

Q&A: How do we bring about cultural change in our churches?

A Friend asks:

My question is, how do we, who are in Christian leadership encourage and bring about cultural change in our churches? I am sure that it is already a question that you are grappling with and probably have no easy answers to.

In the past I would have simply said the main component is leading by example. Lead and others will simply change. In recent experience I would say that, unfortunately that only seems to work when the people around are teachable and actively pursuing growth.

Previously I would have also said teach from the Scriptures and let them speak for themselves. But again, I have seen time and time again a misunderstanding of those Scriptures even when it is spelled out in black and white.

And then what do you do when there are different cultures in the mix? I don't mean racial cultures, but church cultures. How do we authentically worship when so many different priorities are given to the various components of what constitutes a worship service or Bible study? How do we encourage true disciples in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?

[This is a Q&A question. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thank you, dear friend. What a joyfully fundamental question! Answer this, and you will have answered the cry of the heart of every pastor who takes their calling seriously. Books have been written about this. Even Archbishops' Councils wrestle with the conundrum – I reflected on a recent attempt at “Setting God’s People Free” not too long ago.



You’re right. I am grappling with it, and I don’t have any easy answers. There is a whole bunch of theory out there about changing organisational culture etc. In my mind, however, it’s like mentoring and spiritual direction; it relies on *discernment* more than anything else and therefore can only truly be known in context and in practice, not in theory. So here follows some random thoughts from what I’ve seen in the real world:

The **first thing** I want to do in response is to affirm the premise of the question. *Cultural change* is to a church what *sanctification* is to a person. Just as individuals Christians are called to grow into maturity in Christ, so churches are called to grow into maturity as the *Body* of Christ.

The road of maturation for an individual is, necessarily, “a long road of obedience in the same direction” (I think I’m quoting Eugene Peterson there). It involves confronting one’s past, one’s brokenness, one’s fears and pains. It involves repenting of sin, and seizing the lifegiving ways of God with a firm faith in his grace. It can involve times of trial and failure, as well as the temptations of both success and boredom. This is something we all understand.

That leadership task is first and foremost not about the “professional” tasks of institutional refurbishment and

resource management, it is the “pastoral” task of leading a *community* on a long road of obedience. As I said many years ago, this means “we have to talk about the real issues – rebellion, idolatry, lack of belief, hard-heartedness, and unfaithfulness – rather than the excuses of broken systems.”

More recently I have reflected a little more deeply on this. Culture itself can be conceived of in terms of the “stories we tell each other”, i.e. it is grounded in a *narrative* that encapsulates the collective worldview. A *racist* culture will share a narrative about the inhumanity of different ethnicities, for instance. Similarly, the grounding of an individual person’s life can also be thought of in terms of narrative: what story helps us conceive of ourselves within the world? This is why we consider things like “self-talk” when we help an individual to reflect. Individuals and churches share a *narrational world*, i.e. a *cultural context*.

The Christian task is to make sure we are operating out of the *correct* narrative so that we conceive of ourselves and the world according to God’s *truth*, and where we find ourselves in *his* story. In fact, we can think of the conversion experience in terms of an exchange of *stories*, where we die to an old narrative of sin and self-centredness, and are raised to find ourselves in another story in which Jesus is King, and we are forgiven and embraced. I alluded to this in a recent sermon on wisdom in Job, if you have some time to listen.

The sad fact is, in these terms, some churches, as much as any individual, need to convert to Christ. That is the *cultural* change that is needed. And it is an ongoing journey. As the saying goes: “I AM saved, I am BEING saved, I WILL be saved”

But your question is **how do we bring cultural change about?**

Firstly, understand that just as with individual sanctification, it is not entirely humanly possible. “Work out

your salvation with fear and trembling,” Paul says in *Philippians 2*, “for it is **God** who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.” Work it out, because God is at work in you, *and* in the church. Or as someone wise I know says, “We are Christ’s church, and **he** will grow us.”

This isn’t a cop-out, it’s a *focus*. And the practical application is this: **It begins with worship**. Sort out the *upward* focus of your life first, work on the *upward* focus of the church first, and all manner of other things will sort themselves out.

