Building A Gospel Culture in the Contemporary Church: Ten Imperatives for Church Leaders

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Abstract: As the church finds herself amidst ongoing disruptive changes that are exacerbated by the pandemic, the need for church leaders to reexamine the way the church operates is not merely an important necessity but an urgent priority. The purpose of this article is to outline how church leaders can recalibrate the culture of the church to align with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Drawing on insights from Organizational Leadership and Psychology research, three key features of church culture are discussed in relation to the adaptive challenges that impact the church. As practical implications for church leaders, the article proposes ten leadership imperatives to shape and nurture the gospel culture in the church.

Research Highlights

- The author identifies three ideal characteristics of church culture that today church leaders must deliberately and consistently cultivate. These are adaptive culture, psychologically safe culture, and aligned culture. The three elements of church culture are broken down into ten practical imperatives for church leaders to implement at the practical level.
- The author highlights the importance of the gospel in shaping the church's culture. When the church lives out the gospel culture, Christians will be better equipped to be culture-changing agents as they carry out their various callings in society.

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INTRODUCTION

The pervasive lack of leadership capacity to detect slow, gradual changes that are salient to organizational effectiveness has been noted approximately three decades ago.[1] Our neurobiological apparatus for sensing threats to survival are designed primarily to detect sudden and dramatic shifts in our surroundings, but not small and incremental changes. We are not fittingly equipped therefore to detect any gradually developing danger (e.g., climate change, moral decline, shifting societal values, etc.) before it becomes an emergency. A most poignant example within the church is the declining influence of the church as the salt of the earth and light of the world, particularly in the West.

It has been widely observed that the church is in a state of liminality in the contemporary missional world.[2] That is, the relevance of the church has been radically challenged by the societies that are now increasingly post-Christian, multicultural, and multifaith. The latest survey of church leaders in Australia, for example, reveals that while church attendance remains steady between 2006 and 2016, the number of Australians identifying themselves as Christians has continued to decline as secularism and religious plurality are on the rise.[3] The so-called religious 'nones' (i.e., those who choose not to identify with a religion) are rapidly growing in America to the point that their number is equal to the size of evangelical Protestants in the country as they increasingly question religious teachings they deem to be at odds with their secular beliefs.[4]

I would hasten to note, however, that this worrying trend has been observed primarily in the West but not globally. It is reported that between 1900 and 2020, the average annual growth of religious people in general (1.27%) and Christians in particular (1.17%) is higher than that of nonreligious people (0.52%).[5] Nearly 2.56 billion people identify as Christian in 2022, with most growth occurring in Africa, followed by Asia, and predominantly in the Pentecostal or charismatic groups.

Despite these encouraging statistics, the overall impact of the church in the public arena has been arguably in decline. The biblical teachings on divisive issues in the society, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, abortion, racial equality, poverty eradication, and ecological crisis are being radically challenged as the church influence is being marginalized to the periphery. Broadly speaking, the church has not been well prepared to deal with the seismic shifts that have occurred in the world in subsequent waves—globalization, digitization, and disruption. Today three external forces are interacting with each other, forcing every organization to adapt or die, namely (a) social-demographic shifts (e.g., global migration and urban movements, multicultural and multi-generational workforce), (b) technological breakthroughs (e.g., smart cities, wearable tech, AI), and (c)

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[1]This point was noted and discussed by management scholar Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

[2]For more discussion on the church entering a liminal space, see, for example, M. Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007); A.J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997); A.J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

[3]Mark McCrindle and Shannon Wherrett, *The Future of the Church in Australia* (Norwest: McCrindle Research, 2020).

[4]See Gregory A. Smith, "A growing share of Americans say it's not necessary to believe in God to be moral," *Pew Research Center*, October 16, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/16/a-growing-share-of-americans-say-its-not-necessary-to-believe-in-god-to-be-moral.

[5]Status of Global Christianity 2022, in the Context of 1900–2050, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianityz.

'Black Swan' events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden disruptions triggered by the pandemic have forever and fundamentally altered this already-but-not-yet context in which the church serves her King.

