

From Pastor Jim's Desk:

What's Our Church's "mDNA"

A consultation team was invited to Aurora Advent Christian Church, located just outside of Chicago (*made up for this article*), because it was stuck. The church was dynamic in many ways. The leaders were talented and highly motivated, but as a unit, something was wrong.

The first things the team noticed were the signs—in the office, in the gymnasium, on the doors to the bathroom. The place was plastered with "do not's."

- Do not bounce balls on the wall.
- Do not wear black-soled shoes.
- Do not leave the lights on.
- Do not sit here.

Each notice was signed: "The Trustees."

The meetings the team attended were formal, focused on procedure and rules. Yet everyone seemed so friendly, warm, and passionate about ministry. When the team took a direct, left-brain approach and told leaders they were overly focused on the business of the church, it did not go well.

On a return visit, the team focused on trying to understand the church's code. The team took a more intuitive, right-brain approach. In focus groups, the team asked people to go back as far as they could in memory and recall first and most powerful experiences with church. The team was amazed to hear their stories.

"It was the one place each week where Mom and Dad were with me."

"I remember holding Mom's hand, and it was the only place where I held her hand each week."

"I remember going to Grandma's house after church."

Nearly all of the people told the team of deep experiences relating to family. It didn't take a genius to figure it out: the church's code was all about family—warmth, caring, and connection. In leading the church like a business, Aurora Advent Christian had become a stranger to its own code.

Meeting with the leaders, the consultation team explained what we'd heard and what we sensed was their code. Then we asked: "In your board meetings, do you function more like a government agency or a family?" There was a long silence. One by one, they admitted: government agency. They vowed to be more like a family.

By appealing to the congregation's code, "permission" was granted to change, to operate more in line with their DNA.

My-Code, not Mc-Code

What is code? It's the essence or soul of a church. We can talk about what code does, which is to shape the face of how the church displays itself to the world. Code is the often unspoken assumptions that shape a church's vision, values, and mission. It's subtly mirrored in a church's symbols, stories, and history. It is difficult to define because it is invisible, like the air we breathe.

But perhaps code is most easily understood when things are out of alignment, when something isn't quite right. In fact, a church incongruent with its code is the single greatest cause of conflict, and it creates far more damage than clashes over worship styles or even theological differences. Incongruence with code can be highly destructive.

For example, several years ago when Sears launched "the softer side of Sears" campaign, it was a complete flop. Why? Because when people think of Sears, they think of tools and appliances, not nightgowns and dress suits. It didn't fit their code. Healthy churches have a clear sense of identity. They know their code. And they don't readily deviate from it.

That code gives a church a sense of collective personality and uniqueness; it defines each fellowship as one of a kind. Churches must work at keeping their operating culture in alignment with their code.

Unfortunately, too many churches fall prey to formulaic approaches, becoming McFranchises of something else. If a Quarter Pounder, fries, and Coke taste as good in Denver as they do in Dayton, then why can't a church in Charlotte do ministry just like a church in Tacoma? Or so goes the thinking. But simply adopting the Next Big Thing exposes a number of negative unintended consequences, as the church:

- Slides toward mimicry, which inhibits true community;
- Can't find natural ways to bond folks in shared ministry;
- Loses the critical ingredient of local context to focus a church;
- Depersonalizes ministry as leaders spend all their time keeping the machine running smoothly.

The tendency to import church models and styles in an attempt to reach the same results as a church across the country contrasts with God's desire for each church to embody the gospel in its own cultural context—to live by a defining and aligning code.

Digging deeper

If we think of code as the collective identity of a given culture, we can look for code at both macro (big picture perspectives) and micro (the day to day operations) levels.

Every church is connected to a macro code within the larger context of the biblical narrative and its church history. I see within the Bible a series of short stories, each providing context and meaning, all connected to a larger story. Tolkien called such a framework "the meta-narrative"—the one story that explains and encompasses all other stories.

So the Scriptures form a meta-narrative for the church. Reading throughout Old and New Testaments, we find those same themes of redemption, covenant, revelation, and promise. In these overarching ways or big picture perspectives, we will all look like and act like our

heavenly Father. That is not just our DNA, but as I will refer to it as mDNA. We all know that the code in our physical bodies is called DNA, which is simply a script, which tells each cell of our being what it is and what it does. God has not only created congregations with DNA, but as I call it, mDNA, because God has created us with an internal code or script for missions and ministry.

