

HOW MANY ELDERS AND DEACONS SHOULD WE HAVE?

SHOULD WE HAVE A SEPARATE BOARD OF TRUSTEES?

In visits with congregations, discussions with Amy Fowler (Associate in Church Development), readings about congregational dynamics, and discussions with Pastors and Clerks, the Presbytery more and more finds itself addressing the above questions from small, middle sized, and large congregations.

One reason for this is a major shift in our understanding of how congregations function as *systems*. Another is our experience with the rapidly growing independent congregations and how they manage their programs and ministries.

Why we did it the way we did. Prior to about 1930 (and lingering long after for some congregations), most congregations were governed by a self-perpetuating Session of men. Often with a parallel, slightly smaller, board of directors consisting of tenured-for-life leaders. With the Ordination of Women as Elders, the changes invoked by WW II, and organizational theories that emerged in the late 40's and early 50's, the Session came to be seen as a way of drawing individuals into leadership positions and for managing the burgeoning post WW II growth that occurred in most Presbyterian churches. Session was seen as the place where programs and ministries were coordinated, with Elders chairing committees that recruited members as a means of preparing future leaders. This movement was given a boost by the change in our Constitution setting a six year limit on Session terms. There was also a growing trend toward lodging the long traditional functions of a Board of Trustees in the Session. The consequence of these factors was a trend toward larger and larger Sessions usually in proportion to membership growth sometimes resulting in Sessions with 30 or more members.

What Changed? Several new trends emerged in the late 80's and early 90's. Technological change resulted in a change in priorities among organizations (secular and not-for-profit) toward flexibility rather than stability. One only needs to note the changes in IBM between 1984 and 2004 to see what this means. Lean and Mean emerged as a business mantra reflecting a need to be able to change and adapt quickly. Also during this time, successful organizations began to shift from boards that focused on hands-on management to visioning agents who helped the organization define who it is, what it does, and how it is to do it. Along with the executive leadership, their function was to act like the captain of the ship operating the rudder to keep the organization on course. A key consequence for not-for-profits, especially churches, especially the emerging independent mega churches, was to have a very small core of leaders setting the direction with a highly decentralized system of ministries emerging from the bottom up. It is not unusual to find 2000 plus member congregations operating with a Session/Board of fewer than 15.

What Then is the Present Rule of Thumb? The present rule of thumb is that **there is no rule of thumb**. One result of the shifts during the past two decades is a move away from the *one size fits all* best model of organization, to an appreciation of *organic* models of leadership consistent with the traditions and visions of the specific organization. Another result is a willingness to bend or break from one model in order to try another model if the first isn't working.

Hence, if your present leadership/Session model is working for you; if you have people eager to be on your Session/Deacons/Trustees and if those people have a deep sense of spiritual satisfaction from being on your boards, then the **Rule of thumb** is *IF IT AIN'T BROKE, DON'T FIX IT.*

On the other hand, if you have trouble getting people to serve on your Boards, and those who do refuse a second term or go often feeling exhausted, and you are accomplishing only one or two of the **Great Ends** of the Church@G-1.0200, then maybe, just maybe, you need to reconsider how you are organized to fulfill the mission and ministry of the church.

ONE (and certainly not the only way of addressing these concerns) is to look at changing the function of your governing board from a focus on coordinating ministries and generating programs, to one that steps back from concerns about the **day to day** operations of the church and begins to focus on the long terms life of the congregation and what it needs to be doing **NOW** to be healthy and productive 10 years from now. Such a group must be, by the rules of group dynamics, no less than 6 nor more than 12 (maybe 15 in churches above 2000 members). The people who serve must be much more than **warm bodies**. They must also be chosen for spiritual depth and insight rather than as a reward for years of faithful service. Their task is to prayerfully address the question of where God would lead this particular congregation; to study anything and everything (regardless of its source) that will help them better understand the internal and external environment of their particular congregation; and to take the time, free of concerns about the immediate, daily ministries, to shape and articulate and find ways of communicating who this congregations is called to be and where it is being called to minister.

This model requires a second tier of (usually) informal leadership managing the ongoing ministry of the church in **WAYS CONSISTENT WITH THE ARTICULATED VISION FOR THE CHURCH**. As long as people are attracted to what is being offered and it is not inconsistent with the Vision, it continues. If not, it dies. No more persisting just because it's called for by the **ByLaws**, or because there's a committee that involves 10 members (doing what?), or because the largest donor feels we **ought to have** such a ministry; or because the Book of Order says you have to do it. This approach also values eliminating the distinctions between administration, care and compassion, and program; they all must work together toward the congregations's vision of who it is and who it is called to be.

What Should We Do?

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it is, then know that the Amy Fowler or myself will be happy to arrange a time (or times) for working with the Pastor and Session to determine what changes it wants to **C**and is willing to **B**make. Amy can also provide leaders with a library of resources to help leaders through this process.

317-542-5500 or 800-942-5501 Or kgeckeler@whitewatervalley.org Or
afowler@whitewatervalley.org.

(P.s. If you have fewer than 50 people in worship and more than 6 elders or fewer than 125 in worship and more than 9 elders or fewer than 350 in worship and more than 12 elders, you may want to initiate conversations in Session about whether you have the right number for your mission and ministry.)

Dr. W. Keith Geckeler, Co-Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk

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