

-BONUS CHAPTER SEVEN-  
**What We've Been Learning About Governance And Structure**

To many Christians, the words *governance* and *structure* sound like subjects to be avoided, like the classes they didn't want to take in school. *Governance* sounds too much like "governess," which conjures up images of severe ladies, hired by our parents to whip us into shape. *Structure* sounds like something that will only mess up the love and camaraderie and fun that characterize a church at its best. Both however, are necessary, in even the smallest and newest churches, so let's make friends with these scary words.

*Governance* means "the action or manner of conducting the policy, actions and affairs of an organization." Even in a backyard club or a street gang, somebody has to conduct the policy, actions and affairs of the group. *Structure* refers to the "arrangement of and relations between the parts or elements of something complex." Even the smallest, simplest church is complex and has its own structure. It may be written down or it may not be written down, but structure exists: the parts are arranged and they definitely have relationships with each other.

Let's introduce one more word for the sake of differentiating it from governance and structure: *leadership is influence*. Your church has some sort of system of *governance*, at least a certain amount of *structure* and persons giving and accepting *leadership*. Those doing the leading in your church may or may not be the same folks who are doing governance and that's okay. I love the big, wonderful subject of leadership, but this chapter is about governance and structure. (Excepting that if your church's governance and structure are in need of improvement, it will take a leader or leaders to see that they get changed.)

Fortunately, evangelical Christians in America have been learning some good things about these subjects over the past twenty or so years. I have benefited much from the teaching of some great speakers and authors. Without pretending to be offering anything new here, I do want to pass along a few of the helpful things many of us have been learning about these subjects. (If you haven't read the last bonus chapter, "Is there hope for the congregational church?" I recommend that you read it before going further.)

*Simple is better*. I'm not necessarily saying that your constitution and by-laws need to be *short*. They can be complete and detailed and still be simple. Too many of these important documents are impossibly complicated. I've read by-laws that require a "Philadelphia lawyer" to decipher. Providing anything more than the most basic of pastor or board member job descriptions in the constitution or by-laws is probably a mistake, for it will limit your future flexibility, and flexibility is important. Mandating or describing particular ministries in these documents (such as Sunday schools, AWANA clubs or women's ministries) is also a mistake, for the same reason. Keep it simple and flexible. If you need help in simplifying your basic structural documents, ask a denominational leader or a veteran pastor you trust.

*Your church needs one good board*. The word *board* implies ultimate authority. For the sake of clarity, try to use the terms *committee* or *team* for other decision-making groups and make sure that they are subject to the authority of your one and only board. Better yet, make other teams accountable to your senior or lead or only pastor. By a *good* board (again, please see the last bonus chapter), I mean a *trained group of men who measure up to the Bible's qualifications (in Titus one and I Timothy three) and are committed to working together as a tight, Christ-following, unified team*.

Avoid the mistake of requiring a minimum number of board members (usually it's the number seven from Acts chapter six, but nothing in the Bible says we should have seven). The important thing is to have *qualified* men, not a particular number of men. More than one church has suffered from putting unqualified individuals on a board in order to fulfill a constitutional requirement.

*Have one good pastor on your board*. It took me a long time to catch on to this. I so wish I had learned it sooner! If you put a youth or associate pastor on your board (or simply have this individual regularly attend board meetings) you put the associate in the awkward position of having to disagree with his boss, the senior pastor, in order to fully speak his mind. You also put the senior pastor in the position of having to listen to his associate pastor disagreeing with the directions in which he is seeking to lead the church. Worse yet, the associate, if he has voting rights, by being a part of the

board, becomes a part of the pastor's "boss." This well-intentioned arrangement all too often acts like a wedge dividing a church's pastors from each other. Do them (and your church) a big favor by ending this dysfunctional system. A good senior pastor figures out how to discuss almost every board agenda item with his staff members in the days before and after board meetings. If the pastor is doing this right, staff members feel fully "heard" and do not resent not being invited to board meetings.

