

BLACKHAWK CHURCH AND OUR CULTURE

Every church is unique. If you've been to a few different ones, you know that even two churches that believe very similar things may "feel" very different. Why is that? We believe that the difference can be traced to what we call a church's DNA. That DNA might be unstated in "official" documents but nevertheless it is powerful and provides a kind of "script" for much of what takes place in a local church. It is hard to nail down what a church's DNA is but we have tried to do that here. This paper is an attempt to explain our "DNA" that is: what makes Blackhawk, Blackhawk - or why we do what we do the way we do it.

Our "Mission" at Blackhawk Church

Our mission at Blackhawk is to build a loving community that follows Christ in order to reach a community that is lost without Him. Sometimes we abbreviate that to: "Building a Community to Reach a Community."

As a community of Christ followers we are committed to reach our culture (Madison-Dane county) with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The early followers of Christ were committed to this same objective (1 Corinthians 9:22). In Madison this can be difficult because of some primary cultural narratives that undergird much of what our culture believes.

Two of Our Culture's Primary Narratives

- **What's true for you might not be true for me.** Some people in our culture have a hard time deciding what is "true". The whole definition of "truth" is up for grabs. Some people believe that truth is something that is determined by each individual. In other words, I have a right to decide what is true for me, and you have a right to decide what is true for you. This way of determining what is true is completely the opposite of what the bible teaches. The bible teaches that truth can be discovered by us but not determined by us. In other words as humans we should discover the truth, goodness, and beauty established in creation by the Creator. There is a big difference between deciding what is true and discovering what is true.
- **Religion is a personal and private matter.** Some people in our culture react very negatively to any idea that there could be a universal religion (truth) for all people. Rightly or wrongly they feel that organized religions are the cause of bigotry, wars, injustice, and much of the evil that has come upon the world. They see the different organized religions pushing their truth agendas and making a mess of the whole world. While we would agree that organized religion and Christianity in particular, has often behaved in a manner that is unworthy of Christ, it is kind of like "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Bigotry, wars, injustice, and other evils do not belong exclusively to religious people. They can pretty much be found everywhere as they are the result of humans being driven by their quest for selfish power; greed; or pride. These are the very things that the gospel of Jesus Christ is against.

Because of these dominant cultural narratives many of the people in our culture who we are trying to reach with the truth claims of Jesus Christ think that we are simply "out of touch" or at worst they think we are "dangerous". We are on the wrong side of history. From their perspective we are the ones who are lost and in need of being saved from the narrow minded view that we have the truth and the only way. We are the immoral ones.

The Challenge: How do we reach our culture?

Christ-followers in good churches are deeply divided over how to reach our culture. The reactions and responses are varied:

- Some Christians are fearful and counsel cultural withdrawal with a re-emphasis upon tradition. The world is evil; we should withdraw.
- Some are angry and communicate in ungracious ways through aggressive action. The world is the enemy; we should be in battle or protest.
- Some are attracted to our culture and want to re-engineer the church in accordance with it. God loves the world; we need to accept the world.

Our Response to the Challenge:

We Proclaim the Gospel

In the beginning God created the world and it was perfect. He created a world where human beings could flourish by enjoying him; each other; and all of creation. But human beings turned away from him; they thought that they could not trust him and what he said. By doing so they sinned – marring creation and themselves. Nevertheless, because of God’s grace, he didn’t abandon them but promised to rescue them, despite their flawed hearts and character.

To rescue them God called out one family in the world to know him and serve him. Then he grew that family (despite their many flaws) into a nation; entered into a binding and personal covenant with them; and gave them his law to guide their lives. He gave them a promise of incredible blessing if they obeyed him and a system of offerings and sacrifices to deal with their sins if they failed him. And fail him they did, in a big way. Human nature is so messed up and sinful that, despite all of the privileges and centuries of God’s patience God’s covenant people turned away from him. It looked hopeless for the human race.

