



SIX MARKS OF A
CHURCH CULTURE
THAT DEEPLY
CHANGES LIVES

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HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP

Six Marks of a Church Culture that Deeply Changes Lives
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INTRODUCTION

The church of Jesus Christ needs a dramatic shift of culture. And that culture needs to be radically different from that of the world.

Sadly, that is not the reality in most of our churches.

One of the greatest insights I've gained from working with thousands of churches around the world is that creating a healthy culture is a powerful strategy for impacting people's lives as well as the long-term mission of the church. If our goal is to multiply deeply transformed disciples and leaders for the sake of the world, a healthy culture is profoundly important. We have to be intentional about taking the chaos of what people bring with them—from their very different backgrounds, cultures, and families of origin—and shaping it into a radically different culture that operates as the new family of Jesus.

So, what precisely is this thing called culture? Defining it can be challenging because culture consists primarily of unspoken rules about “the way we do things around here.”

Culture is that imprecise something, the invisible presence or personality of a place that can be difficult to describe without actually experiencing it. It is often more readily felt than articulated. Perhaps the simplest and best definitions I've come across describe culture as “the sum-total of the learned patterns of thought and behavior” of any given group;* and “Culture is what human beings make of the world.”**

Multinational companies such as Google, Apple, and IBM have very distinct cultures. Ethnic communities, political groups, and countries have cultures. Denominations and para-church organizations have cultures. Every church, ministry, task force, and team has a certain style that constitutes the spirit or ethos of that particular community. But that doesn't mean culture just "happens." Culture needs to be created, shaped, and maintained. And the responsibility for doing so resides with the leader.

To help you begin thinking about what this might look like in your own church, I've identified six characteristics or marks of an emotionally healthy church culture:

- 1. Slowed-Down Spirituality**
- 2. Integrity in Leadership**
- 3. Beneath-the-Surface Discipleship**
- 4. Healthy Community**
- 5. Passionate Marriages and Singleness**
- 6. Every Person in Full-Time Ministry**

Each characteristic is summarized on the pages that follow. After the description of each characteristic, you will find a quick assessment tool and then questions for personal reflection and team discussion. My prayer is that this process will give you the vision and courage to transform the culture of your ministry so profoundly that its impact will be felt for generations.

* Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Press, 2013) 244.

** This is journalist Ken Myers' definition of culture as summarized by Andy Crouch in *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Carol Stream, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 17.

MARK #1: Slowed-Down Spirituality

We slow down our pace in order to be with Jesus, and this is the source from which our activity flows.

In a church culture that changes lives, people refuse to allow a hurried world to set the pace for their lives. They choose instead to live by rhythms that are slower and more deliberate. They set aside time each day to immerse themselves in Scripture, silence, and solitude, which are foundational practices for their communion with Jesus. Their doing for God flows out of their being with God.

As a result, they consistently embrace other spiritual practices, such as Sabbath-keeping and discernment, in order to cultivate their personal relationship with Jesus and avoid living off of the spirituality of others. They willingly learn about the practices of slowed-down spirituality from 2,000 years of church history and the global church. They remain profoundly aware that, apart from abiding in Jesus, it is impossible to bear lasting fruit—as individuals and as a community.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by slowed-down spirituality?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- In what ways is your current culture an asset that helps people to slow down and cultivate oneness with Jesus? In what ways is it a liability that makes slowing down harder?
- Briefly reflect on your work and leadership over the last month or so. In what ways were the characteristics of slowed-down spirituality most notably evident? For example, in your attitudes, behaviors, demeanor, pace of life, etc. In what ways were these characteristics most notably absent?



MARK #2: Integrity in Leadership

We do not pretend to be something on the outside that we are not on the inside.

In a church culture that changes lives, leaders—staff and volunteer—are intentional about living out of vulnerability and brokenness. They refuse to engage in pretense or impression management. They endeavor to be the same person on stage in public as they are off stage in private. They recognize that their first and most difficult task is to lead themselves so that their work for God is nourished by a deep inner life with God.

This ensures that their leadership is not driven by other motives, such as the need for power, approval from others, or success as the world defines and measures it. Through their lives and their leadership, they seek to create an environment in which their people are encouraged to ask questions and give helpful feedback. They also enjoy the freedom to say a healthy “no” as they discern God’s will and set appropriate limits.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by integrity in leadership?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

• How would you complete the following sentences?

Some of the ways our culture indirectly affirms pretense and subtly encourages impression management are . . .

Some of the ways our culture affirms transparency and encourages people to live out of vulnerability and brokenness are . . .

• *In what aspect of your life or leadership are you most tempted to skim on truth, to be less than honest about your struggles, to deny negative emotions, or to pretend to be more or better than you are?*



MARK #3: Beneath-the-Surface Discipleship

We grow in self-awareness because we cannot change that of which we remain unaware.