More contextually, as the world's fourth-most populous country in the world with 278 million people, Indonesia will have a demographic dividend where over 70% of its people will be in the prime working-age group (15–65 years of age) by 2045. Note, however, that the degree to which this so-called Golden Generation will benefit the country depends on how these hundreds of millions of millennials and Generation Z will be equipped. Many of them are city-dwellers and digitally savvy generations with an untethered belief in moralistic-therapeutic-deism.[6] Generation Z, in particular, might be spiritually more receptive than their predecessors, but tend to have a shorter attention span and higher mental anxiety post-pandemic.

While this socio-demographic means that there will be significantly more image-bearers of God per square inch in Indonesia, particularly in its big cities (hence, an untapped opportunity for evangelism and mission), the onus is on the church leaders to be able to reach out to them without dumbing down. Failing to engage them would mean that they will struggle to bring God's shalom to the city where God stations them.

What does it mean for the church? The church is encountering adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges occur when a glaring gap exists between the church vision and the church operational capacity that the expertise and practices cannot bridge. Churches who are experiencing inertia, unwilling to nurture a culture conducive to change, will have difficulties dealing with adaptive challenges. Small churches often do not have the necessary resources to pivot to the new context they find themselves in. Bigger and more established churches tend to be more insular, myopic, rigid, and inflexible as they grow bigger, focusing more on their internal operation than the external disrupters.

If there is a lesson that the church can learn from the larger organizational context, it is the downward trajectory of organizational lifespan. The average shelf life of business organizations has been shortened from 61 years in 1958, 25 years in 1980, 18 years in 2011, to 15 years today[7]. While the trend occurs primarily in the corporate context, it could also happen to different types of nonprofits, including churches. Behind the accelerating rate of corporate disappearance is its inability to adapt[8]. A similar trajectory could also happen to churches of all sizes and stripes. Had it not been for the sustaining grace of God towards her redeemed people on earth, many churches would soon evaporate!

How should church leaders respond to these external disrupters? As a prototype of the ideal gospel community eagerly expecting the consummation of salvation brought upon by Christ, the Head of the church, church leaders need to examine the way the church operates.

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[6] It's a phrase coined by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and refers to a reductionist version of God as a cosmic therapist or divine butler who exists to serve us.

[7] As many as 75% of the companies listed in Standard & Poor's 500 are projected to disappear by 2027. The tracking of the corporate life-span study was conducted by McKinsey and reported regularly on their website. See, for example, Marla Capozzi, Vanessa Chan, Marc de Jong, and Erik A. Roth, *Meeting the innovation imperative: How large defenders can go on the attack* (McKinsey on Marketing and Sales, July 2014).

[8] Some of the early rigorous studies were conducted by E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973), and subsequently by Arie de Geus, *The Living Company* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

Among the many factors that affect the church effectiveness, the church culture is arguably the most strategic factor for church leaders to re-shape. The remainder of this article will examine how church leaders can foster the gospel culture in a local church.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Broadly speaking, organizational culture is typically understood as the tacit social order of an organization[9]. It defines what is proper or improper, acceptable or unacceptable, encouraged or discouraged within different levels of an organization. It guides and shapes the attitudes and behaviors of organizational members.

In the church context, culture represents the shared experience of grace for the undeserved recipients that is corporately shaped by the gospel. One can tell a church culture by observing phenomena like how people relate with each other (e.g., deep or superficial), how leaders get selected (e.g., ad-hoc or systematic development), or how conflicts are dealt with (e.g., openly and graciously or secretly and harshly).

A few research findings on organizational culture are pertinent to consider in the effort of building a gospel culture. Mindful of the space constraint, I will highlight the three most salient points. First, having the right beliefs, values, or teaching does not guarantee the right culture. In the church context, church leaders often preach and teach gospel doctrine yet neglect gospel culture. They are often unaware of the discrepancy between the

gospel doctrine they hold and the resulting anti-gospel culture they unintentionally develop. In other words, it is possible for leaders to preach the doctrine of grace, but their church culture is marked by legalism and judgmentalism rather by grace.

A case in point was provided in Galatians 2:11–21, where Paul rebuked Peter and, by extension, other leaders who were with Peter when they behaved in a manner that was not aligned with the gospel (*"When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel,"* 2:14). Paul was not accusing Peter that he nullified the doctrine of grace. Instead, he was accusing that their behavior nullified the culture of grace, which by implication denies the doctrine of grace.[10] It is sobering to think that even Peter, an Apostle and church leader, did not realize how his behavior had betrayed the gospel doctrine that he deeply believed in.

