

# Analysing the Culture of a Church

Dr Neil Percival

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The culture of a Church consists of the internal values, assumptions, expectations, and behaviours (usually unwritten) that are the accepted norm for belonging. Culture is deeply embedded, self-reinforcing, and stubbornly resistant to change. On the one hand, this can be a source of stability and security in a constantly changing world. However, others never feel like they truly belong because they either refuse to abide by the norms of the local culture or because they fail to recognise them. Similarly, attempts to bring about change in a church are often frustrated by members who passively, but sometimes actively and vocally, work to maintain the status quo.

While the culture of a Church may align with its publicly stated Vision and Values, this is often not the case. Where the two differ, culture trumps vision and values.

How can we discern the culture of our Church?

## 1. Review the stories

What tales or legends of the past, positive or negative, do members retell often. These stories give clues to what members value, and don't value, and highlight some of their cultural expectations. The stories they tell about past ministers can be particularly enlightening.

## 2. Ask the members

Another way to identify a Church's culture is to ask those who attend. Methods of collecting information, opinions, perceptions, and people's experiences of the culture include surveys (e.g. NCLS), interviews, focus groups, and workshops.

Questions can be asked about members' levels of satisfaction, engagement, motivation, and loyalty to the Church. Their views can be sought on the vision, mission, and values of the Church.

Perceptions of the leadership are central to culture, so it is important to find out how members view the minister and what expectations they have of them.

Members are usually amenable to discussing the strengths and weaknesses of their Church and the areas that need improvement or change if they feel they will be listened to and taken seriously.

## 3. Observe behaviour

Culture is expressed most clearly in the way that people behave and interact with each other in different situations and contexts. Who are the permission

givers and those others defer to? Who corrects and directs behaviour? Who do people admire or seek to emulate? Note the ways that people communicate, collaborate, make decisions, solve problems, handle conflicts, deal with changes, celebrate achievements, and respond to failures. These reveal a lot about the underlying values, assumptions, and expectations of the Church.

#### 4. Analyse the artifacts

Artifacts are the tangible objects that symbolize or represent the culture of a Church. They include things like the Church logo, signs and noticeboards, vision statements, weekly News Sheets, local rituals and ceremonies, processes and procedures, duty statements for staff, rules, budgets... Try to understand where these have come from and the meaning and significance they have for the Church and its membership. Compare these with the actual observed behaviours and outcomes to see if they are consistent or contradictory.

#### 5. Seek feedback

Seek feedback from external sources: visitors, denominational leaders, Church consultants, leaders of other local Churches, Funeral Directors, welfare recipients, Op Shop customers... These can offer a different perspective and a more objective insight into the culture. Ask about their impressions, expectations, and experiences of engaging with the Church. How would they describe its reputation and image?

#### 6. Transforming church culture

1. Identify and list what is positive in the culture and what needs to change. Be specific.
2. Acknowledge, celebrate, and praise the positive wherever you see it. How do we currently do that? What could we do? Words can empower or discourage. Share and affirm the positive regularly and often to individuals and to the whole congregation. Never put down the congregation or berate them.
3. Don't try to change everything. Choose just one or two things that can have a significant impact. Are there things we are currently doing that inhibit growth or progress? Keep on reporting back on progress that is being made.
4. Identify and transition out any staff or lay leaders who are hurtful rather than helpful and who immobilize rather than empower. Leaders must believe in the potential and possibilities of their Church.
5. Make positive culture personal. Own it. Live it. Our actions speak for us. Culture is as much caught as it is taught. What specific actions can we take to model a more positive, God honouring culture in our Church?