

Leading a Church Through Culture Change

By Adrian Beavis - November 2018

Introduction

Go to any conference or course on leadership and you will hear one word almost immediately and very often – *vision*. Whilst whole conferences are given over to “vision” and “turning vision to action”, comparatively little attention is given to one of the main reasons visions (even the most electrifying, kingdom-building, Christ-centred visions) get derailed and fail – the problem of *culture*.

A vision to “welcome in the broken” will die in a culture suspicious of newcomers. A vision “to reach the missing generations” will struggle in a culture resistant to change. The vision may be beautiful, but unaddressed cultural issues obstructing (or in some cases working against) it may mean it never gets off the ground.

What is Culture?

Culture has been defined simply as “*the way things are done around here*.” It is often unquestioned and, like the smell of our own house, unnoticed by those who feel most at home.

To go further, culture is the atmosphere created by “the way we do things around here” (in our worship, fellowship, groups, discussions of big issues, and so on). This atmosphere creates an environment which either helps or hinders the mission of God and our specific local vision to be faithful to it.

Vision is, of course, vitally important. A strong vision that has been collectively discerned by the leadership, with input from as wide a group as possible, is a vital first step. It acts as an anchor and guide when challenges come.

But if it becomes clear that cultural issues are working against the vision and mission and need to be addressed, then the exciting job of casting vision must be accompanied by the equally important—but slow and painstaking—job of culture change.

Diagnosing the Culture of the Church

Because culture is like the air we breathe, it is often most clearly noticed by newcomers and visitors. That is why a new minister or leader can often quickly discern the culture of a church:

- Whether people arrive early or late
- Whether regulars stay afterwards to connect
- Whether newcomers are included or left on their own
- Whether comments are made about how people dress or who looks different
- Whether new ideas are greeted with enthusiasm or suspicion

In many ways, small signals flag up the unspoken culture of a church.

In one of my first services as a new vicar, a long-standing member apologised for a homeless person in the service (“They should behave better in church!”). Another asked why I spent so long talking to visitors: “You seem too concerned with people outside the church.”

After a few similar incidents, I could see that although “Welcoming people from all backgrounds” was a core value (laminated on the noticeboard), the actual culture of the church was unwelcoming.

This was unintentional. People had a strong desire to be welcoming and would have been horrified to think otherwise—but the culture worked against the stated value.

Leading a Church Through Culture Change

Once unhelpful and unhealthy parts of a church culture are diagnosed—whether being unwelcoming, resistant to change, critical, or disunited—the slow work of culture change needs to begin.

Why is culture change so slow?

Partly because culture is often unconscious, people may resist or reject the idea that something is wrong. But culture is also reinforced in many subtle ways: the church programme, the values of key leaders, what gets prioritised and publicised, and what gets celebrated.

Culture change only happens when it is addressed on many different levels, consistently and deliberately, over many months—and often years.

Culture change needs to be addressed through:

Teaching

Explaining biblically why an authentically Christian, Christ-centred church will have a culture of welcome, care for the broken,

evangelism to the lost, passionate worship, commitment to one another, and care for the needy.

Acts 2:42–47 is an obvious New Testament model.

Importantly, this teaching must happen not only on Sundays but midweek and with key leaders, including church councils.

Modelling

Leaders must show why this culture matters through how they live.

Spending time with and praying for a homeless man who heckled during a service did more to demonstrate a culture of welcome than a hundred sermons. Helping at a foodbank or night shelter visibly challenges a culture of indifference to the poor.

Celebrating

Culture change accelerates when early signs of the new culture are highlighted and celebrated.

If addressing a culture weak in outreach, celebrate those who share their faith, invite friends, and share testimonies of coming to faith.

Equally important is choosing not to celebrate activities or behaviours that undermine the new culture.

Appointments

Whether paid staff or volunteer leaders, new appointments must fully share the vision and actively champion the new culture. This is especially important for those who teach, lead groups, or serve on church councils. These

leaders help ensure culture change is lasting—even beyond current leadership.

Policing

Often the hardest step. Leaders must notice, graciously challenge, and correct behaviours that undermine the new culture.

This might include setting clear ground rules in meetings (for example, banning phrases like “It won’t work” or “We’ve tried that before”) or addressing critical behaviour within a team.

If the new culture is not policed, the old culture—like weeds in a garden—will quickly return.

Consistency Over Time

Culture change takes time. It can feel like pushing a stone uphill—progress is made, then lost.

As John Wimber once said:

“Don’t overestimate how much changes in a year, or underestimate how much changes in five.”

Vision can be set in months; culture change often takes at least three years of hard,

consistent effort—and sometimes much longer.

But the work is worth it. Just as *“an unhealthy culture eats vision for breakfast,”* a healthy culture feeds, strengthens, and sustains God-given vision.

If culture change is needed, let’s commit to doing it—for the sake of the kingdom of God.

For Reflection

1. How would you describe the culture of your church? How would a newcomer describe it? A neighbour?
2. How can you take the cultural temperature of your church (welcome, evangelism, discipleship, worship, prayer)? Is there someone new who could act as a culture-tester?
3. Where are unhealthy parts of the culture expressed? How could they be addressed?
4. Where are healthy cultural strengths supporting the vision? How can they be given more space and celebration?