

Don't Just "Do" Discipleship (Build the Culture in Your Church!)

by Michael Kelley

Culture encompasses the values, thoughts, attitudes, and actions of the people within it. According to John Kotter, culture is simply "the way we do things around here." Every environment we encounter has its own culture.

- Your home has a culture.
- Your workplace has a culture.
- And your church has a culture.

Culture is developed over years through shared experiences, including joys, pain, and responses to environmental factors. It is akin to a set of unwritten rules that people follow within that specific environment. It's not just about actions—it's about how you think, how you feel, and of course, how you behave. The culture of a given environment is what lies beneath the surface; it's what truly governs that environment.

The concept of culture is like rebar on a construction site. No one looks at the rebar early on and is impressed by it. Instead, we wait until the structure begins to rise. We're not interested in what keeps it stable; we want to see what makes it look nice. Even though rebar isn't pretty, it's incredibly necessary. Rebar gives a building its stability and strength. It's what holds everything together below the surface, making a structure resistant against the forces of time and nature. Without rebar, a building crumbles because rebar controls the form of everything built above it. The same principle applies to culture.

That brings us to an important question: What do you want the culture of your church to be?

There are likely many answers here – we want the unwritten rules of the church to be kindness, joyfulness, truthfulness, and mission, along with more. But what if the best way to describe the culture in your church was summed up in one word? Discipleship.

Certainly, that’s at least part of—if not the main—answer to the question. This is the church’s broadest mission: to go and make disciples of Jesus. But it becomes part of the culture only when it’s not just the church’s mission, but also the mission of every member. It’s not part of the culture until everyone considers discipleship as part of their own job description.

Isn’t this where we want to be? Isn’t this the kind of church we want to lead? Not one where paid staff members run programs for people to participate in, but instead, one where every member sees the ongoing spiritual growth of the whole congregation as their personal responsibility. But how do we start to instill this value in our culture? How do we not just “do” discipleship, but build a discipleship culture? Here are three suggestions.

- **Distribute leadership more broadly.** Too often, leadership in our churches is limited to a few individuals—the same people repeatedly. To truly embed discipleship into our culture, we must regularly empower and release new leaders.
- **Free up margin for organic discipleship.** Ironically, one obstacle to a discipleship culture is overprogramming. Often, our people are so busy with scheduled events that they lack the margin for spontaneous opportunities, such as inviting someone to read the Bible or meeting for breakfast and prayer. Instead, they are too committed to attending another discipleship class.
- **Treat discipleship as a way of life.** Do we need discipleship classes? Yes, we do. But even as we implement them, we must be careful not to treat or train people to think of discipleship as merely an intellectual activity. Discipleship is a lifestyle, and until people understand that, it will never become part of the church culture.

The call of Jesus to us (and our people) is to make disciples. Let's do our best to ensure this call is deeply woven into everything we do in the church. When that happens, discipleship becomes everyone's responsibility