



## The Role of Organizational Culture and Pastoral Leadership in Sustainable Church Outreach: A Multisite Mini-Ethnographic Case Study

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### Abstract

This study examined the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in two churches that have sustainable outreach programs. The themes derived from the data were altruistic foundations, relational equity, exemplary pastoral leadership, organizational challenges, organizational agility and systems, and the centrality of God. Though these themes are distinct, they are interconnected. Altruistic foundations encompasses recognizing needs, compassion, and responding to needs through service. Relational equity is gained through relationships with the community (consistency and valuing people and human dignity), relationships among organizational members, and partnerships with other organizations. Exemplary pastoral leadership guides organizations through the senior pastors' visions, leading by example and relational equity. These two churches have faced challenges, but they have forged ahead with organizational agility and effective systems. The centrality of God fuels altruism, relationships, pastoral leadership, and organizational agility despite the challenges these organizations experienced.

*Keywords:* pastoral leadership, organizational culture, sustainable outreach, church

Church organizational culture and pastoral leadership could be impacting the increased secularization in the 21st century. Church attendance has declined in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2021). This trend is concerning for many churches (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021). Declining church attendance may indicate that churches are not effectively fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) – engaging their non-Christian neighbors through outreach. This trend may also signal that the church is losing the relevance it once had in society and may need to regain social capital (Van Buren, 2002). Though studies have noted a move away from religion toward secularization (Adams, 2022; Teixeira, 2023), they do not address how churches' organizational culture and pastoral leadership may impact their engagement with their communities. This research fulfilled Geertz's (1973) call to study the cultural system in

religious organizations. Foppen and van Saane (2024) also recommended building on the theoretical foundations of effective pastoral leadership. This study examined the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in sustainable church outreach programs.

## Conceptual Framework

*Organizational culture* has three principal theoretical underpinnings. These frameworks are Denison's, Schein's, and the competing values framework (CVF). Involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission are the four components of organizational culture proposed by Denison and Mishra (1989). Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) highlighted the values within organizations through the CVF. These values are adhocracy and market, embodying the external facets of organizational culture and clan and hierarchy – the internal facets of organizational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Schein (1986) posited that organizational culture is the set of ingrained practices that influence how people act, react, and solve problems without requiring overt or conscious thought. He explained that behavior is not culture; it is the underlying assumptions that determine culture.

In 1990, Schein introduced three levels of culture (artifacts, values, and assumptions) and advocated for inductive research as the best approach to uncover organizational culture. Artifacts are easily experienced with the five senses. They occur at the surface level and do not show the reasoning behind that object or behavior. Values are the ideologies, philosophies, and ideas that organizational stakeholders articulate verbally and in writing. Assumptions are at the unconscious levels of thinking and cannot easily be observed, yet they influence people's actions, feelings, motives, and perceptions. People respond to their organization's culture in different ways: (a) custodial orientation – they totally conform to all elements of the culture, (b) creative individualism – they choose to follow the core principles and reject the others, and (c) rebellion – they leave or sabotage or otherwise work to destroy the culture. Schein (1990) also noted that organizations are open systems that learn and evolve in response to internal and external factors.

*Pastoral leadership* is critical to the mission and vision of the church. Pastoral leadership is sometimes conceptualized in terms of worship service experiences (Barentsen, 2023). However, senior pastors are administrative leaders in their churches (Kim, 2019). Pastors have many responsibilities similar to those of executive leaders in other industries (McKenna et al., 2007) and set priorities and facilitate the execution of the church's mission and vision (Keita & Lao, 2020). Pastors have authority but are not absolved from accountability to God and the church (Jentile, 2021).

Pastoral leader effectiveness is strongly correlated with achievement-oriented, organized, and reliable pastors (Carter, 2009). Transformational leadership is moderately related to effective pastoral leadership. Rojas (2018) suggested there is a life cycle to pastoral leadership. When pastors go to a new church, it may take time to build trust with their congregants (Strunk et al., 2017). Strunk et al. (2017) contended that a primary goal of the pastors in their study was to invest in developing healthy relationships in their churches. Competent listening and altruistic leadership are associated with spiritual experiences among ministry leaders (Choi et al., 2019).

Though pastoral ministry intersects with various aspects of people's lives, much of pastoral ministry is focused on internal stakeholders (e.g., Williams & Cousin, 2021). Nicolaides (2020) revealed that while paternalistic pastoral leadership contributed to numerical church growth, encouraging leadership facilitated church vitality and spiritual maturity. Wollschleger (2018) suggested that future research examine the role of pastors in shaping congregational outcomes. Though the current study focused on churches with outreach programs, its qualitative design enabled exploration of pastoral leadership and organizational culture in these churches' outcomes.