In a church culture that changes lives, no one assumes people are maturing on the basis of activities such as church attendance, small group participation, and serving. Instead, they understand that maturity results when people engage in the slow, hard work of following the crucified Jesus. Leaders carefully teach people how to break free from unhealthy or destructive patterns in their families and culture of origin, and how to live differently in the new family of Jesus. People understand that their past impacts their present, and they are intentional about identifying and facing their beneath-the-surface issues (e.g. a sinful tendencies, unresolved wounds, triggers)

They apply the gospel of grace and the truth of Scripture to every area of life, meeting Jesus in their losses and limits and learning how to love other people as Jesus did. They understand they need to die to the less obvious sins—such as defensiveness, detachment from others, and a lack of vulnerability—as well as the more obvious sins, such as lying or coveting. They also pursue the healthy desires God places in their hearts and celebrate God’s good gifts, such as beauty, nature, laughter, music, and friendships.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by slowed-down spirituality?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- In what ways, if any, does your culture tend to equate increased levels of participation (in programs, events, or serving) with growth and transformation in Christ?
- What beneath-the-surface issues — a sinful tendency, a weakness, a wound, a past failure, or self-protection — has most impacted your leadership in the past recently?



MARK #4: Healthy Community

We are committed to learning tools and practices in order to love others like Jesus.

In a church culture that changes lives, people recognize that there is a disconnect when those who claim to love Jesus are experienced by others as defensive, judgmental, unapproachable, and unsafe. Thus, leaders teach and train people in how to do relationships as Jesus did. This includes how to speak clearly, respectfully, and honestly; how to listen; and how to clarify expectations. It also includes confronting the elephants in the room, such as “dirty fighting,” and equipping people to master “clean fighting” to negotiate conflicts.

As part of living in community, people learn to respect individual viewpoints, choices, and spiritual journeys, allowing each one to take responsibility for his or her own life without blaming or shaming. By sharing and connecting with each other out of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, they offer a gift of God’s grace to one another and to the world.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by beneath-the-surface discipleship?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Every culture has a default mode for negotiating conflict and navigating differing viewpoints. What three words or phrases would you use to describe the default mode of your ministry culture when it comes to conflict and differing viewpoints? In what ways, are these words/phrases indicative of a healthy culture? An unhealthy culture?
- What three words or phrases would you use to describe your personal default mode when it comes to conflict and differing viewpoints? What similarities and differences are there between your default mode and that of the larger culture?



MARK #5: Passionate Marriages and Singleness

We model God's passionate love for the world by living out of our marriages or singleness.

In a church culture that changes lives, the maturity of each person's marriage or singleness is measured not simply by stability or commitment to Christ, but by the degree to which each is becoming a living sign and wonder of God's love for the world. People live out a vision of love that is passionate, intimate, free, and life-giving, recognizing their oneness with Christ is closely connected to their oneness with their spouses (for married people) or to their close community (for single people).

They talk openly about sexuality, recognizing the intimate relationship between Christ and his church is to be reflected in the sexual relationship between a husband and wife, or in the chastity of those who are single. They carefully differentiate between "using" people and "loving" people by monitoring the movements of their hearts and treating others as unrepeatable and invaluable beings made in the image of God.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by healthy community?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- In what ways does your culture affirm marriages and singleness as vocations—as two ways of modeling God’s passionate love for the world? What, if any, differences are there in the ways your culture equips married adults and single adults to live out their respective vocations?
- Overall, how would you describe the role your vocation (marriage or singleness) plays in your leadership? To what degree does the way you spend your time and energy reflect that your marriage/singleness—not ministry—is your first priority as a leader?



MARK #6: Every Person in Full-Time Ministry

We commission every believer to walk in the authority of Jesus at work and in daily life.

In a church culture that changes lives, people reject cultural values that view human beings as spectators and consumers. They affirm that every believer is called to full-time ministry for Jesus. Every sphere of daily activity—paid or unpaid work, or retirement—constitutes a field of ministry. They refuse to compartmentalize work and spirituality, viewing work as an act of worship that brings order out of chaos and builds God's kingdom.

They seek to create community within their spheres of influence, integrating new skills for loving well, and reflecting the generosity of God. In the context of their work and daily activities, they practice Jesus' presence and engage in the slow work of making disciples. Drawing on the foundation of the gospel, they are active in naming and combating language, attitudes, and behaviors resulting from such evils as racism, classism, sexism, and any other ideology that demeans human beings.



QUICK ASSESSMENT

To what degree is your culture characterized by passionate marriage and singleness?

Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response. Then briefly describe the reasons for the number you circled.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all
true of our
culture

Completely
true of our
culture

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- If you were to ask the people in your church to name their ministry, what percentage would name their volunteer service to the church? What percentage would name their sphere of daily activity? Overall, how would you characterize the degree to which your people tend to compartmentalize work and spirituality?
- In what ways does the truth that every person is in full-time ministry challenge you as a leader? In what ways does it encourage you?



