



**Greater Sydney SDA Conference**

## **Transitioning Church Culture**

“See what God is doing and join him” Henry Blackaby *Experiencing God*

### **Church Culture**

“Culture is the most important social reality in your church. Though invisible to the untrained eye, its power is undeniable. Culture gives colour and flavour to everything your church is and does. Like a powerful current running through your church, it can move you inland or take you father out to sea. It can prevent your church’s potential from ever being realized, or – if used by the Holy Spirit – it can draw others in and reproduce healthy spiritual life all along the way.”

Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*

To make any kind of transition as a church, your church’s culture can’t be ignored.

Great ideas go nowhere if the culture is unreceptive.

Your church can have the best programs in the world, but deep-rooted change won’t happen without the right culture shift

Your culture is the lens through which you view your life. If you change the lens you change your outlook.

“Culture is the shared software of our minds.” Geert Hofstede

“Ultimately our church culture resides not in buildings, programs, or printed proclamations but in people who say, ‘This is what God wants us to become’”

Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*

How you think about your church determines what you see and the culture you create. Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*

Even if you have not yet identified your church’s culture, others have.

Culture announces its identity through everything you do. The values of your culture – stated or unstated, thought out or unintentional – shape the feel, behaviour, and attitude of a congregation more than anything else.

You don’t make a culture shift simply by working harder at the things you’re doing.

# Shifting Church Culture

## You are Here

The right culture can be built by starting with what you already have.

The following questions for discussion and application are designed to give you fresh perspectives on your “you are here” identity.

The following questions are taken from Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*

## What Does Your Church Value Most?

*Instructions:* Begin by analysing your church’s culture through the eyes of an outsider. Imagine that in the last month people from your community participated in your church’s worship services, sat in on church programs, met several core people, and learned a bit of the history of your church. The goal in this first set of questions is to describe your church’s invisible cultural “megaphone” as it is perceived by an observer.

1. What values are communicated most strongly when someone approaches your church from the outside?

*Example:* The nice clean facilities, the helpful greeters that assisted us, and the excellent information materials we received to orient our family to the church clearly communicated that they care about new-comers and know how to do things right.

2. What would an outsider, after sitting through several worship services, say your church values *most*?

*Example:* This church values bringing people to Christ. Every worship service is heavy on evangelism, the preaching is very seeker-oriented, and an invitation to receive Christ into one’s life is given every week.

3. What are outsiders’ two or three leading perceptions of your church, after they have participated for a month in a variety of your church’s programs and ministries?

*Example:* The leadership is older here. They probably like things just the way they are. They also promise that you will find deep community here, but we have found as newcomers that it is hard to break into this church and develop meaningful friendships.

4. How would an outsider describe the spirit (or attitudes) most prevalent at your church?

5. Read over your impressions, and sum them up. List a handful of values that they church *seems* to be broadcasting. How surprised are you by how they compare to what you want to be known for?

6. Sketch a totem pole that reflects the values you observed. Is this the totem pole you want for your church?

### **Test Your Impressions of Another Church**

*Instructions:* If exercise one was difficult for you, you may want to practice by doing the same for a church that is not your own. Doing this exercise may make it easier for you to identify your own church's values afterward.

### **Bring in a Focus Group**

*Instructions:* This exercise takes time and effort but pays rich dividends. Put together a small group of people who do not belong to your church but who are willing to look at your church for one month. Afterward, ask them to do exercise one, and then take it a step further by talking to them, perhaps along with other church leaders, about their impressions of your values. How close is their observation to what you hoped they would say?

### **Analysing Your Church's Current Culture**

*Instructions:* Consider each of these ingredients carefully, and write your assessment of it. Hold on to your responses; we'll use them later.

1. Look at leadership and values.
  - Who are the culture setters in your church? (Are they the elected or appointed leaders, or are there unelected leaders who shape the church culture more? Who is *the* leader in setting the culture here at this church?) In your church, one or two leaders may dominate everyone else. Is there a prominent family or persons in the church who control the pastor even though they may not be in a formal leadership position? Do your leadership team members energize one another with the common values they hold, or do they assert conflicting interests?
  - What are the primary values exhibited by those who lead here (the senior pastor, the board, unelected but influential leaders in the church)?
  - What are the real values coming from each major leadership group? How much unity exists between these groups? In what ways do they clash?

*Example:* Several long-term board members and their families are keeping the church the way it has always been. They value an "as is" culture and are holding the church back with their influence.

