

Developing a Missional Culture within the Church

David W. Boshart

Tending to the church's missional culture

The culture of any organization or living system has everything to do with whether that living system will die, survive, or thrive. Organizational psychologist Edgar Schein has made the bold statement that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and ... the unique talent of leadership is their ability to work with culture.”¹

In many cases organizational cultures are more “ecologies” than “machinery.” Because most leaders are not founding leaders of a living system, the task of leadership is more focused on managing and working with cultures than creating them. Nevertheless, fostering the development of a missional church culture requires leadership. Unless church leaders tend to the missional culture of the church, as the church interacts with the wider culture, the church's culture will tend to regress toward reflecting the values of the surrounding culture, stagnate with little sense of purpose, or devolve into ministries of cloistered self-service.

Cultures emerge, evolve, and are sustained by complex interactions among many influences. So it is with the church. Because the Christian church exists as a living system of disciples who are following Jesus in the world, some kind of church culture exists. At times in history, the culture of the Christian church has been vibrant and faithful, acculturated and declining—prophetic or compromised. The culture of the church has evolved and will continue to do so. But as Jesus promised, the church will survive history. The question is: What is needed of leaders to constructively manage or influence the church's culture in order to embody the church's missional vocation?

The *internal integration* and *external engagement* of missional church culture

According to Schein, organizational culture is defined as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration.”² The development of a culture is a learning process.

For a church that seeks to develop a missional culture, leaders will need to work with two broad facets of culture development. First, cultures are *evolving* as they interact with changes in the surrounding environment. Second, cultures are *self-reinforcing* as they organize around common affirmations, beliefs about the nature of reality, and practices that result in faithful or unfaithful witness. For the purposes of looking at missional church culture, these movements can be characterized in terms of *external engagement* and *internal integration*.³ These two movements help us to explore what it means to develop a missional culture.

Internal integration

First, let's examine some of the internal qualities of a missional church culture. The missional church will be *incarnational*. The church seeks not only to talk about the kingdom of God or forecast the

kingdom of God. The missional church seeks to embody life in the kingdom of God now. The missional church seeks not only to offer good news, but seeks to *be* good news. If the church is *bad* news, for instance, what witness to God's reign can it hope to sustain?

The culture of the missional church is *cruciform*. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the fullest revelation of God we can know. We have seen the embodiment of God's reign. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the outcome of history has already been decided. Through the cross of Jesus, God accomplished everything necessary to set all things right. In the missional church believers will be trained to conform to the way of the cross of Jesus, the path that leads to abundant life.

The culture of the missional church will be made up of people who are *reconciled* to God and one another. If reconciliation is the central work of God's mission in the world, then how can the church hope to sustain a missional culture if the internal life of the church is fractured and unreconciled? Of course, this doesn't mean that the church's life will always be characterized by agreement and sameness. But it does mean that to sustain a missional culture, church leaders will tend to "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" as an essential priority. This reconciled unity that the missional church enjoys is understood as a gift from God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The culture of the missional church will be reinforced through *biblical imagination*. The biblical narrative is the trustworthy source for what the missional church *knows* as we live in the world. As Lois Barrett and others so eloquently stated about this commitment: "The Bible is normative in this church's life. It sets the standard for our life as a people. The church reads the Bible together in the light of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to learn God's good and gracious intent for all creation, the way of salvation, and the identity and purpose of life together."⁴

The understanding of Scripture means that leaders in a missional church culture will make a prior commitment to obedience when the church reads its central text. This is not the same as a literalist or wooden approach to the Scriptures. We can and do learn about our experience of reality through many sources. *But* a missional church culture will be reinforced by a hermeneutic of obedience where all "claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason and political powers, need to be tested and corrected in light of Holy Scripture."⁵

In other words, the missional church sees reality from a particular perspective, from the perspective of a people whose citizenship is in, *but transcends*, the material world.⁶ Rather than accepting reality based on what is presented materially or through empirical demonstration, believers in the missional church receive training to see reality in a different way. Believers in the missional church culture see reality through the lens of biblical imagination where all observable things are understood in relation to the power of God at work in the lordship of Jesus on the earth, above the earth, and under the earth (Phil 2:10).

