

Surfing change!

I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of God.

Text: Isaiah 43: 19.

“See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

“ For, I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future! Jeremiah 29:11

Before I went to California, I was not to sure what a tsunami was.

But one day on the North Coast, in Anchor Bay, I met a fisherman who had experienced one.

He had been out fishing intending to come into Anchor bay when he saw it. It was a massive wave. He pointed his boat’s prow towards it and soon began to ride up this mountain of water. The wave on the top had not broken but he soon found his boat accelerating at full speed towards the shore. He floored the throttle in his sturdy boat and did what he could to resist the flow. Eventually he landed on the beach up against the cliff. He was lucky to be alive and his boat only had minor damage. If he had not taken resolute action he would have been lost with his crew and his boat...

Thomas Friedman argues in his book Thank-You for Being Late that we are experiencing an unprecedented level and speed of change. The massive acceleration in computing power, the release of the I-phone and Facebook and Twitter and other social media affect everything we do.

Refugees are on the march across the world. The fate of nations can rest on a Tweet. Technology, the market, globalization and climate change are all accelerating at once at an alarming pace. The weather all over the world is ongoing major news. All of us are aware of this on some level because it affects all of us.

Is this something we have seen before?

No. Definitely no! This is the *Age of Acceleration* sometimes called the second renaissance.

Every man-made system that modern society has built on, is being reshaped and made available to every individual on the planet. These changes can be positive or incredibly negative and adapting to them is both a necessity and an art. Our choice is to ride the tsunami or be drowned in the backwash.

Have you noticed that Donald Trump has a strangle hold on the Republican party despite all the charges against him?

Have you also noticed that he has managed to make himself the topic of conversation around the world?

Why is that?

I was listening to one of the authors of The Age of Discovery, Chris Kutarna. He was on CBC radio and he thought that he had the answer to that.

He said that there was a time when there were no printing presses in the West and the communication was largely oral. In those days **people were considered to be important because they said things that were worth listening to and that made**

them important. Anything that did not make sense was dropped quickly or simply ignored in the old oral system. So, *if you talked nonsense you could not become an important person.* You would be ignored and no one would pay attention. **Your importance came from what you said that was wise or memorable.**

But in today's world we have reversed that. **We believe that if someone is important then we must pay attention to whatever he or she says. If it is printed we seem to have lost the ability to ignore it.**

The evolution from oral communication to print media has made the printed word more powerful than the spoken.

Today anyone, including Donald Trump, can press a button and be published instantly. And we have not yet evolved enough in our uses of print media, to ignore stuff that doesn't make sense.

Thus Trump's strangle hold on world attention when he tweets. Doesn't matter what he says, whether it is lies, personal insults, denials, lighting changes in policy or simplifications, the media reads his feed as if it were actually important, when according to Chris Kutarna it could simply be ignored.

In other words the media has not accommodated the change and neither has the world. Hence the stranglehold.

We are here in Knox as Presbyterians for one major reason: Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. He was very surprised at what happened. He wrote to a friend at the time and said:

“I did not wish to have the theses widely circulated. I only intended submitting them to a few learned men for examination...But now they are being spread abroad and translated everywhere, which I never could have credited, so that I regret having given birth to them.”

What had happened? Luther was at the edge of a huge change. From oral communication to that of the printing press and publishing of written communication.

But Luther was also a brilliant opportunist and he accommodated the change quickly. and then surfed the waves of change.

He was a prolific writer, and was quick to take advantage of a huge opportunity. In fact 1/5th of all pamphlets published in Germany between 1500 and 1530 bore his name, and according to Kutarna and his coauthor Ian Goldin, they “ served to spread his ideas to other opinion leaders quickly, keeping them all in touch with each other’s evolving thoughts and experiences and broadcasting a coordinated program more quickly to a wider audience, than had ever been possible before.

That is one major reason why you and I are here in Knox this morning. Luther surfed the change and the results? The Reform churches were born and eventually like a ripple reaching the edge of a pond, Knox Stratford was formed.

Does what Luther did sound familiar? Yes! We are witnessing something very like the first renaissance that introduced so much change to the world, a lot of it disruptive. The social

media and the acceleration of change in so many areas today have created a change tsunami.

John Kotter is perhaps the leading Guru in the world when it comes to managing change. A Harvard business prof., he argues that widespread and difficult change is no longer the exception. It is, in fact the rule.

When organizations begin, they are fast, lithe and agile and entrepreneurial in focus. But over time they develop a hierarchy of management; they develop processes and procedures that run the business and the organization becomes much less adaptable, and can get itself so far into the mire that it cannot change and has to die. Think declining churches...

But the good news according to Kotter is that older organizations can not only survive, but thrive!

According to Kotter, organizations that are going to be able to survive and thrive in the tsunami of change that the world is confronting, need to **develop a dual operating system**. One system keeps the lights on and the other manages change by finding and seizing upon a major opportunity that is present in every huge change.

When the opportunity is researched by the second operating system and it is sure that it will benefit the organization, the second system presents it to the 'keeping the lights on side' for implementation. Done well, it can turn the organization away from a slow decline, into new life, and the organization can begin to thrive again. Many churches around the world are following Kotter's methodology to renew established older

churches. And they are successful at it. I studied one that used Kotter step by step and it thrives today. It was very impressive what they did. Stunning in fact!

Fortunately, this is not a novel idea. Not only does every successful organization go through this process in its beginning. It is also possible to recreate that lithe, flexible and fast acting entrepreneurial side that can accommodate change, the same system that it once had.

The book of Acts teaches us that the early church was lithe, flexible and fast acting. It faced in the early days a huge challenge. They devised something very similar to what Kotter has proposed. The twelve apostles, who were guiding the early church, had a brilliant idea. The apostles wanted to continue to teach the good news and the church was growing fast. But the widow's and orphan's needs were being neglected. The apostles were too busy to handle it. If they were to do nothing the message would lose credibility because it was not compassionate.

