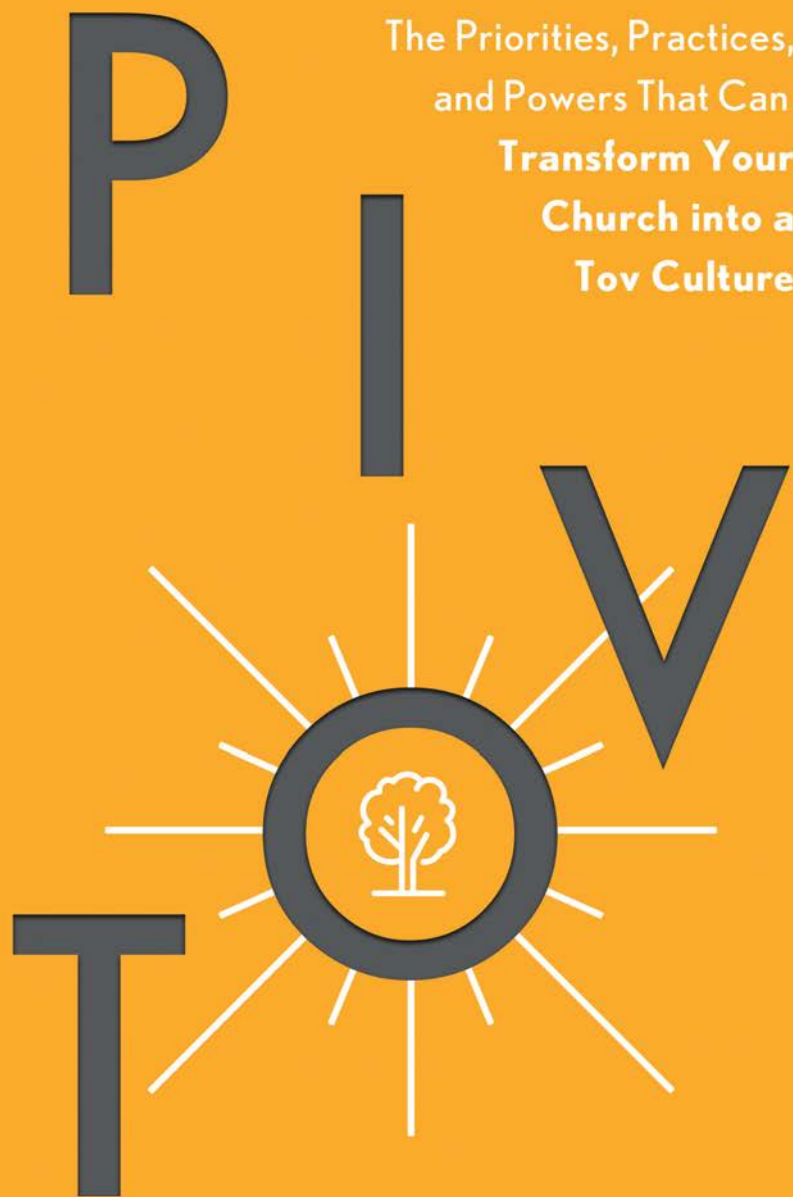


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The Priorities, Practices,
and Powers That Can
**Transform Your
Church into a
Tov Culture**

"Powerful. Accessible. I'll be enthusiastically sharing this with many!" - **RICH VILLODAS**

SCOT MCKNIGHT
LAURA BARRINGER

In your hands is a powerful and accessible guide to help create a culture marked by health and goodness. Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight do much more than just name the troubling state of many church communities. They offer an extensive set of practices and values to actually live into the *toiv* life God desires for us. I'll be enthusiastically sharing this with many!

RICH VILLODAS, lead pastor, New Life Fellowship, and author of *Good and Beautiful and Kind*

Scot and Laura offer strategically hopeful truth in this book. The mass uncovering of abusive practices, systems, and personalities has brought with it a feeling of paralysis. The problem seems so comprehensive and entrenched that it leaves many of us staggering for any kind of hopeful action. *Pivot* is a good and godly answer to this cynical feeling. Not just a catchy title, *Pivot* is a prophetic invitation to *move*. Move toward healing, move toward the light, move toward being the change that is so needed right now. This is exactly what I pray for—the wisdom and clarity to *move* toward wholeness together. This book is going to help us all.