The culture of the missional church will be *distinctive*. Throughout the New Testament, we are reminded that we have been called to be a peculiar people.⁷ As kingdom citizens, our way of being is different from the world's way of being. This way of being is organized by abundant life as it is understood in the kingdom of God. If the culture of the missional church isn't distinct from the surrounding culture, if it doesn't cause the wider culture to raise questions, it is impossible to discern that a peculiar culture exists within the church at all.

Without leadership processes tending to these internal qualities, it will be impossible to sustain a missional culture in local, regional, national, or global expressions of the church. Tending to these common internal qualities is as essential to the church's ability to bear witness to the reign of God as tending to the church's engagement with the external environment.

External engagement

Second, we can examine some of qualities of a missional church culture as the church engages the external environment. Each of these external qualities can be seen in relation to their corresponding qualities of internal integration (see diagram at end of essay). While the missional church will seek to

incarnate, or embody, the reign of God as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, this embodiment is not only for the church's own edification.

The missional church will understand itself as *sent* into the world. As Wilbert Shenk has written, "Mission requires deep penetration into the world—for the world, against the world."⁸ The missional church will understand it has been sent into the world to bless the world, to proclaim and be a sign of the gospel. The missional church will also understand its vocation as having been sent into the world to confront the world where the world is broken, where injustice reigns, where sin persists. The church will be in constant training "to see where the sick are being healed, where the prisoners are being free. We will enter the world to, in fact, participate in the healing and the freeing."⁹

Formed in the way of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the culture of the missional church will, at the same time, be *contextual*. While the internal quality of a missional church culture will be distinctive or differentiated from the world, it is a community formed for the purpose of making the reign of God understood in the world. Rather than replicating the church in identical forms around the world, the missional church will adapt its forms to communicate the message of the gospel in the clearest terms possible.

Andrew Walls speaks of two principles that are simultaneously at work when the gospel is being introduced in any society. The first principle is the *indigenizing* principle. This principle suggests that "we are all conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by 'culture,' in fact."¹⁰ The other principle is the *pilgrim* principle, suggesting that while God accepts people as they are, God "takes them in order to transform them into what God wants them to be." So the gospel both helps us feel at home and puts us "out of step with our society."¹¹ These principles represent a tension that requires diligence to maintain but also keeps the church from devolving into Christendom models of mission as colonial replication.

The culture of the missional church as it interacts with the external culture will be *reconciling*. Just as a missional church culture will be internally governed by a commitment to live as the reconciled people of God, the missional church will announce and model the hope of reconciliation in a world imbued with competitive hostility. The missional church culture is self-renewing as the church engages the world, announcing in hope that through the power of God all things are reconciled in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The culture of the missional church will be *demythologizing*. In whatever temporal context believers finds themselves, the culture of the missional church will "unmask" the provisional powers of this age and point to the lordship of Christ and the promise that the kingdom of God will prevail.¹² Our common identity as the people of God is rooted in an understanding of a holy nation that transcends all temporal boundaries. It is a holy nation marked by the ingathering of all tribes, and peoples, and languages, and nations. A missional church culture will constantly "re-story" the world's nationalistic narratives. It will be a culture marked by people who are able to welcome—rather than live in mistrust of—the "Other."

Finally, a missional church culture leverages its distinctive quality and the practice of demythologizing so it is propelled into *engagement* with the external environment. It will do this as witness. Church history offers many examples of underengaging the surrounding context. This leads to cloistered Christian communities marked by distinctive practices and forms but so disengaged that the world sees little relevance in what is modeled. Church history also offers many examples of overengaging the surrounding context, believing that the church is duty-bound to solve all the world's problems.

A missional church culture will be formed in the understanding that "God is the primary agent of redemption, the world's and our own. We are but secondary agents. Our task is to point to the power of God's redemptive activity and to embody it."¹³ As Alan and Eleanor Kreider and Paulus Widjaja write, "After all, our mission as Christians is not primarily to bring solutions to the world's problems, but to

bring hope for redemption.”¹⁴ In this way, demythologizing is closely connected to engagement because the very nature of exposure to the *mythos* of the world makes the church vulnerable to absorbing wrong understanding about reality. Demythologizing is an essential discipline for distinctive engagement.