This rubs up against one of your subquestions about authentic worship in competing church cultures. One form of worship can only compete with another if we are worshipping the wrong thing! Yes, we need to attend to our attitudes, and recognise different styles, and compromise a bit about liturgical rigour. But I’ve only ever seen this work when the attitude has been “we are all here to help one another to worship Jesus.”

Secondly, your negative experiences don’t mean you had the wrong idea. You talk about leading by example, and about preaching the word. Sometimes they don’t seem to “work.” That doesn’t mean that they are the wrong thing to do.

In fact, they are the right thing to do. Our *story* changes, our *culture* shifts, as individuals and as churches, when we pay heed to what the Lord has to say to us. He has spoken the words of life, and by God’s grace, that word is present for us to read, hear and receive. **Preach the word**, brothers and sisters! Do it without fear or favour, without tickling ears. And by some miracle, and the power of the Spirit, that word will take root and shift our story.

Similarly, **preach with your deeds**. As Paul exhorted *Timothy* set an example for the believers in speech, in

conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

In both cases, of courses, the preaching may seem fruitless. People are hardened to the word, unteachable; they mishandle the Word of God to suit their own ends. You can't do anything about that. But we preach the word both in and out of season.

As a leader, of course, there is a sense in which we must go ahead. We must preach to ourselves first. We must attend to our own sanctification. It is often the case that churches "catch up" to the culture of their leaders. Unless the leader is willing to attend to the long walk of obedience in themselves, they are likely to be content in their existing *church* culture where their insecurities are stabilised and their sins are acceptable.

So it's an absolute imperative: Sanctification begins with me. Personally, I have to say that to myself, even today.

Thirdly, you ask about encouraging "true disciples... in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?"

In my experience, what you are hoping for here is blocked by the blindness of the culture that you're hoping to change. In the West our culture is significantly shaped by consumerism and individualism. When the term "discipleship" is used in churches it has often been emptied of its real meaning and held captive by the culture; it is reduced to a product by which consumer Christians are given "nice ideas by which I might build a successful spiritual life." It has elements of truth, but it has a self-righteous posture; there is an incomprehension that we might have to have our story shifted.

We need to cut across that dynamic somehow, and sometimes we need to be upfront about it. The gospel is encouraging and lifegiving, and it is about being *unmade* as much as it is about being *remade*. The gospel is about conviction and confrontation as much as it is about affirmation. We can set

expectations, explaining to people that we are expecting to be *undone* by God, in fact *hoping* to be challenged and confronted with ourselves. Otherwise, what's the point?

We also need to give them the tools to proceed. A good tool is the ability to question our own cultural assumptions, to question ourselves. Help them to affirm what can be affirmed and question what needs to be questioned. Push for the story underneath the top layer. Ask "why?" a lot. "Why do we do that? Why, really?" What's under the facade? "We have words to explain ourselves, but what do we *really* believe?" It's the difference, as they say, between "espoused theology" and "actual theology". The exposition of Moral Therapeutic Deism is an excellent case study in this; it is the *actual* religion of much of the Western church.

Above all, this is a pastoral task. The incarnation teaches us about how God enters into our world in order to bring us out of darkness into his wonderful light. We must have the same attitude of Christ. Enter the culture. Affirm what can be affirmed. Work out where the ugly bits rub against the gospel, and then bring that light to bear, beginning in yourself. Walk the hard road, and when others join you in it, rejoice.

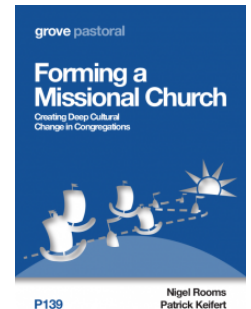
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Review: Forming a Missional Church – Creating Deep

Cultural Change in Congregations

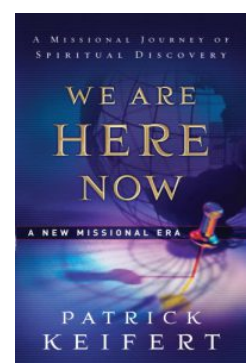
We have noticed a welcome recent trend in thinking about church life. It is a movement away from a fixation on processes and programs, traditions and techniques, mechanistic deliberations about an organisation. It is towards considering the *culture* of the church and understanding it as a social and familial system.

