

# **Voices: Do you hug the church or squeeze its life out?**

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There is a fine line between “hugging” the church and “squeezing the life out of” the church.

That is, what may feel like loving the church may actually be part of the cause for why our church is declining, reaching fewer and fewer people and, perhaps, be close to dying.

When we love someone or something, we want to protect the object of our love from loss. This is a natural reaction to perceived harm. Sometimes, though, in order for us to grow, there needs to be change.

When this happens, our response is often to interpret the need for change as a threat to whomever or whatever we love. Therefore, we often express our love via protectionism by resisting or fighting against the perceived threat.

## **Through the lens of loss**

Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, in their excellent book, “Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading,” wrote, “People don’t resist change, per se. People resist loss.”

The first time I read this, it provided me one of the most helpful tools for leading. As I’ve led three different churches over the years, I have often interpreted the resistance, and sometimes outright hostility, to proposed change as people being “opposed to change.” Sometimes this was the case, but sometimes the resistance came from people who deeply loved the

church and were simply processing the proposed changes through the lens of loss.

The response to the perceived loss was to “hug the church” by actively and passively resisting the proposed changes. I should note that I’m using the phrase “proposed change” to mean methodical change and not doctrinal/biblical change.

The challenge, especially for established churches, is that being protective — which is not bad in and of itself — may actually be squeezing the life out of the church.

## **‘Because they love the church’**

I don’t need to tell you that there are many established Texas Baptist churches that are struggling. All have members who love their church. Because they love their church, they know these challenges need to be addressed. Nevertheless, the proposed changes often feel too much like loss, and the church struggles to find a way to move forward.

In so many churches, this is the stalemate that now exists: pastors and church leaders are proposing changes that need to happen because they love the church and church members are resistant to those changes due to the perceived loss — because they love the church too.

Knowing how challenging this can be, I’d like to give two proposals, one for pastors and church leaders and one for church members:

- Pastors and church leaders: As we lead change and guide our churches to renewal, let’s remember the loss people are feeling. I know this can be hard, but if we view resistance as people simply “opposed to change,” we often become harsh, critical and domineering in our leadership. Yes, let’s lead! Let’s also give

- people space to grieve and help them to see what might be gained.
- Church members: What if, in the name of “hugging the church,” we saw the challenges and needed changes as opportunities for God to work in ways that are new to us? What if we encouraged our pastors and church leaders to share God-sourced, God-sized visions that will probably not be accomplished until after we are gone? What if we acknowledge our loss, respond in a healthy way, and then grow through the process in order to see how God wants to work?

I’m not delusional about how hard this is ... for everyone involved. Nevertheless, I continue to hope and pray for great renewal in established Texas Baptist churches.

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