Transcript: **Leading Effective Change in a Rural Church Context w Dr. Rick Weinert**

**Question:** In your book, and captured in its title, you offer four essentials to leading change. Can you give us a quick introduction to the four essentials as they are introduced in the first chapter?

**RW-**Yeah, thanks. When you start thinking about leading change the first question on your mind is how? But I believe that there is a question we need to ask before “How?” My Dad read my book and said, “You told us we need to look out, but you didn’t tell us how.” He’s right because I believe that before we try to answer the how question we need to make sure that there are four essential elements in place. Without them, the how piece just won’t work effectively.

The first of the four essentials is **personal preparation**. By that I mean the spiritual, emotional, relational health of the pastor or church leader. I have watched leaders undermine their own ability to lead because of their lack of emotional health too many times. Years ago, my wife and I were in a small church in rural Minnesota where we realized an interesting phenomenon. If we recommended something it was almost always rejected. If we waited a year, somebody would come up with this great new idea that everybody accepted. If we needed to be recognized as the originator of that idea, or if we had pushed for it to be implemented when we first suggested it, it would have torpedoed any success we might have had. But if it didn’t matter who got credit for the idea, it was accepted. But if you are not emotionally healthy enough to do that, it just won’t work. A lack of spiritual, emotional, and/or relational health gets in the way of effective leadership every time.

The second essential element is understanding that change doesn’t come from new ideas. We have a tendency to think of change as, “Hey, I have an idea!” But lasting change comes from **challenging and changing our mental models.** A mental model is how you envision church, or ministry, or leadership working. What is something supposed to look like? That’s our mental model. Significant change doesn’t happen until people begin to think differently first. We need to see ourselves and our world through new lenses. Changing mental models results from teaching, conversation, and experimentation that helps us see ourselves and our world more clearly and envision what we might look like. As leaders we need to help those we are leading develop new mental models.

The third essential element is **relational decision-making**. An imposed, to down vision will rarely transform rural congregations. The vision has to bubble up from within. And if we believe that the church is the body of Christ and that every believe is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, isn’t that how it should be? If we want to effect lasting change, we need to stop thinking of ourselves as the one with the answers and learn to ask the right questions to help people discover God’s vision. Pastors come and go, particularly in rural ministries. Congregations will never fully buy into the vision of a pastor who they know will be moving on or who does not fully understand or love their community like they do. Rural ministry is primarily about relationships.

The fourth element is **clarity of direction**. Neither the leader nor the congregation will know what the church will look like in five, ten, or twenty years, but they do have to have a clear understanding of why they exist and the direction they believe God is calling them to move.

So, the personal preparation of spiritual/emotional/relational health, challenging and changing mental models, relational decision making, and clarity of direction. Those are the four essential elements to leading change. If those are not in place, I really don’t believe that any change will be effective or lasting.

**Question:** When you talk about clarity of direction, what do you mean by that and how does one achieve this?

**RW**- That’s a great question. To gain clarity, four questions have to be answered by a church. First, we need to consider our current context. **Where are we?** I believe that pastors are obligated to exegete their congregations and communities as effectively as they exegete the Scriptures. We need to develop a clear vision of where we are and who we are functionally and spiritually as a church. Have we lost our passion? Are we no longer a congregation of young families? Have we turned inward? Is fear driving our decisions? Understanding both our community setting and our present congregational condition is essential.

Second, forward movement has to be addressed. **Where should we be?** There is an inconsistency, for example, between the church and the community in an urban setting where the community has turned from White to Latino but the congregation is still all White. They need to think through their options. In a rural setting the issues and options will be different, but we need to be realistic. An inwardly focused rural church habitually bases their planning on what it used to be. The effective congregation will intentionally contemplate what they ought to become. To be outwardly focused, a congregation has to be future-oriented, asking questions like, Where should we be? What does it mean to love our community? Where is God at work?