## Research Questions

- RQ1: What role does organizational culture play in the development of sustainable church outreach?
- RQ2: What are the assumptions and values that influence sustainable church outreach?
- RQ3: What role does pastoral leadership play in developing sustainable church outreach?
- RQ4: What interconnections exist between organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that have sustainable outreach programs?

## Methodology

The present study utilized a multisite case study embedded with ethnographic principles. This qualitative design facilitated the study of organizational culture within multiple churches with robust outreach programs. A mini-ethnographic case study has been used to research leadership emergence and development (Gibbs et al., 2020) and is good for researching specific topics in short timeframes (Fusch et al., 2017). Leadership is inextricably linked to culture. Ethnographies are used to analyze cultural patterns, which include values, beliefs, and behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies are used to explore real-life situations with specific contexts. Schein (1990) purported that ethnographic methodology is one of the most empirical ways to study organizational

culture, but concluded that it is time consuming. The variables in Schein's organizational culture model, assumptions, values, and artifacts (including behaviors) are comparable to the focus of ethnographies and this study.

**Participants.** Purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used to select the organizations for this study. To be invited to participate in the study, the two churches had to provide outward-focused, reliable, and regular programs and services that engaged their non-Christian neighbors on a daily, weekly, monthly, or other regular basis. Isolated, irregular, or annual events are not considered sustainable. The participating churches were informally screened based on my prior knowledge of the church programs. I was introduced to organizational leaders from each church by a mutual associate. The two churches are located in different geographies within the United States. The size and demographics of these two churches were also in contrast.

I visited each church for 6 days. One church, given the pseudonym Cyprus, is located in the Great Lakes region of the United States; the other, given the pseudonym Lystra, is situated in the Western United States. Both churches are in major cities in their respective regions. Lystra's operation includes residential programs and requires over \$10 million annually, whereas Cyprus is a much smaller entity and operates on approximately \$700,000. This budget includes money raised to fund a building project that will provide housing. From observations, Cyprus Church consists mostly of Black congregants; however, there were a few people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Lystra seemed to be a mix of mostly White and Hispanic, but also included Black and other ethnic backgrounds. Cyprus Church had about 80 attendees on the Sunday morning I visited, whereas Lystra hosted at least a few thousand (the church can seat up to 5,000 people).

**Data Collection and Analysis.** Data were collected through on-site observations, document analysis, and individual and focus group interviews within each organization and informal conversations with internal and external stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Soon after these conversations, I jotted down key points and wrote more detailed field notes as soon as possible. I shadowed selected participants, sat quietly to observe without getting involved, and, on other occasions, participated in the activities with others. To uncover people's perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015), two homogenous focus groups (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) were conducted at each site. One group included non-managerial staff (larger church) or unpaid church leaders (smaller church); the other group consisted of church members. In addition, semistructured interviews were conducted. Interview protocols were created for each interview. Though there were prewritten questions, the researcher asked follow-up questions as needed to better understand the phenomena being discussed (Fusch et al., 2017).

After collecting data during field visits, several steps were taken to systematically organize and analyze the large volume of data (Saldaña, 2021). The focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. After automated transcription, I read the transcripts several times. While listening to the audio, I deleted inconsequential words like “um” and corrected errors in the initial transcriptions. Field observations were recorded with handwritten jottings on the field observation log. The log included columns for reactions or thoughts, date, time, number of hours, location, and observation. Observation, interview transcripts, and organizational artifacts were coded, categorized, and formulated into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Findings

Six themes surfaced regarding organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that engage in sustainable outreach programs: altruistic foundations, relational equity, exemplary pastoral leadership, organizational challenges, organizational agility and systems, and centrality of God. The organizational cultures of these churches are grounded in altruistic foundations and flourish through relational equity. The organizational agility of these churches helps them persevere through challenges. Exemplary pastoral leadership, along with the centrality of God in these organizations, continues to advance the vision.

**Theme 1: Altruistic Foundations.** Outreach is grounded in altruism. These churches’ leaders and other stakeholders perceive the needs and selflessly find ways to meet those needs. These organizational members develop compassion for their community members as needs become apparent, then provide relevant services to combat the hardships they experience. Recognizing the needs yields compassion, and compassion yields a response through service.

