

How can a congregation change its culture?

It helps to focus less on structure and instead envision the church as an organism.

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

Published on September 10, 2024



Century illustration (Source images via Getty)

A woman recently told me she had been asked to be a trustee at the congregation where I am now an interim pastor. “I turned it down,” she said, “because I don’t like working with structures.”

She might benefit from a change of metaphor: congregations are living organisms. They need tender, loving care from all those concerned—pastors, lay leaders, ordinary folk serving a multitude of roles or simply showing up for worship.

Church structure is important. But church culture matters, too: it’s what makes any organization a living organism. Think of structure as the skeleton and culture as the circulatory system. In a healthy organization, the two must be compatible.

Interim pastors intervene in congregations facing troubles or dealing with the departure of a long-term pastor, and they often recommend structural changes. But structural changes do not necessarily change the culture. Congregational culture takes a long time to change. It's like turning a ship around—you have to do it slowly, or it might capsize. So longer-term pastors are probably in a better position than interim pastors to bring about cultural change: it takes persistence, patience, and time. Besides, as Peter Steinke says, "There's no universal treatment for every organism—or congregation."

What is church culture? It consists of the things that churches do habitually, reflexively, without necessarily thinking about them. Culture is hard to legislate. It's not something that can be put into bylaws, a constitution, or a congregational handbook.

David Brubaker is an organizational consultant who has worked with congregations for nearly 40 years. Drawing from David Augsburger, he offers four "R" words to identify organizational culture, each of which is expressed in both formal and informal ways:

- **Rules**, from standard operating procedures to unspoken taboos
- **Roles**, from organizational charts to more casual understandings people share
- **Rituals**, from worship and other ceremonies to informal celebrations and laments
- **Roots**, from official history documents to deep but unnamed emotional ties

Brubaker asks organizations like churches how their culture has changed over time. Organizational culture is so hard to change, says business theorist E. H. Schein, "because it represents the accumulated learning of a group—the ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving the world that have made the group successful." What's more, "the important parts of culture are essentially invisible."

How is a congregation's culture made visible? One way is how it treats and cares for pastors. Another is how its pastors work with lay leaders and nurture their gifts. Both elements are part of the culture.

Does an atmosphere of criticism and gossip prevail in the congregation, or one of affirmation and encouragement? I know of one congregation said to have "a culture of carp"—as in complaining, not fish.

What stories does a congregation tell about itself, and who are the storytellers? Whose voices matter more, both officially (in congregational meetings) and unofficially (at coffee hour)?

What do congregations do to build internal relationships? What do they do outside their four walls as mission to the community and the broader world?

Who uses the church kitchen? Moreover, who controls it? In some church buildings, this is the most contested territory there is. My daughter was once told, “You don’t belong in here”—while using her own congregation’s kitchen for an official church function.

Does a congregation struggle to meet its budget? Are people very generous with their money and time? I once told a congregation I was pastoring, “You are so generous in every way—except with your time.” They were busy professionals, typical suburbanites. How difficult is it for a congregation to fill volunteer positions?

What makes a congregation anxious? How does it handle anxiety? How do its leaders lead in times of anxiety?

How long does it take newcomers to feel at home in a congregation? When my spouse and I made a geographical move 11 years ago, we visited quite a few churches. We went back to one congregation three times, hoping it might provide a spiritual home for us. On the third Sunday, I asked a friend from that congregation, “How long does it take to feel part of this congregation?”

“It took us a year,” he replied.

Back in the car, I told my spouse, “I don’t have a year to make this change.” We didn’t go back again.

Congregational discernment and decision making is one area where some restructuring might actually help with cultural change. One simple technique for improving discernment: in congregational meetings, no one can share their own perspective without first saying what they heard the previous speaker say.

Another idea, one I learned from people in the Friends tradition: consider all ideas and perspectives shared with the congregation as a gift. Once a gift is shared, it is up to the recipients to decide what to do with it. The giver releases control over it. It belongs to the congregation for its discernment.

Congregations that want and need cultural change need to keep asking these questions:

- Who are we as a people?
- What is God calling us to be, to do? What are we here for?
- What promptings of the Spirit suggest some changes in our life and mission?

Cultural change in a congregation demands wise, spiritual, and skillful leadership—along with good structure. It also needs congregants who ask themselves, How is my participation in this church caring for it as a living organism?