AFFECTING CHANGE IN A PRESBYTERATE

How a Survey of Priests[1] Probed the Attitude for Change in a Presbyterate

By Francis Kelly Scheets, OSC

"No matter what, change always threatens to make matters worse."

What is the issue? In the summer of 2001 I was asked by a friend of mine to join him in checking out the parking lots of a number of Protestant and Catholic parishes. Driving home after this expedition he asked me, "What are they doing that we are not?" Catholic researchers know that 'we' are doing the right things – in some parishes. So why not all, or at least in most of them?

Affecting change in a presbyterate is complex. We need to know more: what, why, how.

1. SURVEYING A PRESBYTERATE'S ATTITUDE FOR CHANGE

Why was this presbyterate surveyed? In the spring of 2002, at the height of the clergy sex-abuse scandal, 400 priests of the Archdiocese of Detroit gathered for two 'Conversations with the Cardinal'. The issues surfacing were many; so the Presbyteral Council favored a survey of the presbyterate – especially of the active clergy, as a way to assess their attitude on a number of statements regarding change. The resolution was approved by archbishop Adam Cardinal Maida.

I was asked to serve as director of the survey under the directions of an 'action oriented' Survey Committee charged with recommendations. The committee agreed with me that it was important to build our survey around a national survey -- if the local clergy were to put adequate 'faith' in their own survey. Dr Dean Hoge, of Catholic University, gave permission to make use of his *Survey of American Priests[2]*, conducted in spring of 2001 on behalf of the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

Eight hundred surveys were mailed to active and senior priests of the archdiocese and to those religious community priests assigned to archdiocesan ministries. When the deadline for returns came, I counted 388 responses. I was concerned. Did the active priests scorn this survey?

Did only the senior priests respond? Only weeks later, after the responses were all in the survey database, did I learn that I had an 88% response rate from the priests on active ministry!

Let me share some interesting findings: Their average age was fifty-six. Sixty percent of the priests live alone; about one-fifth are in other ministries than parishes; seventy-one percent have an additional degree beyond the seminary degree with thirty-eight percent having a religious studies degree and thirty-three percent a non-theological or secular degree.

Now to explore the areas in which the presbyterate were tested on their attitude for change.

Did personal issues indicate an 'attitude for change'? Hardly. The survey sought responses on their sources of support, satisfaction, and frustration – both personal and ministry. I found the priests to be extraordinarily happy! Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that each "is a happy priest". Eighty-four percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they even felt like leaving the priesthood. How about that! Now we need to explore the question: Did this general satisfaction reflect other areas of their lives?

Administration of the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy was a 'strong' source of ministry support, so responded eighty-three percent while another fourteen percent felt it provided a 'somewhat strong' source of ministry support. Other 'strong' and 'somewhat strong' sources of support surfaced -- with scores above eighty percent: preaching the Word, opportunities to exercise one's personal abilities, working with people to share the Good News of the Gospel, and being a leader of the Christian community.

Administration skills, nine of them being listed, were a 'strong' source of frustration for only six percent and a 'somewhat strong' source for nineteen percent. Now note: seventy-five percent of the active priests responded that these skills were 'little or no source' or a 'mixed or inconsistent source' of frustration.

My Survey Committee raised two questions: Were their parishioners equally satisfied with quality of those liturgies and with their preaching of the Word? Were their staff and parish councils in agreement regarding the adequacy of their administration skills? The committee's recommendations were questioning: "In order to improve on [the] quality ministry a periodic evaluation of parishioners' impressions of the liturgies and homilies" and "a study of the current level of effectiveness of the nine pastoral skills among the presbyterate" seem indicated.

Did institutional issues show an 'attitude for change'? Considerably. The survey found: "strong agreement exists that Vatican II reforms have not gone too far." Eighty-five percent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the Vatican II reforms had not gone too far! If that statement does not seem sufficient to support the validity of the statement that the presbyterate favors change, then let me set forth seven other responses.