DANIELLE STRICKLAND, advocate, author, and speaker

If *toiv* is the why, *Pivot* is the how. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer's new book is rich in theology, and it makes the principles of integrity accessible for those who lead and support faith communities that yearn to grow in Christlikeness. An absolute must-read!

STEVE CARTER, pastor and author of *The Thing Beneath the Thing*

Nearly a decade ago, moral failures among church leaders seemed rare and unusual. But in recent years the curtains have been pulled back, exposing what's beneath the surface: toxic church cultures. No longer can church leaders point the finger at other churches; instead, it's time to do the hard work and examine our own communities and discover where toxicity exists, with the hope of

being transformed into tov. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer provide practical tools to help pastors and church leaders develop pathways from toxic cultures to tov. Every church leader and pastor should have a sense of urgency that we are *all* at risk of developing toxic cultures; and that intentionality, hard work, discernment, and prayer are needed more than ever. This book belongs in the hands of leaders in every church in America.

TARA BETH LEACH, pastor and author of *Radiant Church*

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SCOT MCKNIGHT
LAURA BARRINGER



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For the transformers

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FOREWORD

BOXER MIKE TYSON FAMOUSLY SAID, “Everybody has a game plan until they get punched in the face.”¹ I experienced that reality eight years ago when my family and I moved from a healthy and thriving church in the Midwest to be part of the rebirth of a struggling church in Portland, Oregon. We had a game plan until we didn’t. You will read a bit of our story in the pages to come, but suffice it to say, participating in the transformation of a crumbling church has been the most daunting and difficult experience of our lives. Our church almost didn’t make it. We almost didn’t make it.

Pivot is a sequel of sorts to *A Church Called Tov*—which I encourage you to read if you haven’t already. *Tov* found deep resonance with pastors and parishioners who knew something was wrong in their churches but didn’t know how to name it. It honestly and lovingly diagnoses what ails and plagues the body of Christ—particularly in the Western world. It calls the church to become a community of goodness that will resist abusive power and champion restorative healing. *Pivot* provides a pathway for that to happen.

Scot and Laura do not write from the cheap seats. They are in the game. They love the church. They offer legitimate critiques, while also providing hopeful solutions. They have both endured deep wounds from the church yet have allowed those wounds to become a catalyst for offering a better way. They speak, pray, and live for a

more beautiful church. Their prophetic voice provides lantern light to navigate the gathering darkness. I am deeply grateful for the gift of this book.

The shockwave of 2020 was the great revealer of the American church. It fast-tracked the exposure of blind spots and brokenness that previously were either hidden or ignored. Simmering fault lines erupted. Most pastors I know thought our churches were healthier than they actually were. The lack of Christlikeness on display from many followers of Jesus has been staggering. As we take stock, we must remember that “every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.”² This stark reality has been humbling. It has caused many of us to tear up our playbooks. Returning to pre-COVID status quo does not seem like a viable option. If insanity is “doing the same thing expecting different results,” then doubling down on what got us here is insane. We must be done with Whac-A-Mole discipleship. Instead, we need a complete renovation of the heart.

Our churches, and those of us who help lead them, must be committed to deep, restorative, and enduring transformation. The church as the body of Christ is still the hope of the world. There is no plan B. Until Jesus returns, the Kingdom comes to earth-as-it-is-in-heaven primarily through the local church.

Pivot provides invaluable insights that will invigorate and fuel the transformation our churches so desperately need. Don’t just read it—ponder it, pray over it, and most important, practice it. *Pivot* is brimming with workable wisdom. Each chapter offers an assortment of tools that will help infuse *tov* into your church’s DNA. And don’t read it alone. Changing culture is a team sport. Buy copies for others in your community and invite them to join you in the journey of helping your church become an outpost of goodness, beauty, and truth.

