

ADJUST YOUR SAILS

When Staying the Same Feels Faithful



I love sailboats.

There is something fascinating to me about moving forward without an engine. You cannot manufacture the wind. You cannot control its direction. You cannot demand that it blow the way it did yesterday. You can only learn to recognize it and adjust your sails.

A good sailor understands this. When the wind changes, the sailor doesn't stand on the deck complaining that the wind isn't coming from the right direction. He doesn't insist that the sails remain exactly where they were because that position worked beautifully yesterday. He adjusts, not because the destination has changed, but because the conditions have.

I wonder if there is something here for the Church.

When the Wind Changes

We are living and leading in the middle of enormous cultural change. The assumptions people carry about Jesus, Christianity, truth, authority, community, belonging, identity, and the Church are not what they were a generation ago.

We can argue about whether those changes are good or bad. We can wish some of them hadn't happened. We can spend enormous amounts of energy trying to understand how we got here. But eventually we have to sail in the conditions we're actually in.

That doesn't mean allowing culture to determine what we believe. Jesus is still Jesus. Truth is still truth. The Kingdom of God hasn't changed.

But the people around us have.

The questions have changed. The language has changed. The assumptions have changed. The places people gather have changed. The ways trust is formed have changed. The things that make people curious about Jesus, and the things that make them suspicious of Christianity, have changed. If the conditions have changed, shouldn't we at least be willing to ask whether the position of our sails should change too?

The Sails Aren't the Problem

This is where I have to guard my own tendency to swing too far. It would be easy to turn the metaphor into an argument for getting rid of everything we've inherited. Stop doing this. Replace that. Abandon this program. Invent something completely different.

But the sails aren't the problem. The sails are good. They were designed to catch the wind.

The problem comes when preserving the position of the sails becomes more important than the reason the sails exist.

Churches have inherited beautiful expressions of faith. Worship gatherings. Preaching. Bible studies. Small groups. Prayer meetings. Children's ministries. Buildings. Programs. Traditions. Some have carried generations of people toward Jesus.

The question isn't whether they're old. The question isn't even whether they worked before. The question is whether we have become so attached to a particular position of the sails that we've stopped noticing the wind.

The purpose of the sails isn't to preserve their position. It's to catch the wind.

Wind and Current

In the Harvest Forward picture, I think about two forces a sailor must pay attention to:

The wind is the Holy Spirit.
The current is the harvest.

Those aren't the same thing. The Holy Spirit leads. The harvest reveals the actual people, places, relationships, questions, pain, hopes, behaviors, and realities around us. Neither is something we control.

That's important because paying attention to the harvest doesn't mean allowing culture to determine our direction. A sailor pays close attention to the current without assuming the current gets to choose the destination. Sometimes you move with it. Sometimes you move across it. Sometimes faithfulness requires moving against it. But ignoring it doesn't make it disappear.

The same is true of the wind. We don't manufacture the movement of God. We don't control the Spirit. Jesus compared the work of the Spirit to wind that "*blows wherever it pleases*" in John 3:8.

Our responsibility is to pay attention.

Where is the Spirit moving?

What is happening in the lives of the people around us?

Where is there openness or resistance?

Where is trust forming?

Where is pain creating questions?

Where is Jesus already closer than anyone realizes?

And what might faithfulness look like here?

Assess. Adjust. Advance.

This is why one of the simplest practices of Harvest Forward is Assess. Adjust. Advance.

We assess the conditions by paying attention to the wind and the current. We listen to people. We notice what is happening. We ask questions before assuming we understand.

Then we adjust. Not the gospel. Not Jesus. Not truth. We adjust the sails. We change the expression. We try something different. We move the conversation somewhere else. We meet around a dinner table instead of expecting someone to enter a building. We ask another question. We slow down. We simplify. We experiment.

Then we advance. We take the next faithful step and pay attention again.

Assess. Adjust. Advance. And then we do it again.

That's not uncertainty. That's sailing.

The Courage to Adjust

There is humility involved in moving a sail that has worked for a long time because changing its position can feel like admitting that something was wrong. But it doesn't mean yesterday was wrong. Yesterday's position may have been exactly right for yesterday's wind.

Faithfulness isn't preserving yesterday's position. Faithfulness is paying attention to where Jesus is leading today.

That may mean some familiar expressions continue exactly as they are. Others may need to shift. Some may eventually disappear. And entirely new Kingdom expressions may emerge that we couldn't have imagined beforehand.

We don't have to decide all of that before we leave the harbor. We just have to become attentive sailors.

The wind is blowing.

The harvest is moving.

Adjust the sails