ASSESSING AND NURTURING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THAT CONVEYS CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND VALUES IN AN ADVENTIST EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

by

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Introduction

Most, if not all, of our Christian institutions come into existence because of a sincere train our young people for better service in this world, and to prepare them to live in heaven. Instead of exposing our youth to the world and its values, it is believed that our institutions are the best means we have at our disposition where we can train these young men and women according to our principles and values. Often however, it seems that this noble aim we fixed when the institutions started, instead of being the dominating influence that characterizes the school, takes a back seat at best or in the worst scenario is simply forgotten as years go by.

One reason that explains such a state of things is found within the cultural structure of the institution and how it evolves through time. As in all other organizations, our institutions operate within a cultural setting that is forged over the years. This organizational culture is dynamic and changes over the years as a response to the external and internal environment. It springs from within the organization and, in return, shapes the beliefs and the way things are done. In as much as that shaping is in harmony with the main objective and values of the organisation, there would not be any cause of concern. In the event of the contrary, there is a high risk that, with time, the first and foremost objective will gradually slip into oblivion.

This paper aims at three main objectives. First, it will define organizational culture and its role within the Adventist organization. This is deemed necessary as a basis for explaining the second objective, which will attempt to set some questions that could be used to assess the prevailing culture of the organization. The third objective is to explain several measures that could be utilized by Adventist organizations to nurture the desired culture within their settings.
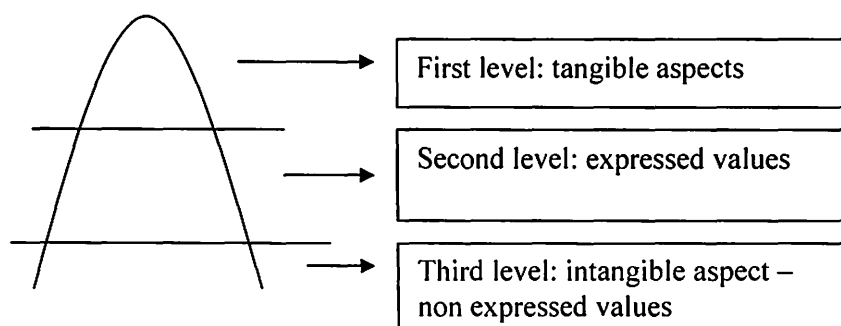
Organizational culture: definition and implications

Organizational culture can be described as the set of norms, ways of living and habits, all of which are supported by basic beliefs, and that create a certain "atmosphere" in an organization. According to Daft (1997), organizational culture is a sum of all the values, ideologies, norms and attitudes that the members of an organization adhere to in general. Schein (1985), on the other hand, defines it as a way of doing things based on assumptions that are considered as a dependable basis for solving problems and that have proved efficient over time.

It is usually set up at three levels. All three levels try to make sense of three major dimensions of our existence: the perception of man towards human nature and activities; the understanding of interpersonal relationships; and the understanding of time, space and language.

There is the surface level, expressed through the physical symbols, the ceremonies, the office layout and all those tangible elements present in the organization. At the second level are the expressed values and beliefs that people use to justify their actions. Charpentier (2007) states that these values are willingly discussed and explained to the stakeholders and are used as a basis for establishing norms. Then there is a third, subconscious level that exists. At this level, assumptions and values exist that are not readily explained and, as a consequence, may not necessarily be understood by all, specially the new arrivals. These three levels guide all the aspects of operations within the organization and largely help determine the end results. A diagram showing these levels would look the following:

There are three basic functions of organizational culture. First, it provides a sense of identity to its members. Greenberg and Baron (1997) state that the more clearly an organization's shared perceptions and values are defined, the more strongly people can associate themselves with their organization's mission and feel a vital part of it.

The second function of culture is to enhance commitment to the organization's mission. As stakeholders are reminded of the values and philosophy of the organization through its culture, they are brought to accept and adhere to these values. As they perceive how their role fits as a part of the whole they are enabled to collaborate with each other towards achieving the main objective, the mission.

The third function of organizational culture is about clarifying and reinforcing standards of behaviour. Culture helps provide consistency to behaviour, especially to new comers.

