

“Christ through us”: Addendum B

The importance of culture

Every organization has a culture—commonly held values, assumptions, and expectations—that shapes what that organization does. Congregations are no different. You can picture congregational health as a pyramid. The foundation is Word and sacrament. St. Paul says, “You are . . . fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19,20). Without that foundation, the church does not exist.

The top of the pyramid is our strategies and tactics—the ways we use Word and sacrament in our mission to disciple believers and evangelize the lost.

In between is congregational culture—the thought habits of the members. If a congregation is going to choose sound strategies and execute them well, members must have the right thoughts, attitudes, and expectations comprising their culture. Healthy culture supports sound ministry efforts.

Every WELS congregation has aspects of healthy culture. For example, by God’s grace, WELS congregations have maintained a rock-solid trust in the efficacy of God’s Word.

Sola Scriptura. We know that God chooses to create and sustain faith through Scripture alone.

Thus, all our ministry strategies have the ultimate aim of leading people into the gospel. However, congregations often have unhealthy elements as part of their congregational culture. This inevitably acts to the detriment of those congregations’ gospel ministry. Shaping a healthy, gospel-driven culture is a major focus of the “Christ through us” plan.

The list below contains some examples of unhealthy cultural aspects that WELS congregations have observed when doing honest self-assessment. For each example there is an explanation of how we pray that Christ, through us, might shift culture: *FROM* the unhealthy mindset *TO* a mindset that is more supportive of our gospel efforts.

This list is shared to illustrate the importance of congregational culture. It may also serve as a diagnostic tool for individuals congregations. With more than a thousand congregations in WELS, there is a broad range in congregational culture. Just as each congregation is unique, the path taken from using this diagnostic will be unique. (Note: The *Shadow of the Leader* program, developed to support “Christ through us—Goal 1: Raise up culture-shaping leaders,” helps congregational leaders with this effort.)

FROM Institutional preservation as the *de facto* focus

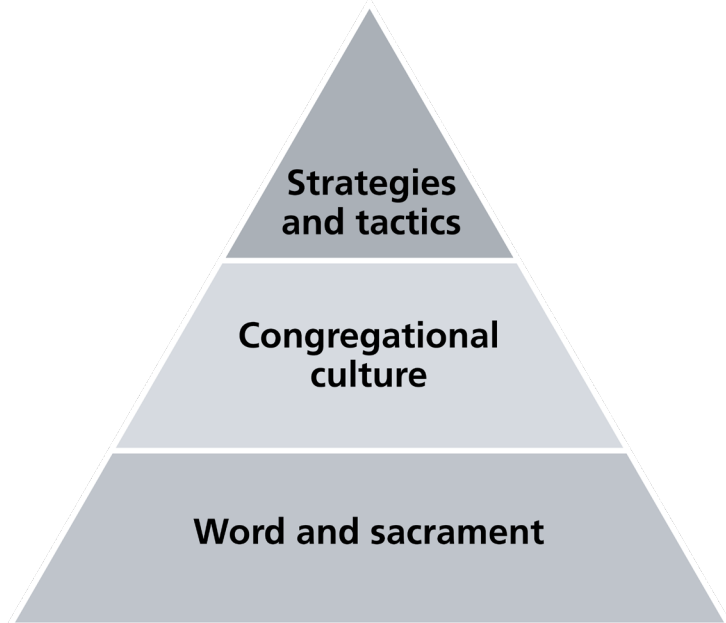
TO Zealous gospel proclamation as the explicit, overriding focus

Some WELS congregations operate with a maintenance-mode mentality. Zealous gospel proclamation means shifting from “How do we sustain our congregation?” to “How do we bring Christ to more souls with urgency and joy?”

FROM Outreach occurs primarily through congregational programs and committees

TO Outreach occurs primarily through members interacting with the unchurched

WELS congregations often rely on structured outreach programs, expecting those to draw people in. Yet many of the unchurched in our communities have a negative view of organized religion. However, they



are still willing to discuss spiritual matters with their Christian neighbor. This culture shift means members joyfully embrace their individual role as Christ's ambassador, sharing the message of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted.

FROM Ministry is accomplished through our called workers, with support of the members

TO Ministry is accomplished by our members as equipped by our called workers

Sometimes congregations default to a "pastor does the ministry" model. The expectation is for members to support and cheer on the church's efforts. For example, in many congregations, schools disciple kids with minimal parental input and corporate outreach is stressed over personal evangelism. This shift sees pastors not as the doers of all gospel ministry but as ones who equip members as they embrace their callings as Christ's ambassador: growing in faith and sharing it, spiritually leading their family, etc.

FROM Comfortable Christians

TO Cross-bearing Christians

Sometimes in our Christian lives we prefer to keep our faith low profile and safe, staying within familiar routines rather than risking discomfort for the gospel. The shift is to a culture of cross-bearing Christians, where service in Christ's kingdom pushes us beyond our comfort zones—embracing the challenges and sacrifices of sharing the message of reconciliation.

FROM *Status quo* mindset; reluctance to depart from tactics

TO Thoughtfully exploring new ideas with curiosity

Ministry tactics must be examined to see if they are serving the gospel well. Some congregations resist change even when better ministry models could strengthen the church and reach more people. The shift would mean maintaining fidelity to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions while embracing curiosity about methodology.

FROM Resigned to decline

TO Committed to renewed efforts

Membership drops and aging demographics can foster a fatalistic slump: "There's nothing we can do." The shift is to a culture of hope—that through his means of grace the Lord of the Church can spark ministry revitalization. We give Christ our most zealous mission efforts while always leaving the results of those efforts completely in his loving hands.

FROM Not fully utilizing women's insights or gifts

TO Women using their gifts in every biblically appropriate way

In some WELS congregations, at times, the ideas and insights of women are unheard and their gifts and skills not fully tapped. This can lead to sisters in Christ feeling discouraged, and it harms the congregation's efforts. The shift is to a culture where women are appropriately involved in congregational ministry, not altering or bypassing biblical principles but upholding them in a way that reflects the complementary design God established at creation.

Culture is a major focus of the "Christ through us" long-range strategic plan, serving as one of the priorities. You will note culture shifts embedded throughout the goals of that plan.