

Churches have distinct cultures comprised by a set of ideas, a vocabulary, core values, and the rewards and penalties used to reinforce these values. Two aspects of that culture are captured in the Descriptive Map of the *Vital Signs*[®] report: theological perspective and flexibility.

Over the years our experience suggests that churches in each of the four quadrants generated by this indicator have distinct characteristics. While every church has elements of each quadrant, there tends to be a dominant pattern that relates more to one quadrant than the other three. Exploring this pattern can be useful to churches engaged in strategic planning or preparing for a search process.

To assist in this exploration we have created a typology of the four church types:

1. **Progressive-Adaptable** churches which we have designated *Magi Cultures*.
2. **Progressive-Settled** churches which we have designated *Paraclete Cultures*.
3. **Conservative-Adaptable** churches which we have designated *Performance Cultures*.
4. **Conservative-Settled** churches which we have designated *Hearth and Home Cultures*.

In the pages that follow, these types are described in terms of their strengths, potential vulnerabilities, and opportunities for growth. This is intended to facilitate the beginning of a conversation, not the end.

The purpose of these typologies is to assist leaders in the following:

1. Clarify core values of a congregation related to theology and style.
2. Explore whether strengths have been fully developed and identify opportunities for further development.
3. Understand how the vulnerabilities inherent in their type may be hampering vitality and growth.
4. Discuss whether efforts to develop and grow in other quadrants might be beneficial.

For example, a church with a *paraclete culture* may discover that it is being overwhelmed by needs it is not prepared to meet. This may require that it more fully develop its strengths through gift identification, training, and resource generation. But it may also need to develop the *performance* side of its work by placing more emphasis on personal responsibility, accountability, and achieving excellence. The goal is not to turn it into a *performing culture* but to make it a stronger *paraclete culture* with long term sustainability. Discoveries such as these can be helpful as they inform search and planning committees.

For churches that are on or near a line, the typology may be less helpful. Certainly time and energy should not be invested in nailing down precisely what the church is. However, it is often the case that churches are bi-modal with worshipping congregations in distinctly different quadrants. Working with each of these cultures and helping them identify the benefits and vulnerabilities that each brings to the table can lead in fruitful directions.

Descriptive Map Typology

Quadrant: Progressive-Adaptable

Cultural Designation: Magi

Primal Element: Wind

Popular Image: Tour Bus

Context/Setting: University, Research

At its best

- Rational
- Advocate
- Intellectual
- Powerful
- Efficient
- Deep knowledge
- Yoda*

At its worst

- Aloof
- Impersonal
- Unapproachable
- Theoretical
- Spock on Steroids*

Quadrant: Conservative-Adaptable

Cultural Designation: Performance

Primal Element: Fire

Popular Image: Revivalist/Traveling Salvation Show

Context/Setting: Entertainment/Internet

At its best

- Fun loving, lively
- Spontaneous
- Experiential
- Conversion/New life
- Relevant
- Hans Solo*

At its worst

- Irresponsible
- Flaky
- Unpredictable
- Hypocritical
- Shallow
- R2D2 (just kidding)*

Quadrant: Progressive-Settled

Cultural Designation: Paraclete

Primal Element: Water

Popular Image: Hostel/Hospital

Context/Setting: Boundary Community

At its best

- Warm
- Compassionate
- Healing
- Mentoring
- Accepting
- Mother Teresa*

At its worst

- Overly emotional
- Overwhelmed
- Naive
- Stuck in routine
- Don Quixote*

Quadrant: Conservative-Settled

Cultural Designation: Hearth and Home

Primal Element: Earth

Popular Image: Lincoln Logs

Context/Setting: Traditional Community

At its best

- Stable
- Secure
- Dependable
- Clear
- Guardian
- Prodigal Father*

At its worst

- Rigid
- Controlling
- System bound
- Conflict prone
- Elder brother*

Conservative-Settled: Hearth and Home

Hearth and Home cultures are ultimately concerned with a clearly defined faith that is lived out in a community with structure and stability. At their best, these cultures serve as guardians of hard won understandings and time-honored traditions which offer a measure of shelter from the frenetic pace of change in the world. In their outreach to others, they not only invite them into faith, but also to come home with all the expectations and rewards of a family. It is common in Hearth and Home cultures to hear folks talk about issues from a Biblical perspective that is more literally interpreted and to call members back to the foundations of the faith.

Members of Hearth and Home cultures appreciate the unchangeable nature of the message they proclaim and live. The clarity provided by their faith is readily translated into guidelines for living and transferable from one situation to another. The line between right and wrong is usually bright and readily articulated. They are often deeply engaged in the study of Scripture through individual devotions, small group Bible studies, and educational classes which tend to engage members directly in the Biblical text. Where a clear Biblical mandate is perceived, members of Hearth and Home cultures provide services to those in need, often with remarkable tenacity and perseverance.