As I read *Pivot*, I was bursting with hope and anticipation. I can hardly wait to put it into practice. I was also bummed. If I’d had this book eight years ago, or even three years ago, I may have made fewer mistakes. I may have been a more effective leader. Our church would

likely be further along. Simply put, this book will save you from paying some significant “stupid tax.”

Sadly, some of my pastor friends have already tapped out. Some have left church altogether. I don't say that with any sense of judgment. I get it. About once a week, I am tempted to apply for my dream job stocking shelves at Trader Joe's. But I just can't. Too much is at stake. I've been part of the problem, and by God's grace I long to be part of the solution.

As we slowly make our way out of an apocalyptic season, I am hopeful. Hints of a coming dawn color the horizon. A fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing. A faithful remnant is rising up. More people are praying. More people are walking the talk. More people are hungry for all that is wrong with the world to be made right again. More people are seeking to be part of the *toiv* renaissance. I'm guessing you are one of these people. May we together be faithful stewards of our missional moment.

Lest we forget, Scot and Laura remind us that the work of transformation is God's job—a work we are invited to join. We have the privilege of being part of the great redemptive story in which (to borrow Tolkien's words) “everything sad [is] going to come untrue.”³ Might God be gathering the scattered and tattered pieces of the church and making something far more glorious than was ever possible before it was broken and lost? Might beauty be emerging from the ashes? I think so, and *Pivot* paints a picture of what that could look like.

As we ponder, pray, and practice this book, here is my prayer:

Father, may we know that we are your beloved and that you chase us with a jealous love that never quits. We grieve with you for your church. Bring her back to life. Restore the years the locusts have eaten. And protect us from evil.

Come, Lord Jesus. We fix our eyes on you. We are weary and heavy laden. May we not lose heart. Give us rest for our souls. And will you give us new wineskins? Will you give us new wine? Because of you, there is always hope.

Holy Spirit, may we have ears to hear. Move with reviving power in our midst. Raise our dry bones from the grave. May we dance once again as we joyfully celebrate and embody goodness in the land of the living.

To God be the glory. All is grace.

John Rosensteel

New Hope Church, Portland, Oregon

INTRODUCTION

UNTIL CHRIST IS FORMED IN US

SINCE PUBLISHING *A CHURCH CALLED TOV* in October 2020, we have collectively given more than 150 interviews about toxic church cultures and how to form healthy ones that resist abuses of power, followed by countless open and honest conversations about the topic. We have felt encouraged by the numbers of *tov*-seeking folks who desire goodness, transformation, and the healing grace of Christ in their churches, ministries, and nonprofit organizations.

But we still hear far too many stories about serious, ongoing abuses. To those who have written to us, called us, and entrusted us with their stories, we want to affirm that your stories are sacred. We hold them tenderly. We continue to hope and trust for a better way. What you have endured is not God's design for the church; it isn't right, nor is it the way anyone should be treated.

After all we've seen and heard, we still believe it's possible for church cultures to be transformed from toxic to *tov*. But how? This book seeks to answer that question.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are four of the most common questions people have asked us about culture transformation:

1. How can I transform the culture in my church or organization to make it more tov?
2. I believe my workplace is toxic or has unhealthy (hidden) values. How do I initiate change?
3. How do I establish or unleash a culture of goodness in my ministry?
4. I'm not in a position of church leadership. What are some red flags that indicate a toxic culture, and what can I do if I see them?

This book contains the best answers we have found to those questions and others.

We are equipped as teachers, not culture consultants; but during more than a year of rich, Spirit-led conversations with men and women who bravely shared their stories, we sought to learn everything we could about the transformation process. We spoke with gifted transformation agents whom God has used to renovate the culture in their own churches. We read widely about organizational transformation, leadership, and culture shifts. From this mixture, we identified several indispensable practices of organizations that have successfully transformed their internal culture—or are well on their way.

In addition to sharing what we have learned, we also offer a collection of useful assessments, tools, and application exercises designed to help you as you labor in cooperation with God's Spirit to begin transforming your church or organization from toxic to tov.

