



| Understanding Church | Culture

You have a wonderful opportunity to lead your church to better understand the elements that make up its unique character. God has provided the resources and opportunities for your church to become exactly what He desires. If there is no compelling reason to change, churches will continue to repeat programs, ministries, and practices from year to year regardless of what impact they may, or may not, be having on the community or the congregation.

Church practices and structures must be viewed through the church's culture to determine how relevant they are in the here-and-now world. Church culture means the local context of church life that shapes the way a church views itself and that leads to the unique identity and style of the church. Every church has its own history, and, consequently, its own culture.

Reviewing the present status reveals "the way we do church" expressed in the history and traditions of the church. It is a rich source for understanding the style of the church and what a church wants to become. Analyzing church culture requires a church to wrestle with the questions, "Who are we as a church today?" and "Who does God want us to become?" Multiple and complex appraisals influence a church's identity. Every church is different. Every church develops a culture whether the church has a long history or is a new start.

Asking appropriate questions can help the congregation discover its personality and its image in the community. What is the present reality for your church? What resources, events, and personalities shape the nature of how the church responds to a changing world? What vision is there of a future that will honor God?

To understand the culture of your church you need to investigate the following criteria:

- What affect is the church having on the lives of those who attend?
How do church members express their devotion to the Lord Jesus? Who has been on a short-term mission trip? How many participate in the church's evangelism strategy? Do you have a prayer ministry? How is the financial support of the church?
- How is the community affected by the presence of the church and its members?
Who lives in the immediate areas around the church? How does the church reach out to them? What services are provided for children, youth, singles, elderly, handicapped, or others? What does the community really think about this church and its members?
- What does the church emphasize?
What percent of the church budget is allocated for evangelism and missions? What place does prayer fit in the daily schedule of the church and staff? How do the events and activities of the church relate to the overall mission of the church?

- How does a guest feel when they visit your church?
How many parking spaces do you have? Is there adequate seating space in the worship center? Do you have a welcome center clearly identified for guests? Is your preschool space clean, safe, adequately sized, and well-staffed? Do you have adequate discipleship opportunities for all ages in spaces that are inviting and welcoming?
- Are leaders functioning in their ministry roles?
What should the deacons be focused on? Is there relevant teaching and preaching that seeks to change lives and strengthen disciples? Do members of the church understand their responsibilities and their spiritual gifts?
- Do attenders have a good time when they come to church?
How does the church fellowship together? What ministries are designed to help break down the sense of the large group and allow people to experience the joy of relationships?

In the same sense individuals are guided by their self-esteem, churches tend to be guided by congregational church-esteem. With low church-esteem we are reluctant to mention our church in conversations at the grocery store, soccer field, or gym. With a high sense of church-esteem we recognize the value our church is in our own lives and the potential value it has for those around us.

Guests who visit your church are 83% more likely to remain a part of your church six months later if they have been a part of a small group such as Bible Study or LIFE Group. So many in our culture, both young and old, are looking for a place to establish deep, lasting relationships. Your church should be the place people turn to find acceptance and support.

Simple church principles call for each church to evaluate every activity in light of how it relates to the main function of the local church. Programs do not need to be complex or expensive to be effective. Seek to focus the ministries of your church around your unique set of core beliefs and values. Involve the whole church in developing a clear understanding of your present reality. Create an environment where the church begins to dream again about the future God has planned for them. Then organize leadership and direction around seeking to focus on those ministries that move the church toward that new desired future state.

"Understanding Church Culture" by Everett Anthony, *THRIVE: Helping Churches Prosper Again* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2010).

