

Why Culture Matters

CULTURE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL REALITY IN your church. Though invisible to the untrained eye, its power is undeniable. Culture gives color and flavor to everything your church is and does. Like a powerful current running through your church, it can move you inland or take you farther 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.

Culture is also an enigma. It defies simple definition and is difficult to explain. It's not a "plug and play" program that you buy off the shelf. Nor is it something you can clone from another church that seems successful.

You might underestimate its capacity for helping you or blocking you, just as you probably don't think regularly about the role of the air you breathe. Yet to make any kind of transition as a church, *your church's culture can't be ignored*. Only if you play an active role in shifting the culture can you best help your church to become the organic, life-giving environment you've always known it can be.

Here is a story to start you on a journey of awakening to the importance of the culture in your church.

“Travis doesn’t want to go back home,” Nate said as the three other church leaders sat down with him for lunch. The occasion was a church conference promising the latest ideas for ministry. For now, though, they were enjoying the opportunity to catch up with each other.

“What’s up?” Dan, the senior pastor, probed.

“Travis is that fifteen-year-old in the detention home for high-risk kids. One of our youth teams has been working with him,” Nate explained.

The others were aware of the situation.

“He’s attended all the classes and is now convinced that drugs will ruin him,” Nate continued. “Best of all, he opened his heart to Christ! On graduation day, Luis and I were there to celebrate with him.”

Luis, who was relatively new to the church and was in training to be a volunteer youth sponsor, explained what happened next. “After the ceremony, Travis looked at me very seriously and said, ‘I don’t want to go home.’”

“Why in the world doesn’t he want to go home?” asked Brianna, a church staff member. “Isn’t that what he’s been working toward for the last six months?”

“What Travis told me next shocked me,” Nate replied. “He told us, ‘If you send me home, I’ll run away as soon as I arrive. You see, it was my parents who introduced me to this stuff in the first place. If I go back home, I’ll fall back in to the habit that I’ve just spent the last six months trying to kick!’”

Dan, with twenty years of ministry under his belt nodded knowingly. “He’s going back a different person, but everyone there is still the same. The odds are stacked against him.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Everyone at the table knew the challenges Travis would face at home.

“I feel that way sometimes,” said Brianna, sounding a little on edge. Dan sensed that the conversation was shifting from Travis to church matters.

“You don’t want to go home either, after this conference?” he asked with a concerned smile.

The others looked at Brianna, sensing a bit of tension.

“It’s not that,” Brianna quickly replied. “But when we go back to church, and we’re all filled with great ideas from a conference like this one, it’s frustrating. It’s like pushing water uphill.”

The rest of them felt the tension building and waited with apprehension for her to continue.

“It’s like with Travis,” she said, trying to explain. “*He* has changed, but he’s going home to a place that refuses to change. It’s one person pushing against an environment that seems to oppose everything he’s learned.”

Dan’s expression suggested he didn’t seem to catch the significance of what she was saying.

“It’s the culture!” she blurted. “You know, like when people talk about corporate culture—the unspoken message about ‘the way we do things here.’ The culture hasn’t changed in his home. And when people like us come back from conferences like this one, great ideas go nowhere if the culture is unreceptive.”

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Dan, Nate, and Luis looked awkwardly at each other, and then at Brianna.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, she added, “Seems like as leaders it’s our job to transform the culture at our own church so that healthy ideas have fertile soil to take root in and grow.”

Dan started to respond but then paused. He didn’t really know what to say.

“Looks like they’re calling us back to the next session,” Nate said, trying to ease the tension.

As they walked back to the session, Dan finally said, “If the snag is the culture at our church, how can we change it? It

seems like an overwhelming task to me. Where do you start?”

“Maybe one of the speakers will talk about that issue,” said Luis hopefully.

“Culture isn’t a subject that a conference like this one will speak to,” said Brianna. This was a subject she’d been thinking about. “It’s a more organic issue.”

No one responded, because they were already tuned into the conference, looking for that next great idea.

COULD THIS BE YOUR CHURCH?

Dan, Luis, Nate, and Brianna made a good start on understanding the problem, but they couldn’t find the help they needed to take the next step. Still, some churches *do* discover how to build the right culture from the inside out. When that happens, their community takes notice. Stories emerge about forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, love, joy, help in adversity, and power for daily living. People living in the area around this particular church, no matter what their faith background, identify it as a community representing the hands and arms of God.

Churches like this one really do exist! They may vary in size and represent many denominations and worship styles, but they all have one quality in common: they “do church” from the inside out. Instead of looking outside for the next great program that will change them, they begin making changes with themselves. As each church births a healthy God-honoring culture, community people come out of the woodwork to experience it.

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What about *your* church? Would you like it to be an island of health that magnetically draws people who feel lost, seasick, or shipwrecked? Or people who are simply in need of solid ground on which to build their lives?

Your church can indeed make certain changes and *become the way church was always meant to be*. Such changes focus not so much on the latest new idea or program but on a culture shift that honors your

church's unique values. How do we know? Because each of us (Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro) has experienced this in our own quite different churches.