Keeping the internal and external in creative tension

When the qualities of internal integration—incarnation, cruciformity, reconciliation, biblical imagination, and communal distinction—are placed in tension with the characteristics of external engagement—a sent vocation, contextualization, reconciling witness, demythologization, and contextual engagement—we discover the crucible in which leaders cultivate and manage a missional church culture.

It doesn’t matter which comes first—internal integration or external engagement. The church in all times understands itself as part of the unfolding story of God’s people beginning with Abraham and continuing until the bridegroom returns for the bride. So it is not a matter of finding *our* beginning point from which we ready *ourselves* adequately for mission. Jesus sent the seventy in Luke 10 believing that the context of mission was itself the platform for formation. The disciples had no idea what powerful outcomes God would bring out of their witness. In Mark 6:30-44, when the twelve returned from their missionary experiment, the gospel writer refers to the twelve in the same story alternately as apostles—those who were sent—and disciples—learners.

Conversely, we show up in the world that has its own long history. Many people are fond of labeling epochs in world history—the Dark Ages, the Enlightenment, the Gay Nineties, the Roaring Twenties, or our current Age of Anxiety. There is no objective beginning point in which a missional church culture begins engaging the world. The church’s unfolding narrative always engages the world’s story midstream.

Instead, wherever we find ourselves in the story of God’s people and in the story of world history, when we place the basic questions of internal integration and external engagement in conversation we will naturally cultivate a missional culture. “How are we enlivened by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?”—internal integration—and “What is God doing in the world?”—external engagement. In this crucible we see that a missional church culture develops through a learning process that places internal integration and external engagement in a rhythm of action and reflection resulting in spiritual transformation. As we observe God’s activity in the world, animated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus at work in our body/ies, making ourselves available to the Spirit’s transformation in our lives, a missional church culture emerges reflecting the very nature of the trinitarian community.

Developing an unlearning/learning process

As we place these two questions in an action/reflection learning process, a missional church culture will develop as we unlearn what we have wrongly absorbed through external engagement and learn the power of God at work in us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Spirit transforms us “from one degree of glory to another.”¹⁵ To sustain this process, the teaching ministry of the church must be at the center of developing a missional church culture. Let’s consider some examples of unlearning and learning that contribute to a missional church culture.

Unlearning abstraction and learning participation

First, developing a missional church culture will require unlearning faith as conceptual abstraction. Memorizing a list of doctrines on a page, ascribing to the words of a written creed, for all their rich and dense rhetoric, will not align the church with the mission of God. The missional church will embody the ancient story. The church’s life is formed in the world through ambidextrous observation of and dramatic participation in God’s unfolding story of redemption from creation to Jesus’ return. The preferred method of learning in the missional church is ongoing intentional catechesis (instruction)

where believers submit themselves to the church's teaching in a context of external engagement and internal integration expecting that it will result in changed lives.¹⁶

Unlearning “settledness” and learning “sentness”

Second, a missional church culture will develop as the church unlearns an imperial identity as “settled” and relearns its missionary nature. The mission of the *settled* church imposes its characters, forms, and script in every context. The missional church contextualizes and embodies the mission of God uniquely in every place. The missionary church is freed from its need to control the forms of the Christian community in every place. As Wilbert Shenk writes of this model, “The gospel message encounters a particular culture, calling forth and leading to the formation of a faith community, which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian.”¹⁷ In this endeavor, the church fulfills God's purpose, “that the *wisdom of God in its rich variety* might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10, emphasis added). In this way the church embodies her missional vocation to the enhancement of our collective internal spiritual vitality and increases our capacity for contextual engagement.

Unlearning exceptionalism and learning Spirit-dependency

Third, a missional church culture will develop as the church unlearns the Western cultural mythology of *exceptionalism* and learns *Spirit-dependency*. Western Christianity, wedded to powerful, imperial political systems, is always at risk of absorbing various forms of idolatry unawares. In our external engagement we risk absorbing the illusion that the supreme nationalistic power is perpetual rather than provisional. Western Christianity has been lulled into a false assumption that through the powers of effectiveness, efficiency, innovation, the unprecedented power of the industrial military complex, we will be able to overcome every obstacle to our success. We can fix every problem and order the world as we want it to be. Yet the foundation of this thinking is crumbling even now. Western empires are mortgaging their future to preserve this false sense of security in the present. Exceptionalism is the great idolatry of the Western world and it, too, will come to an end.

