

Voices: Sounding out soul culture at FBC Waco

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“Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” Peter Drucker told a generation of leaders.

Fair enough, but his counsel would help more if he also told us what culture is.

Peter Scazzerro calls culture “that imprecise something.” For too long, culture has been the “black box” of pastoral leadership.

Breakfast calls for biscuits, and biscuits come from dough. Dough offers a better image for culture and how to steward it wisely.

J.B. Gambrell, a Texas Baptist pioneer of a century ago, wrote: “If we are wise, we will work our dough. There is no greater nor more hopeful task before us than so to culture our people as to bring them to a New Testament way of thinking and feeling.”

Gambrell dreamed of a vibrant “soul culture, growing out of a deep experimental knowledge of God.” That remains our dream for the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas Baptists and the wider church.

With generous support from the [Soundings Project](#) administered by Baylor’s Institute for Faith and Learning, First Baptist Waco has devoted the past four years to “working our dough.” Pastors and congregation have labored together to discern the proper ingredients of a healthy soul culture and to knead it using the proper technique, time and temperature.

Soul culture ingredients

Belief is the bedrock of the church, but bare orthodoxy satisfies no more than a dough made of flour alone. Faithful deeds identify the church as the salt of the earth, but orthopraxy alone nourishes no more than a bowl of Morton's crystals.

Our attitudes, values and goals are critical ingredients akin to the baking soda, powder and yeast that transform and literally elevate the batch into a beautiful loaf.

Combining these ingredients in the right proportion, at the right time and at the right rate is the joy and challenge of ministry. Only then can our churches face times of proving and eventually the oven's refining heat.

Working the dough

We began exploring these five ingredients at First Baptist Waco during a summer sermon series in the pandemic's first year. We returned from fully remote broadcasts to highly cautious in-person worship midway through the series.

We yearned—and learned—to live as the “one loaf” 1 Corinthians 10:17 calls us, while we struggled to peel foil from individually packaged Lord's Supper servings. The practices of physically social distancing within a diverse congregation forced us to identify and cling to the values and goals that hold us spiritually close.

In time, we rejoiced to regather around literal tables. We worked the dough first introduced in sermons around dinner discussions in the fellowship hall. We talked beliefs over burgers, attitudes over applesauce and values over Veg-All. As Texas Baptists, we also had Bush's chicken and mashed potatoes.

Church members from the Greatest Generation to Generation Alpha had a chance to weigh in with their perspectives on the ingredients of soul culture and how each one finds expression in our local congregation.

In the ensuing months and years, the five ingredients and how they interact have entered the vernacular of our shared life. We intuitively sift new ministry ideas through “the grid,” to borrow language from our friend and dialogue partner Pastor Ralph West.

Attending to culture and continually working the dough builds energy around our best endeavors. It also provides shared language to discard plans inconsistent with our identity and mission without growing disagreeable or defensive.

Shared joy

Through the convening invitation of Baylor University’s Institute for Faith and Learning, we also have enjoyed sharing with partner congregations from across our state. Most recently, we spent four days together in the Texas Hill Country at Laity Lodge celebrating both our shared call in Christ and the more specified local callings that make each congregation unique.

We rejoice that the very idea of a call implies a divine Caller.

When we grow tempted to treat our vocations as esoteric puzzles or Indiana Jones-style quests, we remind ourselves that discerning calling is as simple as listening for the voice of Christ. As his voice sounds forth, we responsively sound the depths of our own congregations to discern what gifts, passions and opportunities he has placed within and before us.

Our beliefs, attitudes, values, goals and practices form the grid for this sacred work of community discernment.

Soul culture resources

Finally, First Baptist Waco has delighted to introduce soul culture to the wider church. Our pastor Matt Snowden and I published [Soul Culture](#) in August 2023. The book distills our congregational project into summary form that has proven helpful for churches from Houston to Calgary.

Pastor friends in the Appalachians and the Midwest have hosted leadership workshops for their own churches, and the book has become a course text within Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program.

April 18-19, Truett Seminary will host pastors and other church leaders for their annual [Truett Pastors Conference](#) to explore more about the ingredients we work into our dough. Bringing the project full circle, the conference will take place at First Baptist Waco in the same room where the initial sermon series began. We hope you can join us for worship, teaching, fellowship, encouragement, discussion and renewal.

“Since there is one loaf of bread,” Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “we who are many are one body.”

Texas Baptists like to celebrate our “many-ness” as part of our state’s pride in all things big. This occasion is an invitation to rejoice that we also are one.

Psalm 34:8 beckons us, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” As we partake of Christ, we too become inviting and nourishing for a hungry world.

Joshua Hays is associate pastor of discipleship at First Baptist Church in Waco. First Baptist Church in Waco participated in Baylor University's Soundings Project. Soundings is part of Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Called to

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