

Change Happens...

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES of the COVID-19 pandemic was that, almost overnight, almost everything changed for almost everyone. How we work, shop, study, travel, visit, worship, and wash our hands may never be the same again. So it was quite natural that many of us felt disorientated and anxious for a while. Many people were surprised how tired they felt as their brains adapted to all the new rules, routines, and patterns of behavior. The virus has given us all a crash course in change management and tested our resilience and adaptability.

Ministry families encounter all kinds of changes in their lives. One of the hardest transitions we make is being asked to move churches when we love our current church district and we have no desire to move. It's also tough when the pastor's spouse has to leave an incredibly fulfilling work or study position and start all over again.

PREDICTABLE OR UNEXPECTED?

Change is a natural part of creation. The seasons, clouds, trees, flowers all flow through the process of predictable change. Humans grow and develop and face countless changes every day.

When the changes are predictable, we need to prepare for them ahead of time. We put snow tires on our cars before winter, check that our teenagers have life skills before they leave home, and prepare financially for retirement.

It's also predictable that pastoral families will move regularly. After a few moves, my husband and I chose white furniture that could be mixed and matched into a "new" home more easily, and we kept our stored items in strong, stackable, and labeled boxes that were all ready to go.

Unexpected changes usually happen suddenly. Sometimes they are amazing and enjoyable, like a generous gift. But often they are negative changes. An unexpected move, an illness, a death, a local disaster, the loss of a job, a pandemic . . . These disruptions are more likely to make us feel disorientated because of the chaos that accompanies them and all the powerful emotions they evoke.

Here are seven practical tips for navigating change in your family's life:



The coronavirus has given us all a crash course in change management.

1. PREPARE CHILDREN FOR CHANGE.

Help children to embrace change and see the exciting possibilities. Share how God has used changes in your life to help you grow and learn. Talk about some of the different ways He has helped you through those transitions. Use worship times to explore change in the lives of God's followers throughout the Bible. Talk honestly about the challenges change can bring, and let children know that you are always there to support them through the tough aspects of change in their lives and that God is there too (Deuteronomy 31:8).

2. RECOGNIZE THE LOSS.

Whenever there is change, there are losses, for you and for your children if they are living with you. When there are lots of losses at once, it can be helpful for each person to list them. Rate each loss on a scale of 1-10 so that you can begin to understand each other's pain and sadness. Suggest ways that your family members might help you to manage that loss more easily, such as praying with you and being understanding, supportive, and comforting.

3. MAKE A MAP.

When life is changing, try drawing a map together. Use a large sheet of flip chart paper or a roll of wallpaper. At the left side of the paper, draw, write, or map out previous changes that you have negotiated as a family, the challenges you faced, the ways in which God guided you and provided for you, the different things that helped you, and the pleasant surprises and gifts that came out of the change. Then continue the "road" to where you are now. Make a list of

the things you are most thankful for in your current situation, how you have grown spiritually, and the things that you would like to change about where you are now.

Then draw several roads into the future, describing different possible routes you might take. Explore the possibilities, gains, and challenges in each route. Pray together about the way forward. Be open and honest in your prayers about your feelings and thoughts, as God knows all about them anyway and cares deeply and compassionately for you, whatever you are experiencing (1 Peter 5:7).

4. SHARE YOUR FEELINGS.

Change can evoke sadness, excitement, fear, stress, hope, frustration, anger, curiosity, etc. Write each emotion on a different index card, with a simple description of the feeling. Take turns picking up a card that describes a feeling you have about the change. Talk about your experience of the feeling, when you are most likely and least likely to feel it, and how others can support you when you are feeling like that. Create a chalkboard where you can each write down how you are feeling today and how others can help you.

5. STAY CONNECTED.

Whenever change involves being separated from those we love, it's helpful to make a clear plan about how to stay connected after the move and to plan a return trip within a few months, if possible. Just having a future visit to look forward to can help to bridge the friendship gap, especially for children and teenagers, until fresh connections are made in their new place.

6. HOLD HOPE.

It can be hard to hold on to hope in the face of many difficult changes. Scatter lots of things to look forward to across your family calendar and involve your children and teenagers in the plans. Acts of kindness toward others, being thankful together, laughter, and walking in nature are helpful antidotes to the stress and anxiety of change.

7. JUST KEEP TALKING.

Several years ago my family experienced an unexpected and life-changing move. I would lose my job. We would have to tear our youngest, teenage son away from his friends and transplant him into a remote rural community with a vastly different culture. I raged and cried. I've moved many times and usually enjoy the new possibilities and challenges, but this time it was different. My husband listened to my frustration and tears and comforted me. Talking things through helped me to make sense of my thoughts and emotions, and when he understood how I was feeling, I felt less alone in my struggle.

Seven years after the most challenging change in my life, I looked back and saw how God had used those difficult years to shape me for an amazing purpose I had never imagined. That experience has given me the courage to face future changes with greater peace and hope. ■

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