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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Core Values Drive Our Church?

How do we explain these contradictory facts?

Fact #1: During recent years many churches wrote excellent vision and mission statements—assuming that this process would increase their congregation’s effectiveness.

Fact #2: After a few years of setting goals and making plans based on those carefully crafted words, many churches report no improvements in their effectiveness. As one layperson said, “Year after year, we continue to do pretty much what we’ve always done.”

Congregational behavior does not stem from what its leaders write on paper but from the core values of its members. Congregations *always act on their core values*, not on their goals and plans. If a church’s core values do not support its vision statement and mission statement, the writing process creates zero change.

What are congregational core values? To understand the powerful nature of core values, think of an apple core: the seeds in that core are the apple tree’s core values; these seeds create the future. *A congregation’s core values are deeply ingrained thought-patterns that motivate behaviors.* Core values are those beliefs and convictions that are extremely meaningful to the majority of a church’s leaders and members. Usually unwritten and unstated, a congregation *expresses its core values* (deeply ingrained thought-patterns) *in behaviors* such as the following:

- Ministries to which most of the members are willing—or unwilling—to give time and energy
- Programs and activities with which most of the members feel comfortable—or uncomfortable
- Policy-setting and planning decisions that key laypersons vote for—or against
- Clergy and staff member actions that key laypersons affirm—or oppose

Unfortunately, a congregation’s core values are partially invisible to its members and key lay leaders, submerged in “the way we have always done things here.”

What causes a congregation’s core values? Just as the physical health of human beings derives from multiple causes—such as exercise, diet, genetics, and stress—the actual core values of congregations derive from a complex

mixture of many factors. Three important ones:

1. *Theological focus.* The theological imperatives that Jesus taught his first disciples summarize as follows: (a) Encourage people to grow spiritually in their relationship with God. (b) Love our neighbors in church, community, and world. (c) Offer Christ to people outside our walls. (Luke 10:27 and Matthew 28:19-20)

Congregations rarely give *equal* emphasis and energy to all three of Christ’s theological imperatives. That selection-decision regarding which one gets greater emphasis decides a church’s theological focus, the biblical imperatives about which the church feels the most passionate.

2. *Core-values-driven ministry activities.* The ministries, or behaviors, that congregations emphasize arise from the deeply held core values of (a) the present pastor, (b) previous pastors, (c) influential lay leaders, and (d) the congregation’s traditional behaviors from previous years and decades. Year after year, the congregation tends to unconsciously live out in its thinking, planning, and behaviors the core values that stem from those four influences.



3. *Current community context.* The most effective ministry activities are consistent with the needs of people in the community in which the congregation is embedded. Unfortunately, church tends to lag about one generation behind in its ministry behaviors; thus, reducing its ministry effectiveness. Therefore, the leaders of effective churches continually ask, “What ministries are *currently* effective in this particular community, at this point in history?”

Summary: To be effective, a congregation’s theological focus and its core-values-driven ministry activities must match the reality of its current community context.

Why do clergy and lay leaders often fail to recognize their congregation’s core values? Inability to see and understand the invisible power of core values stems from at least four factors.

1. *Church leaders tend to confuse their PREFERRED core values with their ACTUAL core values.* Clergy and lay leaders often articulate what they want to happen in their congregation. But in their desire to strengthen congregational effectiveness, lay leaders and clergy often blur the distinction between the *ideals* toward which they are striving with vision and mission statements and *actual* core values (deeply ingrained thought-patterns that have driven a congregation’s behaviors during past years and decades).

2. *Church leaders tend to confuse core values with other terms that comprise congregational personality.* Words such as ethos, hopes, dreams, priorities, goals, vision, mission, plans, and strategy are not congregational core values. A church’s core values are the deeply ingrained thought-patterns of influential lay leaders and members—beliefs and convictions that determine “*what* we do in this congregation” and “*how* we do things around here.”

3. *Church leaders tend to confuse the qualities listed in secular “Values Statements” with core values that motivate congregational behaviors.* This substitution is a natural inclination. That type of “values statement” usually contains words that reflect *ideal* thinking and behaviors. Church leaders often see these on the walls of hospitals and businesses.

But using classic corporate values-statement models in congregations has at least five flaws: (a) They are more like a list of *ideal* ethos, spirit, or behavior descriptions than a list of *actual* core-values (deeply ingrained thought-patterns) that produces effective ministries. (b) They are not directly related to the theologically rooted vision, mission, and core values that Jesus taught his disciples. (c) They seldom influence the behaviors of church staff and members. (d) They are difficult to measure. (e) They are difficult to hold church staff and members accountable for accomplishing.

4. *Church leaders tend to confuse printed vision statements and mission statements with core values.* For example, one congregation expresses its vision as “Seeking life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ.” That church

states its mission with these four words: “accepting, transforming, equipping, and sending.”

But those four valuable and biblically rooted words do not define that congregation’s *actual* core values. Rather, those words express that congregation’s *preferred* core values.

How can a congregation discover its actual core values? Look at recent history. What has been happening during the last five to ten years? The most accurate way to obtain that information is a survey of leaders and members. These people know the actual core values that drive a congregation’s vision, mission, strategies, and tactics.

During a typical worship service (not a holiday weekend, late May, or summer), do a seven-minute “Personal Opinion Survey for Worship Attendees” to identify the “Top Ten Core Values” that drive most of this congregation’s *thinking, planning, and actions*.*

How can a congregation transform its desired core values into actual core values? Anyone who reads unpleasant information on bathroom scales knows that information does not equal transformation. Facts do not automatically produce behavior changes.

Does this mean that congregational change is impossible? No! That pessimistic conclusion would deny the power of God’s Spirit to bring change to individuals and churches.

Horticulturists can produce a new variety of fruit tree by grafting new limbs to an old tree. Pastors and lay leaders can add new knowledge and new skills to a congregation’s repertoire of ministries. By this grafting process, pastors and lay leaders can strengthen the ministries essential to their congregation’s overall health and effectiveness (a) with this generation of members, (b) in this community, and (c) at this time in history.

Transforming a *desired* core value into an *actual* core value does not happen by writing a vision or mission statement. It happens when several influential laypersons experience “cognitive restructuring.” They revise some of their deeply ingrained beliefs and convictions. Usually, this is a several-year process.

What process is our church using to transform *desired* core values into *actual* core values that drive congregational effectiveness?

*E-mail HrbMiller@aol.com for a free survey process, titled “What Core Values Drive Our Church?” plus information regarding several optional how-to resources that leaders can use to transform *desired* core values into *actual* core values. (This free survey process is sent only in electronic form, in response to an E-mail request, not in response to requests by U.S. Mail, FAX, or telephone.)

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