Organizational culture needs to be accepted by the majority of stakeholders to be considered the dominant culture of that organization. According to Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (2004), in order to understand the prevailing culture of a particular organization, one needs to observe a) the recurring inter-personal behaviour: social rites; b) the norms shared by all the groups within the organization and "ropes" that newcomers need to learn in order to be accepted within the group; c) the values that are shared by the members of the organization; d) and the philosophy underlying the decisions taken towards those who are outside the organization. Through these elements, the individual learns what is expected from him. In order for him to belong, to thrive and succeed within the organization, it is essential that he understands and adheres to all the values, accepts the norms and acts according to the philosophy.

At the beginning of every organisation, its founders set its culture. Charron and Separi (2001) explain that organizational culture can be considered as a product of history. Hence, the

organization is deeply characterized by the values and philosophy of the founders. They shape the organization through the vision they infuse into the dynamics of the organization. The vision is carried on by their successors without question. On the other end, culture can be considered as a result of a "conscientious construction" whereby several elements of the culture can be brought to change because of necessity. These two approaches complete each other. Indeed every organization has a history and yet may see the need to accomplish a particular project and hence shift its emphasis in time, bringing about a change of culture. Once a particular culture is adopted, nothing guarantees that it will stay as it is.

In most organizations the vision and mission statement expresses, albeit succinctly, the values and philosophical views that the organization intends to uphold. As the mission statement expresses the organization's raison d'être, its purpose and the direction it intends to take for the future, at the same time, values are expressed that are to go hand in hand with the vision of the future. It is significant that these three elements-purpose, direction and values-are all combined together implying that it is not enough that the organization exists but it needs to exist according to certain ideals, not only for today but for tomorrow as well. In other words, its survival needs to be worth it.

Organizational Culture and the Adventist School

It is now necessary to look at the organizational culture of the Adventist school. An Adventist school carries a religious tradition that has a definite purpose, because it is connected to the Adventist church. The unique characteristic of the Adventist church is that it has a commission of divine origin *and* it carries out a prophetic vision. It started at a critical point of biblical prophecy and it fulfils the characteristics of the faithful church of God at the end of times. This is an awesome responsibility and the Adventist school reflects in all its dimensions such a unique purpose.

As with other organizations, both the purpose and basic philosophy of the Adventist school are reflected in its vision and mission statement. The basic purpose and vision is to "keep the faith" alive and to restore and prepare man to live for eternity in the presence of God. The values underlying its purpose and vision are therefore related to God and the Bible principles. Ever since its beginnings, White (1948), states the Adventist college has an *intentional* presence of religion in its midst. It is not here on earth merely to survive through the turbulences of the environment and be phased out after several years of existence. It is intended to make a difference in that environment. It lives on earth but it prepares the student for both service here and a life in the hereafter. Knight (1998) states that teaching is a form of ministry and the school is part of the Lord's vineyard. The Adventist worldview when dealing with the aspects of the nature of man and work, the relationship of man towards others and the management of time, space and language is characterized by a focus on the Bible and its principles.

The organizational culture of the Adventist school performs the three functions mentioned above. First, it provides a sense of identity to the stakeholders. Indeed, the Christian schools (that includes the Adventist schools) have "a strategic advantage over those [organizations] with a humanistic orientation in the sense that [they] have an epistemological and metaphysical grounding for their value system that is not available to others." (Knight, 1998, p.227). The challenge for the Adventist school is to value and retain that uniqueness and be identified as a place where individuals can make a sense of their origin and their final destiny as well as their hope in an Eternal God who holds their future in His hands. If this element in its identity is lost, the young people may be unprepared to meet the questions that the outside world has in store for them (Poe, (2004).

The second function is related to a commitment to the mission. A strong culture enhances commitment to the mission. Through the invisible and visible aspects of culture, the raison

d'être of the organization as well as its values are pointed out. The more they are evident, the more they will allow for an opportunity to commit to a lifestyle that reflects the values they carry. On the other end, if they are but feebly presented and nurtured, the implication is that they are not that important to the stakeholders.

The third function of culture within the Adventist school allows the stakeholders to provide a consistent and unified code of behaviour in the face of the outsiders. An organization with a strong culture tends towards consistency in behaviour over time and space.