Instead, a missional church culture will be a training ground to learn how to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to face every challenge in this age—not to conquer—but to meet every challenge with faithfulness. Developing a missional church culture requires an intentional catechesis that assumes a prior commitment to obedience and repentance as first steps of faith in Jesus. This catechesis then patiently walks believers in trust and dependency through the paths of obedience, patience in adversity, life in reconciled community, and yieldedness in communal discernment. Rather than insisting that a secure present needs to be preserved and protected, this catechesis imbues the church with a missional culture that lives by a robust eschatology. The missional church harmonizes itself to a groaning creation while we wait in patience for redemption (Rom 8:18-25).

To do this will require keen attention to where all members of the community are in their own formation story. All human communities include novices, practitioners, and elders in some form. So it is with the church. Without overt recognition of elders who model the way of the Jesus joyfully and faithfully over a long time, we diminish one of the most important influences in the development of a missional culture. Without this recognition, novices are easily overwhelmed in their opening journey or they prematurely adopt an authoritative voice to paper over their insecurities. The vitality of practitioners is allowed to stagnate in mediocrity where there is little inspiration to really “know” Christ.¹⁸ Naming our elders provides novices a place to securely submit themselves to transformative teaching. The modeling of elders provides a goal toward which practitioners of the Christian faith can aspire.

