



Is your parish culture compatible with a missionary vision?

‘Culture is simply a shared way of doing something with a passion.’

BRIAN CHESKY, CEO, AIRBNB

Have you ever walked into a church and felt expected, welcomed, and ‘at home’? What you immediately sense as you enter a new community is something of the ‘culture’ of that community.

We must address our parish culture if we want to grow a fruitful missionary parish. Fr James Mallon in *Beyond the Parish* (2019) defines culture as ‘the environment we create by what we allow, celebrate and value’ in the life of our parish. ‘Culture is like an iceberg, 90 percent of which sits below the waterline, invisible to observers. We might not be able to see culture, but it influences everything we do.’

When beginning parish renewal, we can put a lot of energy into creating a vision and a strategy. We often use processes we have observed working successfully elsewhere, only to find they are less effective in our community. This can be crushingly disappointing. Peter Drucker famously observed that ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’. An unhealthy culture in our parish will nullify even the best strategies. Jesus’ parable of the sower in Mark 4:1–20 tells of seeds planted in different soils: some seeds produced plants that flourished, and other seeds produced plants that withered and died. The seeds were not the problem; the soil was. What is the ‘soil’ or the culture in your parish? Is your culture compatible with mission? Or will it actively work against your missionary vision and the strategies you are creating?

Creating a healthy culture

Few parishes have created their culture on purpose. Rather, over years, they have gradually drifted to where they are today. But they don’t have to stay there. The responsibility for changing culture resides with the leader: a great leader intentionally creates, shapes and maintains a healthy culture that will provide fertile soil for making and growing disciples.

In ‘[8 words that define your church’s culture](#)’, Stephen Blandino looks at what a healthy culture encompasses:

- 1. Vision:** A healthy parish culture begins with a clear vision, one that comes from the pastor’s heart and that generates passion for who we want to be as a community. Without vision, your culture is stymied by aimlessness.
- 2. Values:** As one of the greatest influences on culture, clearly stated values communicate what is most important in the parish. Values drive behaviour. In this ‘[3-step guide to developing better value statements](#)’, Carey Nieuwhof outlines a process that teams can use to develop value statements that drive a healthy culture.
- 3. Philosophy:** Every leader has assumptions, attitudes and preferred practices that guide their decision-making. For example, you might prefer a ‘team’ or ‘servant’ or ‘collaborative’ leadership style, and this might contrast with others in the team who understand leadership differently. If you want to better shape your parish culture, consider your underlying philosophies and how they shape what you do.
- 4. Traditions:** Even new communities have rituals and routines that are normalised and celebrated. Traditions such as a factionalism in the pastoral council can be symptoms of an unhealthy culture, but other traditions such as innovation, strong leadership and excellent conflict resolution are healthy and can be nurtured.

5. Language: The language you choose defines your parish's culture in people's minds. List the words you use most often in bulletins, emails, homilies and meetings—they are an enlightening window into your culture.

6. Systems: How do things such as property maintenance, hymn choices, baptism preparation and account payment get done in your parish? Good systems are effective, efficient and easy for people to engage with. They encourage good behaviours, and better parish culture follows.

7. Measurement: We measure what we value, and what we value creates our culture. Missionary parishes measure, for example, how many people have had a transforming encounter with Jesus, the proportion of Mass goers who are actively engaged in parish ministries, and the number parishioners engaging in faith formation.

8. Behaviour: Culture follows behaviour and perpetuates behaviour. If we want to grow a healthy culture, unhealthy behaviours need to be named, challenged and changed. This begins with a leader who treats people with respect, dignity, honesty and compassion, and who encourages this type of behaviour throughout the parish.

Key cultures for missional vitality

As well as addressing a parish's broad organisational culture, Fr James Mallon, in *Beyond the Parish* (2019), highlights the following specific cultures, which each need to be actively nurtured in an effective missionary parish:

Leadership: A healthy leadership culture empowers parishioners to broaden their concept of spiritual leadership beyond a perspective that sees their role as 'helping Father'. Leadership of a particular parish ministry is a response to a call that it is prayerfully and communally discerned, not earned or claimed. Delegating leadership is not just giving people tasks and things to do; it is giving them responsibility for an area of parish life and the authority they need to lead it effectively. Our parishes become more fruitful when we raise up leaders, multiply our effectiveness, and encourage people to grow spiritually and to deepen their commitment to mission.

Finding potential leaders is often a challenge, and the acronym 'FACT' can be helpful.

- **Faithful:** Is your potential leader a faith-filled person whose life is in broad alignment with Church teaching?
- **Available:** Is this person available and willing to keep the commitments they make, and can they fulfil this role without undue strain on other areas in their life?
- **Contagious:** Is this person good to be around, and do their behaviours spread love and health rather than harm?
- **Teachable:** Is this person open to learning new ways of doing things and to receiving appropriate feedback?

Evangelisation: Missionary parishes are intentional about reaching those who have not heard about Jesus and about leading them into an encounter with him. A culture of evangelisation is more than a program. It involves a parish choosing a tool for evangelisation, committing to that tool as its key disciple-making process, and resourcing it over an extended time.

Formation: As disciples, we are called to a life-long growth in friendship and intimacy with Jesus and with his Church. In many parishes, there is little growing and maturing happening. What we should want is a culture of formation to grow, where people desire to know and grow, and where there is a clear, step-by-step pathway to support them in this.

Worship: Liturgy done well leads to a prayerful surrender to God's will. It is about being a passionate and active participant. 'A culture of authentic worship refuses to tolerate sloppy, messy, irreverent liturgy,' writes Fr James. Authentic worship opens people's hearts to hear God's call and respond with their life.

Supporting the key cultures above, and helping them to grow, are two further cultures:

Quality: Our parishes need to display a culture of excellence rather than settling for mediocrity. We should provide good quality messaging, through inspiring music, excellent preaching and great sound systems. All of these elements allow the life and love of Jesus to be heard rather than tolerating or barely comprehending a good message delivered poorly. Our work for the kingdom of God is important enough for us to do it with excellence!

Invitation: A missionary parish is always focussed outwards, seeking to draw people into the life of the parish and into relationship with Jesus. This can only be effective if we teach our parishioners how to invite, and if we provide beginner-level events for them to invite their friends to. A culture of invitation is necessary to support the ongoing health of your evangelisation process.

If we want our parishes to be places where lives are transformed, then as leaders we must encourage people to relate to others as Jesus did, growing a community soaked with the Holy Spirit, for 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23)—a place people want to be!