

Size Matters: Mission, Ministry, Boards and Staff

Part 3 of 3
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The first two parts of this article (at www.centerforusmissions.org – Newsletters – 2006 – October 6 and October 20) described how the roles of the pastor and of the governing board vary in congregations of different sizes. This third part covers specific expectations of a board of directors as well as potential problem areas.

“There is one central reason to have a board: Simply put, the board exists (usually on someone else’s behalf) to be accountable that its organization works.”
John Carver & Miriam Carver

A church board exists to be accountable that the church works. The board represents, serves and is accountable to members of a church as a whole. It does not represent or serve the staff, the unchurched, personal interests or board interests. This point is difficult for many to accept because, in an individual’s mind, the staff may need protecting, the church may seem too inwardly focused or a ministry of personal interests seems important beyond the members' understanding.

But none of these factors change the reality that members elect the board to serve them and their interests. If the board believes the membership is steering a course not in the church's best interest, the board has a responsibility to communicate its concern and, where appropriate, educate. But if the members decide to go in a direction the board does not like, board members must either bow to the will of the members or resign their positions. Fortunately, this is a rare necessity and only happens in the unhealthiest of situations.

The board's key role is to understand the church's mission, i.e. the “ends,” and to establish goals to effectively accomplish the mission. The board should express the mission and goals so that the senior pastor can communicate them to staff, volunteers and members of the congregation. The senior pastor, working with the board, develops a plan that lays out the "means" of realizing the ends.

The board must avoid dictating the means, lest they micromanage the work of the pastor, staff and task forces or committees. The board may set limits on how the mission may be accomplished, but the senior pastor and staff should be given wide latitude to accomplish the mission. The board evaluates the results of the means and holds the senior pastor accountable for those results.

The board acts and speaks with one voice. While individuals may express differing opinions during a meeting, and even be split on an issue when voting, once settled by a vote, the action is a board action. All members must uphold the board's decision, as long as it does not violate board policy.

The board only exists as a board when convened as the board. A board member has no authority to speak for the board apart from board policy or action. Board members have an obligation to hear from members and represent the thinking of those members, but action on that thinking is reserved to the board as a whole.

The board functions as a steward of the congregation's resources. It is obligated to due diligence in fiduciary and liability matters, putting proper safeguards in place to protect the congregation physically and financially, including regular audits of the books and liability insurance for property and personnel, including the board.

To ensure that the church works, the board sets four types of policies: Ends policies, Governance Process policies, Board-Staff Linkage policies and Limitation policies. The first three are expressed in a positive, proactive and prescriptive way, while the latter are stated in a proactive, but negative and boundary-setting way.

The board also:

- Sets the agenda for meeting in consultation with the Senior Pastor and publishes the agenda in advance of meetings
- Communicates actions to the congregation through regular reports
- Forms task forces and committees with defined purposes and limitations
- Sets the congregation meeting agenda and publishes it in advance
- Monitors and evaluates its own performance
- Monitors and evaluates "ends" and "means"
- Monitors and evaluates the Senior Pastor through an Evaluation Committee

Board Danger Zones

Standing Committees: Standing committees may begin to see their meetings as ministry in and of themselves. Committee members may think they are making great sacrifices of their time for the Kingdom, whether or not the committee ever produces ministry results. Task forces, with defined purposes and terminal dates or results, are preferred to committees.

Rotating Positions: Rotation of board positions among a small group of leaders may be a throw back to a time when the congregation was a Family Church or small Pastoral Church. In a larger church, it may result from the failure to develop new leadership or even from the desire of a few to control the congregation or hold offices of prestige.

Numerous problems result when leadership positions are rotated among a few people. The small group of leaders often resists change because it threatens their leadership. Future leaders are not being raised up, diminishing the health and future stability of the

congregation. Potential leaders often become discouraged and move on to other congregations where their talents are utilized. Burn out, distrust of leadership and loss of mission focus also occur.

To avoid these problems, congregations should intentionally give leaders time off of the board and intentionally develop new leaders. Task forces are a great way to raise up new leaders. The planning of a ministry or event might be broken into several tasks, each given to a different task force working under the leadership of a coordinator. People who are potential congregational leaders develop skills while leading these task forces, creating a leadership learning lab in a congregation. This strategy also encourages more and more people to buy into the mission and vision of the congregation.

Communication: It is a significant mistake when boards and senior pastors in churches in transition fail to consistently and frequently communicate the vision and direction of the ministry throughout the congregation. When this happens, the murmuring often percolates up from the grassroots, as people feel decisions are being made without consideration of the impact on them. The larger the congregation, the greater this failure is compounded. It is a problem from which it is harder to recover as size increases, especially if the murmuring has gone unheeded for a significant period of time.

Too Many Bosses: A board must clearly define its Board-Staff Linkage policies to avoid confusion over who communicates with and delegates responsibilities to staff members. Usually the board relates to the senior pastor and delegates communication and assignment of tasks to him. Relating solely to the senior pastor is a big challenge for the board that was a working board when the active membership was smaller. But it is essential for good order in the church.

Size matters. Size does not have to limit the congregation's realization of its mission, as one pastor reminded me after the second part of this article was published. But it is important to have an intentional structure that leads to the fulfillment of the mission of the church. Alignment of roles and structure enhances the likelihood that the mission of the church will be accomplished.

Sources:

"How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate Sized Churches" by Roy M. Oswald at <http://www.congregationalresources.org/article0132.asp>

"Carver's Policy Governance® Model in Nonprofit Organizations" by John Carver and Miriam Carver at <http://carvergovernance.com/pg-np.htm>

"Policy Based Governance – What Works and What Doesn't" by Donald J. Bourgeois at <http://www.carters.ca/pub/bulletin/charity/2004/chylb34.htm>

Books:

(All but the first are available at amazon.com.)

Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry by Arlin Rothauge

Size Transitions In Congregations by Arlin J. Rothauge (Introduction), Beth Ann Gaede (Editor)

CarverGuide: Basic Principles of Policy Governance by John Carver and Miriam Mayhew Carver

Boards That Make A Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations by John Carver

Reinventing Your Board: A Step by Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance by John and Miriam Carver

Links:

Nine Principles of Boardsmanship
<http://www.wyla.org/boards/principles.shtml>

Due Diligence In Avoiding Risks For Directors/Leaders Of Churches And Religious Charities by Terrance S. Carter
<http://www.carters.ca/pub/article/church/2002/tsc-1105.pdf>

Free Complete Toolkit for Boards
<http://www.managementhelp.org/boards/boards.htm>

Governance Matters
<http://www.governancematters.org/>