

Church DNA & Culture

Church DNA

Arguably one of the most neglected aspects in the planning of many church plants, is consideration of the DNA that the planter transplants, and therefore the culture of the church that develops.

To identify and shape our church culture with the aim of most effectively making disciples of Jesus, I have found it helpful to think about theological positions, beliefs, practices, ministry patterns, etc, as either 1st, 2nd, or 3rd order issues. This approach is helpful in planning church plants, where decisions need to be made about almost every aspect of church life, but also in established churches where the culture can include ministry patterns that are not directed by mission, but from some other motivation.

These notes are to help you use the Church DNA & Culture Flowchart Worksheet. There is also a Church DNA & Culture worked example to give you some ideas of what might go in the different categories in your context.

First order issues

These are matters of Confession, those doctrinal issues which are key and foundational: Issues of Doctrine: Uniqueness of Jesus, Centrality of the Word, etc. Statement of faith.

These are the category of beliefs and convictions that you would need another person or church to agree on if you were to consider yourself in good gospel fellowship with them. ie people who deny the divinity of Jesus, we don't consider to be gospel partners.

Second order issues

These are matters of Conviction, the theological outworking of your first order issues.

These are the theological positions you hold: Ecclesiology, church polity, governance, denominational connections, mode of baptism, etc.

These are principles that you hold, but are not a test of orthodoxy. Another church or Christian person might take a different position to you on a matter such as ecclesiology or church governance, but you could still enjoy gospel fellowship with them, work towards the flourishing of their ministry, etc.

ie Anglicans and Baptists will differ on their conviction about church governance, but they can still work together for gospel purposes.

The combination of both our thinking and practice about our first order and second order issues, is our church DNA

Just like real DNA, your church DNA doesn't change simply because you want to do something different. Your convictions in some area may change over time, but it's generally a slow process.

Your Members and Mission

Your "Members & Mission" are the people you already have (Members) and those you're trying to reach (Mission).

Your members in a new church plant will include your Starter Group, but also at any future point in your church life, the people who make up the body of Christ in your church.

On the flowchart, our "Members & Mission" act like a lens. They shape the way we think about and implement our first and second order issues. The same 1st or 2nd order conviction will be converted into praxis differently, with different membership, or a different mission.

In addition, the "Members & Mission" lens is a flexible lens, like the lens in our eyes. It is pulled and stretched and impacted upon by a whole range of forces, both outside and inside the church. Some of these we'll be aware of, some we won't.

That is to say, 2 people might hold the same 1st and 2nd order convictions, and share the same members & mission, but their 3rd order practice works out differently because of their church background, previous experiences, other theological convictions, understanding of their mission field, etc.

2 church planters might have the same 1st order conviction about the inspiration and infallibility of the Word of God. They hold the same belief in the necessity of God's Word to be proclaimed and explained through expository preaching (2nd order). One therefore believes it's essential to use the ESV Bible and preach for 40 minutes. The other is convinced the NLT is the best translation and believes that preaching should be 25 minutes or less. Their lens is being shaped so that they see their members and their mission differently and understand the needs of the people differently.

Our lens can also be selectively opaque!

The Members & Mission lens can also stop some things passing through at all.

ie. Consider the conviction of the necessity to raise up leaders. It's a common 2nd order conviction flowing from a 1st order belief that God gifts people to serve his church. But it doesn't happen in lots of churches. Something gets in the way of it being worked out in practice. You should be able to see the 1st and 2nd order issues worked out in application as 3rd order practices. Nothing should remain isolated in the upper categories.

It's worth thinking about what are the elements that shape your lens, impacting the way you see your Members and your Mission, and therefore shaping how you work out your 1st and 2nd order issues.

Third order issues

These are matters of Congregational Freedom.

These are those decisions and practices that aren't made or done as a matter of conviction. But far from being insignificant, these are the areas in which first and second order issues are worked out in practice.

These are often matters of practice: Musical style, how many songs, shape of Sunday gathering, gathering length/type/venue, etc.

Each order is shaped by the one above it.

First order flows into second order. And both are worked out in the third order. But our tendency is to jump straight to 2nd and 3rd order issues first.

For example, I've met lots of church planters can tell me what Bible translation, what kind of music, how long they're going to preach, how their kids' ministry is going to run, but they can't verbalise a clear theological position that has led them to that point, or why this is going to be helpful for their people. They've just arrived at it some other way.