The Culture of the Adventist School and the Culture of the Community

The Adventist school operates within a community with its own cultural setting. As the school nurtures and develops a culture of its own, this organizational culture may be perceived as a counterculture within the community. At the same time, the school is expected to train students to be of service to the community. The problem is: what should the school do? How should the school's organizational culture relate to the external one?

One way would be to isolate the school and the students during their stay and shun anything that comes from the outside. While this method may be useful when facing a culture of an extreme perverse nature, it comports the risk of separating the students from the needs of the community as well (Rasi, 1995). People need the Lord. Jesus Himself prayed His Father that His people be protected from evil but not taken from the world (John 17:15-18).

Another approach is to accept the culture totally as it is and adapting the Christian world view to the culture. The danger of this approach would be to elevate community culture to an absolute standard, even with its flaws, and put aside the divine principles that are reflected in the culture within the Adventist school.

A third approach would be to consider Christ as the transformer of culture. This approach allows the Christians to "understand the values Jesus espoused and then to help

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transform culture by the expression of these values in the world around us." (Sire, 1990 p.162). The challenge is to do God's will fully where we are, and to testify of His grace in a world torn apart in different directions. The risk is to run against the current practices and meet the disapproval of the community. Yet, we are called to be fully loyal to God and to share His grace to the world, teaching and practicing what He commands us to do, even at the risk of being counter cultural if necessary (Rasi, 1995).

Assessing the Current Culture of the Organization

At the core of any decision for the future of an organization there is its basic philosophy and the values it intends to be known for. These values are expressed in the mission statement as well as the norms of conduct that are encouraged throughout the organization. It is not enough to assume that the culture of any organization would demonstrate those values. For some organizations the values are expressed loud and clear and there is an overall adherence to the expression of them. In other organizations, with a weaker culture, the values are not so openly expressed nor nurtured. Hence there is a dissonance between what is expressed in the mission statement and what is practiced. The organization needs to be aware of the degree to which its intended culture is known and practiced, at all the levels of the organization. An assessment is necessary to verify if, in reality, there is harmony between the intended values to be practiced and the real action.

According to Hellriegel and his associates (2004), the process of building up or designing an organization depends on three main choices: the choice of how it communicates with its direct stakeholders and with the outside world; the choice of how it exerts authority; and the choice of how its main tasks and responsibilities are distributed. Each of these choices determines the organization's success to reach its ultimate purpose. In the present paper it is proposed that these three variables be used as tools of assessment of the

organizational culture. By looking at how the organization communicates the values underlying the culture within and without the organization, and how authority is being used at different levels of the organization in order to ensure that the values are transmitted properly and lastly how the task on hand is being distributed with different constituencies, one can get a picture of how far the values are transpiring within the organization.

Organisation

| Communication | Authority | Distribution of tasks |
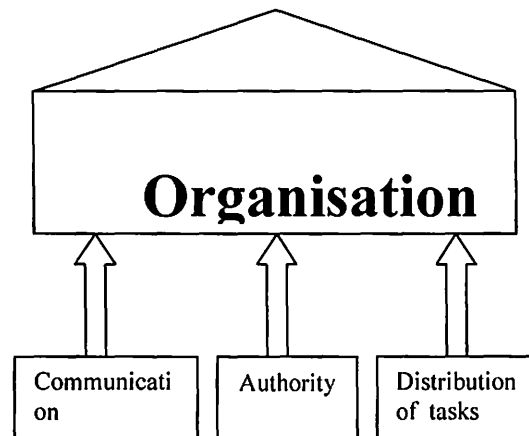
Communication

Information is an important source of power within an organization. It helps alleviate uncertainty and create harmony among the members of the organization. On the other end, if misused or abused, it can create chaos and conflict. The way an organization manages its channels of communication helps determine what it intends to propagate as information.

Benne (2001) mentions three components of the Christian tradition that need to be relevant in a Christian institution: the vision, the ethos and the Christian persons that bear that vision and that ethos.

The vision - The vision is the core of life. The vision starts with the founder of any organization. It is a major part of the historical culture, that is, the culture that has existed from the beginning and transmitted from generation to generation. It remains even after the culture has undergone some changes over time. For the Adventist school, the vision though transmitted since ages ago, remains relevant. Without the vision, the school would lose its identity. Although there are changes in the internal and external environment, human nature is still the same and needs redemption. The vision is extended and reinforced through the mission. This is what the school needs to communicate.

