



# Turning Your Church Board into a Great Strategic Asset

## Are You Ready for a Radical Change in Church Governance?

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*Although the following scenario occurs in the Presbyterian form of church governance, you can change the title to Deacon or Board Member or any other title that exists in church "authority" boards (i.e. a board that is not merely advisory, as in some systems), and you just may recognize parts of your church's story.*

First Presbyterian Church has a typical Session. There are 13 Elders who meet once/month for a Session meeting that usually goes until midnight, and they often come home feeling frustrated about the lack of productive work done there. They wonder whether all those issues they discuss are the best use of time, but someone has to make the decisions, from major ministry issues to \$100 purchasing decisions. They never seem to be unified on ministry issues, so they discuss the same things over and over and then eventually make split decisions that no one is completely satisfied with (and somehow, they're not sure how, the congregation seems to know that, as well). And the pastor -- well, he doesn't seem to know how to lead the Elders or the meeting very effectively. He realizes this, of course, and he is also frustrated by that and by the feeling that he is in a more or less adversarial relationship with them. There is some trust with a couple of them, but that's about all. And he suspects that he is entering burnout.

Once or twice a month the Elders must attend a meeting of the ministry committee they are assigned to. Twice a month they lead their small groups, and then they are supposed to be calling and meeting with their "shepherding flock" of 30 families. They are feeling fairly guilty that they aren't doing a good job at that. It's not that they don't want to or don't try. It just seems like most of their flock aren't responsive to their shepherding, and they wonder whether they really know how to shepherd well. Many also have another ministry they really have a heart for, and they try hard to participate in that regularly. Oh, and in addition, they are supposed to attend every "important" church event in order to show their support. The Elders are spiritually and physically tired of giving away to others constantly. But they assume they have to suck it up, because there's no one to shepherd THEM. Some have burned out and dropped out by becoming "inactive Elders." That's a time when they go back to being regular church members and their experience isn't used in ministry. A couple of them have actually left the church to go somewhere where the people don't yet know they can lead or serve.

Are there any real answers to these issues? Is God's work supposed to be this way?

As I work with churches with boards that have true authority (a good example is the Presbyterian Session, which has final governing authority as opposed to being advisory only), I witness part or all of this story being played out over and over. The issues represented in this story are these:

- Lack of clarity of the role and authority of the board vs. the role and authority of the Pastor and Staff  
It's amazing to work with churches and do surveys with church leaders on this issue. When I listed 20 possible responsibilities of the church board, the average agreement on each of those was 64% (the lowest possible agreement would be 50%). When I listed 20 possible roles of the Pastor, the Board members average agreement on those was 65%. And there is little agreement on the vision of what the church is trying to accomplish in the first place. So if we don't agree on the vision, the role of the Pastor, or the role of the board, how can we expect to move the church forward?
- Confusing the role of the board with the individual role of the officer (Elder or Deacon) or the individual church leadership role of the board member  
In a church environment, as opposed to a business or larger non-profit, key leaders and officers are serving as the board members, meaning the people who are running the organization are also responsible for overseeing it through the church governance. This is necessary in a church, but it creates a mess.
- Confusion between the role of the Staff or lay ministry leader and the role of the officer who is "assigned" to that ministry team or committee  
Often churches assign officers/board members to ministries or ministry committees, either to run them or oversee them. This is again confusing the role of the board and the role of the Pastor to lead and manage the organization. It is further confusing the role of the board and the role of the board member who happens to also be an officer or other church leader. And it can create a muddled organization where no one is clearly in charge of the ministry, with Staff, lay leader, and board member all involved.
- If the Pastor is expected to shepherd everyone in the congregation, he will not have time to lead the church or will burn out trying to both satisfy everyone's shepherding expectations and lead. On the other hand, shepherding systems where the "flock" is divided up among the officers are universally failing.
- In churches with an Elder or Deacon governing system, all the Elders or Deacons are on the board, and that is seen as their main role  
In 1 Pet 5:2, Peter, speaking directly to the Church Elders, says, "**shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly." If the board role is seen as discussing, deciding, and approving every major decision of the church, the officers can't possibly do all of that and be fully engaged in their shepherding role. As a result, the officers feel guilty about that and the church members feel neglected.

These issues are serious deterrents to an effective church. But there are solutions; however, they all involve radically different thinking and acting compared to the traditional church governance approaches. There is perhaps a continuum of governance models that begin with the *traditional model* represented by the story above. At the other end of the scale is *Policy Governance*, which applies to the system developed by John Carver ([www.carvergovernance.com](http://www.carvergovernance.com)). In-between these two extremes is a model we might call *Policy/Partnership*, and a great example of that is my church, Perimeter Church in Atlanta, which has been utilizing this approach for almost 20 years. I have 19 years of experience serving in, working with, and helping to develop this model myself.