This gospel doctrine-culture gap was not merely a first-century phenomenon; many churches today are still grappling with it. Think of a church that teaches sound soteriology that we are all equally sinners saved by grace, yet the leadership team at that church comprises individuals from a certain race and ethnicity. This parochial and insular practice does not reflect the diversity in the congregation which comprises people of various races and ethnicity. More importantly, it blatantly ignores the biblical ideals of church leadership selection (e.g., 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1) which focus on spiritual maturity rather than superior ethnicity. In short, faithfulness to the gospel of Christ necessitates both

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[9]For a succinct and recent introduction to corporate culture, see B. Groysberg, J. Lee, J. Price, and J.Y. Cheng, "The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture: How to manage the eight critical elements of organizational life," *Harvard Business Review,* January–February 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-leaders-guide-to-corporate-culture.

[10]In his commentary on this passage, Martin Luther explained, "But Peter offended through dissimulation, and thereby has established the necessity of the law. He had constrained both Gentiles and Jews to revolt from the truth

of the Gospel, had given them great occasion to forsake Christ, to despise grace, to return to the Jewish religion, and to bear all the burdens of the laws, if Paul had not reproved him, and by that means recalled the Gentiles and Jews which were offended through this example of Peter, to the liberty which is in Christ Jesus, and to the truth of the Gospel." See Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Erasmus Middleton, Kregel Classic Reprint Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 2006).

doctrinal purity and relational beauty that is marked by grace and truth, humility, and courage.

Second, if leaders do not manage culture, culture will manage them. Every church will have a culture, but the question is whether they have the right culture (i.e., the gospel culture). A church culture does not happen overnight but must be intentionally nurtured, lest we have an un-managed, under-managed, or mis-managed culture[11]. On the other hand, it is insufficient to implement a quick-fix solution, such as conducting a 'feasibility study' to copy and paste the culture of a thriving church into the struggling local church. Church culture is often 'the X factor' that is not easily replicable in other churches. It is naïve to assume otherwise (think about how many churches in the US want to be like Rick Warren's Saddleback or Tim Keller's Redeemer church!).

Third, leaders play pivotal roles in creating, fostering, and shaping the organizational culture.[12] What they acknowledge, measure, and pay attention to will determine the attitudes and behaviors expected at the church. However, the most powerful means for leaders to influence culture is through serving as an embodied example of the values that will be part of the culture**.** Leaders play critical roles in shaping gospel culture in a local church.

Building on prior research in the field of Organizational Leadership and Psychology, I will highlight three ideal features of church culture that contemporary church leaders need to intentionally and systematically nurture. These are adaptive culture, psychologically safe culture, and aligned culture. The following paragraphs discuss ten practical imperatives for church leaders to bring our discussion to the most practical level.

A few notes are worth mentioning to set a proper boundary for the remaining of this article. First, it is not a theological treatise on ecclesiology, nor is it a systematic review of organizational culture. That delimitation notwithstanding, the article assumes a gospel-based theological framework (i.e., the gospel is the good and momentous news that God is renewing all things in creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ). [13] Second, the article is not a discourse on the dynamic relationship between church and culture (e.g., Christian cultural engagement, missional contextualization, faithful presence in a secular world). Rather, the article emphasizes how the gospel should shape the church's culture. When the church has a gospel culture, Christians will be better equipped to be culture-changing Christians as they fulfill their various callings in the world.

ADAPTIVE CULTURE

Perhaps no other biblical texts highlight the importance of an adaptive church culture better than 1 Corinthians 9, where Apostle Paul emphasized the need for Christians to be missional adaptive by foregoing his personal rights. The gospel, his all-embracing life ambition (the word 'gospel' appears eight times in the entire chapter), regulates the way

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[11] Due to the dynamic nature of an organization, measuring culture can only provide a snapshot of the culture. However, there are a few tools that exist to help churches understand the gap between where they are and where they want to be. For a discussion at the popular level, see B. Groysberg, et al., "The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture: How to manage the eight critical elements of organizational life."

[12] T.E. Deal and A.A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[13] I have discussed at length how the gospel should shape Christian leaders in Sen Sendjaya, *Leadership Reformed: Why Leaders Need the Gospel to Change the World* (London: Routledge, 2019), 10, which was later translated to Bahasa Indonesia by Literatur Perkantas Jatim under the same title in 2021.

he lived his life, particularly his rights (the word 'right(s)' appears ten times), in order to win more and more people to Christ (the word 'win' appears five times).

