

THANKSGIVING...YEAR-ROUND

Here are a few of the comments I heard this year after our Thanksgiving Eve Service:

“This is my favorite service of the entire year!”

“I am so encouraged to hear people talk about what God is doing in their lives!”

“Your church is doing what on Wednesday night?”

Have you ever wondered how a culture or tradition is born? Many leaders spend a great deal of time dismantling and erasing particular traditions and cultures within the church. Little is said or written about creating culture within individual churches. I would like to spend a little time sharing how our fellowship has created the new (or not so new) tradition and culture of Thanksgiving.

TALK LESS. ACT MORE.

Have you ever found yourself as a pastor, parent, coach, or leader, talking about what you would like things to look like and what you should do to make them happen, and then believing that the work was done simply because you talked about it?

Most leaders do much more talking than they should. I realized that I had fallen into the trap of talking about thankfulness, gratitude, and how to create opportunities to express gratitude than actually expressing gratitude myself.

CREATING A NEW CULTURE MEANS CHANGING...WHAT YOU DO.

We were a little church that had been in a rut of doing the same things over and over again without much change of action or heart. I concluded that the geographical region I lived in was filled with people who were religious, but not committed to long-term life change. I so wanted to create a culture in which expressions of God’s greatness were declared for all to hear.

My first Thanksgiving as pastor of this church rolled around. Many of my people did not have family in the area, so the usual festivities associated with Thanksgiving were not present. These people, in large part, would not have the succulent turkey dinner and a houseful of family for the weekend. They had a simple meal and watched some football or went shopping at some point.

I decided to gather our people on Thanksgiving Eve for a worship service. I hadn’t planned for anything spectacular – just a simple praise and prayer event. That first Thanksgiving Even we had about forty in attendance. Strangely or not, a woman asked Christ to be her

Savior after the service!

NEW CULTURE BEGINS IN THE HEART.

Following that evening, people began to express how meaningful the night was to them, and how they looked forward to the next year. As year two rolled around, I was specifically looking for people whose lives were dramatically changed by God's power. Part of the Thanksgiving Eve Service would include the testimonies of these hand-picked people. Their testimonies would be great encouragement to others in the audience, as well as prompt those in attendance to share their own stories. Two particular people stood out. I asked these two women if they would be willing to share at our Thanksgiving Eve service. They agreed!

The first person was the woman who had accepted Christ after the Thanksgiving Eve service last year. She had grown in the Lord and her children started to attend the church. She came to the mic and gave thanks for all God had done for her and her family. It was very moving! Our people began to connect the dots to see how God uses simple people in small places to do big things.

The second woman had recovered from a brain tumor. Our church had prayed as a group for her for a good portion of the year. She came to the mic and expressed her thankfulness to God for His miraculous work in her body. This opened the floodgates for others to step to the mic and express their thankfulness to God. We had begun to shape a new culture (tradition) that was meaningful and glorifying to God!

MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES ARE CONTAGIOUS.

I began to notice that people were becoming more expressive about what God was doing in their lives. Hearing about God's faithfulness and power became a part of the culture of our church. The spirit of the Thanksgiving Eve service had spread. It was no longer confined to one evening, but more verbal expressed throughout the year.

By the time we hit our fifth Thanksgiving Eve Service, over half of the church was in attendance. I didn't just have two or three people who were willing to share, but rather, I had a hard time narrowing the number down. The open mic portion of the night was characterized by a line of people eagerly waiting to express their gratitude to God for His goodness to them. These expressions included specific answers to prayer, evidence of physical healings, and gratitude and love for other members of the church body.

TEN YEARS LATER.

We had a wonderful evening! Our entire church attended this meaningful service. Tears and

claps accompanied every story. Powerful singing, communion, and scripture reading prepared our hearts to worship to the One to whom we give thanks.

We didn't begin a Thanksgiving Eve Service because it was the "next best thing" to come along, but rather to shift a culture. It was time that we created a culture of thanksgiving...at a time we call Thanksgiving.