It is towards recognising (perish the thought) that God the Holy Spirit *is* actually thoroughly and presently involved; church leadership is more a matter of sharing spiritual discernment than reliance upon managerial expertise.



Two books I have recently read—Patrick Keifert's *We Are Here Now*, and the Grove Booklet *Forming a Missional Church* which Keifert has co-authored with Nigel Rooms—do well to advance this trend and make it accessible to local congregations. The two overlap in content and I will concentrate on the Grove booklet here.

The need for cultural change is often recognised and touted albeit somewhat impotently. Rooms and Keifert seek to actually get to a practical outcome. The groundwork that gets them there takes a number of forms:



Firstly, they engage with postmodernity. Cultural connection within a postmodern world necessarily requires pushback against such modern influences as individualism, propositionalism, and didacticism. It means advancing modes and manners of being church that value real and shared experience.

The categorization of faith as private is among the reasons why many Christians do not speak and act as if God were living and active in the here and now of our every days lives. (Page 4)

This basis for their approach is not novel: the juxtaposition of church and the postmodern world has been around for at least two decades. Keifert is right not to be morose about the changing world. Rather than phrases like “post-Christendom” he prefers a “new missional era.” This obvious and positive sense only adds to my bemusement that such cultural thinking has been largely left behind in academia by church leaders in the field.

Secondly, they bring insights from systems theory. Keifert and Rooms recognise that churches like all “living, feeling, learning human organizations... are not simply machines to be fixed or problems that respond to **technical** solutions” (page 5, emphasis mine). Our tendency for off-the-shelf solutions makes us ill-prepared for “those challenges or problems or complicated situations for which there is not a ready or known fix.” Instead, we must attend to **adaptive** change.

Adaptive challenges require change and transformation on the part of those facing them, in contrast to technical problems where there is a known solution and no change is required... (Page 6)

Indeed, technical “solutions” can be used to insulate ourselves from the costly self-reflection and honesty that is necessary for the mission of the church to be taken seriously.

*Our task is being born into our world, our culture and context, and **dying to all we do not need** to be God’s church in, but not of, the world—and then living into God’s preferred and promised future. Mission, missional life, missional churches... the missio Dei is cross-shaped. (Page 6,*

emphasis mine)

I have found the language of “adaptive” and “technical” to be reasonably useful as a “way in” for people to begin wrestling with the sorts of issues at stake. It is quite managerial in tone, however, and some might find liturgical or reflective language more helpful. After all, as long as the tendency to apply it only to individuals can be avoided, “adaptive” language speaks to concepts such as “being refined”, “amending one’s life”, and being “*transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

Thirdly, they ground everything on robust missiology. The beginning of this is the now famous adage, which they do well to quote:

It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world but the God of mission who has a church in the world. (Page 10)

Missiology in practice emphasises the centrality of *discernment* in the mode and manner of being church. “We cannot simply bless every good thing” (page 11), they say, clearly understanding the propensity of churches to equate their programmatic busy-ness with effective outreach. Rather, “the main skill individuals and Christian communities require to lift anchor faithfully and sail into the unknown, adaptive, exciting, challenging journey of the *missio Dei* is discernment... asking and finding answers to the question, ‘What is God up to?’” (page 11). Such a journey can seem uncertain and therefore unprofessional or irresponsible for some, but from experience we know that it is, in the end, an *exciting* journey that is literally mission-critical:

...rather than doing mission by conducting a programme of mission activities (Alpha courses, holiday clubs for children and young people, invitational events etc), none of which

are unhelpful per se, the church becomes so caught up in the missio Dei that its members are naturally 'detectives of divinity.' The church's very being becomes missional so that all it is and does serves the mission of God. (Pages 11-12)

I was astounded, however, by the claim that in 2008-9 "the missiological concept of the *missio Dei* was only just taking hold at the level of theologically trained clergy" in the English context (page 10). It makes me aware of how ahead of the curve things have been in other less-established contexts around the world. But the fact that it is on the agenda is fruit of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report from 2004 (which they mention), and seminal works such as Wright's *The Mission of God* from 2006. It elevates the importance of works such as these and other significant efforts (Forge Network etc.) around the turn of the millennium.