A HIDDEN POWER

The culture of any organization, including a church, is largely invisible and mostly—sometimes completely—unrecognized. Yet organizational culture is the most powerful force underlying how things operate. Though many of the factors involved are unknown to us, they influence our daily lives.

Edgar Schein wrote a highly influential book on organizational culture, titled *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. It describes the enormous psychological power of culture:

Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations. . . .

Culture at this level provides its members with a basic sense of identity and defines the values that provide self-esteem. . . . Cultures tell their members who they are, how to behave toward each other, and how to feel good about themselves. Recognizing these critical functions makes us aware why “changing” culture is so anxiety provoking.¹

Such enormous psychological power should warn us to become aware of culture and never to underestimate it. We cannot overemphasize the power of a culture to influence, shape, form, and even transform us.

SHIFT, CHANGE, AND TRANSFORMATION

We chose the word *pivot* as the title of this book to describe our purpose. We envision churches around the globe transforming their congregations by pivoting toward a *tov* culture—a culture of goodness that resists all patterns of abuse that might creep into their communities. We use the terms *shift*, *change*, and *transformation* to describe modifications in a culture, but they differ significantly in scope.

Shift refers to moving one thing in a culture to another place in that same culture. Think of switching the timing of the Sunday sermon from the final event in the worship service to a middle event. Or moving the church’s piano from the right side of the sanctuary to the left side. Shifts leave the culture largely undisturbed (though some people inevitably will be upset).

Change in a culture refers to making a significant adjustment within an existing culture, but without deeply changing the culture itself. Think of a church calling a new pastor, who brings his own approach to preaching, teaching, and leading but generally conforms to existing expectations. Or of a church that decides to change the focus of the Sunday service from an evangelistic event for seekers to a time of worship and Bible exposition for Christians. Similarly, a culture change will occur if church leadership decides to call a director of justice and compassion to pioneer a new ministry. Culture changes are more likely than shifts to disturb parishioners. Changes may also generate a desire for deeper adjustments, which we refer to as *transformation*. But changing a culture doesn't necessarily lead to transformation.

A culture is a delicate ecosystem; it is possible, but difficult, to transform an entire ecosystem. One change, or a few small changes, however good, will not result in transformation. The intricacy of a cultural ecosystem demands respect and requires caution with sweeping changes.

Culture *transformation* refers to a revolution or renovation from one type of organization to another. Think of a talent- or gifts-based church transforming into a character formation culture; or from an attractional, seeker-focused model to a spiritual formation model. To undo one type of culture and transform it into another type of culture takes time, commitment, careful communication, and perseverance. It's much easier to dream about it than to actually do it. But if you're dealing with a toxic culture today, nothing short of transformation will bring about the necessary changes to get your organization to *to*.

Not everyone uses these three terms—*shift*, *change*, and *transformation*—the way we do, but it's important to distinguish the various levels. The most distinctive difference between shifts, changes, and transformation is that the first two are top-down and usually driven by a leader's creative vision. Transformation occurs only when ownership and participation happen *comprehensively* throughout the organization. This doesn't mean *everyone*, because some people will

inevitably opt out and leave, but it does mean widespread participation and buy-in. In the case of a toxic culture under transformation toward *tov*, rooting out the toxic elements may lead to substantial turnover or attrition. But it's the only way.

This book explores the major contours of the pivot toward *tov*, especially in churches.

A DEEP DESIRE FOR TOV

We assume you are reading this because you long to see your church's culture pivot toward *tov*, and that you became interested in transformation because of some toxic elements at work in your church community.

A *tov* church is one where God's goodness permeates the institution, empowering its members—by God's grace—to become people shaped by God's design, which is Christlikeness (or Christofornity). *Tov* people, Christlike people, are characterized by empathy, grace, putting other people first, truth telling, justice, and service. Such Christlikeness shows itself in passages like Mark 10:42-45 and Philippians 2:6-11, but also in Jesus' interactions with others, his life, his trial, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension.

Is it easy to transform a deeply unhealthy culture into one that reflects God's goodness? Hardly. As one pastor after another has said to me (Scot), "Church culture transformation is not for the faint of heart."

