

How Cultural Understanding Drives Church Effectiveness

In each era and each cultural environment, the church defines its missiological quest in culture.

Now, that does not mean that everything is on the table. There are [marks of a biblical church](#) that matter in every cultural setting. However, each church has a quest to figure out how to engage its community and organize its ministries. That's its missional quest and every church should ask such questions.

Taking into account the missiological quest, churches then ask based upon the current cultural moment what is the most effective way to accomplish the tasks of a biblical church? This is the cultural question.

While the missiological quest should never change, the answer to the cultural questions do change.

Though not in every way, the how of ministry is in many ways determined by the who, when, and where of culture.

Observing Paul's missionary journeys show that he employed different strategies, methods, and/or terminologies in reaching Jews compared to those used in reaching Gentiles. The mission (and the missiological quest) was the same, but the cultural question changed the way he engaged the host culture.

With the cultural question constantly changing, this gives us contextualized church models.

It's not just an evangelism question; it's deeper. How we do church also changes from one culture to another. For example, how long does the service go, what approach to music, how to we disciple, etc?

Think of it this way: **Missiological quest + Cultural question = A contextualized church model.**

Let me illustrate the above.

Thoughts from the Seeker Church Approach

Think back to the seeker church movement.

Many such churches blossomed in a day when a lot of boomers were asking questions about church and faith and rejecting established traditional churches. In addition, given that many thought church was boring and irrelevant, they attempted to enliven church with its children and youth programs, the music, and the preaching style and content.

When I planted in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1994, I utilized many of the methodologies of this

model. We didn't try to demean other churches. Rather, we tried to communicate our different approach to church. I also (occasionally) wore a Hawaiian shirt, shoes without socks (I know; don't judge me), and we had a band that sang contemporary music.

Soon after, many other churches in our community also had a contemporary service!

They wanted to have a contextualized church model—and that's the right impulse.

They asked questions about what approach to church, within biblical norms, would connect most effectively with the context.

Given the cultural milieu at that time, the answer was: implement a genre of music that would resonate with people in the culture; provide them with substantive, practical, and relevant programming for their children; let the sermon topic and content be on their level, not for the religious elite; and if a building is built, make sure it doesn't resemble a spartan, dated church building of the past century.

I'm not saying this was all great and perfect, and we did not do everything like everyone else, but I am saying that it aligned well with the context, and many such churches reached a lot of people (and many of them also disciplined well).

Now, looking back, some may contend the seeker church model was wrong (and continues to be). I'm not writing to evaluate it, though I think that is a worthy undertaking and have done so in the past.

However, my point is the model lined up well with its culture. Looking back over the 80's, 90's, and early 2000's, seeker church approaches reached a lot of unchurched and dechurched people—those who were disenfranchised from the traditional church.

While it worked then, this model is no longer as well aligned with the predominant cultural milieu. The shift is not true everywhere, but most would say that the seeker model does not engage our culture as well today, partly because culture has shifted to more of a negative perception of the church and organized religion in general.

In other words, there are still seekers, but now many don't see the church as the place to find answers. Seeker strategies are predicated on the idea that they are.

Although people claim to be more spiritual they are skeptical of institutions, including religious ones, thus they opt out of organized religion altogether. Therefore, for the most part it doesn't matter how "cool" or "relevant" churches are.

Those who would have gone back to church because of the "cool-factor" have already gone back.

Changes in Approach

What we have witnessed over the last decade or so, particularly in newer church models, are many in the church trying to engage the missiological quest for a new generation. So, new church models are taking into account the spiritual, post-Christian, pluralistic, skeptical, individualistic, consumerist, and diverse culture.

The church then thinks through the practices and methods that would be most effective at reaching the culture.

In his book [Gaining By Losing](#), J. D. Greear asserts, “[I]f we want to reach the next generation, we are going to have to equip our people to reach them outside the church.”

That’s a question shaping new models of church of church practice.

Hold Your Mission Tightly and Your Models Loosely

When you look back on the last fifty years of church models, what you will find is that the models were most effective in their mission when they were contextualized (geared to their host culture). This drives some theologically-minded people crazy, but it’s what we train and require missionaries to do.

And, we must not forbid our churches to do the very thing we require international missionaries to do.

In other words, models were the result of the church understanding its missiological quest and asking the cultural question.

What we must learn is models come and go, for the culture is always changing and shifting. This doesn’t mean we cannot learn from each model and incorporate those things that are still effective. However, the takeaway from church models and cultural alignment is this: hold your mission tightly and your model loosely.

Be firm on the mission, but flexible on the methodology.

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