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Develop a Core Values Statement for Your Church

One of the most helpful tasks that church leaders can accomplish is to guide the congregation in developing its own distinctive “Core Values Statement.” This step must be accomplished before a congregation can develop a Mission Statement and a Strategic Plan. In future articles, I will describe a process to accomplish the latter two tasks, but in this article I will explain the nature of core values, their importance, and the process for identifying them. I adapted much of this information from various writings by Aubrey Malphurs, whose works are listed at the end of this article.

The Nature of Core Values

Here are three helpful definitions of core values:

- “The constant, passionate, biblical core beliefs that drive the ministry” (Malphurs, 1996, p. 34).
- “The deep-seated, pervasive standards that influence almost every aspect of our lives: our moral judgments, our responses to others, our commitments to personal and organizational goals” (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, pp. 190-191).
- “The rules or guidelines by which a corporation exhorts its members to behavior consistent with its order, security, and growth” (Quigley, 1993, p. 15).

Core values are the underlying principles that guide a church in making decisions, determining priorities, setting goals, allocating resources, and carrying out programs. They are the defining characteristics of a church that are emphasized in discussions and highlighted in church publications. They can also be described as convictions, precepts, ideals, standards, or assumptions. All policies and actions of the church are based on these core values. They are not biblical doctrines themselves, but they are drawn from biblical teachings.

The Importance of Core Values

A church can benefit in many ways by identifying its core values. Malphurs (1996) provides this list of what core values do for a church:

- Determine ministry distinctives
- Dictate personal involvement
- Communicate what is important
- Embrace positive change
- Influence overall behavior
- Inspire people to action
- Enhance credible leadership
- Shape ministry character

- Contribute to ministry success
- Determine the ministry vision.

How do core values contribute to ministry success? They encourage commitment, enthusiasm, and effort among the members. They give people incentive to work harder. They promote innovation, creativity, and risk-taking. They facilitate better communication, decision-making, and evaluation.

A major problem in organizations, including churches, is that members may have unshared, competing values. Getting the members together to articulate their values and reach agreement on which ones are central to the church can improve the unity and progress of the church. Kouzes and Posner (1987) found in their research that shared values in an organization provide the following benefits:

- Foster strong feelings of personal effectiveness
- Promote high levels of company loyalty
- Facilitate consensus about key goals
- Encourage ethical behavior
- Promote strong norms about working hard and caring
- Reduce levels of job stress and tension.

They also cite research that shows that “the more effective companies have three qualities in common: (1) clarity, (2) consensus, and (3) intensity about their core organizational values” (1987, p. 195). These three qualities apply to churches also. First, members of a church need to know and understand the priorities and emphases of their church. Second, members of a church should share and agree with the church’s core values. Third, members of a church should feel deep emotional bonds and commitments to the church’s core values.

The Process of Identifying Core Values

Before I describe the steps for developing a Core Values Statement, I want to emphasize two key points about the process. First, the entire congregation should be involved. This is not something that should be developed by the leaders and then imposed on the congregation. It is important to involve the entire congregation for three reasons:

1. When more people participate, more wisdom will be pooled together, and the results will be more trustworthy.
2. As decisions increase in importance, the number of people who participate in making the decision should increase. And identifying core values is one of the most important decisions a church will make.
3. If more people participate in making these decisions, they are more likely to support the final results.

Second, the core values that are identified should be actual, not aspirational. C. Argyris distinguishes between “espoused theory” and “theory-in-use” (Smith, 2001). Applying this distinction to the concept of values, “espoused values” are those that we say and believe we use,

and “values-in-use” are those that we actually use. A church’s core values statement should describe those principles that have actually guided a church throughout its history. The goal is to make these existing, unspoken assumptions explicit. The goal is not to transform the church into something it is not by identifying those core values that the church aspires to have. If the core values need to be changed, that can be addressed in the strategic plan at the end of the process, but for now the Core Values Statement should describe the actual state of existence of the church. Of course, the exception to this point would be a church that is just starting out and needs to lay out the principles that will guide its future decisions.

At the first meeting held for the purpose of identifying the core values, the person leading the process (in most situations this would be the minister) should spend some time teaching about core values. The teacher can provide examples of core values such as those listed in chapter 2 of J. V. Quigley (1993). Then the people can be divided into groups of 3-5. Each group should have a facilitator. Perhaps the elders can serve this function. Each group should also have a recorder. The groups can be randomly divided or intentionally divided so that each group contains a cross-section of men/women, young/old, etc.

Each group will list on a large sheet of newsprint all the possible core values of the church. They should be encouraged to complete the statements “We are committed to...” or “We value...” They should use a brainstorming process, which involves listing everything that comes to mind without evaluating it. After the allotted time has lapsed, the groups can tape their lists to the wall so that everyone can see them. The leader of each small group can read and explain their results to the entire assembly.

Before the next meeting, a master list of all the core values should be compiled and copies made for the participants. Similar items can be combined to reduce the total list. The following table provides an example of the master list of 50 core values that was developed when I guided Woodbridge Christian Church of Woodbridge, VA, through this process.

Table 1: Master List of Core Values

Acceptance of others	Meeting needs
Atmosphere	Multiethnic ministry
Authority of Scripture	Numerical growth
Christ-centered	Optimism
Comfort for the afflicted	Ordinances: baptism and Lord’s Supper
Commitment	Participatory decision-making
Community	Perseverance
Creativity	Positive attitude
Dedication	Prayer
Discipleship	Priesthood of believers
Diversity on nonessentials	Quality
Empowerment	Racial harmony
Encouraging others	Relationships
Evangelism	Relevance to the culture
Excellence	Risk-taking

Family
Fellowship
Friendliness
Grace
Hard work
Hospitality
Humor
Leadership
Learning
Love for others

Sacrifice
Seeker-sensitive
Service
Spiritual growth
Spirituality
Teaching
Teamwork
Unity/harmony
Willingness to change/flexibility
Inspiring worship

During the second meeting, the groups will discuss the master list and choose the top 10 to 12 core values on which they can agree. The votes of each small group can be tallied to see which core values rise to the top. The whole group can then discuss the results until a consensus is reached.

When the 10-12 core values have been identified, the list can be developed by the minister or a small committee into a Core Values Statement that explains the meaning and significance of each core value. The elders will suggest revisions until they approve the final document. This document will be presented to the entire congregation for their formal acceptance. It can be posted on the website and included in visitors' packets, new members' packets, and other publicity materials.

To view an example of a core values statement, click on this link to open a PDF document: [Core Values Statement.pdf](#). This statement was adopted by Woodbridge Christian Church. It contains 14 core values divided into two categories: Our Relationship with God and Our Relationship with Others. When Woodbridge Christian Church went through this process, the participants viewed it as fun, positive, and enlightening. It was an important community-building exercise for the church.

In future issues of *ChurchLink*, I will explain how to follow up this process with the development of a mission statement and a strategic plan.

Sources:

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1987). [The leadership challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations](#). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Smith, M. K. (2001). Chris Argyris: Theories of action, double-loop learning and organizational learning. *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm>.