Persons in Hearth and Home cultures tend to understand that the call to faith is the call to come home in many different senses of the word. It is a call to return to a Biblical faith or a faith best articulated at a point in the past. In more liturgical traditions, it may be a call to return to a previous style of worship, prayer book, or hymn book. Because Hearth and home cultures often see themselves as a family, straying members are called to come back to the family where they will be welcomed with open arms and ready forgiveness. Efforts to remove inactive adult children from the church roll are often seen as a kind of abandonment.

Even an annual visit to the church at Christmas “counts”. In more evangelical churches, issues are more focused around personal faith and conversion. Still, members are expected to become engaged with the “family” whether that takes the form of a small group or active participation in the single cell of a family-sized congregation.

The biblical themes that are resonant with Hearth and Home cultures include those of home, homeland, families and children, the cycles of birth, confirmation, conversion, marriage, family, and a faithful death. Hearth and Home cultures often value the regulation of behavior articulated in the ten commandments. In addition, Hearth and Home cultures may have other sourcebooks that are important such as ecclesiastical regulations, confessional documents, or worship standards.

Because Hearth and Home cultures understand themselves as guardians of traditional understandings and practices, the positions they take may leave them open to the charge that they are simply resistant to change. Their tendency to focus on the concrete side of matters may lead to inordinate attachments to facilities and furnishings. If they lose their missional focus they may retreat into a fortress mentality and find themselves becoming a diminishing, aging congregation.

If Hearth and Home cultures do not adequately explore the intellectual side of their faith, including the relationship of their tradition to contemporary issues, they may find that they are increasingly detached from the world they live in. In addition, the drive for spiritual and moral clarity on core issues may manifest itself in a lack of tolerance with one another making them vulnerable to demoralizing conflicts. Unless some amount of change can be embraced, returning sons and daughters will not encounter the loving father but a house full of elder brothers...or a house with no one in it at all.

Progressive-Settled: Paraclete

Paraclete cultures are ultimately concerned with the development of communities that are intellectually open and reflective, but with attention paid to the importance of structure and ritual. At their best, this is accomplished through openness to those with different theological and spiritual perspectives combined with structures and practices that provide the external stability necessary for those seeking to develop and grow. A warm and hospitable community can make the church a potential haven for those in need of healing or recovery. It is common in paraclete cultures to hear folks talk about hospitality, inclusiveness, and spiritual practice. While many members are clearly grounded in their own theological perspectives, Paraclete cultures tend to be less demanding of a particular understanding of the faith, but more clear about the benefits of a particular liturgical tradition.

Persons in Paraclete cultures are comfortable with the unique spiritual path that each individual must follow but they also believe that they have discovered important patterns of spiritual practice. They may focus on methods for identifying strengths, temperaments, preferences, or ability patterns of those in their community. In addition, they may be articulate regarding stages of spiritual and emotional development.

Paraclete cultures are uniquely equipped to focus on ministries of healing. Their openness can make them comfortable dealing with various expressions of human brokenness and the emotional/spiritual consequences of life's misfortunes. In a compassionate response to suffering, Paraclete cultures may develop counseling centers, spiritual direction, homeless shelters, food pantries, support groups, and recovery services. What is distinctive about Paraclete cultures is that members are often engaged in the front line work of these ministries and not simply the sponsors of work that others do.

The biblical images that are resonant with Paraclete cultures are those of the Spirit, the parables of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus himself, the wilderness hospitality to strangers found in the exodus, and the Genesis garden as a primal pattern of harmony, balance, and goodness at the heart of creation.

Paraclete cultures value openness to others who think differently about their faith. Their focus on the unique, individual journey may leave them open to the charge that they are wishy-washy regarding values that are core to the larger church. Their tendency to focus on the positive potential in situations and persons may make it difficult for them to deal with the harshness of some cultural and political realities. If they lose their missional focus, they may find themselves going through the motions of set routines that have lost their deeper meaning. Alternatively, they may retreat into a corporate malaise where freedom of thought or individual pain becomes an excuse for mediocrity.

If Paraclete cultures do not find a way to balance their openness with reasonable expectations of others, they may end up attracting more needs than the resources required to address those needs. Their admirable tendency to accept people where they are may not offer an adequate level of accountability that is also essential to wholeness. Without a sufficient level of flexibility, they may become frozen in time and irrelevant to the thinking of those in the community about them.

By developing a performance dimension to their lives, Paraclete cultures add an appropriate level of expectation that can generate both strength and resources. This might be achieved through excellence in a number of areas including liturgical arts, outstanding preaching, or architecture. An emphasis on the power of the Gospel to transform and not simply comfort is also critical.

Magi cultures are ultimately concerned with the rational integrity of their faith, the just application of faith to life, and the journey of understanding. Adherence to these values shapes a community, which, at its best, exhibits deep knowledge, open discourse, and intellectual curiosity. A penetrating analytic culture makes the church a powerful ally for those in need of advocacy and a formidable foe to those with a different perspective on an issue. It is common in Magi cultures to hear folks talk about issues from a systems perspective and the need to develop safeguards for those with minority status or who lack the power to protect themselves.

