

**Discerning Your Church's Hidden Core Values**  
*It's the unstated, underlying purpose that really drives a church.*  
by Angie Ward

A lot has been written lately about the church and culture; most of it, however, refers to the culture around a church. Just as important is the culture within a church, the shared attitudes, values, and beliefs that define a church and shape its practices.

Fresh out of seminary, my husband and I began ministry at an established, 850-member church in a large city. During the interview process, we were impressed by the church's forward-thinking mission and values, and we were excited to join such an apparently dynamic ministry.

As time passed, however, it became clear that there was far more bark than bite at that church, missionally speaking.

Oh, the church leadership certainly talked the talk—about the need to be an "outward-focused" church, about the importance of having staff members who demonstrated "proven character and proven ministry," about the priority of "people over programs."

But in reality, the church was not growing, evangelism was not a priority, staff members were allowed to bully others as long as they got the job done on Sundays, and heaven forbid that a program be dropped, even when it was no longer effective.

It took several years to realize that the problem was not a lack of resources, expertise, or a clearly worded purpose statement. The problem was that the church's actual culture didn't reflect its stated mission.

As with any organization, a church's culture can be encapsulated into an "ethos," or a statement that summarizes its true guiding beliefs. The ethos is almost never officially articulated. It's something that is felt. This ethos is often hard to define, but that doesn't mean it is any less powerful. Ideally, the ethos of an organization should flow out of its purpose, but when it doesn't, the church's underlying culture can subvert even the best vision.

The ethos at our first church? "Don't rock the boat."

While that church on the surface valued outreach, character, and innovation, the no-rocking ethos meant that its actual directive was "Don't offend anyone; don't take risks; and don't deal with hidden sin." It took more than three years for us to figure this out, by repeated trial and error, but also by looking at our church's history, the personalities of its leaders, and even the culture of our surrounding community.

We also learned from experience that simply changing a church's purpose statement or core values does not automatically change its culture. One of our church's stated core values was "diversity in worship styles." Apparently the music director never got that

memo, as he vehemently fought any efforts to introduce contemporary elements into the worship service.

At one staff meeting, the senior pastor emphatically stated that our church "was not an outreach center." Perhaps he meant a rescue mission, soup kitchen, or some other type, but his statement was clearly contradicted one of the church's 14 written core values: "We see ourselves as a mission center in our community." (On a side note, that the church once had 14 core values demonstrates the "Don't rock the boat" mentality: reducing the number of values to a meaningful number would have meant offending someone in the congregation.)

"Don't rock the boat" seems to be a common ethos at many churches, but here are some others:

- We can find something wrong with anything.
- The world isn't safe, so we will protect you.
- Visitors are welcome to come back, if they really want to.
- Saved by grace but living under law.

These core belief are rarely articulated, but they have enormous impact on the health and effectiveness of a church, no matter what its stated purpose.

Culture takes a long time to create, and even longer to change. Melting the tip of the iceberg does not eliminate the ice below the waterline. But in any church, the first step toward creating a healthy culture is identifying the existing ethos, whether positive or negative.

Our experience at our first church prepared us for our current church. (Let me say that we had many gracious, supportive friends and fellow ministers there, and we learned so much.) This time, we knew to look for the underlying culture. The ethos we eventually discovered in our new congregation was "You don't need to do anything." From spiritual growth to evangelism to giving to ministry, a church that was founded as a safe place for those wounded by religion became a place for long-time Christians to be comfortable and inactive.

Changing that culture, of course, is an ongoing process. Slowly, but surely, our church is beginning to reflect a renewed purpose of "Life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with the world around us."

Our new ethos? "The more the merrier!"