**Recognizing Needs.** Recognizing and responding to the needs in their neighborhoods is the whole purpose of the outreach. Lystra did not meet a plethora of needs when the senior pastor started ministering in that area. He addressed one need at a time; eventually, it evolved into a 24-hour-a-day multimillion-dollar operation. Pastor Barak told the story of how his senior pastor’s failure catapulted him into serving the community: “So he took his desk out into the sidewalk and just tried to meet people during the day . . . And then from that, he got around the need.” This pastor physically went out to the community because people were not coming to the church; as he engaged with people in the neighborhood, he became cognizant of one need and then another, driving the evolution of the outreach ministry.

**Compassion.** “Stop for the one” was a phrase repeated by Tabitha in the leader focus group at Cyprus. This phrase captures the idea that each person matters and deserves compassion when experiencing hardship. Pastor Mordecai explained the organizational

characteristics of Cyprus: “I believe that this church is driven by love, passion, care . . . We are very compassionate about what we do as a church, that we don’t pass people by. We don’t ignore the needs of folks.”

***Responding to Need Through Service.*** Organizational members in Lystra and Cyprus see serving through outreach as a natural part of their existence. Outreach is ingrained in their cultures. Claudia’s thoughts show how the culture of service permeates Cyprus:

I think anyone that comes here is going to learn how to serve. And the beautiful thing is you don’t have to be super talented . . . We serve to simply love . . . this is a church where we cultivate service and at the same time, the beautiful thing is that we also get served.

**Theme 2: Relational Equity.** Relational equity was one of the most salient themes to emerge from the data. Relationships are important among colleagues, between leaders and internal stakeholders, between the organization and community members, and between the organization and other entities. The theme of relational equity permeated the overarching code categories and research questions.

***Relationships With the Community.*** Interactions with community members are central to the outward-focused ministries in these churches. These two organizations host events, programs, and services on their campuses and invite people to attend. They also go out into their communities multiple times each week to distribute food and conduct home visits—among other activities. Isaac, a staff member at Lystra, conveyed that people in the community know them and feel safe around them:

When we meet people on outreach, they’re going to get the same love and acceptance and welcome spirit . . . I feel like the people who know us really are so themselves around us, and it seems that they just feel safe.

***Consistency.*** Providing consistent, compassionate service to the community helps to build relational equity. Consistency allows both churches to build relational equity in the communities they serve. They have continued to show up week after week, year after year, in the same communities, helping the constituents of those neighborhoods. Leaders in both churches expressed that the most successful part of their outreach is building relationships through consistency. Micah, the senior pastor of Cyprus, stated, “I believe one of the most successful thing is that we’re reaching a community, and the consistency of us being here has been established.” Similarly, Pastor Candace (Lystra) also stated that “consistency” is the most important component of their ministry. Leaders from both churches desire relational equity with those they serve. Through their relationships with community members, they build awareness of what people need and how they can best help the people. The outreach ministries of both churches have been in place for over 30 years; because of this, people trust these organizational

members to speak to them about issues of faith and practical needs; other entities also trust these organizations to partner with them.

***Valuing People and Human Dignity.*** Valuing people and human dignity is one principle that guided both churches' consistent altruistic activities in their communities. The value of individuals was captured in Naomi's statement in the staff focus group:

So, I think a big thing, culture in our church, it's been that I think we do pretty well on, and I think we're still working towards, it's just treating everybody as a neighbor and being kind and protecting dignity . . . And that's one thing I really love honestly.

Naomi's statement shows reflection on the process of treating people with dignity. She commended the church but also noted that Lystra's stakeholders are continuing to grow in how they honor human dignity.

Pastor Mordecai, the outreach pastor at Cyprus, explained what impressed and drew him to this church:

Like the homeless, we welcome and embrace them. There is no prejudice regarding people's gender, social background. We welcome them, we fellowship with them . . . the pastor picking up people from off the streets, people who doesn't, dressed properly, doesn't smell well.

These statements about valuing people were confirmed in my observations. When we were out doing street ministry at Lystra, the staff shook hands, hugged, and laid hands on people—no matter how dirty they were. One of the instructions staff gave was that we should not use hand sanitizer after physical encounters with people on the streets. Welcoming and embracing people, regardless of their hygiene or socioeconomic status, indicates a value for human dignity, and this culture was attractive to Pastor Mordecai and grounds the staff and volunteers in both churches as they engage in ministry.

