**The Culture of Congregations: An Overview**

**Compiled by Rev. Don Eastman: updated 2022**

Nancy Ammerman, a professor of sociology of religion at Boston University, says that, **“Each congregation is…a unique culture. Congregations have distinct identities that can be seen in what they make and do together. No two congregations are alike.”**

Dr. Ammerman makes the following key points about the distinctive identity and culture of congregations: (see Ammerman in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, 1998, Abingdon Press.)

1. “Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear.”
2. “Culture is who we are and all the ways in which we reinforce and recreate who we are.”
3. “A culture includes the congregation’s history and the stories of its heroes.
4. A culture includes a congregation’s “symbols, rituals, and worldview.”
5. The culture of a congregation is “shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together.”

Ammerman sees three dimensions of a congregation’s culture and identity:

1. Activities: What the congregation does together
2. Artifacts: The things congregations make
3. Accounts: The stories congregations tell

Here is one of Dr. Ammerman’s most important observations about the culture and identity of a church: **Congregational culture is not static or unchanging; it is dynamic and constantly evolving.** New people, new leaders, and changes in the circumstances or larger culture may influence the change of congregational culture. **We are constantly shaping the culture of our congregation.**

**Seven factors that influence the culture/identity of a congregation over time:**

1. Congregational size in terms of average weekly worship attendance. (see various publications of the (former) Alban Institute on church size; (see Susan Beaumont*, Inside the Large Congregation* (2011) for even larger churches)
   * Family size church: under 50 in average weekly attendance
   * Pastoral size church: 50 to 150 in average weekly attendance
   * Program size church 150 to 350 in average weekly attendance
   * Corporation size church above 350 in average weekly attendance
2. Affiliation with a denomination or tradition
   * Congregational culture is influenced by the founding narrative of its denomination
   * Denominational affiliation and tradition influences theological perspectives of a congregation
   * Congregations have shared history with their denominations/traditions: the stories of our tradition or affiliation become our stories.
3. Theological perspectives (Caution: labels can be slippery; often assigned by others)
   * Predominant focus of the largest branches of Christianity (sometimes overlap):
     + Roman Catholics: Sacramental Christians
     + Conservative Evangelical and Fundamentalist : Born-Again Christians
     + Mainline Protestant; progressive/liberal: Golden Rule Christians
   * Most denominations/associations have their own version of conservative and liberal
   * Theological paradigms evolve and change over time
     + Five historical eras with prevailing or dominant theological paradigms (see Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 1990). Kung sees an emerging of sixth era which he calls a post-modern or ecumenical paradigm.
     + Biblical interpretation shapes theological perspectives (see Howard Snyder, 1999, *Models of the Kingdom*). Snyder identifies eight different emphases on Jesus teaching of what has been called the kingdom, dominion, or reign of God.
4. Mission perspectives
   * This-worldly or other-worldly emphasis
   * Inward or outward focus
   * Predominant orientation ((Roozen, McKinney and Carroll in Ammerman 1998)
     + Sanctuary: Providing sacred space that is a safe haven from this world
     + Evangelistic: Seeking individuals who need salvation thereby changing the world one individual at a time.
     + Civic: Acting as promoters and preservers of what is good in this world.
     + Activist: Seeking to change world structures that cause suffering and injustice.
5. Culture in the larger society of the congregation’s location
   * Religious and civil/political history of the nation and/or region
   * Mobility of populations
   * Immigration patterns
   * Democratization of information (internet; smart phones; social media)
   * Evolution in the nature and formation of social networks
   * Emergence of religious pluralism and polarization
6. Internal demographics of the congregation
   * Gender
   * Age/Generation
   * Race/Ethnicity
   * Religious background
   * Social Class
   * Education
7. Pastoral leadership styles
   * Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Board Room: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions* (2004). The authors are church consultants and the book is part of a series associated with the Leadership Network, which serves mostly megachurches. These styles may overlap to some degree in one leader.
     + Family Culture: The pastor is a parental figure expected to maintain the rhythms, rituals and relationships that will provide continuity with the past and predictability for the future (This is the most widespread style in North American Protestant churches.)
     + Archival Culture: The pastor is the sustainer of a core of great historical and universal traditions of the church, making them relevant to the present. (such as a Roman Catholic parish priest)
     + Icon Culture: The pastor is a living logo that personifies the character of the church and is the face and voice through which people enter the church. (Most likely seen in some very large or megachurches. The pastor sometimes has a high public profile outside the church.)
     + Replication Culture: The pastor is a replicator of ministry through multiplicity of called, equipped and deployed leaders and workers. (Usually seen in some very large or megachurches.)
   * Jackson W. Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. (2006). Carroll is a professor of religion and society at Duke University. It is based upon a major survey of clergy and laypeople on pastoral leadership. These four questions on pastoral leadership styles are used in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The second of these styles correlates most with the study’s construct of congregational effectiveness.
     + Style 1: Pastor takes charge
     + Style 2: Pastor inspires and encourages laity to act, but acts alone when necessary
     + Style 3: Pastor acts on laity’s goals
     + Style 4: Laity make most decisions; pastor empowers them