These three forms of engagement coalesce and have their natural conclusions in what it means to live and act as a church community. Clearly it also challenges some of the precious ways we have viewed leadership. The challenge for church leaders can be personal and overwhelming; it's one thing to talk about missiological concepts in theory, or even to bring some sort of analysis to the church as an institution, but adaptive change cannot be led except by example. It means dealing with the "trap" of modernity that makes the "professional" leader "the primary basis of identity for both the community and the leader" while at the same time recognising that there is a role for "spiritual discernment, spiritual leadership" (page 13). To avoid this trap the leader must take a "personal spiritual journey, sometimes called a rule of life" (page 14) that faces and avoids "our own desire for control and certainty, especially in choppy waters" (page 15). Personally speaking, I have known the pain and frustration that comes from falling into this trap, seeking a vain fleeting peace in control and drive and avoidance, when the call is to trust God even as impotence

and anxiety loom.

In the end, Room and Keifert present “six missional practices” (page 20). These should not be seen so much as steps in a recipe but practices that found and inform a “diffused innovation.” The hope is that through them cultural change might advance throughout the community while naturally responding to strengths and weaknesses and the very real human aspects that will either welcome or resist it.

dwelling in the word – a shared method of Bible that seeks to heed what God is saying in his Word, recognising that the Holy Spirit will speak in Scripture not only to individuals but *through* the members of the body, one to another. It sounds simple but, when taken seriously, allows a shared experience of being undone and remade by the Spirit of God through the Word of God.

dwelling in the world – involves the shared journey of listening and hearing what is happening within and around the community. It allows hard things to be heard, and undiscovered ways to be revealed. It anticipates the *activity* of the Holy Spirit in the real world who calls us beyond ourselves.

hospitality – is engagement beyond the community that comes neither from above or below, but both gives and receives, “taking turns hosting and being a guest” (page 22). It recognises that the best place to encounter both world and word is at the point where relationships open up. It turns us towards those “people of peace”–“friendly looking strangers”–that we often ignore, who are right in front of us, who are possibly not what we had expected or hoped, but who are open to heed and be heeded.

corporate spiritual discernment – is placed not at the beginning, but in the middle, as the shared experience of dwelling in word and world begins to develop a sense of “What

is God's preferred and promised future for our local Church?" "Who is God calling us to join in accomplishing that preferred future in our community?" (page 22)

announcing the kingdom – recognises that there is a gospel to share, and a Saviour to speak about. It is adaptive, not impositional: Putting words to the recognition of how the Spirit of Christ is already at work, it invites others to join him, and to enter into the kingdom not as some abstraction but in how he is present in the here and now.

focus for missional action – urges a further and clearer pursuit of the journey of discernment:

*"Every ministry setting has more good things to do and more good things to love than any local church can rightly or well take on. Without the practise of discerning a focus for missional action, the sixth missional practice, the others lead to a kind of disorderly love and dissipation of energy and life into nothingness. **St. Augustine refers to this pattern of behaviour as sin and it is a very common practice in most local churches.**" (Page 23, emphasis mine)*

These six applied practices require further thought on my part to fully understand how they are meant and why they are emphasised over other actions and disciplines. The groundwork on which they are based certainly matches my own experience.

By laying this groundwork Rooms and Keifert have helped answer my own questions of "*What* is going on?" in a mission-adverse church. In the six practices they also attempt to answer the "So what" question: "So what can we do about it?"

Given the veracity of their starting point, they certainly cannot be lightly dismissed. Critical and biblical enquiry would serve to strengthen what should be strengthened, and correct what might be askance. This is something I hope to attend to at some point.

My main caution (which is not insurmountable) is this: behind

these books is an ecclesial **product**. *Partnership for Missional Church (PMC)* is a church consultancy framework through which churches who want to explore these practices can “buy in” facilitation and support over a three-year process. Monetisation like this isn’t necessarily bad; it is akin to 3dm (focussing on discipleship and missional communities) or NCD which takes an inventory based approach to balanced growth. But there is a little discordance when a framework which resists a culture of faddish quickfixes is promulgated as something that literally needs a ™ symbol. Nevertheless, PMC does better than most to transcend the irony; a non-linear messy frustrating journey of discernment is not the stuff of populism. To the extent that it will play its part in the developing trend-changing culture until mission is a natural rhythm—it will do itself out of a job and, in that possibility, it would rightly be seen as a success.