No, it's not easy. But when has radical transformation ever been easy, painless, or quick? We hear the apostle Paul say, "I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:27). He means that the prize is worth the pain, the effort, the time. We also hear Paul say to a beloved

Tov is the Hebrew word for good or goodness. God is good, all that God creates is good, all creation has a tov design, and all humans are called by God to do good. Jesus embodies goodness, and one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is goodness. The gospel itself is good (tov) news.

church in dire need of culture transformation, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you . . .” (Galatians 4:19). Paul compares the work of transforming an unhealthy church culture to the terrible pain a woman suffers in childbirth. Easy, painless, and quick? Far from it. So why does he do it? For the beautiful result it produces!

Until Christ is formed in you. That’s tov! That is the pivot we desperately need! Transforming a deeply unhealthy culture into a Christlike one, for God’s glory and our benefit, is worth every bit of pain, effort, and time it may take.

Are you ready to get to work?

TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE, BUT NOT EASY



IT IS POSSIBLE FOR YOUR church culture to pivot, and to be transformed out of its lingering and seemingly incurable toxicity.

It isn't easy to transform a culture! It's *hard work*. And yet it's well worth the considerable effort required. Consider the story of one church that decided to shift from an attractional culture model to a spiritual formation and transformation model.

THE JOURNEY OF OAK HILLS

Oak Hills Church began simply and modestly in 1984 with seventeen people in a strip mall in suburban Folsom, California. Over the next six years, the church grew to about 200 in weekly attendance, but according to founding pastor Kent Carlson, "There was a sense among the church leadership that something was not quite right."¹ Though most of their growth came from people moving into the area, these were mostly churchgoers looking for a new local church. "We had not seen many new believers become a part of our church," Carlson said.²

Around this time, Willow Creek Community Church was emerging as a leader in the church-growth movement with their electric, relevant weekend seeker-services. The leaders of Oak Hills attended a conference at Willow and soon adopted the attractional model as their own.

Attendance exploded, and by 1997 the church grew to an average attendance of 1,700. That's when Kent Carlson hired Mike Lueken as pastor of spiritual formation. By 2002, the two men were senior co-pastors of Oak Hills.

In *Renovation of the Church*, Carlson describes Oak Hills' rapid growth in the 1990s: "It was exhilarating and intoxicating. We would finish a service and there would be a long line of people waiting to talk with me."³ He also confesses, "The fact that I was recognized [by Willow Creek] as an up-and-coming leader in the seeker-targeted movement filled me with a sense of inflated importance."⁴

But a creeping unease began to grow among the Oak Hills staff. In fact, they collectively used the metaphor of "a monster" to describe their concerns:

One of the undeniable truths of the culture of the large entrepreneurial, attractional-model church is that it requires constant feeding. When we structure a church around attracting people to cutting-edge, entertaining, interesting, inspirational and always-growing services and ministries, there is simply no room for letting up. . . . There is no resting. If there is a particularly wonderful experience one weekend, we are driven to do even better the next. . . .

Many in our staff . . . were often troubled by the fact that we could never really let up. We would talk about how we could hear the monster beginning to stir again in the fictional basement of our church, and we knew that if we did not feed it, its cage would not hold it. . . . Therefore, week after week, we all mustered the energy to put on the show one more time.⁵

Don't misunderstand: Carlson isn't bashing Willow Creek. The strategy that worked at Willow had also worked at Oak Hills. But although counting attendance numbers and giving are important, they cannot tell the whole story. Nor do they reveal anything about transformed lives or Christlike character.

Eventually, Carlson and Lueken, along with their staff, underwent a process of Spirit-led transformation. The story at Oak Hills began to change, from one that followed a model of success based on numbers and religious consumerism, to one that focused more on God's Kingdom, the mission of the gospel, and spiritual formation in the congregation.

