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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Should We Fine-Tune Our Church's Internal Culture?

Every group in which people work together to achieve a worthy purpose develops an *inclination* toward thinking, behaving, and organizing in specific ways. Examples include PTAs, civic clubs, corporations, political parties, soccer teams, and congregations.

Over time, a group's thinking and behavior *inclinations* harden into *habits*. In each aspect of the group's life—how its participants think about important issues, how they behave toward their leaders, how they interact with the general public, etc.—the group's *habits* begin to define the group's thinking and behavior patterns. Soon, outsiders are able to say with considerable accuracy: "That's the way they operate."

Over time, some of the group's thinking and behavior *habits* grow into *obsessions*. Thus, if someone in the group starts thinking and behaving in new ways, anxiety increases among the group's participants. Among several participants, that anxiety grows into frustration, then irritation. These individuals vent their feelings in conversations and attempt to steer the group back within the boundaries of "the way we've always done things."

Over time, a group's habits and obsessions become its *culture*. Like every other type of group, a congregation's *culture* often blocks its people from recognizing and coping with new challenges. For example, the type of people who live in the surrounding community may change, but the congregation's culture stays the same, frozen in time.

Fortunately, a group's culture is not genetic. Unlike the built-in instincts that cause Canadian geese to fly south each fall, churches can fine-tune their culture. When that happens, they often achieve dramatically different results in their ministries.

Relocation Is Not Enough!

A small church located in a small-town suburb since 1929 moved 1.8 miles—from a tiny, parking-starved site to a ten-acre site across from the new elementary school and one block east of the high school. Numerous new houses were springing up nearby.

But the new location was not enough! During its first three years on its new property (2001-2003), average worship attendance at First United Methodist Church, Wolfforth, Texas, remained the same. Nation-wide research adds insight to that experience. Location in a growing-population community does *not* automatically

increase a church's attendance: 35 percent of *numerically declining* congregations in the United States are located in growing-population areas. And 24 percent of *numerically plateaued* congregations in the United States are located in growing-population areas. (Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008] page 84)

Internal Culture Change Begins

During the next five years (2004-2008), the Wolfforth Church's average worship attendance grew from 134 to 262. Its various ministries in the community and beyond multiplied by more than 500 percent. Giving to community and world-missions causes increased 900 percent.

Several factors moved the church's internal culture in a new direction. Three seem especially influential: (a) preaching and teaching that emphasize the ten action-passions of evangelical theology, (b) introduction of Leadership Training Classes, and (c) creation of a Visionary Leadership Team.



"Ah, ah ... don't touch that dial, Pastor."

Fine-Tuning the Leadership Structure

In the classic organizational system—used in some form by every denomination—what happens when a pastor wants the church to move in a new direction? He or she tries to persuade one of the committees and the governing board. Resistance is usually polite but strong. Conflict sometimes ignites. The shift toward new ideas is slow and incremental.

Fine-tuning the Wolfforth Church's classic organizational model unfolded gradually, in roughly the following sequence:

1. After the pastor arrived in 2004, worship attendance increased, along with expansion of the congregation's ministries. These positive evidences paved the way for acceptance of new ideas.

2. Almost two years later (2006), the pastor recognized that further increases in ministry effectiveness would be difficult under the congregation's present organizational structure.

3. The pastor developed the Ministry Action Plan (M.A.P.), a twelve-page booklet that contains standard planning elements such as Vision, Mission, Values, Strategy—concepts familiar to some of the lay leadership from their secular business settings. The Ministry Action Plan also contained organizational-structure concepts such as the Visionary Leadership Team, the Ten-week Leadership Training Sessions, the Discovery Groups, and the Ministry Action Cells.

4. The pastor distributed a copy of the Ministry Action Plan to governing board members for review and study about a month before discussing it as a group. The M.A.P. was *not* introduced as a way to replace the congregation's traditional organizational structure but was introduced as a way (a) to *compliment it* and (b) to encourage greater involvement of laypersons in the church's various ministries.

5. The pastor presented the M.A.P. booklet for discussion at a governing board planning retreat.

6. The governing board officially adopted the Ministry Action Plan.

7. A dozen people experienced the ten-week Visionary Leadership Training. The objective in these training sessions is to develop leaders who, working from this model, (a) encourage people to read their Bibles, (b) pray, (c) listen to what God wants for our congregation, and (d) move in unity to accomplish the mission of making disciples.

8. The first of six Discovery Groups launched. Each group meets monthly. The groups accomplish discussion,

feedback, and communication in ways not possible in the governing board and committees.

9. The governing board established a Visionary Leadership Team and assigned this group the authority to discuss new ideas. The pastor and the Team—which meets every other month—consider new ideas and big decisions *together*, and *only after* communication with and feedback from parishioners in the six Discovery Groups that meet monthly. After an idea is thoroughly processed and polished, the Leadership Team recommends a new ministry or a major change to the governing board.

10. Out of discussions in the Discovery Groups, new ministries began evolving in the form of Action-Cells that spontaneously formed as a result of recognizing important needs. These Action-Cell Ministries involve new people and expand the number and quality of ministries within the church and outside the church—in the local community, the nation, and across the world.

11. By 2009 thirty-six people had graduated from the church's Visionary Leadership Training Classes. This process gradually created a greater cohesiveness, unity, and sense of community that overpowered the change-resisting “way we've always done things around here.” As metamorphous to new ways of thinking and behaving gradually happened in several dozen individuals, the congregation as a whole gradually took on new values, priorities, thought patterns, and behaviors.

12. The new leadership structure continues to evolve, as the pastor and lay leadership experience it together.*

The Bottom Line

An old Texas proverb says, “If all you ever do is all you've ever done, than all you'll get is all you ever got.”

An old Chinese proverb says, “When the wind changes direction, there are those who build walls and those who build windmills.”

What is our congregation building?

* To obtain the 76-page document in which Curtis House details (a) the congregation's Mission Action Plan, (b) the ten-week Visionary Leadership Curriculum, (c) how the Discovery Groups function, (d) the church's forty-nine ministries, and (e) a list of the ten action-passions of evangelical theology, download free of charge *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 34, Changing a Church's Culture Changes Its Future* by Curtis House (www.TheParishPaper.com).