An impressive ninety-two percent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the "presbyterate must incorporate the possibility for continuing change into its life". Further, almost as many agreed that evangelization has to begin at home by "improving the quality of homilies and liturgy". More than seventy percent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed': the presbyterate must be willing to take risks, the Church needs to move faster in empowering the laity in ministry, priests need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues, parish life would be aided by a great increase in full-time professional lay ministers, and bishop-priest relationship does not encourage collaboration.

Three statements had more than fifty percent of responses 'agree' or 'strongly agree' (with about twenty-five percent 'uncertain' being a large swing group): there is insufficient collaboration among similar size and type of parishes, the election of membership to the councils (presbyterate and vicariate) improves morale[3], and the clergy are not held sufficiently accountable for professional growth.

Did the younger priests also support these statements? A number of the younger priests, those under forty-five years of age, did disagree with their elders regarding the above change-statements. Over all, fifty-three percent of the younger priests chose 'agree' or 'strongly agree' compared with seventy-one percent of the older priests. What did surface was a fifth of the younger priests were 'uncertain' – a large swing group. That 'swing' group is yet to be convinced about the need for specific changes.

My Survey Committee and I were impressed with these results. In order to tap this real attitude for change the committee recommended broad scale involvement of priests and laity: "*Both the Presbyteral Council and the Council of Vicars should make broad use of Task Forces whose membership should involve the presbyterate (and laity) in determination and implementation of policies.*" In making such a recommendation, the committee prefaced the recommendation: "We think our well educated presbyterate needs to be partner in determining and implementing policies" and "We think we must move quickly to increase our professional accountability."

2. MEASURING THE REAL ATTITUDE FOR CHANGE
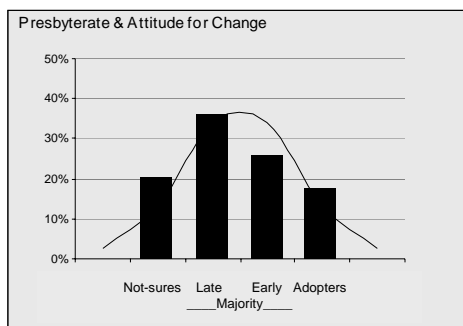
Did this presbyterate truly desire change?

We all know that large institutions possess an antipathy to change. Not only is the Catholic Church a large institution, but it is responsible for preserving the legacy of Jesus and the Gospel through the centuries.

How could the presbyterate's *real* attitude for change be determined? I was anxious to test the Detroit priests on their 'real' attitude for change, even though I had no idea that the responses to the above eleven statements would suggest so positive an atmosphere for change! To assess their real attitude I needed to be able to compare them to a normal group of persons. Fortunately, sociologists had developed and tested several statements regarding change which would enable me to compare the clergy to a 'normal' distribution of individuals.

Let me explain. Research has shown that a sufficiently large group of people fall into a 'normal distribution curve'. Picture to yourself a hill sloping to the right and to the left. This large hill is divided into two sections -- evenly split down the middle with the right side favoring change and the left half opposed. Each half is further split into three sub-groups. Far to the right are smallest number, these are the innovators and the first ones to adopt a new idea. Moving partially up the hill , the next to change are the adopters; this group follows the example of the innovators. The largest segment favoring change, forming up to the crest are the great middle; these are the early majority. Moving to the left of the crest, among those not favoring change, is the largest group; they are the late majority. Moving down the hill we find the not-sures[4]; these are the last to accept change. Far to the left are those who resist change forever; these are the not-change group. A 'normal distribution curve' has an equal spread on each side of the middle, descending to the extremes, innovators to the right and not-changers on the left. So much for a normal distribution. (In setting up the survey I combined the two ends: innovators with adopters and the not-sures with not-change group.)

Did the survey find the presbyterate *really* favored change? No. The survey found the clergy to be less open to change than a normal distribution of individuals. I admit that neither I nor the committee expected a different result.