Identifying the Problem

What inspired the profound unease felt by the Oak Hills staff? Individually and as a group, they had discovered the profound, soulful writings of Eugene Peterson, Henri Nouwen, Richard Foster, and Dallas Willard. These deep thinkers “began to infect our minds with so many thought viruses,” says Kent Carlson, “that we found ourselves in an almost constant state of ecclesiastical disequilibrium. . . . We began to realize that our current church structure was actually *working against* the invitation of Christ to experience his authentic transformation.”⁶

It was this illuminating insight that prompted Oak Hills to begin a process of transformation, which meant building an entirely new foundation based not on how many people were coming but on *who they were becoming*. The leaders bravely confronted perhaps the most difficult challenge of all—their own character, complicity, and duplicity. Mike Lueken writes:

When we try to attract people by intimating that our church offers something better than the other church, we are complicit in the whole sorry mess of consumer Christianity. We are now stuck in this wearisome game of keeping these people satisfied so they don't go to another church.

KENT CARLSON,
RENOVATION OF THE CHURCH

It was time to face ourselves. It was time to deal with . . . the ugliness of our motivations, the size of our egos and our runaway ambition. . . .

We needed to experiment with simplicity. We needed to deal with our anger and lust. We needed to learn how to abandon the outcome of our work. . . . We had to rigorously pursue our own formation. From the beginning, the transition at Oak Hills had to begin with God doing something real in our hearts.⁷

Services slowly transformed as well. The pastors began to teach attenders how to grow in Christ rather than to passively consume an hour-long show. Lueken explains:

This theme of transformation was woven into nearly all of our sermons. . . . Regardless of the sermon topic, our message was essentially the same: cooperate with the Spirit of God to put off the old, put on the new and become the person Jesus redeemed you to be. . . .

With glaring redundancy, we concluded our messages by encouraging people to spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus. We were absolutely convinced spiritual formation in Christ was the key to living as God intended.⁸

Worship now centered on the story of God rather than putting on stage what would attract the most people.

Tumult

Doesn't all this sound very tov-ish? But let's not overlook the difficulty of bringing about this level of change. Oak Hills' let's-do-all-this-starting-now transition to culture transformation brought tumultuous times to the church. Several members and some staff mourned the loss of familiar services and resisted leadership's new direction. Oak Hills' attendance declined by approximately 1,000

people. Many church employees found the changes difficult because they had been hired to produce and perform. They were utterly confused by the new spiritual formation model. Attenders who had “shopped” for a church and expected to find what they wanted at Oak Hills now didn’t know which end was up.

One Step at a Time

In their implementation, the church wisely took small steps. Carlson and Lueken taught spiritual formation from the pulpit and steadily pushed against the spirit of consumerism. Small groups that valued intentionality and developed practices for living like Jesus became an important catalyst for spiritual transformation. Step by step and little by little, the church walked together into a spiritual transformation culture.

You might wonder what became of Oak Hills’ evangelistic passion, modeled after Willow Creek’s. It, too, underwent transformation.

As the focus moved from emphasizing numbers, success, and getting new people in the door, Lueken says the church struggled with questions such as “How do we evangelize without being concerned with the numerical growth of the church?” and “How do we invite people into the community of faith without getting caught up in whether or not they are coming to *our* church?”⁹ And also this profound question: “How do we evangelize people into a life of apprenticeship to Jesus?”¹⁰

Evangelism morphed from drawing a crowd to trying to develop the character of Christ within the church. “We discovered,” writes Lueken, “that the most important strategy for reaching lost people is Christians living Christianly. Effective evangelism starts by cooperating with God to become a new kind of person out of whom new and better things routinely and easily flow.”¹¹

We would never do a very good job of inviting people to reorient their lives around the teachings of Christ if our worship services became simply another place where Christians exercised their consumer choices.

KENT CARLSON,
RENOVATION OF THE CHURCH

A Learning Experience

Carlson and Lueken are honest about the many mistakes they made during the journey of transforming their church's deeply entrenched culture. They confess to moving too quickly and making top-down decisions that ignored questions and lacked compassion. They mention their own impatience and defensiveness, and a tendency to speak instead of listen when parishioners shared their concerns, fears, sorrow, and loss of the familiar.

Carlson and Lueken sought, however imperfectly, to teach ordinary people to be transformed by the love and power of Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount, Carlson says, “there’s no talk of an organization. There’s no building of empires.