In an emotionally-charged defense before his ungrateful critics at Corinth who questioned his ministry, he laid out his personal rights to be appreciated as an apostle of Jesus Christ (v. 1–3), to be financially supported (v. 4), to have a spouse who is also financially supported (v. 5), and to be freed from working for a living so he can devote his time exclusively for the Gospel ministry (v. 6). He then proceeded by giving five compelling reasons in support of those rights from Scripture and common sense that forever silenced his critics who should have known better (v. 7-14). Paul, in essence, exclaimed, *"C'mon* Corinthians, use your common sense, read your Scripture, be fair, know your religious tradition, and remember Christ's command. And you will know that I don't pluck these rights out of thin air!"

But Paul did not stop in verse 14, for the whole point of airing his rights in public was to set an example for others that he did not cling to any of those rights, let alone maximize them (v. 15). Instead, he surrendered his rights to Christ and, as such, endured the consequences rather than putting "an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (v. 12b).

Paul, a highly educated, most religious, and free Roman citizen, summarized his life in the following sentences: "I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more (v. 19)"; "I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some (v. 23). Indeed, the most effective strategy in mission has less to do with abundant financial resources or pre-packaged approaches like Evangelism Explosion or the Four Spiritual Laws (as

useful as they might be) and more to do with renouncing our personal rights to Christ to be adaptive and flexible.

Paul knew that, in Christ, he was free to exercise his rights but to win as many people as possible to Christ, he was willing to forego his rights. However, in becoming all things to all people, he did not compromise himself morally and doctrinally. Instead, he was willing to accommodate others in *cultural* areas but not in *moral* and *doctrinal* areas. His message to the Corinthians was loud and clear when it comes to moral precepts (e.g., "Flee from sexual immorality"— 1 Corinthians 6:18) and doctrinal teaching (e.g., the resurrection of the body—1 Corinthians 15). No second-guessing with these absolutes. But when it comes to cultural issues, he was very adaptive. Paul's adaptive leadership can be summarized as follows: "In your adaptive flexibility to serve Christ, be like a chameleon. In your absolute fidelity to Christ, don't be a chameleon. And for the sake of the gospel, know the difference!"[14]

That willingness to be adaptive should be a key feature of today's church culture. Leadership effectiveness is dependent in large part upon the context, and as outlined in the introduction, the church finds herself in a disruptive context with major forces interacting simultaneously to create adaptive challenges.

Leadership Imperatives

How can church leaders build an adaptive culture at the church? **Imperative #1**. Preach the gospel to yourself every day. Many leaders merely assume they understand the gospel, but they really do not. They find it hard to relate the gospel to their leadership roles (e.g., the way they use power, how they deal with criticism or handle conflicts, etc.). What many leaders need is a thorough recalibration of

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[14] This three-sentence summary first appeared as an Instagram post on my account (@sensendjaya)—it underscores the adaptive approach Paul took for the sake of the gospel.

their hearts to the gospel of Christ. They need to drink every day from the bottomless well of the gospel regardless of whether they have been Christian leaders for five years or five decades. The gospel is so rich; it gives us humility and courage at the same time. Humility to acknowledge that our combined past experiences amount to nothing in the current pandemic-wrought challenges, and courage to navigate through the uncertainties with our hands firmly leaning on the everlasting arms of our mighty God.

Imperative #2. Befriend ambiguities and uncertainties in ministry. Leaders face adaptive challenges when the challenges they encounter mutate from complicated to complex challenges. Fixing an electronic vehicle like Tesla is a complicated problem given its sophisticated electronic mechanisms, but dealing with the multilayered ramifications of the pandemic is a complex problem. In the former, the issues are considered 'known unknowns,' and there is a clear cause-and-effect linkage that a team of experts can troubleshoot. In the latter, no one has the expertise because they operate in the 'unknown unknowns,' that is, the unknown issues are unknown to anyone. In such domain, the solutions are tested on-the-go as emergent practices, which may or may not work. There are no pre-packaged, off-the-shelf solutions that work.

