

"The Church Board, Part One" by Dan Reiland

I thought this was church folklore until I actually heard it said in a board meeting. I was consulting with a caring and friendly downtown Methodist church of about 250 people and the Chairman of the board made this announcement after my summary presentation. "Dan, thank you for your work, but just so you know, we've all (the board members) been here since long before the pastor got here, and we'll be here long after he leaves. So as far as your recommendations go, we'll let the pastor know which ones we are in favor of."

A number of years ago, I met with a large Lutheran Church and really connected with the pastor and people. The board was pretty cool too. They also had a board sub-committee that made up the personnel team. They were like the IRS of the church. They were a scary bunch and it seemed like everyone who faced their decisions felt helpless. They hired and fired at will and the pastor had no say. They fired assertive and progressive leaders. They kept unproductive but popular staff members. The staff morale was terrible, and the pastor was discouraged.

One more story. A church of about 500 located in the southeast was growing restless with their pastor. The pastor was a godly man, who had led a solid ministry over a long tenure, but attendance had begun to decline and the finances were starting to follow. The board began to host a series of secret meetings without the pastor. The story gets really ugly, and it ends with the Pastor resigning. He and his wife are still trying to heal from the hurts.

Some of the scariest stories from the local church come from board meetings. There are literally thousands of such stories. The good news is that there are many strong, Godly and effective church boards as well. This two part series is designed with a goal of strengthening your board.

Obsessive is a Good Word When it Comes to Selection

If someone wants to be a board member, a good general guiding principle is that they should not become one. If someone tries to be a board member they definitely shouldn't become one. Think about it, any board you've served on — you were asked to serve. And like most of us you gave it a lot of thought and probably tried to turn it down. Being nominated, selected, or invited is a very different deal than seeking the position. Once someone has accepted a board position, a desire to remain on the board is different issue as long as that desire is about service and not power.

Set the bar high. I Timothy 3 makes it clear that an overseer's role requires high standards. Are your qualifications clear? What kind of interview process is in place? Is there a vote? How do you keep politics out? How do you select the most qualified rather than the most popular? What accountability is in place? How do you make certain that the candidate is a good leader, loves God, and is committed to your church?

It's so much easier to make a good selection up front than to remove a board member who has become divisive, drives a personal agenda, or in some way is counter-productive to the mission. Don't be rushed in your selection process. Take your time. It's better to have an empty chair than to fill it with the wrong person.

No one wants to be a rubber stamp.

Board members in a wide variety of churches tell me they feel like nothing more than a rubber stamp and they don't know why they bother to show up. Others feel more needed but don't know what their role is. It's encouraging when I meet board members who know they are productive, their voice matters and they enjoy being on the team. Those men and women consistently tell me they know exactly what the expectations are.

I can't tell you what the roles and responsibilities should be for your church, but I can share ours and hopefully that will be helpful to you. The best context is a comparison of board and staff member roles.

Board Members

- Affirmation of the vision (usually from Senior Pastor) through prayer and discernment of God's voice.
- Direction / affirmation of values and big picture ministry direction, again with Senior Pastor.
What does Church look like in 5-10-15 years?
What does (Your church name) look like in 5-10-15 years?
- Determine pace and values for facility and finance
- Act as discerning partners with the pastor: e.g. theological, political, social and community issues and public position on key issues.
- Ask productive questions and serve a provider of solutions.
- Decision making responsibility for major business matters of the church. (Example: A land purchase.)
- Serve as prayer warriors for the general ministries of the church and lead with a positive influence in the congregation.

Staff Members

- Responsible for morale, momentum, and culture of the church.
- Carry the day to day leadership of all church functions.
- Decision-making responsibility for daily ministry, staff and operational issues.
- Responsible for unity in thought for practical expression of theological issues in ministry.
- Design and implementation of church ministries.
- Selection and hiring (and dismissal) of all staff (except the senior pastor)
- Budget design and management (approved annually by Elders)
- Creative design and execution of all worship services
- Leadership development.

I have not included the role of finance and or trustees. This of course adds complexity to the matter. Many boards carry these roles themselves, or have one finance board that covers both. The following are the issues to consider.

Personnel Team:

- Salary (& salary structure) Approximately 50% of budget
- Approve new positions
- Benefits
- Policy and employee handbooks

Trustees

- Financial matters on approximately 50% of budget (non personnel issues)
- Building design and construction
- Capital Campaigns
- Property matters

Make Prayer a Driving Engine

Kevin Myers, senior pastor at 12Stone Church, has made prayer a trademark of our monthly business meetings. Some of our greatest board experiences include us leaving the board room to pray, for example, office by office over the staff. Another example, if we are meeting on a Wednesday night, is to go one of the student ministry meetings and take part in their gathering by praying over the students and staff.

