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Leading lasting change

Transformation happens when problems are tackled from multiple angles and at multiple levels, writes David L. Odom.

by [David L. Odom](#)



Illustration by Jessamyn Rubio

Rather than focus on individuals to effect change, administrators must devise a multi-tiered strategy.

May 25, 2010

Hurricane Floyd was one of the deadliest and costliest storms in U.S. history. The brunt of the 1999 storm was borne by Eastern North Carolina, where 35 people were killed and nearly every river basin exceeded 500-year flood levels. The devastation exposed in clearer light the extensive poverty in this often-overlooked rural region.

The Rev. Claire Clyburn McKeown, pastor of Calvary Memorial United Methodist Church, encouraged her congregation to participate in the county's economic recovery. She helped establish an economic development partnership between churches, Greene County government, foundations and the local community college. Now, 10 years later, the partnership's centerpiece is a computer lab where teenage volunteers are helping senior citizens and local farmers improve their [computer literacy](#).

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According to conventional wisdom, religious leaders no longer wield much public influence or achieve significant change in their communities. Indeed, many equate effective ministry with growing a congregation rather than cultivating thriving communities that are signs of God's reign. The story of McKeown, her successors, and Calvary Memorial suggests a different vision for transformative Christian leadership.

But how does a leader translate a good idea into a plan for lasting change?

I have found helpful insight in the arena of public health. During the 15 years I worked for a major medical system, our organization became convinced that the campus should be smoke-free. Rather than focusing solely on the smokers, administrators devised a multi-tiered strategy that also targeted the smokers' families and friends, the organization as a whole and the broader community.

The medical center offered chemical aids, such as nicotine patches, and counseling to employees who wanted to stop smoking. We launched support groups for smokers and their family members. At the organizational policy level, we began by limiting smoking to certain parts of the building. Smoking areas were later moved outside and then away from campus. These efforts were supported at the civic level with a smoking ban in government buildings and eventually inside restaurants. This effort coincided with a national public awareness campaign about the dangers of smoking. Public health research supports this [layered approach](#), finding that attacking a problem at more than one level more frequently results in lasting change. In the case of smoking, for instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports a drop in the smoking rate among adults from 42 percent in 1965 to 21 percent in 2005.

My employer was successful in creating lasting change -- but it certainly wasn't easy. The leaders weren't anxious to take on the challenge. Most of our buildings were named for tobacco tycoons whose company remained a significant employer in the town. Many patients were raised growing or manufacturing tobacco. Like McKeown, the medical center's leaders were courageous in articulating a vision and overseeing the creation of mutually reinforcing activities.

Mainline Christian leaders face their own challenges, not the least of which are working in institutions with limited resources and working with congregations frequently described as declining. But we are a resurrection people, with a vision of the future. We can see how God's purpose is for the world to turn from sin to love, to reconcile all things. We are not called to, nor could we, work alone. We are called to cast a vision and then equip individuals and their networks, institutions and communities to advance the church's mission. Working at multiple levels is critical theologically. In the same way we recognize that sin's effects are found not only in individuals but in broader relationships and institutions, so we must see that change and faithfulness involve a multi-tiered approach.

Transformative leaders have their eyes, minds and hearts open to all the possibilities. They consider how a project will affect the institution's mission, look for partners, and empower a community of people to carry on the work. McKeown had the vision and began cultivating people in the church and the community, but she was transferred before the project actually began. The Rev. James Weaver, McKeown's successor, and other church leaders moved it forward and outward. The vision of God's reign has many advocates.