> The best education that can be given to children and youth is that which bears the closest relation to the future, immortal life... They are to be earnestly instructed in the truths of the Bible, that they may become pillars in the church, champions for truth, rooted and grounded in the faith. They are to know whereof they believe, and to have such an experience in divine things that they will never become betrayers of sacred trusts. The youth should be educated by precept and example that they are to be agents for God, messengers of mercy, ready for every good word and work, that they are to be blessings to those who are ready to perish. (White, *Fundamentals of Education*, p.31)

The ethos – Since the school is an Adventist institution, it is necessary to have coherence between the Adventist beliefs and the way these beliefs are lived on a daily basis. The individuals coming in contact with the institution need to be aware of what is expected of them. Often it is assumed that the personnel and students, since they come from a Christian background, know what the rules of conduct are and understand them. But that may not be the case. The basis for the rules of conduct need to be clearly explained in order to ensure that the students (and others) are nurtured into practising the integration of what they believe with how they live.

The people – One way of transmitting the culture within an organization is through its people. One needs people to allow information to pass from one mind to another. Christianity is centered not on rules and credos but on God in three Persons. Jesus Himself saw it necessary to entrust His mission to His disciples before He left His earthly sojourn.

Hence people are critical elements in carrying God's purpose. It is therefore necessary to ensure that there be intentional communication processes and channels that are formed between God and the individuals and among each other. Several examples of such communication processes and channels are provided in many of our institutions. For instance, there are prayer gardens where students and others are free to commune with God any time, any day. There are also spiritual retreat and the likes that help the students to have time to reflect on how to live their faith. There is also the availability of a mentor for every student whereby the student is given the opportunity to gain from the experience of somebody who has been there before.

The following questions can be used and developed as an assessment tool dealing with communicating the vision/mission, the ethos and the people:

Vision/mission:

- ◆ Is the vision/mission known to all the different groups: students, regular and contractual employees, administrators and others, specially the newcomers?
- ◆ Is there an entity on campus that is in charge of orienting the newcomers as to the reason of the vision/mission?
- ◆ Are the vision/mission and their implications explained to these groups on several occasions and according to their level of understanding?
- ◆ Are the stakeholders (including students) aware of their contribution in achieving the goals of the vision/mission?

Ethos:

- ◆ Are there opportunities to openly discuss the relationship between the beliefs and their relevance to the daily activities within the institution?
- ◆ Are the rules of conduct explained to the students clearly by those in charge to enforce them?
- ◆ Is there a code of values with a pledge of acceptance that spells out the values and that is discussed, read and signed by the parties concerned?

People:

- ◆ Is there a deliberate process of encouraging students to communicate with God in a personal manner apart from the normal worship services on campus?
- ◆ Is there a significant presence of individuals that help nurture a desire to carry the vision?
- ◆ Are there formal channels of communication that are regularly "oiled" and whereby the stakeholders (including the students) feel free to discuss openly about the mission?

Authority

In the context of an Adventist school, the chain of command starts from the executive committee, administrative committee, the different departments and the supporting departments. Instructions are issued from these committees and are executed at the lower levels. When it comes to transmitting values, each one of these groups has a role to play. If top administration does not clearly reinforce the type of culture they desire to see flourish in the organization, informal groups will create their own subcultures that can be a counterculture within the organization. (Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn, 1991).

The manner in which the organisation structures decision making and determines authority to be delegated to each task force determines the hierarchy of authority. In an Adventist school, such decision making procedures regarding the transmission of values follows a top to bottom structure. Top administration decides on the rules and regulations that determine the conduct of the students and personnel alike. These rules are written in various handbooks and given to the stakeholders concerned. At the lower levels of management, enough authority is delegated from the top to the department heads so that the persons involved can do their job properly. For example, the dormitory deans have some degree of authority delegated to them to enforce rules within the dormitories. In turn, suggestions coming from the lower levels of management are channelled back to top management so that the latter can improve on the rules in order to better respond to the needs of the students.