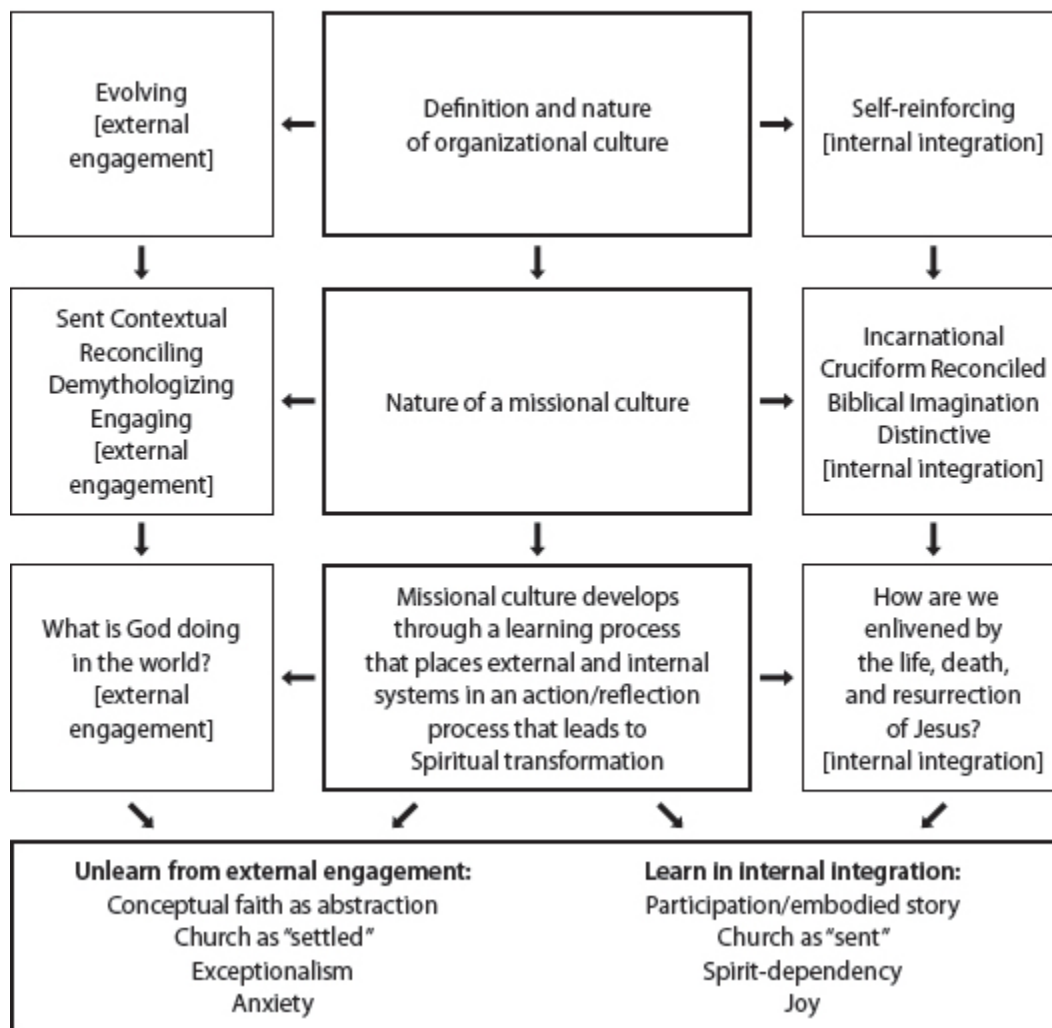
Unlearning anxiety and learning joy

Finally, as we answer the questions posed by external engagement and internal integration, we will

need to unlearn *anxiety* and learn *joy*. It has been said that when historians look back on the epoch that began after September 11, 2001, they will refer to the ensuing period as the Age of Anxiety. Much of our external engagement with the world reinforces a sense of anxiety, fear, and insecurity. This anxiety is a symptom that we are absorbing a new experience of reality, one in which ordering the world as we want it to be is no longer in our power, as though it ever was. So what are our choices? Shall we concede to the power of anxiety, which makes our fears more real? Or shall we unlearn anxiety and learn a new level of Spirit-dependency for the outcome of everything, believing that God is at work? By doing so we can grow in hope-filled joy. As Harry Huebner writes, “We praise God for transformations, including of our minds; transformations we can see and ones we know are taking place which we cannot see. After all, we know that Christ, the one who has already come, is also the one who is to come.”¹⁹

Perhaps this last point can become a sort of litmus test in the action/reflection learning process of spiritual transformation in developing a missional culture. As we place external engagement and internal integration in conversation with each other, surely the best test of whether the learning process is cycling in the right direction is if the character of the missional church culture is reducing in anxiety and increasing in joy. May it be so.

DEVELOPING A MISSIONAL CULTURE WITHIN MENNONITE CHURCH USA



1. Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), 2.

2. Ibid., 18. Schein's full definition is, "The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems."
3. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 4th ed., 2010; use the 2000 edition, pp. 73–115. Schein refers to these movements as external adaptation and internal integration. For the purposes of this essay I will refer to the evolving movement as "external engagement" because the church, by its nature, is not assumed to *adapt* itself to every external circumstance it meets. The missional church will, in some ways, produce an alternative society within the external environment that is quite out of step with and puzzling to the external environment.
4. From "Our Purposeful Plan: Desiring God's Coming Kingdom—A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan for Mennonite Church USA" (available at: <http://mennoniteusa.org/purposeful-plan/>, February 2014), 6; adapted from Walter C. Hobbes, "Indicators of a Missional Church," in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 160.
5. *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 21–22.
6. Phil 3:20-21, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself."
7. See Luke 10:21-24; John 18:36; Rom 12:2; Eph 2:11-22; 1 Pet 2:9-10.
8. Wilbert Shenk, *Forging a Theology of Mission from an Anabaptist Perspective*, Mission Insight series, no. 13, ed. James R. Krabill (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000), 4–14.
9. Harry Huebner, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 126.
10. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 7.
11. Ibid., 8.
12. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word*, 103.
13. Ibid., 143.
14. Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 79.
15. 2 Cor 3:18.
16. See Alan Kreider, *Patient Ferment: The Growth of the Church in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming in 2016). Kreider's [chapter 6](#) offers a rich description of transformational catechesis in early church perspective.
17. Wilbert Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 56. Shenk refers to this as the "contextualization" model.
18. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us go on toward perfection" (Heb 5:12-6:1). The word *perfection* here is from the Greek word *telos*, which refers to moving toward one's intended purpose or full realization.
19. Huebner, *Echoes of the Word*, 127.