***Relationships Among Organizational Members.*** Both churches have a network of relationships among their staff and members. This strong network is necessary for cohesion and unity as they serve their neighbors. Their congeniality and care for each other start inside their church and overflows as they engage in ministry. Jacob, a Lystra staff member, expressed gratitude for the relationships he gets to have with the people with whom he lives and serves: "I get to be here around all these people, and when in my life am I going to be in communal living with people who love Jesus?" Pastor Keziah of Cyprus also emphasized that having strong relationships among all members of the church is important: "So the whole community, that's one of our values, that we have to do in life together." These two statements from stakeholders at both churches indicate the value they place on relationships within their organizations.

**Partnerships With Organizational and Government Entities.** Both organizations invite others to partner with them. Lystra's website stated, "If you are an organization interested in doing good works, click here to find out how you can get involved with Lystra!" Cyprus's website has a similar invitation: "Come spend a week serving." Both organizations partner with government entities. Pastor Candace stated, "love the idea of us partnering with the government." She was discussing the work they do within the foster care system to help families stay together. Likewise, Pastor Keziah from Cyprus itemized some of the entities their church works with: "the aldermans, the police precincts, the public schools, the park districts." Partnering with other entities enhances the outreach these two churches provide.

**Theme 3: Exemplary Pastoral Leadership.** People admire, respect, and emulate their senior pastors at Cyprus and Lystra. During the focus groups, people praised their senior pastors for their work, believed they carried out their responsibilities with fidelity, and inspired others to follow their lead. In response to how her senior pastor influences outreach ministries, Lystra Church member Jael stated, "He is the outreach." Moses, a leader from Cyprus Church, pointed out that outreach is central to the senior pastor's leadership: "It's really at the forefront of his heart. The forefront of his ministry is the outreach. He influence it and he leads by example. He's involved." Outreach is not just an addendum to either of these churches; it is a core part of the churches' vision and mission, as both senior pastors exemplify.

**Senior Pastors' Vision.** To garner buy-in from stakeholders, the senior pastor must embody the stated vision. The vision starts with the perceived spiritual and material exigencies in society and the desire to meet those needs. Service, compassion, consistency and dependability, flexibility and creativity, strong relationships, and transformation encompass these churches' visions. For people to serve well, they must know the vision. Continual reminders of the vision's significance are essential to keep people grounded as they engage in various aspects of ministry.

Stakeholders take their cue from the senior pastor. The pastor must embody consistent and dependable service to their communities. When asked what specific values they saw in the pastoral staff that aligned with outreach, Gaius said, "Consistency came to my mind." In the leader focus group at Cyprus, Tabitha also shared the senior pastor's connection to outreach: "Just seeing and hearing their vision and their values and then seeing them model that, seeing them live the lifestyle of the vision, living the lifestyle of their values." The lifestyle and vision she referred to alluded to the consistency with which the senior pastor carries out the outreach ministries of the church. The senior pastors at both Lystra and Cyprus have been consistent in the vision they put before their congregations and have worked diligently with other stakeholders to see this vision carried out over many years.



**Leading by Example.** At both Cyprus and Lystra, people spoke highly of their senior pastors. They also mentioned that these pastors set great examples for them. Claudia, from Cyprus, characterizes her senior pastor and his wife:

I think they are people who lead by example. They're not just about talk. They actually, I think lead more by example than talk . . . So, it's not like a performance, it's by character. And so, I think the way that we become who we are is from more of a heart transformation and we see it in them.

She posited that the senior pastor's directives to them on how to be welcoming are not mere surface gestures but genuinely a part of his and Pastor Keziah's characters. The pastor's characteristics are reflected in the staff and congregational attitude.

**Pastoral Relational Equity.** Relational equity is at the nexus of pastoral leadership and organizational culture. The data revealed that both senior pastors are relational. Their affable personalities are a hallmark of how they approach ministry and, hence, how their churches engage in ministry. Naomi, a staff member at Lystra, expressed her love and appreciation for how her senior pastor builds relationships: "I love about him is that he's really approachable . . . You can always approach him. He's very personable. I mean, just last week he invited a ton of people to the beach." These non-managerial staff members admired how their senior pastor, who oversees a very large organization, makes gestures to build relationships with them beyond their work.

**Co-leadership.** During interviews at both organizations, participants consistently referred to the senior pastor and his wife in response to questions about the senior pastor. Stakeholders in the organizations view both senior pastor and spouse as decision-making leaders. While interviewing Pastor Candace, she responded to a question about the senior pastor: "I think the pastor's role is to provide vision, is to give us the big picture, give us his or her direction that they feel like God is asking us to go." I clarified that I was speaking about Pastor [senior pastor's name] and she responded, "Yeah, – [name of senior pastor's wife], they co-pastors." These statements indicated that organizational members are not just politely including the senior pastor's wife in their verbiage; she is actively engaged in leadership decisions, and they respect her co-leadership with her husband. The senior pastor at Cyprus also explained his co-leadership with his wife: "She's not just following my lead that God speaks to her as well . . . she's too valuable to the ministry. And that's why I said we both lead the church." In this anecdote, Pastor Micah expressed that his wife leads alongside him. For this reason, he encouraged her to obtain the ministry credentials so her leadership would not be dismissed but more broadly recognized.