But God came to the rescue the human race by personally entering into the world of time, space, and history. He became flesh and lived a perfect life. But he was rejected again and was nailed to a cross and died a death that he didn’t deserve to die. But because he was God, he rose from the dead and then he revealed that he had come to fulfill the law with his perfect life, to offer a final sacrifice for all sin for all time, taking the curse of death that humans deserve and securing the promised blessings for us by free grace.

Now those of us who place our faith in him are united with God despite our sin and we become his people. We are not a single nation-state but are a new international, multiethnic fellowship of believers in every nation and culture. We now serve him and our neighbors as we wait in hope for Jesus to return and renew all creation, sweeping away death and all suffering.¹

¹ This section is adapted freely from Tim Keller.

Some Characteristic Features of Blackhawk Church

1. How we view and interact with others:

- A. *The World is in the Atrium.*** A sizeable minority of folks who come to Blackhawk on a regular basis self-identify as not being followers of Christ. People openly question our arguments for God, and disagree with us on many fronts. We are happy that they are coming and we hope that they feel welcomed.
- This means that we endeavor to avoid “we-they” language (“we” being believers and “they” being non-believers). We refuse to talk disparagingly about groups, organizations, or people outside of Christianity.
 - This also means that we don’t bash other denominations or churches. We have lots of people coming from Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, or other backgrounds. Some who have come from these places have had good experiences and have grown closer in their walk with Christ there, and some have had bad experiences there. But we never want to assume that we all share a common background or experience. We assume people of lots of different backgrounds and faith commitments are all around us.
- B. *We accept people as they are.*** We want people to come as they are and to feel welcomed. But we also want people to change and follow Christ. We are all about helping each and every individual take the necessary steps to follow Christ no matter where they are in their journey. *We believe that acceptance and agreement are not the same things.* Jesus was often surrounded by the “wrong kind of people.” He accepted them but he also wanted them to change and follow him.
- C. *We use the common language of the culture.*** We always explain biblical terms and ideas in plain English. We eschew obfuscation i.e., we want to avoid confusing language like “eschew obfuscation.” For years, Christ-followers have developed their own “church talk” that simply is not clear to the people we are trying to reach. We acknowledge and admit that some biblical concepts are complex or incomprehensible to people. We try to get inside the worldviews of people who are not Christ-followers and ask the question, “how would this sound to them?” We do not dodge hard biblical concepts but instead we simply are sensitive to how foreign they might sound. We do not see this as “dumbing down” the gospel.
- This also means that we avoid tribal language i.e., spiritual talk. At Blackhawk it is undesirable and unacceptable to hear a teacher say, “God has laid it on my heart today to tell you...” Pious language is avoided. We want to communicate in the same manner as people talk in the world outside our doors, i.e., we want to sound like normal people. We don’t draw a distinction between “church talk” and “normal talk,” e.g., talking one way while at church and another way while at work or school

At Blackhawk, we want to use language that is accessible to all people especially if this is their first time in a church setting. See the list below for more examples.

Normal talk

Connection

Serving

Team

Guest

Next Step

Grow in your faith

Sharing your faith

Message/Talk

Pastor

Students

Church Talk:

Intimacy

Outreach

Committee

Unchurched, Non-Christian

Go Deeper

Discipleship

Evangelism

Sermon

Reverend

Youth, Kids

2. How we engage with the broader culture:

Churches with very similar doctrinal commitments may take radically different approaches to how they relate with culture. Therefore, understanding a church's approach to how it relates to culture is one of the chief distinguishing marks that make it unique. The following commitments are important values for how we relate to our surrounding culture:

A. We love our city. At Blackhawk Church we don't talk disparagingly or judgmentally about Madison. We love the city and the University of Wisconsin and we see great potential and opportunity for the cause of God's kingdom in both.

- We believe that Madison is more like Babylon than Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 29:7). People are biblically illiterate and have no basic understanding of biblical theology. When we talk about basic biblical issues, like the gospel, people in our culture have no idea what we are talking about. We are aliens in a different culture (2 Peter 2.11). Instead of doing battle with our neighbors we should pray for them and try to love them.