Our churches are worlds apart—Robert's is in Arkansas and Wayne's is in Hawaii—but we're on remarkably parallel pathways. God has birthed an authentic, life-giving culture at each church, and it has drawn people one by one, then by tens, and now by hundreds and thousands each year. More important, the people who come are finding the kind of help they seek. They're getting better, finding Christ, and maturing in every way.

Our approach is not a quick fix. It avoids a plug-and-play, one-size-fits-all program. Instead it's a *culture shift*: a new different way of thinking about church, one that works in Arkansas and Hawaii, and in all other geographies and circumstances.

How can we make such an assertive claim? God's Word offers it, and the power of the Holy Spirit is doing it in many places. This culture shift can come to your town, beginning with your church. We believe it's your birthright, your spiritual inheritance, something promised to you by God.

IDENTIFYING YOUR INHERITANCE

Imagine a billionaire's child who was promised money as a birthright. Or better, imagine *you* are the heir. You're eight years old and you have a multibillionaire dad who intends to give you his estate as an inheritance. You are to receive it at age twenty-one.

Your loving father hires someone to tutor you so that when you turn twenty-one you will have the depth, character, and wisdom necessary to steward all that money. Your tutor has a degree of authority but doesn't dictate your life. Instead, the tutor creates a nurturing yet challenging culture to assist you in growing toward an appropriate level of skill and stature. The tutor serves you, helping you come into your inheritance as a delight to your father.

Sound far-fetched? That's exactly what happened in ancient Greek society. Paul describes such a situation in Galatians 4:1–2: "As long as

the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.”

No matter how wealthy the father may be, the child cannot yet enjoy the wealth. The money belongs to the child but cannot be possessed and used by the child until he or she reaches the age stipulated in the trust.

The tutor’s job is to build an appropriate culture so a youth will be ready for an inheritance. By analogy, church leaders are the primary tutors God uses to lead believers personally and practically into a rich experience of the salvation that is theirs. The spiritual wealth is already there, set aside and waiting to be inherited. But this wealthy potential can be released congregationally only if the right tutors produce the right culture for receiving it. That’s the job of *church leadership*.

Are you in love with the potential that’s in your church? Do you see the great potential God has already willed to it? As a leader, you’re the tutor God has called to release it.

YES, YOUR CHURCH

Your church, whatever its size or age, has billion-dollar potential. Yes, your church, and every church where the Spirit of God lives. Not

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just the ones wealthy people are part of, or whose buildings sit on top of an oilfield or a goldmine.

God’s children are heirs to things so precious that no amount of money can buy them. All they need is a tutor who sees their potential. That’s *you* as a leader in the church. Your job is to *develop a culture* in which these young emerging leaders can mature to the point where they can steward the inheritance of Christ. Your church can have the best programs in the world, but deep-rooted change won’t happen without the right culture shift.

“But we don’t have all the right resources,” you say.

“But we don’t have that kind of culture,” you say.

“But you don’t know our church and the leadership group we inherited,” you say.

Ephesians 4:11 says the purpose of a leader is “for the equipping of the saints” (NASB), or “for building up the body of Christ” (NRSV). If you have people with Christ living inside, then you’ve got all you need. The right culture *can* be built by starting with what you already have.

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David faced a similar situation. He certainly didn’t start with a dream team: “Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them” (1 Samuel 22:2).

From the roster of people who would never qualify as first-round draft choices, David built one of the best teams Israel ever knew. It seemed as though David’s group should be called “the Losers,” but by *changing their culture* David led them to become a championship team of guerilla warriors.

Suppose you’re starting off as David did. Suppose you feel your best team is full of distressed and discontented people. How can you learn to steward the inheritance of your church? Let us show you, through what God has done in our churches.

WE STARTED THERE TOO: NEW HOPE’S MUSICIANS

At New Hope Christian Fellowship O’ahu in Hawaii, we’re continually asked, “Where’d you get such great musicians? Did they migrate from other churches? How do you recruit such talented people?” It’s understandable that they ask because our musicians are incredibly, amazingly good.

The answer is that they didn’t come to New Hope fully assembled and ready to play. As a pioneer church, we knew we needed to build a

culture where aspiring musicians would find an environment conducive to growth. So we built a culture that values musicians who are still in the early stages. Our keyboardist, Charlie, is twenty-one years old, but we believed in him when he was fourteen. Likewise, we believed in Teresa when she was sixteen. We believed in Errol when his family was falling apart, and we believed in Maria when she was not yet a Christian. (True situations, but the names have been changed.) Today, years later, look at all of them!

Heathcliff was a guitarist who had a dream of playing with one of New Hope's weekend worship teams, but he was afraid of making mistakes. Fear threw him off his confidence and distracted his motives. I sensed his desire to use his gifts for the Lord even though he was constantly being dissuaded by his fear, so I encouraged him to play anyway. "No way!" he replied. "I'd die! I just can't."