2. Look at the vision statement of your church.
  - Is your vision expressed in a serious written document that leaders and the congregation know and embrace?
  - Does your vision statement communicate what you really believe and live?
  - If it does, what are the cultural values it clearly spells out? If not, where are the gaps?

- If you don't have a written statement, what is the implied or assumed vision?

Write your assessment of your vision statement, and how you are or aren't living it out.

3. Look at your symbols, ceremonies, and celebrations.
  - What symbols do you see when you look around your church facility? What do these things say about what you really value? What do they communicate about your culture?
  - What ceremonies and rituals does your church honour? How popular are they with the congregation?
  - Who are the heroes in your church---the members who are most celebrated, honoured, and emulated? What cultural values do those heroes represent?

Write your assessment.

*Example:* We honour people with strong teaching gifts and people who are generous givers. They get most of the attention at our church.

4. Look at yourself as a leader.
  - What do I really value? (Ruthless honesty is required here.)
  - What am I really trying to do and build here at this church?
  - Is it my passion to build a kingdom culture that honours and serves God, or a culture that rewards me?
  - What are my measurements of success as a leader? Do they match up with what I say my real values are/

### **Boil It Down**

Now it's time to boil down all the observations you've written in this chapter and draw a conclusion. Be as specific as possible.

You might decide, for example, that "A few power players drive our culture. It's programming-based culture that draws people who primarily want to be entertained." Or you might be even blunter: "Our culture lacks kingdom values. Our values are nothing more than traditions which we follow because they're comfortable and familiar." Maybe your conclusion is a metaphor: "We're like a country club where our primary accomplishments are to take care of each other." Maybe your conclusion is a self-confession: "I don't know what I'm excited about. I used to have spiritual passion, but I've pretty much lost it." Or maybe you will see how your church has untapped potential and energy resting just beneath the surface, waiting to be released.

### **The Bottom Line**

*Instructions:* Answer the following questions with some short, highly descriptive phrases.

## 1. How would I describe our church's current culture?

*Example:* A mile wide and an inch deep...we do children's ministry really well...no real discipleship... we value creativity... we feel more like a country club than a church... we care deeply about our church's role in this neighbourhood... we don't put much emphasis on life transformation ... many of our leaders live out what they believe ... we draw people to listen but we don't equip them well ... our leaders are willing to make courageous changes to reach our community ... we have competing values that create division and competition ... we welcome a wide variety of musical styles ... we're inwardly focused ... our leadership works hard to give laypeople ownership of ministry ... we're not bothered by the fact that we're growing older as a congregation ... newcomers generally have a positive first impression of us ... our community does "quality" far better than we do ... our leaders are willing to admit when they're wrong ... we don't really know what we believe doctrinally ... we're known as a joyful congregation ... we have no clear vision or direction for what we're to accomplish ... we do a good job of honouring our seniors ... our church is trapped back in the twentieth century ... our church's environment is one of honesty and authenticity ... we're afraid of change...

2. Now it's time to boil it down. As I look over the list I just made, what two or three phrases stand out as the key values that presently *drive* the culture of our church? Are these the values I am passionate about and the ones our leadership team believes that God wants for our church?

## **Moving Forward**

The ultimate culture shifter is the Holy Spirit

### **Assess Your Role**

Focus on Kingdom values

Change your thinking. Let your brain soak up the Word of God; it will strongly colour what you see.

As a leader of the church, do you embrace and passionately live out a kingdom vision? Remember it must first flow out of you before it will convince anyone else. Leaders must search their hearts first before they can shift the culture.

You reproduce what you are

### **List and Enlist**

List the values that would exemplify the preferred culture. Are they biblical? Are they positive? Enlist buy-in from other leaders. Encourage healthy dialogue and discussion.

## **Live and Teach**

Use your kingdom vision when you do ministry placement, disciple new believers, generate new ideas, measure the success of events and programming etc. It should be communicated to the congregation often, in both written materials and real-life stories. Remember the filtering process takes time.

## **Celebrate and Honour**

Who embodies the values? Feature them in the service or sermon illustrations. Let them tell their story through testimony. Whatever you show off or sing praises about. People will want to imitate or be part of.

## **Check and Recheck**

How does accountability and correction happen if you stray from the vision?

Everyday make a move toward your destination.

## **Resource used for this summary**

Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Alan Nelson and Gene Appel, *How To Change Your Church Without Killing It*, Thomas Nelson, 2000.

Dan Southerland, *Transitioning – Leading Your Church Through Change*, Zondervan, 1999.