So, there were complaints that grew louder and louder. So, the apostles had a conference and decided to change the way of operating by adding a second operating system. Simply put, the apostles suggested that there be a separation of duties: the apostles would preach and a new creation called Deacons, would look after the Hebrew and Greek widows and orphan's needs, in the distribution of food, and on the waiting on tables. The whole community bought into it, it was implemented, and the church prospered and grew- Those two ways of operating are still used in many churches today. We still call them elders and deacons.

So what Kotter is suggesting is not new at all to us Christians. In fact, the early church's impressive growth still inspires those who study organizational change like Stephen Covey.

But what's new is this: the change that is coming at us this time is coming **so** fast, that we need to have two operating systems going **all the time**, one to stay afloat and the other to deal with the constant accelerating pace of change and **to look for opportunities within it**. Churches that do this are far more likely to survive and churches that fail to do this are more likely to decline.

In June 2013 the Haynes report was published in the Presbyterian Record, (which as a magazine, due to change, is itself now defunct. We now have The Connection.) The report was all about the rapid decline of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The report told us something we all know...that nationwide and locally our Presbyterian church is in rapid decline.

What practically do we need to do at the congregational level?

In each congregation determined to survive and thrive we could create what Kotter calls a Guiding coalition, or planning committee, that acts as a turn around team of congregational leaders with vision, who would be tasked with assessing the changes that are coming to churches and seeing which ones, if implemented, would benefit the local church the most. This committee of session does the research and the homework and then they present to the Session a fully researched proposal for discussion. If Session agrees then the

Session implements the proposed changes into the congregational life and mission.

In today's world it is so important to experiment, to try things out and to not be afraid of failure. For we often learn the most from failure. But having failed we don't get discouraged, we simply try something else that might work. There are churches that are thriving in the midst of this massive change. Some of them may be young and still have that lithe, flexible entrepreneurial side. But if these churches shut down that lithe side, with which they began, they too will decline.

So, what is the trick to thriving no matter what organization you serve in?

For Luther it was print, and translating a printed Bible into the vernacular. He seized the opportunities and rode that wave of print throughout his life. It was stronger than the Catholic church and so Protestantism took off. Luther could not be stopped thanks to the Guttenberg printing press.

I was at a Christian education meeting once and a discussion occurred about the connected world children are in. Then a bright young parent said that children still need authentic face to face connection rather than virtual text, Instagram or video connection. She said that there is an opportunity there for the church. Her challenge? Can we provide authentic, personal connection that is face to face and real?

You ask why should the church be interested in this?

Because there is a huge opportunity here! **People today are craving connection.** That is why churches that thrive, create and connect small groups of people **at similar life stages.** One church I know of created 18 new small groups last Fall alone. It is a thriving church and it is older. The secret? Connection!

So, is there hope for the Presbyterian Church in Canada? You bet. The research is out there. We know that Kotter's 8 stage process works. We know that in every disruptive change there is also opportunity.

What we need to do as congregations is to create with prayer, resolution and faith, a **system to manage change opportunities that** will position the Church for the future.

Sing Sing Prison in New York, still in operation today, was one of the toughest prisons in the world in 1921. It needed change badly. And prisons are so resistant to positive change. It was deemed impossible to change so it was left the way it was.

But in 1921 Lewis Lawes became the warden and by the time he retired, some 20 years later, it had, against all the odds, become a model humanitarian institution. Those who studied the system said the change came about because of Lawes. But when he was asked about the transformation, this is what he said: "I owe it all to my wife Catherine who is buried outside the prison walls."

Catherine's favourite Bible text was the one we began with today:

"For, I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and

a future! Jeremiah 29:11 She took this text to heart for the prisoners.

Catherine was a mother of three small children when her husband became warden. Everybody warned her never to step inside the prison, but Catherine was the kind of person who took Jesus seriously. When the first prison basketball game was held, she went...walking into the gym with her three little children and they sat in the stands with the inmates. In doing this she broke every precedent in the prison's history.

Her attitude? "My husband and I are going to take care of these men and I believe that they will take care of me. I don't have to worry!"

She insisted in getting acquainted with the men and their records. She discovered one convicted murderer was blind so she paid him a visit. Holding his hand in hers she said: "Do you read braille?"

"What's braille?" he asked. Then she taught him how to read. Years later he would weep with love for her.

She found a deaf mute in prison. She taught him sign language. Many people said this of Catherine Lawes: "Catherine Lawes was the body of Jesus that came alive again in Sing Sing from 1921-1937."

Then one day she was killed in a car accident. That news got around and into the prison. The next morning Lewis Lawes didn't come to work and the acting warden took his place.

The following day her body was resting in a casket in her home, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from the prison.

When the acting warden came in, he was shocked to find a large crowd of the toughest, hardest looking criminals he had ever seen, gathered like a herd of animals at the main gate. He came closer and saw tears of grief and sadness. He knew how much they loved Catherine.

And so, against all the prison rules, he decided to trust them!

He said: “Alright men. You can go visit Catherine. Just be sure that you check back in tonight!”

Then incredibly, he opened the gates of the prison of Sing Sing, and the men streamed out...

They walked without a guard the $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to stand in line to pay their respects to Catherine.

They all returned to the prison. Every last one of them!

“ For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future!

Catherine Lawes lived by this verse and in one of the darkest places on the planet, where change needed to come the most, she brought hope and a future.

We too can live by this verse, so that, we can surf change positively, making a difference wherever we touch the world; at home at work at play, and in the Knox of tomorrow!

Amen.