

A Primer on Culture-Adapted to a Parish

What is culture?

- A shared set of values (what we care about)
- A shared set of beliefs (what we believe to be true)
- Norms of behavior (how we do things)

What does culture “do?”

- Aligns effort
- Engenders shared sense-making/meaning making
- Increases predictability
- Encodes organizational lessons about what does and does not work

An axiom: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Peter Drucker What does this mean? That culture is more influential on behavior than any kind of strategy, no matter how well thought out. If the strategy does not align with the culture, it will largely fail.

What characteristics are part of a culture that can adapt, innovate and survive?

- Focus on the people. Prioritize the needs of your people rather than on the needs of the organization.
- Focus on the parish’s place within the larger Church. Make sure what you are saying and doing aligns with the larger “ecosystem” called the Roman Catholic Church.
- Collect and analyze data: Embrace data and analytics in decision-making rather than relying on just experience or judgment.
- Work collaboratively: No silos. Work in teams, across the parish, between parishes and beyond.
- Get moving. Try ideas fairly quickly. Value the movement and what you learn over perfectionism.
- Embrace learning. Experiment, get feedback, and reward ongoing learning.
- Enable others. This is the work of the leaders: remove obstacles, share authority, affirm, and follow others’ leads all while holding them accountable for agreed upon outcomes.

How do you change culture?

- Recognize that this is the work of the leaders. It CANNOT be delegated. Leaders must align, balance, empower, articulate, communicate and demonstrate their own growth and development into the desired culture.
- Start with the “why.” Make the case for the change with the critical influencers/stakeholders. And make the case for all the elements within the organization (its culture) that will need to change in order to get to the larger outcome. Do it over and over again.
- Define the target cultural values and behaviors. What will it look like when the culture is changed. This is what it looks like and this is what has to happen in order to get there. For an example of some target cultural elements, see Nick Wagner’s article “What does a catechumenal culture look like?”

https://teamrcia.com/2022/06/what-does-a-catechumenal-culture-look-like/?vgo_ee=%2BK%2Bt

[h%2FjkN22FBcMCGtoMi2QOP8ZXmRzMvz3Yw%2BcA7gI%3D](https://www.hprweb.com/2014/07/ressourcement-aggiornamento-and-vatican-ii-in-ecumenical-perspective/) Then ask yourself about all the things that have to change to reach this description? And all that is already in place that may need prioritized, revitalized, affirmed and supported?

- Get input. Be synodal. Put these ideas out there and LISTEN, broadly and for as long as it takes to hear from a wide swath of the parish. Get “culture coalitions”, people who see where you are trying to go and are passionate about it, to host these listening sessions. Make sure to continue to pray and seek the Spirit’s wisdom as it flows from listening.
- Build pathways/bridges to the desired culture. Preserve and strengthen cultural elements that are aligned. Identify aspects of the existing culture that need to come to the forefront, making sure to honor the enduring legacy of what has been by weaving it into the culture of the future. These are the first bridges to the future. The Vatican II practice of *ressourcement*¹ does this.
- Reinforce the desired culture in all of the parish’s councils, committees, groups, clubs, activities and events. Attitudes and perspectives need to be accompanied by concrete behaviors. Those new behaviors need noticed, affirmed and amplified. Parish life needs assessed through the new cultural lens consistently.
- Rapidly reward the emerging culture. When the new is on display, highlight it. Reward it. Affirm it. Keep telling the stories about it. And be consistent with this. People respond to affirmation and this affirms that the new culture is “real”. This helps short circuit “the way we’ve always done things.”

How long does it take? It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Early adopters will make it seem like it can be pretty quick. But they are usually few, and will need to be part of demonstrating the change concretely so that those on the “fence” about it all see that it is happening and come along. When that happens, you will have enough people in the new culture to see real movement. Some say this takes minimally 18 months of concerted effort. Others say up to 36. In the Church, I’d say it could take 5 years or more.

My perspective...to get you started. When I think about the culture in my parish, here are some of the cultural elements:

1. We value: nice, pretty, comfort, not asking too much (under the guise of respecting how busy everyone is), charity and justice, Vatican II liturgy and liturgical practice, intellectual pursuits, faith that does not challenge the other belief systems we hold, lots of years of belonging to the parish, children and youth, our award-winning building. We value having openly gay/Lesbian people among us. I’d love to hear from others what they think we care about as a parish and what evidence they have for that.
2. We believe: Well, we have two creedal statements, the Lord’s Prayer, the Scriptures and the Tradition. We have the sacraments. But I could not say, with regard to any of that, the degree to which we share belief in what they articulate. Engagement with all of these is varied. Enthusiasm for them often not apparent. But I think it is fair to say we believe God and Jesus to be true, we believe Jesus to have really lived. I am uncertain about who believes what about the Holy Spirit. We believe sacraments should be more important than they are. We believe it should

¹ Eduardo Echeverria. “Ressourcement,” “Aggiornamento,” and Vatican II in Ecumenical Perspective.” July 24, 2014. Homiletic and Pastoral Review.

<https://www.hprweb.com/2014/07/ressourcement-aggiornamento-and-vatican-ii-in-ecumenical-perspective/>
Accessed 6-23-22

be ok that we not have shared beliefs. We believe faith is private and individual. We believe our parish is really great. We believe it's ok to be baptized and not otherwise engaged. We believe all people are created in God's image.

3. Our norms: We do liturgy according to Vatican II principles first, and US and diocesan principles secondarily or not at all. We act as if the parish is still very small even though it is squarely a medium sized parish. This looks like
 - a. The works of the parish are carried out by a few people, many of whom do multiple jobs consistently and have for a VERY long time.
 - b. Systems for communication, succession planning, onboarding with training and formation, saying hello and good-bye are all immature or non-existent.
 - c. Everything has to go through a small group of people. There are a lot of gatekeepers because of the amount of responsibility they have, left over from the small parish model.
 - d. Silos and secrets are more prevalent than collaborations and transparency.

So this is the kind of exercise that gets you started on culture change. Pope Francis is calling for a culture that is synodal. #synodjourney That's not been the way. In order to change the culture, it will require this kind of concrete, real work.

Want help? Contact us at www.pentecostvigilproject.org We can help you think about this, make a plan, lead conversations, visit and tell you what we experience as outsiders, and more. Our first conversation is free!

<https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-every-executive-should-be-focusing-on-culture-change-now/>