

Five Positive Responses to Negative People

The grief is both real and anticipatory.

The church member knows his or her church is in decline.

That member knows some things must change or the church is headed for more rapid decline or even death.

But change is difficult. These members want their old church back. They want to do things the way they've always done them.

That church of the past, however, will not return. The pace of change is faster than ever, and it will only increase.

How do we respond to these hurting, and sometimes, angry people? Here are five responses.

1. **Respond pastorally.** These members are not just hurting; they are grieving. Some of them believe they can find a way to return to the church of the 60s, 70s, or 80s. When they finally realize that the past will not return, their grief intensifies. They need our love, our encouragement, our support, and our prayers. If our first response is to return anger with anger, we can exacerbate a difficult situation.
2. **Respond with reality.** Do not give false hope to these members. That will only make the situation worse. Let them know gently and lovingly that change is inevitable. The church will either respond proactively to change, or it will be the victim of change. The latter is usually a death sentence.
3. **Respond with the non-negotiables.** Assure the church member that there are some facets of church life that can never change. The Bible is still the Word of God. The gospel is still powerful. Christ is still the only way of salvation. In providing these non-negotiables, you are pointing the members away from the minors to the majors.
4. **Respond with an outward focus.** Sometimes a church member's longing for the past is indicative that he or she is inwardly focused. These members can possibly see church as a place to meet all their needs and desires. If possible, get them involved in ministries that take them away from their own preferences and desires to the world that needs our hope, our love, and our ministry.
5. **Respond with resolution.** A few church members will fight for the past no matter how toxic it may be for the church and her future. Leaders have to resolve to move on. They cannot spend all their time coddling the disaffected to the neglect of those who are ready to make a difference. This step is a last step. It is a final alternative. It is the most painful. But it can be necessary for the health of the body as a whole.

These days are days of rapid change. Congregations have not been immune from the impact of the change. We must always love people. But we cannot let one or a few hinder us from the work to which God has called us.

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