

Does Your Church Have Integrity?

Churches with organizational integrity are “rock solid” in the sense that their dreams are grounded in stable and effective processes.

by
TOM THATCHER

A CHURCH OF INTEGRITY

Integrity—an inner wholeness that aligns all the parts of a system—is a critical element of any healthy church.


Please note that we’re not talking about moral integrity. For sure, that’s critical for all healthy churches and their leaders. But the focus here is on *organizational integrity*: ways that your church develops and maintains systems to achieve its goals.

Churches with organizational integrity are “rock solid” in the sense that their dreams are grounded in stable and effective processes. Stated goals and values are clearly aligned with actual practices. There are no hidden hierarchies: the published org chart actually describes how people and departments relate to one another. Decisions are fair, predictable, and missional.

Churches with high integrity communicate well. They communicate often and to everyone. They go out of their way to ensure that everyone knows what’s going on and why it’s going on. They strive to be clear about everything. When people disagree, they disagree because they understand and don’t like it, not because they’re confused.

Churches must create and maintain solid systems to ensure that

- the vision is clearly understood;
- processes are in place to ensure that the vision is realized; and,
- people work together so effort isn’t wasted.



What are two things your church could do to better communicate to everyone at every level of the organization?

THE INTEGRITY CHALLENGE

As a church grows older and/or larger, it becomes harder and harder to maintain organizational integrity [link]. “Organizational integrity” refers to systems and processes that leverage resources toward fulfillment of the mission and vision. Older and larger churches face special challenges in doing that, for at least two reasons.

The first challenge arises from the very nature of the church. Regardless of size, churches are inordinately complex organizations, much more so than most businesses or civic groups.

Even small churches have to accomplish a great many things at once for diverse populations. A church of 100 must have systems for outreach, worship, discipleship, and community. All these systems must be scaled for people in different age groups and life situations—children, youth, and adults. And all these “spiritual” activities take place alongside the church’s life as a not-for-profit entity, with all needed business systems. Finally, all these spiritual and business activities require a physical plant with specialized spaces for all of them.

As a church gets bigger and its vision grows, with more and more programs, systems, and facilities to serve more and more populations, the complexity grows exponentially. After a while, the top-level leadership of the church is only vaguely aware of what’s happening in the trenches.

This leads to the second special integrity challenge churches face: communication.

The more people you have, the harder it is to communicate to all of them clearly. It gets harder to get the word out to everyone in terms everyone can understand. And the older a church gets, the more likely you are to communicate in terms that make sense to the people who’ve been around for a while but that newer folks won’t grasp.

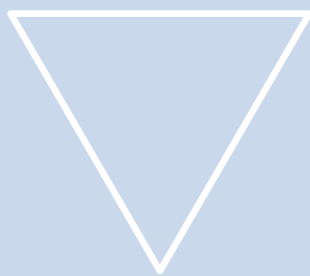
For these reasons, churches must do regular “systems checks” to ensure that all processes are running smoothly and together. Lack of sound systems makes it impossible to coordinate efforts and use resources well.



How long has it been since you did a “systems check”?

THE CHALLENGE OF THE EMERGENT

Integrity—maintaining sound systems that leverage resources toward the accomplishment of goals—is a key element of any healthy church. But integrity can be difficult to establish and maintain. We explored two reasons for this in a prior post [link], and here we’ll note another serious challenge to integrity: the emergent.



**Integrity—
maintaining
sound
systems that
leverage
resources
toward the
accomplish
ment of
goals—is a
key element
of any
healthy
church.**

Some churches refer to themselves as “emergent” or “emerging.” They use this label to identify themselves as participants in a movement that seeks to renew the Church by realigning its global strategies for outreach, worship, and spiritual formation. Emergent churches are particularly interested in postmodernity and in discovering ways to engage post-Christian culture.

We use the word “emergent” here in a different sense, once drawn more narrowly from the social sciences and the study of organizational behavior.

From this perspective, an activity performed by a group or an organization becomes “emergent” when it “just happens.” We do this just because we do it. This takes place, but it would be difficult to say exactly why, or even who actually does it.

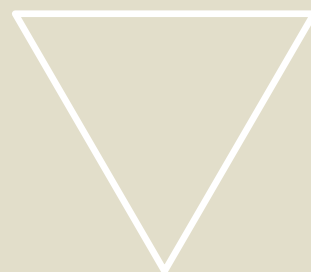
An “emergent” activity seems to have a life of its own. It feels like a natural byproduct of the church’s existence. It’s automatic.

As an example, consider the case of a church that invested a great deal of money and human resources in its annual VBS program. When volunteers and parents arrived on opening night, all were awed by the decorations, the skill of the teaching, the elegance of the systems for moving kids from station to station, the quality of the snacks, the creativity of the arts and crafts—everything was amazing.

Over the years, in fact, this VBS program had become so big and so amazing, involving so many people in complex systems of planning and execution, that people working in the kitchen didn’t know what was happening in the gym or who was doing it. In fact, most volunteers couldn’t say who was actually running the program, or who put it on the schedule or made decisions about it. VBS had taken on a life of its own.

Every year, someone would suggest that maybe the VBS program should be dropped, even though this church had been doing it for at least three decades. But before anyone could reach a decision, VBS had appeared on next year’s church calendar.