I did find that the adopter-innovators were of a greater percentage than I expected while the early majority group was well below normal. (See the graph; the black line illustrates the distribution of normal attitudes for change; the bars show the percent of the priests found in the four groups.) The adopter-innovators were twelve percent above average; but the early majority surprised me as this group was twenty-four percent below normal. The late majority were slightly above normal. The not-sures (with the not-change groups), at twenty-six percent above normal,

Presbyterate & Attitude for Change

were far more numerous than I expected. The summation of the individual characteristics of all the priests strongly indicates that they would be *really* slow to accept change.

What personal qualities impact their *real* attitude for change? The survey tested seven personal qualities[5] but found only three affected the overall distribution in change-attitudes: education beyond the seminary, year of ordination, and whether parish priests had an extra work assignment (e.g. pastor of cluster parishes, teaching, tribunal).

An education degree in addition to the seminary degree proved important. Priests with a non-religious or secular degree and those with a degree in religious studies (e.g. theology, canon law, religious education) were over represented among the adopter-innovators. It was the priests who did not possess a degree beyond the seminary who were highly over represented among the not-sure-not-change priests.

Ordination years proved somewhat significant. I found the priests ordained during the 1960s were over represented among the adopter-innovators and among the early majority. The priests ordained before 1960 furnished most of late majority and the not-sure-not-change priests.

The Survey Committee, faced with a strong expression for change suggested by the eleven responses I noted above, coupled with majority of the presbyterate (56 %) who are really slower to accept change, recommended: *The Presbyteral Council needs to assure … special care for its adopters as well as the late majority so that any necessary changes can be experienced in a positive way that does not divide.*

It now remains to explain just why this recommendation called for s*pecial care for its adopters as well as the late majority.*

3. AFFECTING CHANGE IN A PRESBYTERATE

Is there a theory about our attitude for change? Yes. The diffusion of innovation theory was first articulated by Everett M. Rogers of Harvard University in his 1962 study *Diffusion of Innovations*[6]. In that book Rogers developed the concepts to explain how the rate of adoption of a new idea proceeds among those who will benefit from it. He defined this theory: "Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system."

Reflect on our experiences with changes in the Catholic Church over the past forty years. That experience has clearly shown all of us two diverse ways for change to happen. Changes mandated by authority come quickly and are explosive! We all bear our scars to the still-on-going conflicts arising from some of those changes. When changes are left to their 'natural course' acceptance takes a generation. To note two 'new ideas': parish pastoral councils have been with us for nigh on to thirty years, still one-fifth of the parishes have yet to institute a council. The RCIA program was started in the early 1980s; today less than one-third of all parishes employ a director.

Why is change so difficult for most people? The diffusion of innovation – the adoption of a new idea -- is the study of how knowledge about doing something different is obtained and acted upon. In a word, it is knowing how a group of individuals deal with risk and the uncertainty that accompanies change. I react to change differently from you as my willingness to risk is as different as our upbringing and education has varied. We risk leaving the present way of acting worse-off for our having tried – if we mess up. We lose the sense of security we derive from knowing that we have done this many times – and that restricts our openness to change. 'The new' brings uncertainty, that fear of failure which leads each of us to feel the need to seek social reinforcement in our attitude toward 'the new'. Only the innovator is willing to risk – alone. Our need for varying degrees of 'social reinforcement' is what Everett Rogers studied over forty years ago and what we are going to explore now.

What are the characteristics of 'change groups'? Personal, social, and educational characteristics are factors related to the speed with which we adopt a new practice or respond to change when first introduced. The characteristics of the earlier groups vary significantly from those of the later groups.

Innovators: The innovators are the most venturesome; they have a large amount of risk capital. They are more literate in that they read books, journals, magazines, and may write articles; they have friends in universities and organizations with whom they are in frequent contact. They belong to formal organizations and have many informal contacts; they possess a greater ability to deal with abstractions. They are frequently responsible for larger parishes or occupy responsible positions. Innovators comprise 3% of a group.

Adopters: These adopters have a considerable amount of risk capital; they too subscribe to a number of magazines and journals; they too participate in the formal activities of organizations. But they tend to wait several years before adopting an idea first developed and used by their in-

novator friends. Most important, the adopters work out kinks in a new idea and make it adaptable by others so they are trusted by their fellow priests. They too are often in charge of the larger parishes or occupy important positions. Adopters comprise 13% of a group. (Together, the innovators and adopters comprise 16 %.)