We all know that the power of God is the real deal, but human nature makes it easy to get so caught up in the business of the church that we forget the One who owns the business. He can solve in minutes what takes us hours!

Make no mistake, prayer is work. We've often begun a prayer time very late at night and I've thought "It is seriously time to go home!" But without fail, this is the best part of the meeting. Afterward we all have a deep sense that it was then that we really got something done. Don't misunderstand, I don't see an entire board meeting as some mystical event that requires no preparation beforehand or work during the meeting. The opposite is true. In fact, the more preparation the better the prayer!

Invest Deeply in Leading and Growing Your Board Members

Rarely if ever is someone born a good board member. It takes a unique person to be both positive and supportive of the vision and yet strong enough to speak up, tell the truth and ask productive questions.

One of the reasons I'm not an advocate of large boards is because it's not practical to invest in that many people to the level required. Five to seven is a great board size; ten to twelve is at the outside of what is manageable.

First, the pastor is the chief shepherd of the board. No matter how large the church becomes, he is the pastor of that group. From hospital visits to weddings and funerals, he is their shepherd. The pastor prays for them, stays in close communication with them and offers counsel when appropriate. It is very important to maintain this close and personal

connection.

Second, the pastor is the mentor leader of the board members. He or she teaches the board how to think like a leader. Not what to think, but how to think like a leader when it comes to church matters. The pastor puts good books in the hands of the board, takes them on strategy retreats and creates opportunities for the board to attend church and leadership conferences.

Third, the pastor is willing to go "the last 10%" with each board member. That's our phrase at 12Stone. It's really all about honesty. For example, if a board member begins to lose sight of the overall mission and gets focused on a pet agenda of their own, the pastor must step in to offer guidance. This takes artful leadership because the goal is not to shut the board member down, but to keep the focus of their effort and energy positive and productive.

Leading a board requires a substantial amount of work. Pastor, either you lead the board or they lead you. Preparing the agenda alone is a major undertaking if done well. If you have a volunteer chairman of the board that helps with the agenda, don't delegate the entire responsibility. Stay in the game, work hard on the agenda together.

Board meetings are not something to "get through and get over with." They are a vital part of a healthy and growing church. And believe it or not they can be fun. Of course, at least in the case of our board, massive quantities of food seem to make the whole experience just a little better.

"The Church Board, Part Two: A Privilege and a Trust" by Charlie Wetzel

In 1997, my wife, Stephanie, and I moved from San Diego, California, to the suburbs northeast of Atlanta, Georgia. A few months before the move, we had visited 12Stone Church in Lawrenceville, and that very day we sensed that it was where God wanted us to be. We knew immediately that we could happily follow Kevin Myers, the senior pastor, and it was obvious to us that God had his hand on the church.

Stephanie and I rolled up our sleeves and began serving right away. We felt it was a privilege to be part of a church where God was moving. Soon after we settled in, I felt a calling to 12Stone. And God impressed upon me that my relationship with the church would last twenty years.

After about a year, I was asked to serve as an elder on our church's board. When I first started, I had no experience in such a role. Honestly, most lay leaders in the church have very little knowledge of how churches work outside of their own limited experience. I learned much by watching Tony Bartlett, a board member who was a model for me. And of course my pastor taught me a lot.

After ten years of service as an elder in a local church - and an additional three years' experience training pastors and working with churches in the UK - I believe I have some good advice to give lay leaders who serve on boards.

If you are a pastor, my encouragement is that you give a copy of this article to your lay leaders. Let them mull over what I have to say, and use it as a springboard for dialogue on what's important for board members in your church.

Here's what I say is important for board members to know:

1. Don't Step Up Unless You're Ready and Willing to Step Down

When my pastor, Kevin Myers, first talked to me about the possibility of serving as a member of our church's board, he explained something that I will never forget. It has since become a foundational principle for me in any kind of leadership. He said, "As long as your leadership is good enough to help the church, you belong on the board. But if the church ever outgrows your ability to lead, you will have to step down."

My purpose on the board is to serve the church and my pastor - not for it or him to serve me. For that reason, I've always held on loosely to my position on our board of elders. I'm acutely aware that it is a privilege to serve in a church where God is working, and I feel lucky to be where I am. God could have chosen anyone to serve Him at 12Stone, yet He picked me. I strive to live a life worthy of the calling I have received (Eph 4:1). And I am determined never to stand in the way of what God is doing at the church.

2. Protect Your Pastor So He Can Pursue God's Vision

I believe that one day I will stand before God, and one of the things He will ask me is, "Did you make it easier or harder for your pastor to fulfill the vision I gave him for the church?" I find that thought very sobering, and it grounds me in all my decision making as a leader.

One of my pet peeves about some church board members is that they seem to believe their role is to protect the church from the pastor. They couldn't be more wrong. If God has called a pastor to a church, then the board's role is to protect the pastor so that he or she can pursue the vision.