**Theme 4: Organizational Challenges.** Outreach ministry is demanding and multifaceted. These complexities influence the pastor and the entire organization's

culture. These challenges include the impact of the external environment, the emotional toll, and the retention rate. Both churches have found ways to navigate these obstacles.

**Finances.** Finances, though not directly culture or leadership, affect many facets of the organization. Both churches experience pecuniary hurdles despite the vast difference in their annual budgets. In their interviews, both executive leaders from Lystra emphasized that though there are opportunities to obtain more funding, they would have to eliminate the gospel message, which is not an option they are willing to take. Budgets affect everything and everyone, from staff to buildings, vehicles, and all other ministry operations. Retaining staff is a challenge in Lystra, while hiring full-time staff and retaining part-time staff is a struggle for Cyprus due to limited funds to pay personnel.

**Retention.** The data show that both organizations appear to have a high turnover rate among non-managerial staff. Upper-echelon leaders stay with these churches for decades, whereas many others come and go every few years. Finances, as well as the emotional toll of this type of work, impact retention.

**Emotional Toll.** Several people mentioned that outreach ministry is hard emotionally. They do not always get to experience success. They work hard physically and give of themselves emotionally, but often do not see the results they expect. The people they invest in sometimes do not change as they anticipated, experience no obvious change, or vacillate between progress and setbacks. Pastor Candace captured the essence of this struggle: “It’s exhausting hard work because you feel like you’re losing more than you’re winning.” Pastor Keziah (Cyprus) also captured the emotional toll it takes to see people they invested in teeter between progress and setback: “And then it’s always an awesome thing when they fail and learn from it. But before they can get to that point, the many times they fail, and some quit along the way.” Pastor Keziah also connected the high “turnover rates” to “burnout.” The emotional burdens that come with outreach ministries thwart many people’s ability to go beyond a few years. It is challenging for staff when lives are not transformed as the staff had hoped.

**External Environment.** Organizations are affected by their external environment. Several prevailing circumstances affect Cyprus and Lystra. Various facets of the socioeconomic environment, family dynamics in the community, governmental structures, and transience impact how these churches do outreach. These factors influence trust. The senior pastor at Cyprus highlighted the challenges of gaining trust: “Trust that has been violated in such a huge way here that it takes people a long time to trust you.” Pastor Micah noted there are myriad reasons that promote distrust in the communities they serve. Pastor Barak, the executive pastor at Lystra, discussed distrust in relation to the transience that affects people, even if they themselves are not transient, “but they still are affected by this transientness that’s going on around them. Creates

distrust, it creates a sense of skepticism.” Gaining the trust of the people in these communities takes consistent service and fidelity to the churches’ missions to continually engage with and care for them.

**Theme 5: Organizational Agility and Systems.** A part of altruism comes from humility and openness to learning new ways to minister to people’s needs. Gaius, a staff member in the focus group, started the brief conversation about short-term compassionate service: “We’re going to open up an emergency shelter.” Isaac and Rachel chimed in. Isaac added, “Right, exactly. Half our staff, is running an emergency shelter. Now, yesterday you didn’t know you were going to be doing that.” Rachel concluded with this anecdote of a shared experience: “And then driving out to the communities to pick up people to come before the rain hit, so crazy.” These altruistic actions warrant their flexibility and creativity.

The ministry at Cyprus also requires flexibility and creativity. They use a multipurpose space for their worship services. During my field visit, I witnessed this space transform from a basketball court to a sanctuary and a banquet hall – complete with a play area to spare. The current church (Sunday service) location is a recreation center or community center in prior years. The basketball court remains a part of the space, allowing different organizations and programs to use it for sports and recreation during the week. The office area of the church was once the balcony used to view games on the basketball court. This repurposed space not only houses administrative offices but also the pregnancy resource center. The adult Sunday school is held in a small area of the preschool. Folding chairs are lined up in what is typically used for a hallway. I sat right next to the cubbies labeled with children’s names that held items like diapers and wipes. Their use of space demonstrates their creativity and flexibility in devising solutions to accommodate diverse programs and services.

