1

The Value and Importance
of Church Personality

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CHURCHES ARE DIFFERENT. A program that earns enthu-
siastic praise at the church down the street could initiate heated conflict
in yours. Why? While there could be many reasons, it may well be
because of church personality.

There is no guarantee that spiritually mature people will work
well with one another. While they usually share the same ultimate
goals, there is no assurance that they will agree on the best way to
achieve these goals. When people's convictions are strongly held *and*
mutually exclusive (as were Paul's and Barnabas's plans for deal-
ing with John Mark in Acts 15:36–40), conflict can emerge, which
sometimes prevents progress toward the goals that everyone desires.
This is why it is important for church leaders to understand their
ministry styles and why it is essential to establish philosophical and
relational standards of qualification for your church leaders in addi-
tion to spiritual ones.

Once you recognize the conflict created by different ministry styles,
you can work proactively to lead your congregation toward necessary
change. Miscommunication that hinders the gospel will give way to

3

a fruitful and prosperous ministry. Posturing and infighting will be replaced by a spirit of teamwork and cooperation. A board once unable to agree on the most insignificant decisions can learn to deal successfully with the truly important issues of your church's ministry. Until you know and understand your church's personality, however, you cannot pinpoint what difficulties these differences present. You may not even be aware of them.

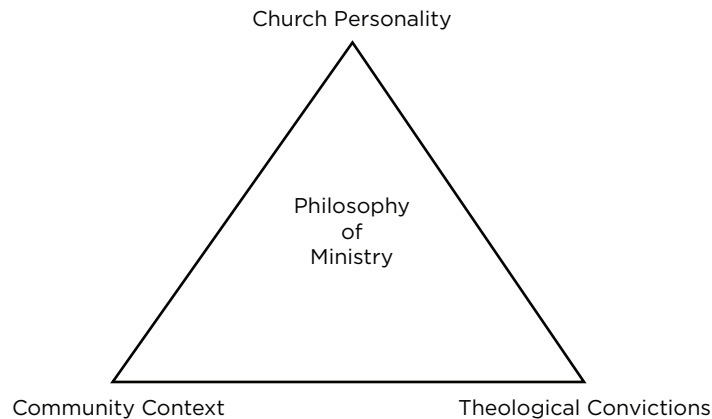## YOUR CHURCH PERSONALITY—WHAT IS IT?

Your church's personality is not the list of values published by your denomination and perhaps displayed on the wall outside your sanctuary. These are your church's ideals, and they set forth the mission of any church in your denomination—*not* how a church will carry out that mission. Your church has an identity—a set of values, beliefs, norms—that shapes its practices and behavior like a mold shapes plaster. The ideals of your denomination or church association are like the plaster: what goes into the mold is essentially the same for every church, but the shape it takes is determined by the mold itself. One mold is not inherently better than another, simply different.

IDENTIFYING YOUR CHURCH'S PERSONALITY

Assessing the personality of your church provides measurable data about the values and norms that give your church its shape. This data will, in turn, provide helpful assistance in leading the church in accordance with its specific mission. Understanding your church's personality can help you to set aside some of your impressions about what really matters in the church, and will tell you where your ideals diverge from the way things actually are. You will then be able to identify sources of conflict in the church.

Your church personality is one of the three elements that comprise your church's *philosophy of ministry* (as noted in Figure 1). Most churches are adept at expressing their theological convictions, most have established biblical standards of godly character for their leaders, and most work capably toward assessing how they can minister effectively

4

Figure 1: The three elements of church philosophy.

Church Personality

Philosophy
of
Ministry

Community Context

Theological Convictions

in their community contexts. But, sadly, many do not understand the nature of their church personalities—and therefore the roots of the conflicts they experience.

Think about the following contrasts regarding your church:

Achievement. How is effectiveness defined in your church? Is it measured by numbers of people, growth of the budget, or expansion of church facilities, or by the meeting of goals or the learning and maintaining of certain standards? In other words, how does your church define success?

Time Measurement. Is your church focused on the next quarter or the next five years? Is it acceptable to fail to reach goals next quarter but succeed over the long term? How much time is given for a ministry to do well before the plug is pulled? What is the church's attention span and what is its patience level regarding a new ministry effort?

Mistakes. Every church makes mistakes. How are they handled in *your* church? Are those who slip up chastised or accepted? Does your church give accolades to people who make the most mistakes because they are viewed as being on the cutting edge or stepping out in faith? Do people come together to fix a mistake, or step back and cast stones?

5

Does the church learn from its mistakes or tend to make the same ones repeatedly? How are mistakes defined, and by whom?

Decisions. Are most decisions made primarily by the pastor and the other leaders, or is congregational consensus a must? Are board decisions respected or second-guessed? Is reanalyzing a decision in light of new information encouraged or frowned upon? Are decisions generally explained or defended? How important is transparency in making decisions?

Risk. How is risk tolerated? Is the church more prone to attempt great things to the point of presuming on the Lord, or do the leaders tend toward small, measured steps? If you climb out on a limb, will people stand below to catch you, or wait to say "I told you so," if you fail?

Operating Principles. Does the church publicize official judgments or prefer to keep them private? Does the church consider impact on the community when making ministry decisions, or is the focus only on what is best for the members?

Trust. Do church members trust each other and you out of a sense of interdependency, or is there more of a spirit of independence and individualism? Do people tend to trust and submit to what they hear from you and the other leaders, or are they vocal in questioning authority?

Formality. Do you encourage church members to interact with you and the other leaders privately, or do you prefer a more formal process of communication? Do your meetings follow *Robert's Rules of Order*, or are they free-flowing? Do you encourage casual dress at meetings, or do you prefer that people appear in suit and tie? Does every classroom look immaculate, or does the building's appearance not matter as much as other things?