Persons in Magi cultures are not averse to the wandering aspect of the faith. Indeed, they often understand faith as the foundation for wandering. This wandering can take many forms. For some, it can take the form of literal journeys with a significant percentage of the membership engaged in travel or pilgrimage, with international lecturers brought onsite, or with leaders engaged in international exchanges. For others, the wandering happens in one place and takes the form of intellectual development or liturgical exploration. It is for this reason that Magi cultures are often located near university campuses, research facilities, or other academic populations

The biblical images that are resonant with Magi cultures include the story of the Magi themselves, the children of Israel in the wilderness, the prophets who spoke to the people of God around the constellation of exiles and returns, the women who traveled about in support of the ministry of Jesus, and the ministry of Jesus himself, traveling around Judea and healing all those oppressed by evil.

Magi cultures value knowledge and understanding. For this reason, they can be perceived as aloof and unapproachable. Because their care for others is

often expressed in terms of fairness or justice, others may misinterpret them as personally cold or uncaring. Their intellectual explorations may leave them open to the charge that they lack commitment to the core values that are important to others. Their tendency to focus on the conceptual side may make it more difficult for them to deal with facility and maintenance issues. If they lose their missional focus they may retreat into esoteric debates and end up being defined by what they think rather than what they *personally* do.

If Magi cultures do not adequately develop the “hearth and home” dimension to their community life, they may find relationships difficult to develop and sustain. They also may overestimate the power of reason to manage the non-rational elements of life which may result in emotions that erupt unexpectedly and without a path for resolution. They may be so focused on larger issues that they underestimate their need for training to develop boundaries, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and trust.

Since their dominant reflexes are prioritized around rational understanding, they may not give proper weight to the role of emotion in persuading and enlisting support. Failing to realize that it is emotion that leads to action, they may become frustrated that their decisions do not bring about change. In their quest to be flexible they also may not give enough voice to the values of commitment and clarity which may make it difficult for them to communicate who they are to potential members.

By developing the more relational, emotional and structural aspects of their common life, Magi cultures can add the stability that will help provide sustainability over the longer term. This can also provide the cohesion that will help the community build an identity that is not focused on a particular issue.

Conservative-Adaptable: Performance

Performance cultures are ultimately concerned with an experiential faith presented in a way that people find accessible and compelling. At their best, these cultures serve as bridges between traditional understandings of Christian beliefs and contemporary life experiences. By fusing the Christian message with a variety of innovative messaging techniques the distance between past and present is spanned in a way that increases the plausibility of the message to the target audience. Performance cultures are often able to create powerful experiences for participants that open them to alternative ways of looking at life. By shifting emotional landscapes they lay the groundwork for compelling calls to conversion and renewal.

Performance cultures are concerned with what works now, not by changing the basic message, but by discovering ways to increase the impact of that message. Venue, furnishings, music, symbols, media are all means to an end that could be changed at any time if a better method is discovered for winning people to faith or strengthening the faith of the already won. It is common in performance cultures to hear members talk about experiences, testimonies, being moved, inspired, lifted up, spoken to, touched, or convicted. Worship services, witness talks, and group experiences are specially designed for an experiential impact that can lead to conversion and transformation.

Performance cultures often rely heavily on various aspects of the performing arts. By presenting an ancient message using the best of contemporary media, internet technology or other innovative messaging approaches performance cultures create experiences in which the emphasis is widened from simply understanding the Gospel to feeling the power of it.

The biblical themes that are most resonant with

Performance cultures are those that can be powerfully portrayed and experienced. They are often masters at retelling Biblical stories of Individual encounters with God in a way that pulls the audience into their own encounter. While the confrontation may be more indirect than that of a revivalist tent meeting, the result is the same: a crisis is created and a choice must be made. Performance cultures are also resonant with the experiential quality of the Psalms and may build much of their worship experience around simple verses set to music.

Performance culture efforts to make an eternal message fresh and accessible may leave them open to the charge that they fail to recognize the importance of a shared tradition. In addition, they may underestimate the creativity and resources required to be effective in their approach. The gap between the performance ideal in the mind and the actual reality may lead to a new tradition of mediocrity that fails its purpose. If performance cultures lose their missional focus they may find themselves chasing a religious high where lives are rarely changed and change does not have adequate roots to be sustainable.

If Performance cultures do not adequately develop the deeper dimensions of their community life they run the risks of shallowness and pretense. Their tendency to focus on conversion and transformation may not appreciate the often slow and painful process required for spiritual development and recovery from trauma. Their inability to acknowledge the abiding shadows within the human personality can lead to personal behaviors that are inconsistent with their public persona. By incorporating service to others, spiritual direction and spiritual disciplines that have proved valuable to Christians across the centuries, Performance cultures can ground the gifts and creativity that give them such an impact upon the people around them.