Every church has an mDNA which is to guide and direct all of its activities. These are:

- To actively participate in God's work of redemption: sharing the gospel and working to redeem a fallen world.
- To function as a covenant community, caring for each other with self-sacrificial love.
- To understand how God has revealed Himself and continues to reveal Himself today in our world.
- To cling to an eternal hope that drives everything toward God's promised future.

When any church lives outside these elements, it strays from its genetic and experiential relationship with its Father. Beyond this "macro code," each church is formed uniquely. It has a "micro code" that is identified by listening to the stories of the people.

We need to ask our people again to tell us:

- Who are you as a church?
- What first attracted you to this church?
- What is most different about your life since coming to this church?

The answers people give to these and other questions help crack the code. Then we can determine whether a church is living outside its code, or if the code itself should be changed.

Epilogue

Six months after the consultation, the pastor of the Chicago-area church sent an e-mail saying the board meetings were the best they had been in his 12 years at the church. They took a few minutes for business, and spent the rest of the time interacting like a healthy family—sharing with each other, praying for each other, reading together.

At times, the only way for a church to move forward is to look back. Paradoxically, change can come only when the best of its past is guarded with passion. Code shapes church culture, values, focus, and mission. It creates a context for vision and strategy to emerge.

The future vision of our church therefore must include the best of the past, while hearing anew the plans of God for this community. Every church needs understand their mDNA and to determine anew how God created them, made them and formed them. Knowing how we are made will help lead us to know what God wants us to do.

In the architectural world, we are told that "form follows function." In other words, we build what we need in form, i.e. homes, auditoriums, gymnasiums, based on the purpose or function we want them to perform.

To review and renew a church's vision, we will proceed in just the opposite direction. In other words, God has already determined the form. Now we must ask what function or purpose God wants accomplished by creating this form.

Imagine you see a screw driver for the very first time. You have no idea what this long, handled, pointing thing does. So, you try to drive a nail into some wood with it. Will that work? No. Why? That's not its function. Suppose you use that screw driver as a key for your car door? Will that work? Well, yes and no. You will probably get the car door open, but you may not be able to close it again. Why? Again, that's not the screw driver's purpose.

Every Church needs to discover again the purpose and function for which God has created them. He has already built the form; now the church must discover the function. I have been calling that function or purpose the church's **Clear and Compelling Vision**, or as I have referred to it in this article, as our **mDNA**. God has placed us in this unique time and place for a purpose. This has not happened by accident. Now it is up to us to so align ourselves to be in God's purpose and plan.

Pastor Jim

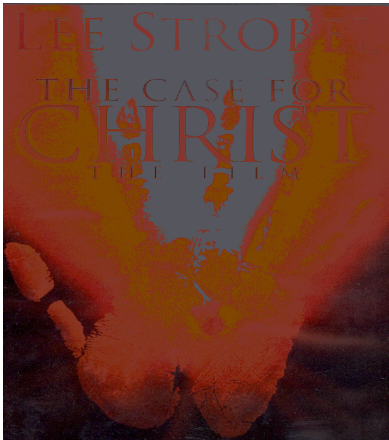


A man and his ever-nagging wife went on vacation to Jerusalem. While they were there, the wife passed away. The undertaker told the husband, "You can have her shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury her here, in the Holy Land, for \$150." The man thought about it and told him he would just have her shipped home. The undertaker asked, "Why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your wife home, when it would be wonderful to be buried here and you would spend only \$150?"

The man replied, "Long ago a man died here, was buried here, and three days later he rose from the dead. I just can't take that chance..

Coming Events you won't want to miss! Mark your calendars NOW!

“The Case for Christ”



On May 1st at 7 pm, we will show the film “The Case for Christ” by Lee Strobel. This film documents Lee’s journey from atheism to faith through his two -year investigation of the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ.

Bring your friends and neighbors, and you be the judge in the case for Christ?

Is this the Face of Christ?

On May 15th at 7 pm in the Learning Center, Pastor Jim will present his presentation on the “Shroud of Turin.” See the image of a man who suffered and was crucified as Jesus was. Could this be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ? Come and see!