One of the most structured components of Lystra is its recovery residential program. The executive pastor stated, “It’s very structured for people coming out of homelessness and drug addiction.” Most of the people in the discipleship program had unhealthy patterns; establishing a scheduled rhythm was helpful for the discipleship process. The senior pastor of Cyprus has implemented several structures during his tenure in the church. He explained that “people see the structure but it’s not so tight that they feel that they’re not welcome.” He postulated that structure is necessary for people to thrive, but does not preclude a welcoming environment. His belief is similar to the rationale for the very structured recovery program at Lystra.

**Theme 6: The Centrality of God.** God is the reason for these outreach ministries. People in these churches believe God has called them to serve and be a source of hope for their communities. “We are a community who believes that it is a privilege to serve

our Creator by serving His creation!" is one of the statements on Lystra's website that encourages its congregants to participate in serving.

People in both organizations believe that God allows them to be part of His process to help others. The executive pastor of Lystra explained, "It's average everyday people just being consistent and then how God just produces so much fruit from that." Mary, a Cyprus Church member, referenced a scripture when she discussed how God works with them: "And that's another value that is not dependent on us. We have a part to play, but some plant, some water, but God brings." Ruth finished her statement with "the increase." Stakeholders of both organizations believe God helps them do more than they can on their own.

***The Great Commission.*** Sharing this gospel message is a central teaching that propels the outreach ministries in these two churches. Stakeholders at these two churches believe sharing the gospel through outreach will help to transform lives. Pastor Esther (Cyprus) noted, "the vision of changing lives, not just by giving physical resources, but encouraging them to know the Lord. Jael, a Lystra member, stated this idea clearly: "We go out with a mission, a mission to bring those in that don't know Jesus." Jael's statement indicates an urgency to share the gospel with people so they will experience eternal salvation. "The responsibility of the conversion, that's ultimately God," according to Mary, a Cyprus Church member.

***Transformation.*** Transformation is possible with the right support and services, regardless of the situation. Cyprus' motto is "Changing our city one life at a time" and was reiterated in the interviews as well as in the Sunday morning worship services. This motto is focused on helping individuals have transformative experiences that will spread to change their communities positively. The repetition of this motto likely means it was significant to the church stakeholders and helped them remember the objective of the ministries they orchestrate. Pastor Barak (Lystra) stated, "Our mission is transforming lives, transforming lives and community through Christ. God brings the transformation. We just create the environment and God breathes into it." Based on his statement, God is the one who brings about transformation; God guides the organization to put mechanisms in place that promote life change.

## Discussion

The data show that organizational culture and pastoral leadership influence sustainable outreach. The senior pastors' personalities and leadership greatly influenced the culture that facilitated sustainable outreach in their churches. Both churches had strong, relational, and service-oriented cultures that acted as the impetus for regularly serving their communities. The smaller church (Cyprus) actively engaged the community multiple times per week, both on and off the church campus. The larger church (Lystra)

provided services 24 hours a day on the campus and multiple times per week off campus.

These programs and services engage their non-Christian neighbors and give these organizations positive reputations in the communities they serve. Community leaders and government agencies also partner with these churches to benefit the community members. These two organizations serve the common good and hence can be considered organizations that bring public value (Meynhardt et al., 2020). Meynhardt et al. (2020) showed a positive link between organizational public value and organizational citizenship behavior, as well as work engagement. During the interviews, staff and other organizational stakeholders seemed passionate and enthusiastic about the work their churches do in the community to add value to people's lives.

Several principles can be deduced from the findings of this research to answer the research questions: sacrificial service, hopefulness, welcoming environment, people's need to connect with God, the Great Commission, human dignity, the leader exemplifying service, vision casting, and empowering leadership.

Research Question 1 focused on organizational culture: What role does organizational culture play in the development of sustainable church outreach? This study's findings indicate that organizational culture's role in church outreach is significant. These data inform researchers and practitioners that there is a cost to altruism. Developing sustainable outreach is facilitated by a culture of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment. As in the current study, Grusendorf and Acevedo (2022) found that knowing and addressing the needs of people in their neighborhoods was critical to the participant churches' cultures.

Research Question 2 asked: What are the assumptions and values that influence sustainable outreach? Schein (1986) posited that assumptions are not easily seen but are covert principles that guide organizational practices without conscious thought. Conversely, values are often embedded in an organization's mission and vision statements or other overt mechanisms (Rosen, 2023). The findings of this study indicate that the primary assumptions in churches that engage in sustainable outreach are related to God. The centrality of God and the gospel are paramount; people must be connected to God, and people—created in God's image—are valuable. Fulfilling the Great Commission constitutes serving God and serving people simultaneously. People are served because their innate dignity is valued. The present study is a reminder to practitioners that doing outreach does not diminish the gospel and the centrality of God to the church. The centrality of God and the gospel are the catalyst for outreach. The findings of this study also contribute to the academic literature, reaffirming the notion that underlying assumptions infuse organizational culture.