However, top administration is not the only group that is needed in the process of transmitting the vision, mission and values. Faculty makes up a strong group within the Christian college that has the potential of passing on the knowledge and the experience. "The non-teaching position, ideal curriculum, latest teaching tools, and flawless organizational pyramid are marginal unless there are quality human relationships at the point where students

encounter a school's teachers." (Knignt, p.205). The teaching faculty spends a great deal of time with the students and is therefore in a position to directly influence and inspire them.

The teachers in our schools will need to manifest Christlike love, forbearance, and wisdom. Students will come to school who have no definite purpose, no fixed principles, no realization of the claim that God has upon them. ...Under the influence of wise teachers, the indolent may be led to arouse, the thoughtless to become serious. Through painstaking effort, the most unpromising student may be so trained and disciplined that he will go forth from the school with high motives and noble principles, prepared to be a successful light bearer in the darkness of the world. (White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*, p. 499.)

Apart from the administrators and teaching faculty, other individuals play a more or less strong influence on the students as they go through our schools. It becomes therefore necessary to hire and keep those who will have the best contribution towards transmitting the values. Hence the recruitment process plays a major role in acquiring the best people and allowing our students to be exposed to the best influence possible.

After recruiting the employees, the orientation and socialization process begins. Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly and Konopaske (2006) state that through the process of socialization the old employees transmit values, assumptions and attitudes to the new employees, thus the new employees are "brought into the culture". The socialization process takes time and is pursued the whole time the employee stays with the organization. Among the different phases the employee goes through, there is a time when she is brought to ask whether what she is experiencing in the organization is in harmony with his learned beliefs and behaviour before his employment. This self-examination allows the person to decide whether she would stay with the organization or resign. Finally, all those employees who stay with the organization are those who have come to terms with that internal conflict and wilfully decide to stay. It is to be noted that it is the organization that provides ground for such a self examination through its socialization process. This implies the importance of such a process.

The questions that can be developed as assessment tools when it comes to authority are as follows:

- Does top administration team set aside time to prepare (or revise) a program used to help foster the type of culture that is desired?
- Is there an input coming from the lower level of management when decisions are made regarding rules for value transmission?
- Is there a support system in place that would allow the lower level "managers" to exert their required task in passing on the values?
- Is the recruitment process developed enough to ensure that the school is getting the best faculty, and other personnel?
- Is the orientation process developed enough to ensure that the employees are brought into the culture?

Division of labor and distribution of responsibility

When it comes to culture, every group within the organization has a part to play in transmitting values and practising them. The responsibility of transmitting vision and values belongs to top management, faculty and personnel, as well as student body. The fellowship among students allows for an easy transmission of values. The perception of the group's role within the organization plays an important part for a good or bad influence. It is highly desirable that they see themselves as an integral part of the whole, instead of just an opposing party to the whole organization. If the student body feels part of the school community as a whole with a definite role to play in enhancing moral values, the chances of maintaining one culture with one set of values within the organization are high. If they are brought to realize that they are to be of service to others and to be useful in gaining souls to Christ, and if group members are given a chance to be involved in such an endeavour, then their level of commitment will increase. (White,1923; Hall,1992).

Apart from the curricular activities that go on within a school, there is a host of non academic activities that are carried on as well. These activities are done in groups most of the time: students with faculty and administration, students within the student association or informal groups of students. As each group behaves according to a certain pattern it gives a certain message as to its commitment to the philosophy and its adherence to it. Values are not

only passed on among students but to everyone who has the opportunity to come in contact with the school.

The question to ask at this point is:

♦ Is there a statement describing the responsibility of each group concerning the transmission of values in the organization?

Nurturing the Desired Culture in the Organization

Through an invitation to a closer communion with God

Knight (1998) states that Christian education has a conservative function which implies the provision of an atmosphere favourable to value transmission. Further, the Adventist school has a service orientation that transcends all altruistic objectives. The students and other stakeholders need to know that they are first and foremost loved and valued as individuals, because of the love of God. The implication is that instead of searching for artificial ways of nurturing a culture that underlies the desired values, it needs to be realized that God has already provided the means to do so. Hence, effort should be geared towards a closer communion of the school community as a whole with God and with each other. (White, 1923). The school community should bring anybody who comes in contact with it a desire to "taste that the Lord is good." This is important as it involves the people's heart and will. Indeed, there can be no reinforcement and nurturing if the individual does not want to adhere to the culture and its values. A closer communion with God will allow for a transformation from within and avoid too much emphasis on externals only. (Foster, 1988).