Early Majority: Members of this group possess a moderate amount of risk capital; they read magazines, a few journals, and some books. They tend to distrust the innovators among the presbyterate and rely on their friends among the adopters – or among the late majority. They may wait a decade before accepting a new way of doing something and then only after it has proven successful among the adopters. They comprise 34% of a group.

Late Majority: The late majority have a low amount of risk capital and fear that change can only make matters worse. Members of this group read magazines; they seldom attend the activities of regional or national organizations. They distrust the innovators, and the adopters to a lesser extent, so they tend to get most of their information from conversations with their friends among the early majority – or among the not-sures. They may wait several decades before committing themselves. They comprise 34% of a group.

Not-sure and Not Change: These two categories have very little risk capital and so are suspicious of change. They may wait two or three decades to feel comfortable in adopting a practice – and a number, only when it is mandated by a recognized authority. Change causes a lot of pain and anguish. It is important to understand this group. Don't ignore them but don't concentrate time, frustration, and possible anger on them. Not-sures comprise 13%. (Together with the not-change group they comprise 16%.)

What is necessary to insure a reasonable attitude for change? For each of us, our lived experience is clear. Change is messy and it takes so-o-o long. It occurs quickly only when a strong authority figure mandates immediate change. In that instance, change is followed by anger and frustration, if not outright rebellion. Why, then, left to itself, must change take twenty to thirty years – a whole generation?

Risk: Change involves risk – a willingness to risk that change will improve upon the presently accepted way. Fear of risk will be reduced only when individuals are aware that the benefits really do exceed the costs.

Skills: Change requires a comfortable level of skill -- the *how* to bring 'the new' about. The 'how' requires many skills: preparing people for change, knowing how to implement change in an orderly manner, and how to stabilize 'the new' so that it becomes part of the established way of doing things. We should not forget, too, that a given skill may not be easily transferable

Credibility: Change depends on trust. Trust relates to an individual and not to a group; one trusts one's friends. Those friends are found on either side of the normal curve – an adopter trust his innovator friends; an early majority trusts his adopter friends; a late majority trusts only his early majority friends; and not-sures hesitate to trust anyone but their friends among the late majority.

I need to point out an obvious point: an innovator, on any one issue, could easily be among the early majority on another issue. In that case the innovator's level of risk capital may be lower or the needed skills may be non-existent. This Survey of Priests measured risk and attitude for change in the context of each respondent's general experience.

4. THE UNIQUE CHANGE AGENT: THE PRIEST-ADOPTER

Why protect the *priest-adopter***?** Adopters have enough 'risk capital' that enables them to undertake something new with confidence following on the initial experience of their innovator friends. The adopter's skills, because he builds on the innovator's success before starting, is able to work out the details and bugs that follow adopting 'the new'. The adopter reduces the level of risk for the majority because he can measure the success of 'the new'. Only the adopter inspires credibility among the early majority -- and so is trusted much more than the innovators. And what about the late majority? Who is their teacher? It is with their early majority friends that the late majority becomes disposed to accept change.

If the lengthy time lag for effectively implementing something new within a presbyterate is to be shortened, it is the adopter who must be the teacher!

If the lengthy time lag for effectively implementing something new within a presbyterate is to be shortened, it is the early and late majority who must be taught.

And so it was that the Detroit Survey Committee recommended: *The Presbyteral Council needs to assure … special care for its adopters as well as the late majority so that any necessary changes can be experienced in a positive way that does not divide.*

How does the adopter become the teacher? Priest adopters need to be made aware of their importance as the teachers to their presbyterate. To make my point, let's take a look at an average diocese: it has 100 parishes ministered to by 106 priests; at the most it may have three innovators and fourteen adopters – and 72 priests scattered between the early and late majorities. Don't overlook the 17 priests among the not-sure-not-change group. Remember: the few innovators are rarely trusted by the great majority. Innovators possess, to a very high degree, the two qualities

needed to accept change – willingness to risk and the skill to bring change about. To the large majority innovators are not trusted for those very reasons: for them the need for change is unclear nor do they possess the skill to implement change by themselves. The not-sures and not-change persons are likely to consider innovators as dangerous – destroyers of the proven status quo. The adopters must be the teachers for they are generally trusted. The adopters must be assured of special care. The late majority need special care – for they have to learn to trust their teachers. To be the teachers the adopters need a 'parish school'.