Here are some of the key differences among these three models.

## **Board membership**

Traditional – The board consists of all the Elders or Deacons, no matter how many.

Policy/Partnership – The board consists of a smaller number of the officers, 7-9, who are “commissioned” by all the officers for this purpose. This insures that the board will not get too large to be effective and frees the other officers up to fulfill their Biblical role of shepherd and leader.

Policy Governance – Same as Policy/Partnership.

## **The role of the Board**

Traditional – Govern the church, which often means different things to different people involved (verified by the surveys I mentioned above). Most often it includes discussing and deciding on all major ministry decisions and changes, personnel decisions, budget items, communications, worship style, policy making, etc. It includes approval of all major decisions by the Pastor. Thirdly, it encompasses oversight of shepherding needs in the church.

Policy/Partnership – Separates “policy” from “operational” decisions, giving the board responsibility for policy decisions and delegating responsibility for operational decisions to the Pastor. The Pastor reports to the board. However, the board also provides major leadership support to the Pastor by giving advice and counsel on major operational issues and actual approval of the following critical decisions: the overall Ministry Plan for the church; all policies drafted by Staff; the annual goals, the annual budget in total, but without nitpicking details; new Staff roles and hiring decisions; Staff compensation plans; other major decisions where the Pastor feels he needs the full backing of the board. The board also shepherds the Pastor with prayer and accountability, supports him with the congregation, and protects him from a job description that would result in burnout. An example of the last point would be ruling that the Pastor cannot do weddings without the approval of the board.

Policy Governance – The board is the link between ownership and the operational organization. They produce written policies covering the “ends” or results that the Pastor is expected to produce, the delegation from the board to the Pastor, the limits on his authority and operations, and the governance process they themselves will follow. Their meetings consist of continually monitoring the results and adherence to the limits. It is strongly recommended that they not give advice and counsel to the Pastor

because that usually results in implied directives and a “we’re in this together” culture that is a barrier to the board holding the Pastor’s feet to the fire in attaining the prescribed results.

## **The role of the Pastor**

Traditional – As I mentioned, surveys show that members of the **same board** are all over the place in what they think their Pastor’s responsibilities are. It’s sometimes unclear who works for whom, since the Pastor is actually a member of the board. So the Pastor is the preacher and chief teacher, the spiritual leader and chief shepherd, co-leader with the board, and executor of ministry as approved or directed by the board.

Policy/Partnership – Preach and teach where he is most effective, shepherd the executive Staff and Elders, create the Ministry Plan and annual goals, execute ministry under advice and counsel of the board, develop leaders, manage the officers in their roles of shepherd and leader.

Policy Governance – Preach and teach where he is most effective, shepherd the executive Staff and Elders, create the “means” for accomplishing the “ends” or results prescribed by the board, staying within the limits prescribed by the board, manage the officers in their roles of shepherd and leader.

## **The individual role of the Officer**

Traditional – Serve on the board, lead a committee overseeing a ministry, shepherd a member flock, probably in this order of priority.

Policy/Partnership – Disciple a small group of men or serve in another ministry leadership role as he feels called, shepherding the families involved in the same ministry as the officer, serve on the board for a 3 year rotation if called, in this order of priority. The board service and other ministry roles are kept completely separate.

Policy Governance – Same as Policy/Partnership.

## **Leading the Board meeting**

Traditional – The Pastor brings the agenda to the board and moderates the meeting.

Policy/Partnership – The Pastor and Staff bring the agenda to the board and the Pastor or a designated Facilitator guides the meeting.

Policy Governance – The Governance Commission brings the agenda, and the Chief Governance officer (CGO), who is not the Pastor, leads the meeting.

## **Organizational results**

Traditional – Results are rarely identified, not widely agreed upon, and seldom measured and reported. Therefore, there are various opinions about how well the church is doing. Not surprisingly, this is then not a regular focus of the board.

Policy/Partnership – The Ministry Plan and annual goals are discussed and progress is reported to the board by the Pastor. The board reviews results.

Policy Governance – The board creates the “ends” policies, constantly refines them and continuously measures them as its main focus. The Pastor is responsible for deciding on the “means” to accomplish the ends and for reporting regularly to the board on progress.

## **Board/Pastor relationship**

Traditional – There is a confusion of roles and responsibilities which often leads to an adversarial relationship.