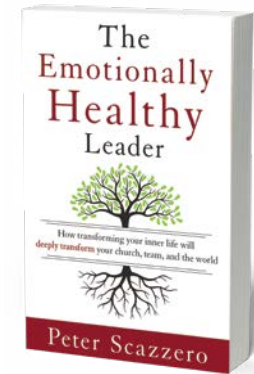
NEXT STEPS



If what you've read here has awakened in you a hunger to create a healthier church culture, I encourage you to boldly take your next steps. Since culture flows from leadership, the best place to start is with your core leadership team. Here are two steps you can take to get started:

1. READ THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LEADER

As a team, read through the book one chapter at a time and take time to not only complete the exercises and assessments, but to discuss them together. As you explore the inner life and outer life of healthy leadership, you will begin to experience health in the deep foundations of your church. Access a free Discussion Guide [here](#).



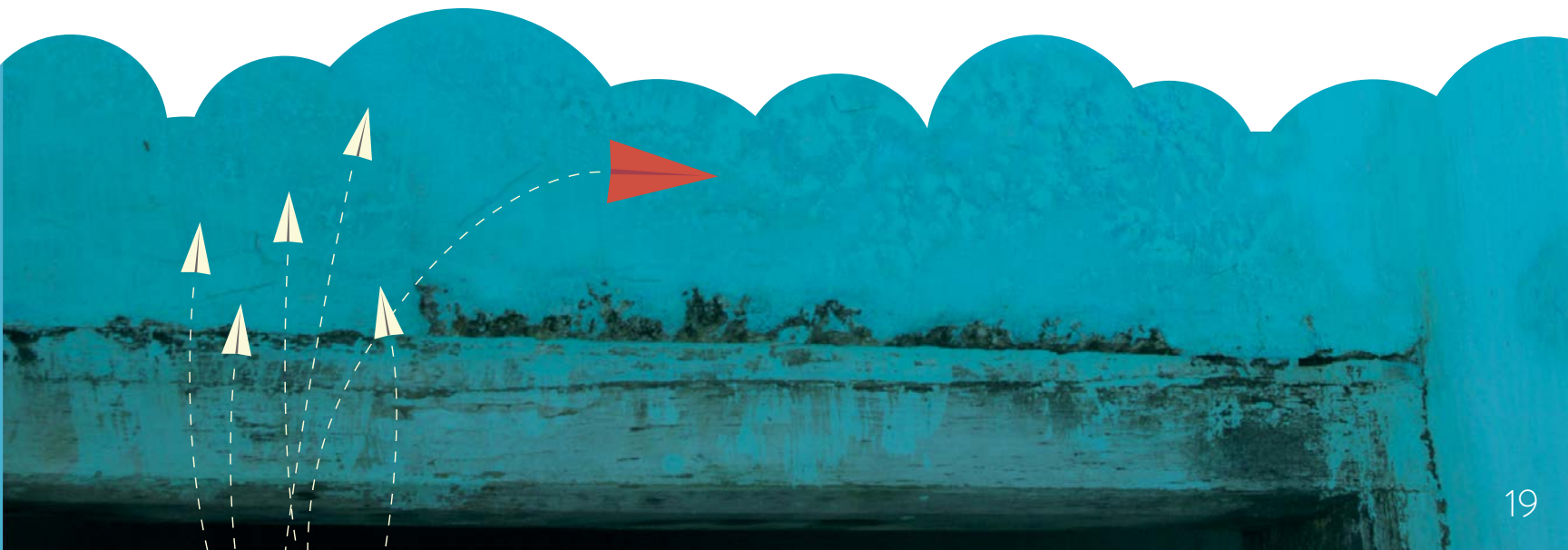
2. EXPERIENCE THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP COURSE

Embedding of this course into a church or ministry is the best way for your team or church build an emotionally healthy culture that deeply changes lives. For more information on the course, watch this brief video, [What Is Emotionally Healthy Discipleship?](#), and visit the leadership page of our web site [here](#) to learn more about our leadership training events.



NEXT STEPS (CONTINUED)

Wherever your next steps take you, my prayer is that God will give you the courage to faithfully live your unique life in Christ, and that you will discover a whole new way of living as a result. May his love invade you as you continue your journey.



ABOUT PETE SCAZZERO

Pete Scazzero is the founder of New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York City, a large, multiracial church with more than seventy-three countries represented. After serving as senior pastor for twenty-six years, Pete now serves as a teaching pastor/pastor at large.

He is the author of a number of best-selling books, including [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality](#) and [The Emotionally Healthy Leader](#). He is also the co-author of [The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course Leader's Kit](#), a two-part course that is transforming churches and ministries around the world.

Pete is co-founder, along with his wife Geri, of [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship](#), a global ministry active in over twenty-five countries. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry in Marriage and Family.

For more information, visit emotionallyhealthy.org, or connect with Pete on Twitter [@petescazzero](#), [Facebook](#), or his popular podcast, [The Emotionally Healthy Leader](#).