What is this 'Parish School'? I would envisage such a school to be in any number of places around the country. I would like to see each attached to a college, university, or seminary. I would insist that each school be based on practical learning. My school exists to enable pastors assess the cost-benefits of the risk in change and to assist them in acquiring the needed skills. It should be based on the following three principles.

1st: *Learning occurs by doing.* Participants need to work from prepared case studies which bring out the cost-benefits derived change or from refusing to change. Participants need to be absorbed with role modeling in order to acquire the skills useful for change. Time as in weeks must be allocated for knowledge and transferable skills to be acquired.

2nd: *Learning occurs best among equals.* The learning process must occur in a gathering of priests from similar size and type parishes. Sharing must be real to be feasible. Glance back at our average diocese. It has very large parishes -- thirty mega parishes with more than 3,000 registered households – the spiritual home to over seventy percent of all registered Catholics. The mega church pastors relate best to other mega church pastors. Our average diocese has small parishes – thirty-two which register fewer than 1,200 parishioners. Small parish pastors relate best to other small parish pastors. Like relates best to like.

3rd: *Adopters need their skills enhanced.* To be effective teachers they have to know how to measure the need for change – how to make use of professional surveys, focus groups. They must know how to obtain comparative before-and-after-data – how to measure the benefits of change and its cost. In too many cases the best of the adopters would need considerable in developing a good case study. Professional assistance will be needed.

I am not proposing something new. I am only reflecting on what I know of how corporations, banks, government, military, struggle with this same 'attitude for change' that the Detroit presbyterate faces. I have long admired Msgr. Philip Murnion's 'New Pastors Workshop' – and attended two. His workshops make use of truly national innovators in order to expose local innovator-adopters to the best practices – but with only four days of lectures. Corporations have come

to appreciate the importance of allowing for time – time needed to absorb the case study approach and of learning among equals.

For more years than I care to acknowledge, I have been haunted by this quote from the management consultant, Peter F. Drucker, which went something like this: "If a corporation has a plant which it cannot prepare its average manager to manage well – it should close the plant." We have not closed the plant nor have we prepared the average priest to manage well. We have done our clergy a disservice. We failed to provide skills-workshops in which they could learn and practice how to improve preaching[7], liturgies, pastoral council meetings, parish planning, public communication and accountability, and other skills.

Francis Kelly Scheets, OSC, is a member of the Crosier Fathers and Brothers Province. He was director the Survey of Priests, 2002, for the Presbyteral Council of the Archdiocese of Detroit. He holds a Ph.D. in parish management information systems.

---

[1] *Survey of Priests, 2002*, © 2003, Archdiocese of Detroit.

[2] Hoge, Dean R. and Wenger, Jacqueline E., *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*; Liturgical Press, St John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN; 2003.

[3] The USCCB Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry suggested important changes for improving the morale of priests: election to the presbyterate council, involvement in the determination and implementation of policies, provision of mentors, and frequent contact between the bishop and priests.

[4] Laggard is the term generally used; 'Not-sures' is a non pejorative term chosen by my Survey Committee.

[5] The eight personal qualities were: present age, year of ordination, present assignment, parish location, parish size, non-seminary degree, willing acceptance of change.

[6] Rogers, Everett M., *Diffusion of Innovations*, fourth edition; Free Press, Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, NY; 1995.

[7] The Dominicans have been the acknowledged leaders in the improvement of Catholic preaching since Vatican II: the National Institute on the Word of God, the Aquinas Institute's graduate degree program in preaching, homily helps, etc. However, it was Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, who showed us how to improve the quality of preaching among the majority.