Church ministry in the post-pandemic era is filled with both 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns.' Leaders should continually challenge their deeply held values that are no longer relevant (without compromising sound doctrines). They should be willing to let go of certainty (i.e., the old ways of doing things) and experiment with new ideas while keeping an eye on the long-term vision. The goal is to come up with new solutions to the

problem and new ways of seeing the problem. It is not sufficient for leaders to think outside the box. They need to see the box entirely differently.

Imperative #3. Embrace new mindsets and learn new tools. Being adaptive is not so much about accurate prediction; rather, it is about continuous preparation. It is about testing, failing, and testing new approaches and practices to solve new challenges. Leaders should be willing to set aside their ego and ask themselves regularly: "What is it that I need to unlearn this week?" as an important step to building adaptive culture at church. Not only should leaders embrace new mindsets, but they should also learn new tools useful for leading the church. For example, instead of employing linear thinking in solving problems, embrace systemic thinking. Instead of merely engaging in short-term planning for the church, do collective scenario planning sessions.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE CULTURE

Research shows that individuals, at any given time, always engage in a sort of tacit calculus at micro-behavioral decision points.[15] They perpetually assess the interpersonal risk associated with behaviors such as asking a question, seeking feedback, reporting a mistake, or proposing a new idea). In such an intuitive process, one weighs in on the following question "If I do it here and now, will I be embarrassed or criticized or penalized?" A psychologically safe culture provides the psychological space for individuals to do so without being judged. It has been found to be a key predictor for creating high-performing, innovative organizations.

In the absence of a psychologically safe culture, honest conversations about difficult yet highly important issues never occur. Data

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[15] Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organisation: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2019).

from numerous airline accidents suggest that what causes plane crashes are almost always a lack of communication or communication errors. Critical information is not being communicated to and among pilots because of fear of its potential consequences (e.g., loss of face).[16] A similar pattern was observed at the onset of the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan when its officials failed to inform Beijing of the potentially deadly consequences of the virus[17]. Like many organizations, churches often make it their default to keep information confidential and provide it only on a 'need to know' basis. Church leaders should flip this around that make information sharing (rather than hoarding) the default mode unless there is a biblical and logical reason not to. When people feel they operate in a psychologically safe culture, information travels up and down freely without the need to be filtered.

A psychologically safe culture creates a culture of candor at church where individuals have the courage to voice their opinions (or, in biblical terms, speaking the truth in love, and not just *the* truth of the gospel, but any truth). However, church leaders can create a culture of candor only if they themselves are immersed in the gospel. The gospel enables leaders to not live for people's approval because Christ, the one whose approval really counts, has fully and eternally received them on the cross while they were still his enemies. Nevertheless, the gospel also empowers leaders to live for people's approval for the sake of serving them and bringing them closer to Christ. As I have written elsewhere, because of the gospel, people's opinions *do not* matter, and for the sake of the gospel their opinions *do* matter.[18]

Leadership Imperatives

How do leaders cultivate this culture of candor? Since leadership is better caught than taught, leaders need to model the behaviors they want to see in others.

Imperative #4. Encourage people to speak the truth upward. Leaders need to protect voices from below. Yet they often forget that because of their position of power, people lower in hierarchy or status are typically reluctant to tell inconvenient truths accessible to them but not to the leaders. These truths are vital for the leaders to know, but they would never learn about these truths if an open and transparent upward communication channel is not consciously designed and encouraged.

Speaking unpleasant truths upward is challenging because people's natural impulse is to tell others only what they want to hear. People hoard information, engage in groupthink, and tell their pastor or elder only what they think will please or appease them. Countless research studies point to people's reluctance to speak the truth upward. As human beings, we have a good, innate desire to belong, but as sinners, we know too well that that good desire has turned into an ultimate desire. We want to be liked by everybody, and prefer to be seen as part of the family rather than troublemakers. Christians are probably worse than others in a sense because of the added pressure to behave as peace-seeking followers of Christ (which, unfortunately, is often done incorrectly). As such, the pressure to conform is naturally high, which has been proven to block the organizational capacity to grow and innovate. The high power distance and collectivistic culture in Indonesia magnify this tendency. To counter these natural tendencies,

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[16] This account is shared in Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

[17] See Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Local Officials in China Hid Coronavirus Dangers From Beijing, U.S. Agencies Find," *The New York Times*, September 17, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/world/asia/china-coronavirus-beijing-trump.html.

[18] See Sendjaya, *Leadership Reformed*, 124.

leaders need to consciously decide to democratize information, flatten the hierarchy, and provide a safe space for people to voice their concerns upward.