I'm not saying there isn't the rare instance when a pastor intentionally does harm to his church for his own benefit. It does happen, but I believe it's rare. For every individual pastor who abuses his position, there are many thousands of board members who abuse theirs! Often it's in the name of stewardship. While stewardship is important, I observe that many board members practice stinginess and call it stewardship. God cares about people. Money itself has no value to God; he can create it or destroy it at will. It's merely a tool to be used for his purpose. We need to remember that.

So how do you protect your pastor? I think of it as helping to create an environment where he has enough room to work effectively. That means making sure he has the resources he needs to pursue the vision (2 Cor 9:6). It means allowing him to risk and occasionally fail for the sake of the Kingdom (Rom 15:1). It means providing for him and his family so that worries about finances don't become a distraction (Luke 10:7). It means giving him sound counsel (Proverbs 15:22), gently pushing back when he's wrong (Eph 4:15), and defending him against careless accusations (1 Tim 5:19). And of course it means serving when asked.

Nobody in the church should tie the pastor's hands, chain his feet, and then say, "Go ahead, pastor. Run the race!"

3. Find the Role on the Board Where You Add the Most Value

Scripture makes it clear that we are to work together in the body of Christ, each of us using our gifts (1 Cor 12). People who serve on a board should keep that in mind and figure out how they can best serve the team.

In addition to Kevin, our senior pastor, and Dan, our executive pastor, there are four of us lay people serving on the board at 12Stone. One member of our board is a true prayer warrior and also has extensive experience in non-profit fundraising at the highest levels. Another is an entrepreneur who founded and leads a technology company. Another owns businesses, has built commercial facilities, and understands complicated business arrangements. They all contribute according to their individual strengths.

My greatest contribution, believe it or not, is asking penetrating questions. I think it comes as a result of my strength in strategic thinking and my extensive experience in ministry (for a lay person). I also keep the minutes and records for the board, which I find easy with my writing and research experience.

What unique contribution can you make to add value to your team? It's your responsibility to figure that out.

4. Serve Somewhere in the Church in Addition to the Board

One of the dangers of serving on boards is that people can lose their way and develop a wrong attitude about leadership. Jesus washed his leaders' feet and reminded them to serve others rather than rely on their authority (Luke 25:24-26).

I think one of the best ways to prevent and battle a wrong attitude is to serve in areas of the church unrelated to board duties. When I'm serving in a ministry, it's never as a board member. Though I carry that responsibility and perspective with me always, I do not carry that authority with me outside of the boardroom.

When I was a small group leader and coach, I served under the authority of a staff pastor. We didn't always agree philosophically, and I wasn't shy about offering my opinions. But at the end of the day, I submitted to his authority and served as I was asked to -; even though at that time I was considered the "small group elder." It's dangerous for someone to lead who hasn't learned to follow. As Al Garsis says, "I can lead, and I can follow. An important aspect of leadership is knowing when to do which." As a board member, you need to figure that out.

These days my primary ministry is mentoring men in their twenties. And I've recruited four other men to mentor others too. I believe mentoring is one of the things God created me for. But it also has the added benefit of keeping me on the front lines of ministry.

When you serve on a board, you're really there to assist the person God has called to fulfill

the vision. But that is not your ministry. You have to do your part, according to God's call on your life. That means finding somewhere you can serve effectively.

5. Lead and Serve With Eternity in Mind

For a lot of people, church is on the periphery of their lives. It's a place to engage socially, to "fill up" on Sundays, or to perform some volunteer work to make them feel better about themselves. I think individuals who approach church this way have lost sight of how high the stakes are. What hangs in the balance is where people will spend eternity!

As a member of my church's board, it's my responsibility to maintain perspective. What does that mean? First, it means trying to always keep the big picture in mind. We sometimes call this maintaining a 30,000 foot view of the church. We can't afford to get caught up in petty matters or territorial disputes. We need to keep our hearts set on God, our eyes focused on the vision, and our minds engaged in thinking about what the church needs to be doing in five years, ten years, and farther into the future.

It also means we need to be praying. One of the most important things we do as a board is pray -; for protection for the church and its staff, for guidance from God, for confirmation of the vision that God has given to our leader. It's not something I'm naturally good at, but I work at it constantly. Honestly, if I'm not willing to really go after prayer for my church, then I probably don't belong on the board.

You may feel that I'm a bit rigid in some of my views about board service in a local church, that I'm setting the bar very high. If so, you're right. I believe that what I do in ministry is the most important thing I will do in life - after leading and caring for my family. The Church is Christ's Bride, and protecting her is an awesome responsibility and a fantastic privilege. I hope that one day God will tell me "Well done, good and faithful servant." If you serve on a board in a local church, I hope the same for you. Meanwhile, do everything you can to lead in a way that honors God and advances His Kingdom.