Effective evangelism starts by cooperating with God to become a new kind of person out of whom new and better things routinely and easily flow.

MIKE LUEKEN

Jesus simply invites his followers to live together in the reality of God’s kingdom.”¹²

Though the Oak Hills story is just one example, it illustrates every important practice of church culture transformation that Laura and I have

identified as we’ve studied, read, talked, and listened to pastors over the past three years. And it also shines a bright spotlight on one practice that may do more than anything else to transform a church from unhealthy to tov: spiritual conversation.

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF CONVERSATION

Did you notice how conversational the process was at Oak Hills Church? Carlson and Lueken talked to one another, the leaders talked to one another, and members of the congregation talked with one another, with the leaders, and with Carlson and Lueken.

Genuine transformation will require countless conversations, deeply immersed in transparency and honesty. Without open, honest, *safe* conversations—many, many conversations, and not a few of them difficult—there will be no transformation.

Do you know one of the most revealing methods of understanding

your coworkers? Invite a conversation by asking good, honest, open questions that people can answer or discuss in safety and mutual respect—with a heart for true exploration. Alas, we are not very good at conversation these days in our society, are we?

Churches are too often known for a different kind of communication style: a tell-others-what-to-do style. This didactic approach springs from a long-standing emphasis in the church on biblical expertise, and the tendency of some to believe it's their job to teach everyone else what to think. But good conversations—involving back-and-forth exchanges through which we learn from one another and gain real understanding—are *required if the church wants to engage in culture transformation*. This may be the most significant need in transformational churches: Members must be able to converse with one another, honestly and with great transparency.

Let this be said: Sometimes (and perhaps more often than not), the best ideas for church culture transformation arise from the congregation. Unfortunately, many pastors, elders, deacons, and other leaders dismiss, disagree with, dispute, and silence those best ideas—which may well be a form of quenching the Spirit. Those who embrace (as we do) “the priesthood of all believers” should be the ones who listen the most to others in the congregation. Careful listening and honest dialogue will lead to new, fruitful, and creative conversations.

SEVEN ATTRIBUTES OF A GOOD CONVERSATION

Good conversations exhibit at least seven attributes. Let's consider each of them in turn.

1. *Good conversations are safe for everyone involved.* Everyone has an opportunity to speak their mind and know that their views are respected.
2. *Good conversations begin with good questions about important topics.* A good conversation is not idle chatter about hither and yon in the by-and-by. It has substance, focus, and direction, and it's about things that matter.

3. *Good conversations are characterized by courtesy and civility.* At the least, courtesy and civility mean not interrupting each other, not shouting each other down, and not calling each other names. Too often we've gotten away from common courtesy in the church, and social media makes it even worse. In good conversations about the church, Christians can learn a new way of civility.
4. *Good conversations occur in a spirit of exploration and experimentation.* We identify a topic—transforming church culture—that more and more people recognize is of colossal importance, and we start asking questions: What is the current culture? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What problems does it present? How can we move the culture toward tov? As people answer these questions, probe one another's answers, and explore together what goodness may mean for the church, progress is made toward a positive transformation of culture.
5. *Good conversations are on a mutual quest for wisdom.* Good conversations often tend to be about something that is not yet known or that needs to be learned. Where a know-it-all may try to direct and coerce a conversation toward a predetermined conclusion, good conversationalists allow the give-and-take to germinate ideas and lead toward conclusions moderated by careful thinking.
6. *Good conversations discipline themselves to stay on topic.* They avoid wandering off to Twitter's latest scandal or the church griper's latest complaint. If the topic is tov, they stick to tov.
7. *Good conversations in the church require shared convictions about Christian truth (gospel), relationships (love), and goals (wisdom).* The time may well come for white-hot debates. Church culture transformation will, at times, set people off. Our concern here is not that every conversation be calm and reasonable, but that the heart of the conversation be

finding common ground. Learning to think about culture and transformation by looking at a variety of scenarios can nudge us toward tov. Genuine conversations may well reveal that what many considered a shared conviction is not, in fact, shared by all.¹³

GETTING TO WORK

Warm Up

Consider two fictional scenarios for a conversation:

1. You are a fairly new staff member at your church. You know people's names and they know yours. One day you notice the pastor step into a nearby office and you hear raised voices. You wonder what's going on. Soon the pastor shuts the door—rather, he slams it—and storms off. You think, *Someone's having a bad day*. A month later you witness something similar. You decide to talk about it with a trusted friend on staff, and she tells you she's seen the same behavior off and on for the last five years. You wonder how a pastor can act like that. In a moment of consternation, you realize that others must have witnessed such things before, and you wonder how people in the church permit such behavior. *Why doesn't anyone seem to have the courage to confront the pastor?*
 - a. How would you describe the culture at work in this scenario?
 - b. What single biggest problem does it suggest to you? Why?
 - c. How open would you be to someone confronting you?
 - d. What would you do to form a more tov culture?
2. Anne is a teacher at a private Christian school. She has taught there since its founding, working for several principals during her tenure. In recent years, Anne has noticed changes in the school but doesn't quite have the language to describe them. The latest new principal who was hired seems friendly, warm, and helpful in public. But Anne has begun to hear stories about colleagues getting their hands slapped by the principal for minor offenses, and it has become increasingly common to find teachers in tears in their classrooms after school. Also, some staff members who were called in by administration and released from their positions had to sign nondisclosure documents prohibiting them from explaining why they suddenly left the school. Anne is afraid to be seen speaking to anyone but "approved" and "safe" colleagues. She finds hidden ways to communicate with her teammates so that

she cannot be blamed by leadership for supposedly “being negative.” She loves her students but feels overwhelmed with fear—of saying the wrong thing, making a mistake, or upsetting the principal and getting her hand slapped too.

- a. How would you describe the culture at work in this scenario?
- b. What single biggest problem does it suggest to you? Why?
- c. What might be keeping Anne from speaking up?
- d. What would you do to form a more tov culture?

Get Some Insight

1. After making sure you can discuss the issue in safety and mutual exploration, have a conversation with a coworker or associate about an area of concern in your organization. Take care that your conversation exhibits all seven of the attributes of a healthy conversation listed on pages 13–15. What did you learn from the conversation? How did the conversation make you feel? Why?
2. What “shared convictions” in your church or organization may not, in fact, be *shared* at all? Give some examples and explain why you think these may not be commonly held convictions.

Do the Hard Work

One of the best ways to begin discerning the culture in your organization or church is to ask some key questions. The answers, at times, may be surprising or even frightening. Pastors, leaders, and staff members will likely be the ones to select the specific questions for discussion, but all stakeholders must make sure the questions are *relevant*.

- Who has power?
- Who answers to whom and why?
- Who gets paid the most?
- What are the gradations of salaries and wages?
- Who gets benefits and perks, what are they, and why do certain people get them?

- Which groups/pockets have the most influence?
- What do various power pockets think of one another?
- What expectations do people have?
- How would you describe the character of your church or institution?
- What are your institution's theological claims and cultural assumptions?

Questions that pertain to others in the organization are often the easiest to answer. We can always see how someone else contributes to or is part of the problem. But it's much harder to answer those same questions about ourselves! We're all practiced at the art of self-deception (see James 1:22-24).

At Oak Hills, Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken asked questions like these:

- What is the purpose of the church?
- How does the church relate to a consumer-driven culture?
- To what extent have we oriented our church around the desires of people who have little interest in living as disciples of Jesus?
- Do our ministry practices proclaim the gospel and further the cause of God's Kingdom?

Conversations based on questions like these will make it possible for you to comprehensively grasp your church's culture, instead of focusing only on what people see and say—that is, the values and creeds you confess. Honest dialogue will help you to uncover the underlying culture that directly affects the health of your church or organization.

Please remember: This exercise is not a simple "checklist" activity that will take only a few moments to complete before you check it off your list. A proper—and therefore helpful—analysis of your culture will take time and countless conversations, and will often come with a degree of pain. But unless you do the hard work, you will never identify the true culture of your church or organization.

You cannot transform a culture without first completing a comprehensive analysis of where you are now.