Imperative #5. Encourage participation in the decision-making process. We need to recover the lost art of collective decision-making at church. The most visible way for church leaders to appreciate and empower one another in church meetings is by inviting each person in the meeting room to speak. Most church meetings are dominated by a select few extroverts who speak the first, the loudest, and the longest. They tend to drive the agenda, even if they do not have the best ideas. The introverts often get neglected (i.e., the other half of the people in the room) who often have brilliant ideas but need to be prompted to speak up. Introverts do not necessarily avoid interacting with people. They just easily get overloaded with loud voices and prefer to channel it elsewhere. Wise leaders know that better quality decisions are reached when a diversity of voices is considered.

In larger circles, it is important to involve key stakeholders in making decisions. There is a saying in Latin *'nihil de nobis, sine nobis"* that means "nothing about us without us." That essentially means that any representative should make no decisions without the full and direct participation of group members affected by that policy. Practically speaking, it means that if the church board meets to make decisions that will affect the church youth groups (or the street children they want to minister to in their next mission program), representatives of these groups should be invited to voice out their views.

Imperative #6. Recognize and appreciate contrarians. Of course, there are people who give contrary opinions for the sake of giving contrary opinions. However, if there are well-meaning motives behind dissenting opinions, they are helpful for leaders. Even when the opinions are wrong, they at least serve as reminders that leaders are not the fourth member of the Trinity and therefore are not infallible. As such, church leaders should avoid the temptation to listen only to views that make them feel good and despise those that make them think hard. In church's formal meetings or informal interactions, they should encourage others verbally and repeatedly to challenge their own assumptions and ideas.

In order to invite different opinions around the table, leaders must learn better to utilize their ears rather than their mouths. The late management guru Peter Drucker once quipped that "listening is not a skill; it's a discipline. Anybody can do it. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut." [19] In church meetings that aim to make key decisions about the church's future (e.g., when to meet onsite vs. online), that would mean practically that leaders should be the last to convey their opinions and views to let others speak first. There is a reason why listen and silent are spelled with the same letters.

Imperative #7. Encourage healthy and productive debates. Many church leaders do not know how to have a civilized disagreement with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Productive conflicts, or any conflict for that matter, are avoided at all costs in the name of superficial unity. Because of this conflict-avoidance mode, many ideas discussed in meetings are not challenged and refined. They are half-baked ideas. Worse, many solutions reached, because they are not the best solutions, only become problems in the future. Think about the solution to split church services into traditional and contemporary

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[19] Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Practices and Principles* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15

services. It might be a quick-fix solution, but what if it becomes the seed of problems such as worship wars, intergenerational conflict, and so forth.

Church leaders need to learn to foster task conflicts (rather than relationship conflicts) that focus on the issues and problems. Such initiative requires the leaders to first embrace vulnerability and be ready to admit their limitations and mistakes. If leaders model it, they would encourage others to do the same.

What stops a healthy, productive conflict to occur at church is because many leaders are doctrinal bullies. They use sound theological arguments to show their superiority—attacking those who disagree, indoctrinating those who agree and judging those who are still unsure. I would hasten to note here that learning biblical doctrines are crucial for every Christian. But doctrinal bullies spoon feed doctrines to people without allowing room for doubts or encouraging them to think on their own feet. They create narrow-minded and arrogant Christian parrots rather than curious and humble students of the Word.

ALIGNED CULTURE

Studies repeatedly show the importance of aligning the organizational culture with strategy, system, and structure. [20] Think about wheel alignment on cars that needs to be performed on a regular basis, not only to ensure the safety of the car and the people within and around the car but also to ensure the optimal performance of the car in terms of handling impact, fuel efficiency, tire wear, etc. In a similar vein, the church as an organization of people needs to align its culture with the rest of the organizational operating mechanism to ensure it stays on its track.

Culture alignment is not an easy task because organizations are naturally evolving constantly as it interacts with other systems and variables within and outside the church. Moreover, the rate of change has been rapidly accelerating since the pandemic. The pandemic confirms what has been well documented in the management literature that past organizational performance cannot and will not predict future organizational performance. It is naïve, therefore, to rest on our past successes.[21] As the church operates in uncharted territory in the post-pandemic era, church leaders who think they have been successful thus far must be vigilant to avoid becoming prisoners of their own success.