I pushed back on him. "Heathcliff, I want you to play with one stipulation: that you won't plug your guitar in."

His first response was, "That would be weird. No one will hear me!"

I replied, "One person will hear you—Jesus. When you are comfortable playing for an audience of One, then you'll be ready to play for an audience of many."

So he played without amplification, for six months. During that time he learned to play with excellence and without being intimidated. Today he is one of our stars.

WE STARTED THERE TOO: FELLOWSHIP BIBLE FILLS DREAMS, NOT SLOTS

Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, has built a culture that invites people to use their gifts and allows them to step into new roles, knowing that we stand behind them. Our goal is to fill dreams, not slots.

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A great illustration at Fellowship is Jim Phillips, an accountant, and his wife, Connie. They came to me several years ago, expressing a desire to provide mentors and educa-

tion that would counter the rampant sexual promiscuity sweeping through the junior high public schools. “I have this dream,” Jim said, “but I don’t know how.”

With others they started an abstinence-based mentoring program called Excel. The church helped through encouragement, publicity, and small-group support. Now they’re in every public school in central Arkansas. Some one thousand volunteers from 125 churches are mentoring ten thousand students in thirty-one public schools. They do all this with the support of a half-million-dollar budget and seven full-time staff. In an equipping culture that believes each person has gifts to be expressed, Jim and Connie have gone from taking a baby step to really making a difference in our community.

Nancy Carter became part of Fellowship years ago. Not long after, she sought help for her crumbling marriage; she found love and support from our people and staff. It became clear to Nancy that she would need to provide financially for her children, and when the staff receptionist position at our church came open we offered it to her and she accepted.

One day, when things were slow, one of the staff asked her to help create some posters for a church activity. Nancy’s designs were so good that word got around about her artistic abilities. Soon she was being asked to do all kinds of artwork. We encouraged her to further the development of her abilities through computer training and other help. In time, we hired her to do media work for us. As our church grew, her media office became a department, which Nancy now leads. All this is because the culture of our church is to help people be the best they can be for the kingdom of God.

Tim Holder is another example. He came to Fellowship struggling with his sexual orientation. He was scared to death. But he found people who reached out to him. They gave him hope and courage. He opened up and shared his struggle, and people loved him even more. This love helped Tim take charge of his life, grow strong, and determine, regardless of his struggles, to be pure. Today, he is on our worship staff and engaged in leading our Recovery Ministry as a proven example of God’s amazing grace.

No one plans transformations like this. The cultural soil at our churches makes it happen from the ground up. It grows people's lives from the inside out.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Your culture is the lens through which you view your life. If you change the lens, you change your outlook. Change the culture, and everything else changes, including the future.

<p>Change the culture, and everything else changes, including the future.</p>	<p>A dictionary would define <i>culture</i> as the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another. Its root meaning is shared with the word <i>agriculture</i>, referring to soil that has been tilled, and by extension a set of traits that have been plowed into a group's way of life. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art.</p>
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On most computers, everything that happens is filtered through Microsoft Windows. Those "windows" are the lens through which everything on your computer is translated. Likewise, one social scientist says culture is the shared software of our minds.¹

QUICK FIXERS VS. CULTURE GROWERS

<p>Culture is the shared software of our minds. (Geert Hofstede)</p>	<p>A young woman at New Hope O'ahu became ill. As many of us would do, she visited a doctor, got diagnosed, went to a pharmacy, and began taking the prescribed antibiotic. She felt better for several days but then became worse. She went back to the doctor, who made another diagnosis and sent her home with another prescription. Again she had symptoms of health for a few days but then became ill.</p>
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The cycle continued until finally her doctors discovered they were treating her for the wrong thing. She had an abscessed cyst in her fallopian tube. The doctors had every good and noble intention, but until they dealt with the real problem she was actually becoming worse, even though each shot of antibiotics gave a short-term appearance of health. It was like hoping to lose weight by sometimes eating less of the wrong things.

Too many churches operate the same way. When something is wrong, we try to get it fixed, but like Travis in the opening story the real problem remains unchanged.

Want to change the future of your church for the better? Begin by acknowledging that even though you've been working hard in your church, you're treating symptoms with the wrong prescriptions. It starts with acknowledging that regardless of how your church looks now, it has billion-dollar potential. The potential is found in your culture—the *real and true* culture of your church, not the quick-fix culture you may so often be tempted to try. It all starts when you, along with other church leaders, accept that your key role is to be the tutor who stewards a culture that releases this deep spiritual potential into the lives of your people.

Culture Shift asks you to ignore the quick-fix programs that are all around you and, working from the inside out, grow your culture into the rich inheritance God wants to provide. If you're ready for that, let's move on.



Each chapter of *Culture Shift* readily lends itself to discussion and application, and you are invited to create follow-up exercises from each chapter. The main sections that invite active participation, however, are in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, where you are guided in identifying the culture of your church and then exploring the next specific transition steps that are needed.