Exemplary pastoral leadership played a vital role in developing sustainable outreach in these two churches. Pastoral leaders are critical to the development of church outreach. The senior pastors of these two churches embodied the five practices that Kouzes and Posner (2004) delineated as characteristics leaders should exemplify: modeling for others, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the status quo, enabling others to act, and encouraging the hearts of people. Research Question 3 asked: What role does pastoral leadership play in developing sustainable church outreach? Pastoral leaders must embody and communicate the precepts they desire their congregants and stakeholders to live by. The data from the current study strongly support the principle that organizational characteristics often mimic the attributes of the executive leader. For churches to develop sustainable church outreach, pastors must exemplify service, use empowering leadership, and communicate their vision through words and actions.

Research Question 4 asked: What interconnections exist between organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that have sustainable outreach programs? Participant responses showed there is a strong interconnection between pastoral leadership and organizational culture. A study conducted in a flight school showed student performance had a positive relationship with leadership; however, their performance was more strongly correlated to organizational culture (Gokalp & Soran, 2022). The current study indicated that the churches' cultures mirrored the leadership style and personalities of the pastors. These pastors had created church cultures of sacrificial service that warranted awareness of their external environments, organizational agility, and consistency. Pastors and church constituents will likely establish sustainable outreach with awareness of their context, flexibility, and regular and dependable service to their community.

**Theoretical Implications.** The characteristics of the pastoral leaders were similar to what other scholars found to be effective through leadership and organizational studies research (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Findings from this study overlap with other organizational culture and leadership theories (Chaudhary & Panda, 2018) and findings from exegetical analysis (Pickwell, 2022).

The findings support existing theories. In Smith and Besharov's (2019) longitudinal case study, three themes emerged: "formal organizational structure, individual leadership expertise, and external stakeholder relationships" (p. 9). These three themes resemble three of the themes in the current study: organizational agility and systems, exemplary pastoral leadership, and relational equity. The broader social culture and external environment influenced the organizational cultures of the churches in the current study and the organizations in Nurullah Rabbani et al.'s (2024) study.

Theory needs to be developed on pastoral leadership in churches that engage in sustainable outreach, and this research provided insight into possible characteristics

that pastors who lead these churches embody. This research also confirmed existing theories that leadership drives organizational culture (Okwata et al., 2022), communicating vision effectively is important to develop shared mental models (Zhou & Pazos, 2021), relational equity (Bradley, 2021), and willingness to change traditions and structures (Kraft, 2021) are essential components of running productive organizations.

This study broadened our understanding of pastoral leadership and church culture. According to Foppen and van Saane's (2024) scoping literature review on religious leadership, attendance and church growth are the most used criteria to measure religious leaders' effectiveness. The current study contributed additional insight by exploring pastoral leadership holistically in connection with outreach, allowing participants and organizational artifacts to tell the story of their pastors' leadership.

**Practical Implications.** Practitioners could glean some insights from the findings of the current study. Nine key elements grouped in three categories descend from the organizational culture and pastoral leadership. The repeated use of double-ended arrows in Figure 1 indicates there is a cyclical and interdependent relationship among these concepts – they are all intricately intertwined and illustrate the interconnections of sustainable church outreach to organizational culture and pastoral leadership. Churches must have these fundamentals included in their efforts to stimulate sustainable outreach.

Sustainable outreach begins with the church's assumption that people need to be connected with God. Outreach is done for God and is sustained by God to bring people to God. The findings in the current research align with Lilleorg et al.'s (2021) study on growing churches. Churches that desire to engage in outreach must realize that God is central to all aspects of their church and its outreach. This need to connect with God both causes and is affected by the desire to fulfill the Great Commission and preserve human dignity as seen by the double-ended arrows in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Interconnections of Outreach



Likewise, preserving human dignity and fulfilling the Great Commission is an antecedent and corollary of outreach. Fulfilling the Great Commission is closely aligned with organizational principles, whereas preserving human dignity is closely aligned with relational principles. The relational and organizational principles feed and are fed by pastoral leadership. Organizational principles (i.e., organizational agility, consistency, and organizational awareness of the external environment), pastoral leadership (i.e., exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering leadership), and relational principles (i.e., hopefulness, a welcoming and loving environment, and sacrificial service) work together to propel sustainable outreach.