It is essential to highlight the role of leaders as organizational architects. Indeed a key responsibility of church leaders that is often neglected is to build and foster a most conducive environment for the gospel growth to occur within each individual and collectively. This responsibility is strategic if we consider the fact that there are only so many leaders can do to change individuals. No doubt only Jesus can bring about a life-giving and life-transforming change in our lives. Leaders are just conduits of that grace of the Lord Jesus. Leaders' talents, personality, charisma, and strengths can facilitate that operation of grace until such a point when they become a hindrance. If leaders think they could change another person by the volume of their voice, the power of their words, or the allure of their charisma, Jesus did not have to come!

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[20]In a study I conducted with my colleagues, we found that servant leadership is more effective under low formalized and low centralized structure, see N. Eva, S. Sendjaya, D. Prajogo, A. Cavanagh, and M. Robin, "Creating strategic fit: Aligning servant leadership with organizational structure and strategy," *Personnel Review* 47,

no. 1 (2018): 166-186, https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-03-2016-0064.

[21] Microsoft founder Bill Gates once remarked that "Success is a lousy teacher. It makes smart people think they can't lose."

But church leaders can intentionally foster the best possible context for Jesus through his spirit to do his sovereign work at church, and within every person he sends to the church for the leaders to minister. Here are a few evidence-informed leadership imperatives to consider.

Leadership Imperatives

Imperative #8. Role-model the behaviors that are critical to the cultivation of gospel culture. Of all strategies leaders can navigate to shape and change culture, the most important is leaders' attitudes and actions that are visible to others. They signal to others that what is essential and non-essential in the organization, and as such, are powerful shapers of culture.[22] In other words, the way they shape the church culture has little to do with charisma and a lot to do with serving as a living example of gospel characteristics that make up the culture. What leaders *do* are far more vital in determining the church culture than what the leaders *say* (preach or teach).

An example might best illustrate this important point. A newly installed, influential leader at the church turns out to be domineering, condescending, and even bordering on bullying towards other leaders and volunteers. This anti-gospel behavior has been observed repeatedly, creating a bit of concern among the most active volunteers. The ensuing action (or lack of action) of the church board towards that individual will significantly shape the church culture. Everyone at the church will be watching to see how the church board will respond. Furthermore, that response will be an important learning moment for them. It is a defining moment to see whether what is being preached on Sunday morning sermon will get applied in the church context.

Three things worth noting here in terms of how leaders shape the church culture. First, what they pay attention to and ignore, get excited and upset about, or encourage and discourage. The second is how they react to critical incidents and church crises. Third, the criteria by which people at the church are recruited, promoted and held accountable. In the above illustration, which of these two options would the leaders take. Will the church minister or elder speak the truth in love to that individual in question? Or, will the problem be conveniently swept under the rug given the high status and contributions of that person?

If the first option is chosen, it is clear that rather than calling it a sinful behavior, the leaders accept it as part of the normal functioning of the church. Hence, it will be part and parcel of the church culture. It does not matter much if people hear from the pulpit and official communication channel about the importance of honoring one another above ourselves (Romans 12:10), building up one another (Romans 14:19), being kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32), etc. When people see the knowing-doing gap, they instinctively know that the real church culture is not one characterized by grace and truth but one ruled by powerful individual(s).[23] In such a context, any church strategy or program to create an authentic gospel community will be perceived with apathy as an exercise in futility. No authentic gospel community can be created at a church that fails to hold the authoritarian and bullying leader accountable.

The first option is a much wiser course of action for leaders to take to ensure alignment between culture and strategy. That is, for the

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[22]Edgar H. Schein, *The corporate culture survival guide: Sense and nonsense about culture change*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 98.

[23]Sadly many variants of this anti-gospel church culture exist, the most notoriously known of late was broadcasted

in a highly popular podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* which I heartily recommend, https://www.christianity today.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill.

church minister/elder to speak on behalf of the church board to erring to the erring leader above, apply the procedure prescribed by our Lord himself in Matthew 18:15-18, confront his/her sin, and, if necessary, discipline the person by suspending his/her leadership role in order to restore him/her to Christ. While this is not easy to be implemented in the Asian highly paternalistic and collectivistic societal culture, the gospel can and has created that change across cultures.[24]

Imperative #9. Harness Collective Intelligence of God's People. As a steward of the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:1), church leaders are responsible for managing and growing resources. The most important resource God has entrusted them under their care is the people of God. The best evidence of gospel growth within the people of God is the extent to which they live a gospel-centered life. To that end, the church must be a training ground where people come not to be served but to learn how to serve one another and together (and forgive each other whenever mistakes and failures are done).

