast, hold fast to the things that don't change.

In the tempest, nothing feels secure. The men are scared, exhausted and starving; they are living in constant suspense of the next catastrophic change. We can only begin to imagine how seasick everyone felt. We've all been in that place before, where the changes are coming fast and the blame game is heating up. What are we to do when all the change and

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uncertainty make us feel like we're upside down? Paul gives us insight. At the height of uncertainty, when things are bleakest, Paul grabs bread and the men are encouraged. Amid nauseating change, Paul seizes the unshakeable cornerstone of the world: Christ.

Lesson 3: If you try to hold onto the boat, you will never reach the shore.

God said every soul would be saved but the ship would be lost. The ship is the place on water from which men rule. It is the symbol of their security at sea. You can almost feel the agony of the sailors as God strips away every confidence, first the lifeboats, then the anchors, then the cargo. In the end, nothing is left. Every man is pushed by the waves onto the shore. Charles Spurgeon once said, "I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the Rock of Ages." When we find ourselves on the high seas of uncertainty, where does our hope reside? In the ship or in the Lord? 🚢

Here ends my observations on Stability and Change in our church. If there are specific questions you would like me to answer, please contact me directly by phone (412-561-5100, ext. 215) or by email (nate@beverlyheights.org).

Blessings to you,
Pastor Nate

BETWEEN | SUNDAYS

BY RICK WOLLING

is it about me or thee?

Katharina von Schlegel (1697-1768) was a German aristocrat and woman of deep faith who penned 29 hymns during her lifetime.

One of her best-known hymns is *Be Still My Soul*. It is surmised that von Schlegel is dealing with a great loss she experienced at the death of a friend or loved one, but we don't know that for sure.

What we do know is the themes of the hymn go far beyond addressing pain and loss. I am struck by the closing phrase of verse 1: "... In every change He faithful will remain." What an important focus this brings when considering the subject of change. It's not about ME; it's about THEE.

This underscores perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned while in seminary at Gordon-Conwell oh so long ago. There are two ways with which to view every issue, topic, problem or opportunity we encounter. One takes "a view from below," which begins with ME; or the other alternative, "a view from above," which begins with GOD.

For the follower of Jesus Christ, one must take a view from above. Typically, however, this is not how we view change. Our view from below asks questions such as:

Do I agree with the change?

Do I like it?

Does it serve my purposes?

How does it make me feel?

Do I trust the person, committee or institution which is the source of change?

What will my response be?

In other words, change, when viewed from below, is all about ME. On the other hand, viewing change from above – putting GOD first, in the position He rightfully should occupy – asks questions like:

Does God have a right to create change?

Does God have a plan?

Is God's way for me perfect, regardless of what I think or feel?

Is God's way fully comprehensible to me?

Does God really have my best in mind?

Do I really want God to shape my thinking about this change?

One of the difficulties in dealing with change is that it often seems arbitrary and random, lacking in coherence and purpose. One can feel as though things are spinning out of control. That causes us to fear and to react emotionally, which can be destructive to others and to ourselves.

Those promoting change become frustrated because people "just don't

get it." And those on the receiving end agree: "We just don't get why the change is necessary."

During my half century of pastoral ministry, I often erred when I was the agent of change, the person doing the acting rather than the one acted upon. One of the biggest mistakes I made – and now regret – was failing to be sufficiently sensitive to how difficult change can be for the acted upon.

I overlooked the effect it would have, not on the mission and ministry of the church necessarily, but on the emotional well-being of the congregation. Now, as one of the acted upon, I have more compassion. It saddens me to think of the pain some of my changes may have caused.

But more compassion does not blur my vision. The proper vantage point when considering change must always be from above.

Changes must be made and embraced by faith, without which "no one may please God" (Hebrews 11.6).

The appropriate posture puts God first, trusting in His perfect sovereignty, love and grace. It demonstrates sacrificial love for Him and others by setting ourselves aside and finding our security in the joyful truth that "... In every change He faithful will remain ... through thorny ways [He] leads to a joyful end."

Rick Wolling is pastor emeritus of Beverly Heights Church.