

When Values Demand Change: Defining Your Church's Core Values

From the moment it is planted, every church has an internal and external identity.

The internal life of the church has to do with the congregation itself: its values, how well it knows itself, and what it really believes about the nature, values and mission of its ministry. While those dynamics may be in process for a new church plant, the motivation for and mission of the plant often reveal the internal identity of even the youngest congregations. A church's external identity is the image and message it projects to those outside the congregation. A healthy church's external identity should be a natural expression of internal identity. The better a church knows itself and why it exists, the better it connects with everyone who comes in contact with the church. This external expression of the church's identity can be broken down into 2 pieces: core values and personality.

A church's external identity is often referred to as the church's brand. Some are uneasy with that term, worrying that it reflects a church-as-a-business model of marketing. We don't think business-marketing principles transfer neatly and easily to the nature and mission of the Church. However, branding is one of those concepts that can help the church understand and establish a healthy, mission-focused external identity and message — a particularly important task for church plants. Simply put, your church's brand is the identity and message people associate with your church's name and people. Reflecting who you are with clarity and authenticity requires you to be intentional.

Core Values

Many churches start at the end, trying to craft an effective external brand and message without a clear sense of internal identity. That rarely works. Before you can project a unique, external identity or brand, you must first understand your church's internal character, even at the earliest stages of planting. This internal identity—defined by the values that your church considers essential to its existence—is the source from which all other aspects of your brand will flow. This task is not nearly as daunting as it sounds, and the attached worksheet will guide you through it. Your goal is to identify three or four values that define the essence of your church. These values aren't meant to confine who you are or restrict who you become. They simply offer a useful starting place for developing your sense of internal identity.

Establishing a set of core values is as critical as ever in the current culture. The people in your congregation and the people you hope to reach are inundated with competing messages and appeals. Most of us have developed an immunity of sorts – trained ourselves to ferret out the superficial promises, half-truths, and overstatements and learned to tune out messages that aren't clear and relevant to our lives. Your task – and your opportunity – is to penetrate that immune system by making your core values simple, believable, and relevant. The goal is to invite people to join the mission of God in the world by knowing and effectively communicating your church's role in that mission.

Is Every Value a Core Value?

Certainly any church can accumulate long lists of real values, ideas, concepts, goals, ministries, and missions that the church considers important to its biblical calling and privilege. The goal is to take these values and form a simple, concise list that will be a foundation for the mission that God has uniquely called you for.

Biblically-rooted passion is often a reliable test of whether a value is a core value. No church can do everything equally well. What are the particular characteristics and ministries you feel God has uniquely called your church to exhibit and embrace? Among the many good things you'll do as a church, where will you center your energy and passion?



Complete the Core Values Worksheet.

Core Message

The core message is the key message your church communicates to all of its audiences. It obviously is not the only message you will communicate, but all other messages coming from your church will be rooted in this one. This purpose statement is defined only after knowing your core values. It defines who you are and what you are about. Simplicity cannot be stressed enough here. You will be tempted to write a novel about why your church exists and what its purpose is. That's not what you need here. Think brief. Think biblical. Think powerful.

“How often do you have to read a book, a news story, or see a movie or play? If it is interesting, once is enough; if it is dull, once is plenty. The key to memorability is relevance. The key to annoying people is mindless repetition.”

Crafting Your Core Message

- 1) Is your core message simple and clear? Read your message to someone and ask the listener to repeat it back. If he or she can't, it's not simple enough.
- 2) Is your core message relevant and accessible for all audiences? The key to memorability is relevance.
- 3) Is your core message consistent with your core values? You never want to communicate a message that is inconsistent with who you really are and who you can be in the near future. Your church's external identity and brand will only have integrity if they accurately reflect the culture of your congregation.
- 4) Many valid messages get eliminated because someone says, "Wait, another local church can say that too." The concern should not be with what other churches can theoretically say, but which message you can actually own. You aren't competing with other churches for members or "position in the market." You're simply trying to communicate who you really are with confidence and passion.



Complete the Core Message Worksheet.

Core Values Worksheet

A) List 8 to 10 potential values.

Examples: Community, Trust, Preaching, Worship, Compassion, Family, Bible teaching, Hope, Accountability, Fun, Creativity, Authenticity, Connection, Simplicity, Honesty, Diversity, Growth, Shepherding, Discipleship, Acceptance, Mercy, Healing, Friendship, Accessibility, Relevance, Children

B) Use the following questions to make sure that the values you end up with are core values.

- 1) Which values evoke passion among your church's leadership and people?
- 2) Are these values that you believe your church can and will adhere to under stress and in the face of all obstacles?
- 3) Which values are such a part of your church's identity and purpose that if they disappeared, your church would endure a major identity crisis?

C) Narrow your list to 3 or 4 of the most critical values. For each one, write a description that identifies:

- 1) Why that value applies specifically to your church community,
- 2) How your church does or will soon embody that value, including an honest assessment of your current and future capacities, and
- 3) Why that value is essential to the life and future health of your church.

Core Message Worksheet

A) Write one or two sentences explaining why your church exists.

B) What overall impression do you hope for the community around you to have of your church?

C) List five common misperceptions people have of churches like yours, then list the reality you hope for your church to embody relative to that perception.

Example:	PERCEPTION	REALITY
	Isolated	Community focused

D) Write your Core Message in fifteen words or less.

E) Is your core message biblically sound and people-oriented?

F) Who is the target for this message?

G) What makes this message relevant to that target?

H) What impression do you want your various audiences to take away from your core message?

Write your answer from the perspective of the audience. For example, someone who hears your message might say, "Finally, there's a church that has a good looking pastor and gives away cash every Sunday." (If that's your answer, go back to the beginning and start over. But you get the point.)