Third, mission and purpose are important. **Why should we be there?** Why does our congregation exist, and why does it do what it does? Knowing the what without knowing the why is demotivating. A clear understanding of the why gives clarity to the direction of a congregation. Biblical and practical aspects of the why are important. Great Commandment compassion needs to be melded with Great Commission conviction and a kingdom heart. Motivation comes from recognizing need both internally and externally. Why should we be there?

Fourth, a church has to consider how to move forward as a congregation. **How do we get there?** A clear vision without seeing any possibility of getting there leaves the leader and the congregation discouraged and ready to quit. The entire path will probably not be clear, but we can be clear on how to begin moving forward. So clarity of direction requires us to answer four questions: Where are we? Where should we be? Why should we be there? How do we get there, or maybe better, How do we start moving in that direction?

**Question:** Rick, in your book you also introduce four related action points to leading change. The third of these action points is to assess the culture and demographics of the congregation and community. Why is that important? Isn't it enough to just teach the Word?

**RW**- I hear that a lot. Just preach the Word. Don’t give me all that worldly leadership stuff about demographics, assessment, strategic planning, and on and on. But the reality is that what we expect our missionaries to do, we reject out of hand here at home. Who would tell a missionary to go to Papua New Guinea and just preach the word? Shouldn’t they first understand the people? Shouldn’t they first understand the language and the culture so that they don’t miscommunicate. We expect them to effectively contextualize the gospel without compromising it. The stories that Jesus told, the illustrations and metaphors he used, even the challenges to the Scribes and Pharisees were culturally relevant.

The problem is that we assume that we understand our culture, yet every community has a different culture. For example, you don’t schedule a week of meetings at your church during Deer season or fishing opener. It’s not that people are not interested in spiritual things, it’s just that culturally it doesn’t work. In Kansas you don’t schedule a week of revival meetings during harvest. That’s their livelihood. You need to understand that.

Too often I have watched pastors criticize their congregations for being unbiblical, ungodly, and uninterested in spiritual things, but the real problem was that they didn’t understand their people. What we call unspiritual is often just culturally different. Someone who comes from a culture that places a high value on honesty will speak truth in ways that sound harsh and unloving to others. Someone who comes from a culture that places a high value on keeping the peace may sound untruthful. So you have pastor speaking truth in harsh ways that are rejected by his congregation, not because what he is saying is wrong, but because he is saying it in a culturally unacceptable way. At the same time he is accusing his people of being untruthful and wishy washy because they don’t speak the truth like he does. Understanding culture is essential.

A few years ago, I asked four people in my congregation to do an experiment for me. I asked them to go someplace they don’t normally go, sit there for an hour and observe people. I asked them to watch for indications of the Fall, expressions of being made in the image of God, and a couple other things. Two of them went to Doctor’s offices. One went to the Mall. One asked if she could go to a bar. She and her husband went to a bar where they had supper. The conversations around their observations were fascinating. They were beginning to see their community through different eyes, and they began to talk about their church from a different perspective.

I gave some pastors an assignment to drive around their community on streets and roads they don’t normally drive down and do a demographic study of their community. One rural pastor was blown away by how many people lived in his community. He had no idea there were that many people. So yes, we need to preach the word. But we need to do it in a way that best communicates with our people, and we need to know who it is we are trying to reach. That’s why I believe that effective church leaders need to assess the culture and demographics of their congregation and community.

**Question:** Any final thoughts- words of encouragement that you would like to leave with us today?

**RW**- Of the four essentials, spiritual/emotional/relational health of the leader(s), challenging and changing mental models, relational decision making, and clarity of direction, I would suggest that the emotional/spiritual/relational health of the leader and relational decision making are first priority.

**Resources:**

* Peter Scazzero- Emotionally Healthy Discipleship- <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/>
* Ken Sande- Relational Wisdom- <https://rw360.org/>
* Rick Weinert- *Four Essentials: Leading Effective Change in a Rural Church Setting-* <https://nextstepresources.com/product/four-essentials/>