
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

The Depths of Church Culture

Understanding a church's culture is a bit challenging. However, I've found it helpful to think of culture as a lily pad.

If you picture a lily pad in your mind, you will see a flat green pad laying on the top of a pond. Unseen under the pad is a long stem that reaches down deeply into the water. Embedded even deeper into the muddy bottom of the pond are the roots of the lily pad. Both the stem and the roots are unseen when looking at the pad on top of the water. Together these three elements of a lily pad—pad, stem, and roots—illustrate the different levels of culture found in a church.

Levels of Culture

The pad represents the Face of Culture, which is the physical and social aspects of church life and ministry that are clearly visible. This is sometimes called the “hard culture” of a church, and includes artifacts, such as, the facility and furnishings, various programs and ministries, and written or recorded documents. This hard culture is easily observed and understood.

Hidden below the surface is the stem, which represents the Mind of the Church. This is the “soft culture” of

beliefs and values. Determining a church's true beliefs and values is more difficult than observing the hard culture, but can be understood through observation, conversations, and strategic investigation. For example, observing how a church spends its budget, or what ministries are neglected, or where people invest their time, may indicate its true beliefs and values.

Deeply buried is the Heart of the Church, which is represented by the roots of the lily pad. As roots are buried deep in the mud at the bottom of a pond, so to is the heart of a church. This “spongy or slippery culture” is difficult to grasp. It represents the assumptions that supply the rationale for beliefs and values, and ultimately for the artifacts that arise over the years in a church. A church's assumptions are often the result of past negative or positive experiences, which have served to shape the thought process of the leaders and people. This level of culture is the most difficult to identify and understand.

30th Anniversary
of
Growth Points

Evaluating Culture

If you desire to truly understand your church's culture, consider the following process of evaluation.

First, start by looking at the Face of the Church, i.e., the hard culture.

What do the facilities say about your church? Are they clean, modern, and up-to-date? Are they worn, dingy, and out-of-date? Are they open and accessible or closed and unhandy. What does this say about your culture?

What do the programs and ministries of your church reveal? Are they inward focused on current attendees? Are they outward focused on newcomers? Are they examples of older models of ministry or newer models? What does this say about your culture?

What do the written documents demonstrate? Are they written in churchy language or do they use newer terms? Are they clear to the average person or difficult to understand? Are they found in old forms or newer forms (perhaps on the church's website)? What does this say about your culture?

Second, investigate the Mind of the Church through conversations, interviews, and observations.

What is the attitude toward guests? Are guests expected, welcomed, and

embraced, or are people surprised when a guest arrives? Are newcomers involved quickly into entry levels of ministry, or not used due to mistrust? What does this say about your culture?

What ministries or programs attract the best attendance or participation? Which ones attract very little attendance or participation? What new innovations have been embraced? What potential changes have been rejected? What does this say about your culture?

What does the church's use of money disclose? Where is the money spent? What is neglected in the budget? Where do you find people volunteering? Where do you find it difficult to find volunteers? What does this say about your culture?

Third, delve deeply into the Heart of the Church to discover its stories, victories, defeats, and long memories.

What are the stories that are told over and over again in your church? What do people remember being the most significant events in the history of your church? What major victories or defeats do people recall? What does this say about your culture?

Start thinking deeply about your church's culture. Explore the three levels by developing an outline of ideas, insights, and thoughts under the subtitles of the Face, the Mind, and the Heart of the Church. Investigating the depths of your culture will be revealing.

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Church Consulting

Picture your church in the not-too-distant future. Imagine a gradually changing attitude reflecting a new sense of expectancy. Imagine new people with a contagious enthusiasm for Christ and your church. Imagine ministries pulsating with new life. Imagine a new heart for mission in your church.

Is it possible? The answer . . . a resounding YES! It is possible. Indeed, God very much wants to see it happen. Just think about it. God wants your church to grow! And, the McIntosh Church Growth Network stands ready to assist you through personal coaching and/or your church through consulting to see growth take place.

Gary L. McIntosh is considered one of the premier church consultants in the United States today. Here is what others are saying about his church consultations and guidance.

“I cannot tell you how much I appreciated your consultation with our elders. You are a wealth of help and guidance. And you do it with such grace! As I sat there listening to you describe the challenges of growing from 400-800, I noticed the elders faces. They were lighting up with understanding about things that I would have found difficult to say. You did a masterful job.” —**Jerry Reub, Cornerstone Church**

“It was wonderful to return from my time in England and Indonesia and to receive the McIntosh Report. Thank you for its clarity, brevity, wisdom and insight. Everybody so far has received it with enthusiasm, which is no mean feat in the Midwest! May God richly bless you in your ministry of strengthening and supporting the Church.” —**C. John Steer, Autumn Ridge Church**

“I have had the opportunity to meet and speak with Gary individually on several occasions, and he has been a tremendous blessing to my life and ministry. Gary is a very wise, stable, insightful and capable Christian man. The counsel, guidance and direction Gary has offered to me over the past two years have been extremely helpful.” —**John W. Tastad, East Hills Christian Church**

“The impact has been incredible. Through his insight and recommendations I have grown as a pastor in ways I never thought possible. We appreciated not only Gary’s expertise but also the spirit by which he worked with us. He was compassionate, sensitive and personable as he interviewed our people, brought recommendations and continues to lead us through the growing process. Each conversation has been an encouragement to me as a pastor to continue in the work to which God has called me.” —**Robert L. Bletcher, Faith Evangelical Church**

If you could replenish the spiritual dynamic of your church, would you be interested?

If you could enhance the guest welcome of your church, would you be interested?

If you could improve the growth environment of your church, would you be interested?

If you could increase the outreach potential of your church, would you be interested?

If you could align your staff in a more productive way, would you be interested?

Dr. Gary L. McIntosh can help you with these and other aspects of fruitful ministry. For full information email Gary at cgnet@earthlink.net or call 951-506-3086 for details.