

# Re-Coding Your Church DNA

by Allen Ratta

## Foreword

There is a fundamental need for church leadership to migrate away from exclusive departmental thinking, i.e. running efficient functions. This kind of silo thinking often leads to inadequate performance (and possibly mission failure) in the more critical ministry processes that define church health and promote church growth. Pastors are the key agents to manage the shift to process thinking. Their core mission is to effect change in people's lives. This is accomplished through two primary means; the creative application of biblical truth and the intentional development of a community that embodies Kingdom values. Here we have the domain of church DNA.

## Future-Speak

Without intentional leadership that goes deep enough to target the ongoing formation of your church's DNA, things will slowly devolve at the core. The heady days of passionate vision that typified the formation and early years of the church will, in time, become a collection of fond memories. These events are so oft repeated that the script is an easy one to write.

*In a galaxy far away, a future pastor of your church, like untold tens of thousands of other pastors, will struggle with a church that desperately needs an infusion of new life. The pulse of congregational passion will be all but imperceptible. People will come like they have for years doing the things they have always done more out of habituated patterns than a vision for a grander future. There is no pizzazz left, that is, no distinctive that makes the church stand out in its community and be noticed. The only thing remarkable about your church is how unremarkable it has become.*

What is needed? Things have come full circle. It will take intentional leadership that goes deep enough to target the ongoing formation of your church's DNA. This scenario has been described in other places as a "turnaround church." What is required is a re-coding of the church's DNA. Genetic manipulation is tricky business and the subject of this article.

## The Broader Case for Re-Coding

A savvy pundit once defined insanity as "doing the same things the same way and expecting different results." While this saying has enjoyed widespread acceptance and repetition throughout the church world, its truth has effected little change in many quarters. It has been our discovery through interactions with large numbers of churches that many continue to be unintentional practitioners of this kind of insanity. They desire church growth and increased community impact for Christ yet are stuck in ruts where they do essentially the same things they have always done.

## DNA

DNA refers to the genetic code found in every life form. It predisposes an entity's makeup and, if fertile, that of its offspring. The Church is the Body of Christ and, as such, is undisputedly the highest form of life on planet earth. It has been coded with the DNA of Christ. The Bible speaks of this genetic transformation, *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory,"* (NASB) 2 Cor. 3.18. This gives added import to the words of Paul, *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* Ideally, the DNA of Christ should utterly dominate and define a local church's heart and form. Common experience teaches us that the ideal is rarely the real.

## Church DNA

Every church is a living organism with its own unique spiritual and organizational DNA. While the Spirit of Christ resides in and impacts a church's DNA, there are clearly other forces at

work. Church DNA over time comes to consist of the values, belief systems, and expectations that become hardwired into the psyche of a Christian community and predispose its ministry form, function and the nature of its offspring.

## **The DNA Coding Process**

Church DNA coding, like all pastoral work, is part divine and part human. Pastors who embark upon it can be encouraged to know that they are co-labourers with Christ. Transformation of the heart and mind is a work of the Spirit but the pastor plays an essential role. This is even truer in a church communal setting. We see huge differences in the DNA coding from church to church much of which can be traced back to the focus and passion of leadership. The scriptures resonate with this genetic transformational theme. When someone becomes a Christian it is defined in terms of an actual birth. Paul elaborates, *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come"* (NASB) 2 Cor. 5.17. The same spiritual work of recoding that happens on the level of the individual also happens on a congregational level. I can recall *turning points* in my pastoral ministry when the church seemed to experience a shift on a genetic level that led to a season of increased passion and ministry effectiveness.

## **Replication**

DNA, by definition, replicates itself. This is bad news and good news. The bad news is: if negative DNA traits are predominant, they have likely been replicated rather thoroughly throughout your organization. The good news is: if you can recode positive DNA traits within a critical mass of the communal organism, they will replicate and infuse the entire organization with new life. This raises important questions. What kind of offspring are we creating? Are they Christians, "little Christs" or should we rename them in some other image? Have we been lulled asleep by prosperity or do we exhibit the passion of Christ and His priorities?

## **Distinctive DNA**

Many churches display strong singular traits. This is indicative of strong underlying DNA coding. A church may have a DNA structure that breeds an unusual propensity for evangelism, or service or study or the inner life of spiritual experience. This is invariably the result of long-term leadership that possessed distinctive passions and priorities that, over time, have replicated throughout the organism.

## **DNA and Church Growth**

It is interesting to note that churches with a strong distinctive, whatever that may be, are churches that tend to be growing churches. Such churches often possess a stronger innate sense of who they are and their mission within their community. That clarity leads to predictable behaviors and ultimately easier DNA replication in newcomers.

## **Pastoral Transitions and DNA**

The new pastor who assumes the helm of a church with highly distinctive DNA may find a significant mismatch with the church on a fundamental genetic level. If the pastor's DNA is not in harmony with that of the church, dire consequences may ensue. This can become a toxic mix leading to frustration and eventual transitional failure. Pastors do well to consider these realities when making a transition.

## **Conclusion**

Successful pastors have learned that recoding the DNA of a church is not a quick process nor is it ever completely finished. It will take patience, consistency and persistence. Be encouraged as you work with the Spirit and remind yourself that even relatively small DNA changes can unleash monumental and long lasting effects.

<http://www.connectionpower.com>