



Leading Cultural Change

By Dr. Gregory Wiens

As we have talked about culture these past few weeks, the question inevitably arises: "How do you change culture?" A pastor recently recommended a book to me entitled, ***To Change The World...*** by James Davison Hunter. This book challenges many of the current theories within Christianity concerning how to change the culture of the world we find ourselves in. Let me suggest on a microcosm level, the principles can equally apply to changing the culture of churches.

As I have stated earlier, every church has a dominant culture. A church culture exists because influential individuals in the life of the church formed it and it was reinforced through years of behavior. So how do you change the culture of a church?

I have seen many pastors come into a church and attempt to change the culture over night. This can be done, but at great risk to the church as well as the pastor. When one attempts to implement change instantly in predominant cultural issues, there is a great backlash. These issues can be leadership style, worship style, preaching style, clothing style, or values reflected in many of the ways we have already discussed.

When sudden changes are made, people react. Some may feel the battle is not worth fighting and will simply leave the church. Others will fight openly and aggressively, while still others will passively push in not so obvious ways; like stop giving, supporting or initiating. A critical leadership skill for all pastors and leaders is knowing how to change the culture of a church. You can change cultural attributes very quickly but the true culture will only transition through time*. If you knee jerk the culture without appreciating how culture changes you are setting yourself and others up for significant pain and trauma. The length of time it takes for a healthy cultural transition depends on a lot of different factors.

One of the big factors in understanding how cultures change is knowing the difference between "top down" and "bottom up" cultural change. Most people think you change the culture from the bottom up. We think if get enough people who believe like we do the culture of the church or organization will change. This is true to a certain extent, but there are limits to this type of cultural change. If we leave cultural change to be determined by the majority, then the change will be slow, erratic and not necessarily healthy or desired. And most of us have seen where most of the congregation wants to pursue a direction and yet the cultural norms (read cultural leaders) won't allow it.

Most often cultures are changed through influencers who are leaders in cultural architecture. In other words, there are people in every organization (church) who intentionally set the culture whether they know it or not. Those who have been in

churches awhile know clearly who these people are. They are often the matriarch or patriarch of the oldest or biggest family. It might be the one who has given the most money over the years, or the person who has held the majority of leadership positions. These people are at the center of the culture.

To change culture, you must become a cultural architect. This often happens when a new pastor comes with fresh or different ideas. Most often cultural change occurs when someone with influence begins to challenge and change the existing cultural center. These people usually are close enough to the center to have influence, but not so close as to "become one of the gang", so they use their influence to move the center of the culture. They change the culture by intentionally scripting behaviors, attitudes and values.

If you closely study the New Testament Church you will see that Paul served in this role as the church transitioned from its first life-cycle to its second; that is as the church transitioned from being centered in Jerusalem to Antioch (read *Acts 8.1-13.1*).

When a pastor comes to a church, he/she would be in a position to be a cultural architect. They would be a person of influence, but not immediately at the previously established cultural center. So a pastor can use his/her influence to move the center of culture. They do this through helping people in the church see the need for change, enabling them to grieve the loss that they will experience and most importantly guiding them through the chaos which is caused in cultural transitions.

Changing the culture of a church is a necessity. As a church grows and reaches its peak impact, it will inevitably begin to plateau and decline. All churches go through these natural rhythms. For a new life-cycle to begin, the culture of the church invariably will need to adjust as well. Good leaders understand how to bring about this change both from the top down and from the bottom up.

*A great book on change is: ***Managing Transitions: Making Most Change***, by William Bridges. See Appendix E, The leaders role in times of transitions.