Through the intentional spiritual activities of the school

The Adventist schools have a strong emphasis on the spiritual life of its students. The attendance to church services, mid-week prayer meetings, morning and evening worship

services and other meetings of a spiritual nature tend to help measure the level of spirituality of the school. Out of the abundance of the spiritual life comes a richness brought to the social life whether in the dorm, homes of personnel or in the classroom.

Through the recruitment, promotion and dismissal process of personnel

The criteria for recruiting, promoting and dismissing personnel are generally known in any organization and can be used to maintain or modify an existing culture. (Hellriegel, Slocum, Woodman, 2004). The characteristics that are looked for in new employees and that are detected through correspondence prior to recruitment and through the interviews carried on can be of help in the decision of whether to accept the persons or not. The reasons for promoting and firing personnel also send a clear signal as to what the school gives importance to and what it rewards or reproves. Indeed, the basis for rewarding and acknowledging a particular action is a strong indicator of the type of culture that is desired within the organization. This process of rewarding could be extended to other people than personnel, including students. Reward and recognition does not need to involve work accomplishment only but also other aspects of school life. Then it becomes easy to reward students when they are caught in action in transmitting the desired values. Likewise, what management sanctions or punishes is a sign of the undesirable behaviour it desires to eradicate.

Through management action during crisis situation

Another significant factor is management reactions in times of important incidents and organizational crisis. The stand that management takes in times of crisis sheds light on what they believe to be important for the organization. Often under stress the true character is revealed and the identity of the institution is demonstrated. These actions, more than words, reveal the true spirit that is to be cultivated throughout the school.

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Through management emphasis on certain aspects of organization life

What management repeats through meetings (formally and informally), speeches, committees are easily remembered and tend to change the behaviour of those who come in regular contact with the school. In the same manner, what management measures and controls most send a signal on what is important and needs to be guarded.

Through ceremonies, rites, rituals, and stories

The ceremonies, rites and rituals that are ongoing in the school life consist of another nurturing tool that can be used to convey values. Even if they operate within the same type of environment, two organizations will not have the same type of ceremonies, rites and rituals. Each one will have its own particular "twist" and "flavour." In as much as it helps transmit the values of the organization it is necessary to cultivate the practice of these ceremonies and rites. In the same manner, the stories that are repeated and that pertain to the history of the school, the church or the community can also be utilized to link the existence of the school with a solid past heritage. Storytelling is a primary way of human expression of who we are, where we came from, and what we anticipate in our lives. This is necessary for the maintenance of a strong identity of the individuals as well as the community. (Conçalves, 2006).

Conclusion

In any organization there is a culture that originates with its founder and evolves over time. Its form depends on the philosophies and values set and expressed through the vision and mission of the organization, the way of life within its premises and its visible expressions and the people that practice and pass on these values to all who come in contact with the organization. The Christian school has a unique mission and its people carry a special burden

to bring its students to a better knowledge of Christ while acquiring the necessary skills to be useful to others in this life. The values that go with this mission may run against the current philosophies in the external environment. These values that characterise the culture of the school if not properly assessed and nurtured may not be prioritized as time goes. Consequently, the school is in risk of losing its identity as a salt of the earth. It is imperative therefore to assess the existent culture to make sure it is carrying the desired values and that the latter are being passed on to the stakeholders. To expand the idea, this paper made use of the three strategic choices that are debated on when designing any organization as variables for assessing the culture: communication, exercise of authority and division of labour. As far as the nurturing factors are concerned, the efforts should be first geared to allow every student to come in closer communion to God. He alone can put the love of his principles in the hearts. Top administration plays an important role in maintaining the culture. Their criteria for recruiting, orienting and rewarding behaviour, as well as their reaction in times of crisis and difficulties are clear signals as to what is important. Apart from the higher authority, faculty and personnel are at strategic places for transmitting values being constantly in contact with the students. The constant repetition and emphasis on certain values help clarify any misunderstanding about those values. The student body as a group is a powerful instrument in carrying values. The ceremonies, rites, rituals and stories told and retold are strong nurturing tools.

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