And I meet people in churches where decisions are made for all kinds of reasons, which with just a little bit of reflection are entirely unjustifiable in their minds!

You know the story of the woman who cuts the end off her roast when she puts it in the pan. Why? That's what her mum did. And her mum does it because it's what *her* mother did. One day the woman asks her grandmother why. Her grandmother laughs at the fact that she and her mum have been doing it that way all these years. The grandmother cut the ends of the roast before she put it in the pan simply because her roasting pan wasn't big enough to fit it in whole!

That's a classic example of jumping straight to third order. "We've always done it this way!"

Of course, some people consider one issue a first order issue, others consider it a second order issue! ie baptism. This is when the lines of orthodoxy get drawn in all sorts of odd and inappropriate places.

What are some of the decisions you make in your church or planting plans, that flow from your 1st and 2nd order convictions?

You can fill them in on the blank flowchart worksheet.

Your Church Culture

Your church DNA is the combination of thinking and practice with regard to 1st order and 2nd order issues.

Your church culture is the combination and interplay of our 1st and 2nd order issues (DNA) together with our Members & Mission, as well as the practical outworking of our convictions in our 3rd order issues. That is to say, culture is the whole lot!

What's the difference between culture and DNA? Culture can change. And should change. And should be continually reviewed. So, DNA is the part of your culture that doesn't change. At least not rapidly!

The churches that I've served as a pastor have had agreement on 1st order issues. They've had almost complete agreement on 2nd order issues. But those churches have looked quite different at the level of 3rd order issues because the Members & Mission are different, and are understood differently by those making decisions. That is to say, that lens works differently in the different churches, and as we've noted, differently for different leaders in the same church. So in these churches where I've served, the DNA has been the same, but the rest of the culture is not.

As an individual church or network of churches plants more churches, especially among more diverse groups of people (ie more variety in both the "Members" and the "Mission") we would expect that the 3rd order patterns will become even more varied. The Bible translation, style of dress, pattern of service, community norms, etc for a Mandarin-speaking church plant will be very different to those in a working class community, but there can still be 100% agreement in our first and second order issues.

How do you identify your DNA?

While it would be nice to think that all our first order and second order issues are well-thought through theologically and entirely Scriptural, the truth is, much of our DNA is assumed, or inherited. Hence the need for very careful thinking about DNA when planting.

Some questions to ask to help identify your DNA if you can't see it!

What is characteristic of everything we do?

What happens in every congregation?**What would popular opinion never allow us to change without uproar?**

Of course, what you perhaps thought was a 3rd order issue may be a 2nd order issue for others in your church!

But if something is in 1st or 2nd order that can't be backed up from Scripture, it's in the wrong spot! It's being dictated by something like personal preference, convenience, or history. Even if these positions are unhelpful, they're still your DNA. These are the things you think, and hold to, and do because of who you are.

Think about a matter as simple as notices/announcements/community news, whatever it's called in your context. Whether you have them, and how and when they're presented, is a 3rd order question that reflects your 1st and 2nd order issues:

Your theology of gathering.

Your commitment to evangelism.

Your love for lost people.

Your goal of building up the saints (Ephesians 4).

The balance between gospel impact and good impression

Our great hope and prayer is that people will be impacted by the gospel of Jesus in our churches. Without that, there is no point anyone coming along. If there is no opportunity for gospel impact, we are wasting our time.

And people are complex beings! Few if anyone will become a member of a church if they are also not left with a good impression. People need to feel welcomed. They need to be accepted. They must feel safe, and most certainly be convinced that their children are safe. Without this, what we might broadly call a "good impression" then people will not come back, and will not invite their friends. The potential for wonderful gospel impact might be present, superb preaching, etc but if no one wants to be part of the church community or walk through the doors on a Sunday, there's no opportunity for the gospel impact to occur.

There are many churches that are strong on one or the other; they have solid Bible teaching but they're unfriendly. Or their gatherings are wonderfully fun, interesting and welcoming, but without the message of the gospel.

So we seek a balance between gospel impact and good impression. Our goal is to make both of them as large as possible, to maximise the overlap between the two. Thinking about and deliberately shaping our DNA and culture is ultimately about making disciples of Jesus in obedience to the Great Commission.