Members. Do you treat members with respect until they do something to violate your trust, or are you wary of members until they earn your respect? Do you think of members as assets with spiritual gifts that

should be developed? Are you more focused on events and programs or the people who populate them?

FROM YOUR PROMINENT SYMBOLS TO YOUR MOST UNCONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS

Church personality can be viewed at two levels: some aspects of its personality are visible and concrete, while many characteristics are intangible and subconscious. Basic assumptions that guide a church are deeply rooted and often taken for granted. For example, avoiding conflict rather than dealing with it directly is a subconscious norm that has major influence on the way the church does things consciously. For an insider, such subconscious characteristics are difficult to see, particularly if the individual has grown up within that church's personality. New members and staff people frequently are better positioned to identify these assumptions or values because they possess a fresh, objective frame of reference by which they compare one church with another.

Some of the most powerful expressions of a church's personality are the architecture and decor, the clothing people wear, the church processes and structures, its rituals and celebrations. Other manifestations of personality are found in commonly used jargon, letterhead logos, and brochures, as well as status symbols: offices and titles, for example. Outsiders can often spot these symbols easily upon entering a church. Longtime insiders, however, no longer recognize these symbols on a conscious level, as they have become part of the church's personality.

Publicly promoted or secondary values are communicated and understood at a more conscious level; these are the standards that you discuss, endorse, and encourage people to follow consciously in their lives. All members of a church I recently pastored, for example, became familiar with the values embodied in our slogan—"Transformed Together in Christ"—because we imprinted that statement on all of our literature. However, people were not as clear about the ways we handled conflict. Everyone recognized that we treated the Bible as our "only infallible rule of faith and practice" because we often talked about this value. They were not as knowledgeable about how we budgeted funds; this process was based on the subconscious

7

characteristics of our church's personality and therefore was conducted on a more informal basis, and was open to considerable flexibility, because that was a trait of our church personality.

PERSONALITY AS THE CHURCH'S "OPERATING SYSTEM"

Personality drives a church and its actions. We might call it the "operating system" of the church. For example, Microsoft Windows XP operates my computer, Macintosh OS X drives my son's computer, and one of the Linux systems runs the internal process of the computers of some of my high-tech friends. Although the manufacturers may not admit it, one system is just as capable as the other, even though they are quite different in the ways they are structured and run the computer's applications, or programs.

I am never conscious of the way the core of my computer operating system—something called the Windows system32 file folder—functions, even though it is essential to the machine's inner workings. When I try to examine the files in that folder, a message appears on the screen warning me that if I try to change any part of system32 then my computer will no longer work properly. In a similar manner, your church's personality is always working quietly behind the scenes, guiding how your church thinks, feels, and acts, and directing "how we do things around here." If a new pastor or staff member tries to change the operating system (i.e., the church personality) to fit his ministry style preferences, the church will malfunction in the form of conflict. Such attempts at modification are similar to installing the Linux operating system on top of Windows XP; the systems are not compatible and the computer will crash. It would be more practical to remove all the components of the computer and start afresh—which is possible although tedious in the computer world, but usually impossible to do in a church.

CHURCH PERSONALITY—YOU KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT

As you can see now, church personality is one of those realities that often is difficult to define distinctly, but something you know

8

when you see it. Newcomers identify the personality of your church (consciously or unconsciously) during the first five minutes inside your building. Not unlike what you sense about someone else's personality, some of the many things that may help others recognize your church's personality are:

- The friendliness of the people.
- The clothing of the members.
- The bulletin (or the lack of one).
- The items emphasized in the announcement time.
- The worship style.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Researchers tell us that 80 percent to 90 percent of what we convey is expressed nonverbally. Consider, for example, what you communicate when you hold your hands outstretched, palms up. Depending on the context, you may mean any of a variety of things. If you are making an appeal to your governing board with your palms up, then you may be asking, "Do you really want me to do this?" If you are in front of your Sunday school class, then you may be entreating them, "Please do this." Some gestures with lifted palms may be expressions of hopelessness, saying, "What can we do?" Others may implore, "I need your help."[1]

Consider other gestures you may use every day. A hands-on-hips stance can make you look more commanding or exude a self-assured, "take-charge" attitude. At times you may place your hand behind your head, usually a sign of frustration, uncertainty, or anger. If you fold your arms across your chest (especially if your arms are elevated and held away from the body), it is generally a sign of pride, loathing, or difference of opinion. Your hand gestures, eye movements, facial expressions, and body positions—your "body language"—tells others much more than what you say (or don't say) verbally. One expert speculates that a reason for President Ronald Reagan's remarkable popularity in the United States was his liberal use of display of his palms. In this manner he communicated geniality in a disarming, warm, and comforting way that led people to trust him.[2]

9

Recently, my family and I attended a church in our area for the fifth time. Within a few minutes of entering the building I could tell that the atmosphere was rather subdued. How did I come to that conclusion? The body language of the people: almost everyone was turned toward another member. Rather than being met at the entrance by greeters, as had occurred during our first four visits, we were left to ourselves as they huddled together to talk among themselves, with somber expressions on their faces. I interpreted the nonverbal communication to mean that the people were unfriendly.

There could have been any of several explanations for this behavior. To begin with, since it was a very hot day, the heat might have sapped people's energy and made them tired and unresponsive. Or it may have been that my family and I had visited often enough for people to get used to seeing us, and they therefore made no special effort to be friendly. It was not until we had been in the building for some time that we learned the 18-year-old son of one of the member families had committed suicide a few days before. Since the members were on an e-mail communication system, most of them knew about the death. They were grieving with the family and trying to make sense of the incident. The point is that the people of the church were communicating—nonverbally—and thereby creating an atmosphere that I mistakenly interpreted as unfriendliness.