Pastors who exemplify service validate the vision they communicate. Other insights are that pastors communicate in words and actions; their actions may motivate and inspire internal stakeholders to serve more than their words. Trusted pastoral leadership entails vision casting, authenticity, and consistency (Grusendorf & Acevedo, 2022). People must perceive the pastor as trustworthy for his vision to permeate the culture.

The findings indicate the need for consistent service, building internal and external relational equity, exercising agility, and engaging in sacrificial service to pursue outreach. To start serving, pastors and church stakeholders must recognize the needs in



their community and begin to respond to those needs. Churches must move from primarily focusing inward and begin to observe what is going on in their surroundings and build relationships with their neighbors to discern the needs around them (Zscheile, 2015). According to Zscheile (2015), failure may be a part of the process when developing solutions to the problems in the community; therefore, churches must remain agile to continue in these ventures.

These findings also correlate to salient themes in Teasdale and Trefz's (2016) study showing the need for building relationships, a viable team, financial resources, and efficient systems to carry out the vision. The current study's findings indicate that to effectively engage in sustainable outreach, churches may need to have a culture of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment; see people's need to connect with God; prioritize the Great Commission and human dignity; and have a pastor who leads by exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering others.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.**

This study used ethnographic tenets within a multisite case study to explore organizational culture and pastoral leadership in two churches that participated in sustainable outreach. Though I spent about 6 days at each site, my access to people and places within the organizations was limited. To avert issues related to limited access, Schein (1993) suggested organizational research should be done through clinical experiences because certain system dynamics will only surface during the change process, and a passive researcher cannot capture those dynamics. Future research should include longitudinal studies in churches at varying stages of initiating and sustaining outreach development. Longitudinal studies could involve the researcher in a clinician role (Schein, 1993), serving an organization over several months, a year, or longer. Actively participating in an organization's culture as a research clinician (Schein, 2006) may help the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the organization that would not be uncovered in a purely research role.

Future qualitative and quantitative studies should include using other organizational culture frameworks to study churches. The current study used Schein's (1990) organizational culture framework to explore the culture and leadership in these two churches. The CVF has been used to study churches' organizational culture and effectiveness (Boggs & Fields, 2006). However, the field could benefit from using Denison's (Denison & Mishra, 1995) model or the CVF (Cameron & Quinn, 2011) for quantitative analysis. Principles from any of these three models, as well as other existing models, could be applied to other qualitative analyses, such as phenomenology, to explore the perceptions of leaders and other church stakeholders.

The current study focused on churches that were engaged in outreach primarily catering to individuals experiencing economic hardship. However, spiritual exigency is not limited to people who struggle financially. More studies are needed to explore the phenomenon of providing sustainable outreach to middle-class and upper-echelon members of society. I join Teasdale and Trefz (2016) to suggest future research on outreach in several categories: the relationship between church participation in social, political, and economic arenas and outreach; space needed for outreach; cross-denominational outreach efforts; and pastoral preparation for outreach.

### Summary

This study explored the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in sustainable church outreach within the context of a multisite mini-ethnographic case study. Two churches with some major differences in terms of size, demographics, financial resources, and region within the United States participated. Despite their differences, there were similarities in their pastoral leadership and organizational cultures. During the field visits, these similarities were not readily apparent, indicating churches can have unique characteristics yet hold some core values and assumptions that guide their outreach. Churches that engage in sustainable outreach are not carbon copies of each other but uniquely embody the principles of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment; see people's need to connect with God; prioritize the Great Commission and human dignity; display organizational agility, consistency, and organizational awareness of external needs; and have a pastor who leads by exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering others.

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### About the Author

Dr. Gordon-Scott has been an educator and advocate for students with diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds for over 16 years in the New York City public school system. She proactively finds solutions that benefit organizational stakeholders because she is a champion for students' success. She has initiated and maintained relationships with multiple organizations to provide transition services to students and is currently working with school leaders and teachers to fine tune the implementation of the school's multitiered system of support in literacy. She has mentored new teachers, served as a team leader, and been a member of several committees.

She cares about organizational health and has researched organizational culture, leadership, group dynamics, and other facets of organizational behavior. As a trustee of a nonprofit organization, she collaborates with other leaders to foster a healthy culture that enables stakeholders to thrive.

Dr. Gordon-Scott is an ordained minister. She earned her Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Southeastern University. She also holds a Master of Science in

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