In other words, although church leaders are the most pivotal forces in shaping culture, the way to shape it most effectively is by tapping into the God-given potential in each person at church. However, it takes a lot of gospel humility for leaders to value everyone's opinion. Just because a leader believes in the biblical teaching of the priesthood of believers and every-member ministry does not necessarily mean that they are ready to work together with other people as equals. If church leaders think they are always right, they miss the basic premise of the Christian doctrine that the fullness of God never resides in anyone but Christ. If they feel insecure or even threatened by the presence of younger and smarter

followers, they are, in effect, denying the sovereignty of God that they claim to believe in and teach. If they find that they are the smartest person in the church meeting room, chances are the smarter people have moved on to a different church. Church leaders should surround themselves with people more talented than they are and allow others to experiment and be creative without fear.

Imperative #10. Make the gospel the central organizing principle for church life. The best way to do it in the church context is to ensure that every church leader profoundly thinks about the gospel and its implications on their personal lives and church life. When they are capable of applying the gospel as the central governing principle for the church life, they should then be encouraged and empowered to make decisions freely. This is particularly relevant for decisions that have non-strategic organizational impact but are frequently made vis-à-vis strategic and risky decisions with unclear outcomes. It goes without saying that a proper level of accountability is expected for every decision made. With the gospel as the core decision-making principle, there is little need for church bureaucracies and red tapes. If the most innovative corporations empower their employees closest to customers to make better and faster customer-focused decisions, gospel-shaped churches should also empower leaders closest to church members/issues to make gospel-focused decisions.

One of the key reasons why smart people who truly love Jesus are under-utilized in many local churches is the fixation with church traditionalism. Please note that the culprit here is not church traditions but traditionalism. The following oft-quoted remark attributed to Christian historian Jaroslav Pelikan

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[24] Speaking the truth in love in a culture that highly values loss of face like Indonesia is particularly challenging, relative to that in a more egalitarian culture like Australia. That is what I found in a co-authored study. See A.A. Pekerti and S. Sendjaya, "Exploring servant leadership

across cultures: comparative study in Australia and Indonesia," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 21, no. 5 (2010), 754–780, https://doi.org/10.1080/09585191003658920.

clarifies the difference between the two: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."[25]

For senior church leaders to unleash every church member's creative potential, particularly Generation Z, they need to re-examine which past routines still serve the church well today and tomorrow, and courageously jettison those which do not. For young(er) church leaders, however, it is important to heed to the following Chestertonian wisdom "Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up."[26] Most traditions in the church that have been passed down from generations have a solid biblical rationale behind them, and the onus is for young leaders to learn and understand them.

If everyone at church feels appreciated and valued, they are more likely to give their 110% at church. If the gospel becomes the central governing principle of the church, both the senior and young(er) leaders would learn to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10), even if they have different viewpoints.

CONCLUSION

Like every other organization on the planet, the church is hard hit on all fronts by disruptive changes exacerbated by the pandemic. Many church leaders are languishing without a clear direction and sense of what to do, yet maintaining the status quo is no longer an option. What is needed is a movement to recalibrate the heart of the church leaders and, subsequently the church's culture, to the gospel. This movement is never about choosing

between past traditions and present realities, or between historical traditions and contemporary practices. Instead, it is a movement that seeks to manifest the timeless glory of God in Christ Jesus most clearly in the post-pandemic context.

While it is true that God's people can only progress with their mission if they stay true to their original intent and design as the salt of the earth and light of the world, that original intent and design may need to take different shapes and forms that befits the current context and challenges. The onus is on the local church leaders to be the catalysts and enablers of this gospel movement.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

The author is responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

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[25] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65–82. Another popular saying that opponents of tradition often use is tradition is a form of peer pressure from dead people or theologians. There is a merit in that insofar we practice something for the sake of practicing it without a definitive biblical principle behind it.

[26] The quote is taken from G.K. Chesterton's 1929 chapter "The Drift from Domesticity" in his book *The Thing* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929).

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