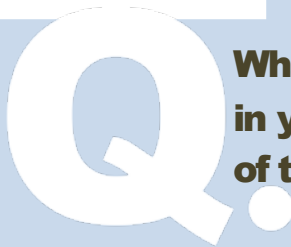
It had become emergent.



You can probably relate to this example, even if VBS isn't one of your "autopilot" programs. Because churches are complex entities, it's very easy for programs to take on a life of their own. Whether they have anything to do with today's needs and goals, they just emerge from the everyday life of the organization and the cycle of the church calendar. No one thinks about these things, really, any more than we think about why leaves emerge from trees in the spring. They just do.

The example above, about the emergent VBS program, is helpful because it illustrates an essential point: *even good things can threaten our integrity.*

Morally, spiritually, missionally—however you slice it, it would be hard to say that offering an excellent education program for neighborhood kids is a "bad thing." But it might also be hard to show how this program is in line with a particular church's mission and vision. In the meanwhile, it eats up a great deal of time and resources.



What programs or activities have become “emergent” in your church, taking on a life of their own regardless of their effectiveness?

THE MISSION CHALLENGE

Churches with integrity maintain systems and processes that leverage resources toward the fulfillment of their mission. Obviously, then, integrity is impossible if you don't have a functional mission statement.

There are different theories about mission statements. For churches, we suggest the following: the mission statement should say why you exist in a single simple sentence. You are here to do this in these ways. "First Church exists to . . .".

Since that's the reason you exist, all your resources should be invested in doing that. If that's why you exist, why would you spend time, effort, and money anything else?

MISSION STATEMENTS

Since that's the reason you exist, all your resources should be invested in doing that. If that's why you exist, why would you spend time, effort, and money anything else?

Take a moment to review your church's current mission statement. The goal is to determine whether that statement is a firm foundation for your systems and processes.

If you don't have a mission statement, make one up that you think most members of your leadership team would agree with. Your church exists to do what how for who?

Good mission statements will have three characteristics: they will be *memorable, actionable, and measurable*.

"Memorable" means that the mission statement is short and clear so people can remember it. If you can't remember it, you can't do it. A complex mission statement may look great on the website but it won't help people make decisions in the heat of the moment.

"Actionable" means that the mission isn't all "pie in the sky." People who read this statement say, "OK, I could do [these things] to accomplish that." It needs to be realistic, and it needs to drive decisions in the real world.

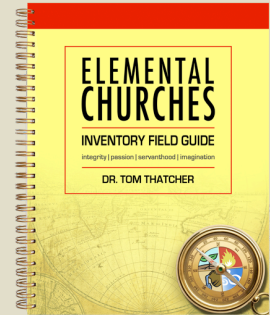
"Measurable" means it would be possible to show whether the mission had actually been accomplished. For churches, this is often the hardest part to nail down. Many churches, for example, might say that their goal is to "win the world for Christ." That's inspiring, but what does it mean and how could you prove whether you had done that or not?

A working fuel gauge doesn't mean you have gas in the tank, just that it would be possible to know whether you do or not. more likely you are to communicate in terms that make sense to the people who've been around for a while but that newer folks won't grasp.

For these reasons, churches must do regular "systems checks" to ensure that all processes are running smoothly and together. Lack of sound systems makes it impossible to coordinate efforts and use resources well.

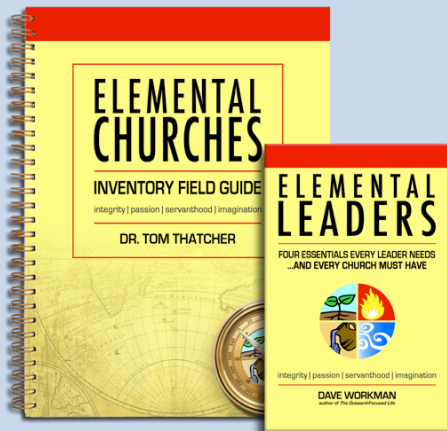
Q. Is your mission statement memorable, actionable, and measurable?

*Excerpted from the **Elemental Churches Field Guide** by Tom Thatcher. Tom is Co-Founder and Chief Analyst at Elemental Churches, a consulting group devoted to developing tools to help churches become healthier and more effective. The **Field Guide** is part of an inventory to measure church health and effectiveness through a comprehensive team-based audit. For a free 12-page summary of the **Elemental Leaders** book the **Field Guide** is based on, visit www.elementalchurches.com*



INTRODUCING THE ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY

The **ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY** is a unique web-based assessment to measure church health and effectiveness. Combining individual and team learning through online surveys and videos with personalized coaching, the Inventory provides a comprehensive report with action steps. It's a roadmap based on your own uploaded reports and surveys as you and your team work through the personal and group exercises. For more info and pricing, visit www.elementalinventory.com.



THE ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY includes:

- 12 ELEMENTAL LEADERS BOOKS
- 12 ELEMENTAL CHURCHES FIELD GUIDES (85-page workbook)
- 16 online videos
- web access to organization assessments & surveys
- interactive team exercises
- personalized consulting
- a comprehensive report with action steps

*Want to see where your personal leadership style falls on the **Four Elements** scale? Take our **free** self-assessment at <https://elementalinventory.com/assessments>.*

