

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Does a Photograph of Our “Corporate Culture” Reveal?

Every summer, thousands of congregations welcome new pastors. Both parties in every newly formed pastor-people partnership feel motivated to work together for a strong future.

But photographs taken a few summers later reveal three different results: (a) some pastor-people teams achieve their worthy dreams; (b) some teams do *not*; and (c) one or both parties in some teams *wish* that clergy relocation were happening again this year, but it isn't.

What factors increase the likelihood of positive outcomes? Some of the results depend on whether the pastor-people team understands the differences in how small, midsize, and large churches function.*

However, whether the pastor is new this year or has been here for a decade, a major part of every team's effectiveness depends on whether the pastor and people sing from the same page in a far less visible hymnbook: the congregation's corporate culture.

What is our congregation's story? An Iowa town's name is Story City. But every town or city has a “story” and every church has a “story.” The congregational culture is embedded in that story. Effective pastors know that learning and becoming part of that story is essential to exerting positive influence in this congregation and community.

New ideas that seem to “fit” a congregation's foundational story can unite hearts and minds for concerted action and positive results. Other new ideas—regardless of how rational, practical, appropriate, or frequently used by other congregations—may achieve enthusiastic resistance from dedicated lay leaders and parishioners.

To more quickly discern a congregation's “story,” a new pastor can ask the governing board to appoint a task force “to help me get acquainted with how and why we do things around here.” The pastor meets with this task force two or three times. After reading aloud the explanation below, the pastor reads each of the twenty-one congregational culture components—one at a time—and asks group members to describe “*what that component looks like in our church.*”

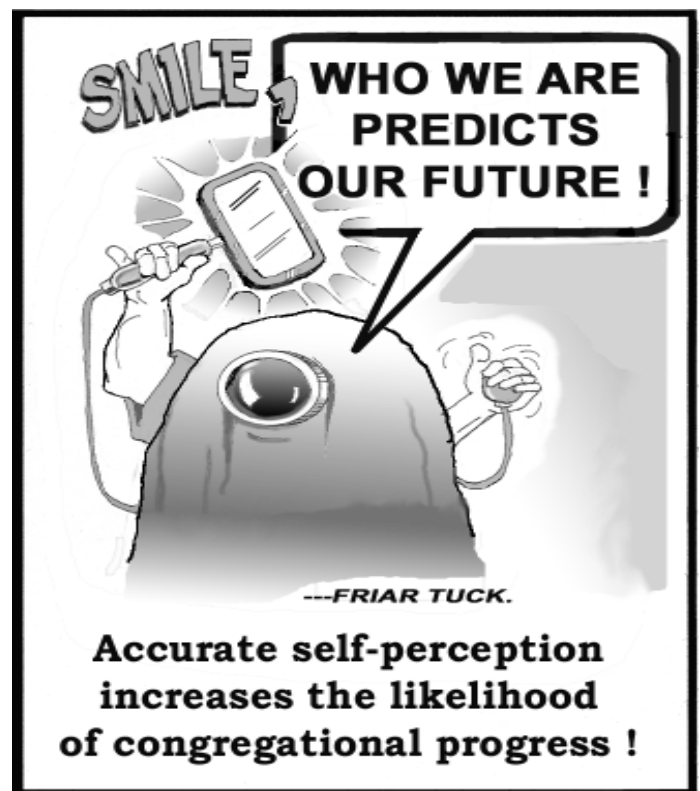
Comprise the task force of ten respected laypersons: four people above age forty who have been members here

for at least twenty years, four people under age forty who have been members here for at least ten years, and two people who became members within the last three years. If possible, include a mixture of people from each of the following birth-date ranges: prior to 1927, 1928-1945, 1946-1964, and 1965-1984.

Do we understand our congregation's deeply ingrained, but often unstated, corporate culture? As in the business world, *congregational culture* is the way a church's members behave, based on its cherished values and group traditions. Corporate culture differs in each congregation.

The multiple components of a congregation's corporate culture—many of which are invisible to a just-arrived pastor—determine (a) how and why parishioners do what they do and (b) what type of new ideas they typically embrace or reject.

Every congregation's corporate culture includes the following interwoven components:



1. Furniture, pictures, and rooms in the building that hold great symbolic meaning

2. Often repeated “creation stories,” describing the church’s early days, founding principles, and the initial constituent base

3. The deep meaning and continuing influence of unusual events or hero/villain personalities during high or low points in congregational history

4. The congregation’s self-identity in this community (how parishioners see it and how they think community residents see it)

5. Predominant type of theology/spirituality, such as conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, or liberal

6. Customs, traditions, and rituals to which leaders and parishioners religiously adhere

7. Significant congregational skills and parishioner skills

8. Basic philosophies and priorities—often unwritten and sometimes unbiblical—that repeatedly judge some ministries important and other ministries irrelevant (example: “Our church is about the right size,” a totally opposite idea from Christ’s Great Commission, which directs his followers to “go into all the world and make disciples.”)

9. Often repeated metaphors regarding which ministries are important and how to do them (example: “We want quality, not quantity.”)

10. How the congregation thinks about money and financial giving, such as what types of annual stewardship programs are acceptable and unacceptable

11. The theological ethos desired, taught, and preached (which sometimes differ from the *actual* ethos observed in congregational behaviors) For example, healthy, effective congregations consistently (a) *live by faith in God’s guidance*, (b) *are known by their love toward people inside and outside the church*, and (c) *speak hopefully regarding the future*. (1 Corinthians 13:13) By contrast, unhealthy, ineffective congregations are weak in one or two ethos elements and hope those elements “take care of themselves.”

12. Behavioral standards to which lay leaders hold one another and parishioners accountable

13. The activities and ministries lay leaders feel are worthy of spending time to accomplish and the ones they feel comfortable neglecting

14. The activities and ministries lay leaders feel the pastor must make a high priority and the ones they feel comfortable with the pastor disregarding

15. Written and unwritten rules regarding how the organizational structure functions (how we make decisions and plans)

16. Mental models deeply embedded in the lay leaders’ cherished ideologies and organizational structures (example: “We do not believe in scheduling _____ or permitting _____ programs.”)

17. The emotional climate (warm, accepting, and loving—or cold, judgmental, and introverted)

18. The dominant psychological mood (depressed, happy, fearful, cautious, or critical)

19. Which members the congregation holds in high esteem, listening carefully to their opinions, and which members the congregation disregards

20. Which group(s) the pastor must take care not to alienate, such as the women’s organization, a particular adult Sunday school class, or the property committee

21. The core-values-driven vision of what our church should attempt in future years (example: Jesus taught his first disciples three core values through The Great Commandment and The Great Commission: Help people grow spiritually in their relationship with God. Love our neighbors in church, community, and world. Offer Christ to people outside our walls.) *Healthy*, effective churches give all three of Christ’s core values equal emphasis and energy. *Unhealthy*, ineffective congregations give most of their emphasis and energy to only one of those core values.

The Bottom Line: What does that photograph of our church’s corporate culture reveal? What does the photograph teach us regarding how the pastor-people partnership can develop new directions that (a) are consistent with its story, (b) fit its needs for this point in history, and (c) unite heads and hearts for concerted action?

* *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*, Volumes #14, #18, #26, and #28 define these church-size differences in detail and illustrate practical leadership procedures. E-mail HrbMiller@aol.com for a free contents-descriptions and an order form (sent only in electronic form, in response to E-mail requests, NOT in response to requests by U.S. Mail, FAX, or telephone.)

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