Policy/Partnership – All support the agreed-on Ministry Plan, trust is given and earned in both directions, and the governance mostly works as a healthy partnership.

Policy Governance – This relationship is actually defined in a set of policies. Separation of responsibility and clear delegation of authority lead to mutual respect and trust.

## **Delegation**

Traditional – Often vaguely defined or not defined at all, resulting in confusion of direction and supervision of staff and laity.

Policy/Partnership – The board delegates only to the Pastor, who delegates to others.

Policy Governance – Same as Policy/Partnership.

## **Satisfaction with the governance process**

Traditional – My leader surveys and consulting work with churches have verified that, although some are satisfied, there is also widespread dissatisfaction with the process and the personal experience of serving on a church board. Also, some of the board members are not naturally wired for that type of work in the first place.

Policy/Partnership – Board members and Pastor report a harmonious and productive relationship, and board members also report a strong understanding of the ministry and its results. Most board members are pleased to serve another three-year term when invited. The Pastor feels cared for and supported by the board. Since not all must serve on the board, most of the members can be naturally suited to that type of work. This board role does take a different type of person from the Traditional church board.

Policy Governance – Clarity between roles and focus of the board and the Pastor on their responsibilities creates a sense of efficiency and effectiveness. This type of board role takes a very different type of person from the Traditional board and even a somewhat different type of person from the Policy/Partnership board.

## **In Summary**

The Church, the precious Bride of Christ, is too often not as beautiful a bride as she should be, but this area of church governance is one in which there are clearly ways to beautify her. These are not just technical changes but are “adaptive” ones that require a change in values and long-standing tradition, in

addition to radical changes in roles. Whichever new model the church chooses, the major role changes add up to these:

**The Pastor** must usually become more of a leader and develop broad enough leadership shoulders to carry the responsibility of executing the vision and mission of the church under the policies and accountability for results of the board.

**The officers** must come to the realization that their key Biblical role is that of shepherd of the flock (1 Pet 5:2) and be willing to be freed up from board work in order to focus more on that role. And to truly shepherd as Jesus did, they must learn what it means to truly disciple others in a “life-on-life” fashion (for more on this, see [www.transform-coach.com](http://www.transform-coach.com) on “Transforming Discipleship”). Those that do serve on the board must give up the right to micromanage the Pastor and be in on all the key ministry decisions. However, they must become committed to the role of providing more true governance oversight of the results of the ministry.

**As for choosing between the two non-traditional models**, you should consider the following. Moving to Policy/Partnership will be a less radical change and maintain the advantages of providing Session advice to the Pastor for counsel and for leadership backing. Policy Governance will require an extremely strong Pastor/leader who is able to obtain his counsel and leadership backing from outside the Session venue and Session Elders who are willing to be less involved in the workings of the church than even the Policy/Partnership approach. However, Policy Governance will tend to maintain more objective focus on the ministry results and clarity of role between the Commission and the Pastor.

**Finally, regarding how to get there**, the best path is to discuss and endorse the key principles of good governance that we have been discussing, then to become familiar with and decide between the two key models of Policy/Partnership and Policy Governance. Finally, you will need to develop the role definitions and policies that will allow you to quickly move to that model. Obviously, it would be very wise to find a knowledgeable consultant who can objectively help you walk down this path of significant change.

In summary, here’s a story of First Presbyterian Church after it has reworked its governance system.

The main focus of Elders First Presbyterian Church now is to shepherd and disciple others, which has resulted in their having raised up 25 Elders. 7 of them are on the Governing Commission on a 3 year rotation. Their meetings are focused on shepherding the Pastor, discussing big-picture ministry results, and making new policy to help guide the Pastor, Staff, and lay teams in their ministry. Meetings can be more focused since they have clearly defined the role and limits of authority of the Pastor vs. the Commission, and they are always home by 10:00 PM, feeling energized and encouraged.

The Pastor actually looks forward to the Commission meeting for real encouragement and real help. He is more focused on the ministry results and must present reports to the

Commission monthly on progress. His leadership is definitely being stretched, so he is being mentored by a couple of his Elders in that area and he is definitely growing.

Elders are no longer assigned to ministry committees, and the lay leaders are trusted to lead their ministry teams. However, all Elders are leading either discipleship groups or other types of small groups or other ministry teams where they feel called. Their "shepherding flocks" now consist of the families of the small groups or ministries where they serve, and the expectations of the congregation and capacity of the Elders are much more in alignment. The Staff Pastors are engaging with them in a shepherding/coaching relationship, and the Elders are actually feeling cared for and are growing as leaders.

Which story would you like to be yours? It CAN be a reality for your church.

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