Jeremiah 29:7 - "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

- Example: Mifflin Street Block Party clean-up

B. We seek to be counter-cultural not sub-cultural; not a Christian club but a community that shares power and seeks justice. At Blackhawk we will not have a Christian school, Christian athletic league, or Christian campaigns against various moral issues of the day. We will not march against same-sex marriage, abortion, or other cultural practices we find to be in conflict with biblical truth. The reason for this refusal is not because truth is not important, but because such polarizing activities tend to divide and separate us from the very culture we are trying to reach.

- What we mean by “sub-culture”:
 - Challenge: staying pure and not being contaminated by or being seen with people who don’t believe and live the way they do
 - Language: has a large, religious vocabulary that most people wouldn’t understand
 - Primary concern: primarily own tribe (“my kids, my church”)
 - Culture: culture is bad, unaware of primary cultural narratives
 - Space: inhabits different spaces
 - Identity: willing to be identified as a believer and often offended by people who believe, speak and act differently
- What we mean by “counter-culture”:
 - Challenge: navigating the tension between remaining engaged while still living with different values
 - Language: not a spate “church language” and “secular language”, doesn’t use religious jargon
 - Primary concern: common good, not simply own tribe
 - Culture: culturally conversant and aware of cultural narratives
 - Space: inhabits same spaces
 - Identity: willing to be identified as a believer, but not offended by others who believe, speak and act differently
- Jesus Christ, a countercultural example ...
 - Christ spoke the language of the people ... birds of the air, soil/farming, fishing, vineyards, sheep and shepherds
 - Christ sought common good of not only people in synagogue, but the crowds and enemies
 - Culturally conversant, Jesus was never naïve. He knew the concerns and hopes of people of his day
 - Christ inhabited spaces that religious subculture types of his day would never inhabit, he ate with sinners
- Being countercultural means that we seek to live lives that are in many ways both *like and unlike* those around us.

C. We are not political. Madison is a state capitol and is known for being politically divisive. Well intentioned Christians disagree about how politically active churches should be. Since we desire to *influence* our culture, not to *battle* it we have decided that we want to relate to our city as a mission field. It is our desire that Blackhawk church would draw all people, despite their political affiliation, to the gospel. And since reasonable, Bible-believing Christ-followers can disagree about both theological issues and political issues it makes sense to us not to be known in our community for taking one political side over another. As a local congregation, we will continue to affirm whatever reasonable, Bible believing Christians cannot deny. As a church, however, we will not take a position on political issues or matters of legislation about which Bible believing Christians can reasonably disagree. Jesus prayed that all Christ-followers “may be one” so that the world may believe the gospel (John 17:22-23). Politics divides; the gospel unites.

- Our refusal to take positions on political issues and candidates is not because we are trying to avoid moral issues about which the Bible speaks. Our goal will always be to teach what the Bible says about principles of morality and justice. However, applying those principles in a fallen world often involves compromises and political trade-offs about which reasonable Christ-followers can differ. The primary reason why Blackhawk does not get involved in politics concerns the more fundamental issue of how we as a local congregation should interact with our culture and society as a whole.
- Example: Walker court case in the spring of 2011 (2 opposing attorneys both attend Blackhawk)

D. We seek to train people how to be Christians in the workplace and neighborhood. At Blackhawk that means that we don't distinguish between the sacred and the secular. When people are at work they are serving God (Colossians 3:23). We recognize that our neighborhoods and places of regular contact with others (school, soccer practice, social clubs, and hair salons) are God-given places to represent and demonstrate the kingdom. Thus, we equip people for ministry in their daily lives.

Resources:

- Tim Keller - *Center Church* (Zondervan, 2012)
- Darrell Guder - *Missional Church* (Eerdmans, 1998)
- John G. Stackhouse Jr. - *Making the Best of It* (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- John Burke - *No Perfect People Allowed* (Zondervan, 2005)
- David Kinnaman - *Unchristian* (Baker Books, 2007)