*Work towards having proactive board meetings.* Many church boards frustrate their best members and scare away their best *potential* members by spending their time "playing defense." *Jesus wants His church playing offense:* "...I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Matthew 16:18b Here's how to get on offense: (1) Discuss only items that the full board needs to discuss; (2) Do as little management as possible. It's not that it's evil for boards to do management, they're just not good at it; (3) Don't try to *write* as a board either. Have a capable member write the first draft of the policy or letter (or whatever needs writing) and have the board review it. Boards are good at *reviewing* the writing of individuals; (4) Save in-depth discussion and prayer regarding "shepherding issues" (the care of people) for a separate monthly gathering; (5) Major on the "big rocks" governance items of mission, vision, values, strategy and policy. Put some serious time for these items *first* on the agenda. Leave yourself very little time for discussing last month's minutes, financial reports, reports from individual board members, etc. If board members are supervisors of ministries, exchange reports via e-mail and bring only a few limited "decision items" (items regarding which a board member really needs the board's input) to your meetings; (6) Trust each other to handle budget areas responsibly. *When you start having proactive board meetings, your board members will go home with a real feeling of having done ministry and having accomplished something worthwhile. Honest. Try it.*

*Write guiding principles, one at a time.* Guiding principles are values turned into commitments; they are guidelines to which board members pledge themselves. They help build unity and save vast amounts of time. You can write guiding principles regarding how you will function as a board (i.e., starting and ending on time), how you will support each other outside the meeting room (i.e., we will not entertain gossip about each other), how board members will care for and lead the church, etc. Write them as you learn together from the valuable books and articles you're reading and the great discussions you're having. Review them often.

*Write policies, one at a time.* When you have an-depth, time-consuming discussion about the Madison-Peterson wedding, turn it into a policy, so that the discussion doesn't have to be repeated at another meeting a few months later. Put your guiding principles and policies into a three-ring binder that each board member has at each meeting. (Put your budget, your constitution and by-laws, staff member job descriptions, etc. in those binders as well.)

*Write clear and simple (and short) ministry descriptions for staff members and as many volunteer positions as possible.* Give staff members the freedom to accomplish major objectives in creative ways. Don't spell out creativity-killing details.

*Consider the wonderful governance formula from John Kaiser's book, Winning On Purpose:* The board is for governance (the big rocks items, the rules of the game), the pastor is for leadership (the evangelist of clarity or carrier of the church's vision), the staff is for management (and this includes volunteer leaders of ministries as well as paid staff) and the congregation is for ministry.

*The board should only manage one employee: the senior pastor.* Sorry board members, but another thing which boards (by their very nature as groups, not individuals) don't do well is managing employees. The more employees or volunteers which the board supervises the more chaos you will experience. Expect your pastor to be the leader of your volunteer managers and staff members. If he can't do this, he can be sent (at the church's expense) for further training. Don't have dotted lines (communication, not authority) from the board or board members to employees or volunteers either. The only thing this will foster is individuals making "end runs" around the pastor to complain to the board about the pastor. This isn't helpful for anyone.

*Expect your senior pastor to be the leader of the board, the leader of the staff and the leader of the church.* Groups don't lead; groups are led. It's okay to have a board chairman take the board through an agenda which he and the senior pastor have agreed upon, but there should be no question about who the leader is. I've read several books that talk about letting a "natural born" leader among the board members lead the board and/or the church if the pastor is not much of a leader. I have

never seen this work. (If you have, tell me about it.) Senior or solo pastors who do not know how to lead a church can be sent back to school and learn. Those who can't or won't learn should seek other types of pastoral roles: they will never flourish in a solo or senior pastorate and their churches will suffer the consequences.

*Finally, if your church has a membership, take it seriously.* Keep the membership role up to date. A membership list with the names of folks on it who have long departed from the church makes a joke out of membership in your congregation. Have some actual requirements for members. Many churches are returning to having membership *covenants* and for good reason: we cannot be over-reminded of what church body members need to do for the body. If God expects some things of the saints of God we should expect the same. Service clubs such as the Lions require service from their members; they are *service organizations*. Isn't the church the greatest service organization ever?

Here's a final admission and warning: a great governance system and a great, simple structure are helpful aids to church health, *but that's all they are*. They are only as good as the people using them. A cumbersome structure and an unbiblical governance system will hinder church health, but a streamlined structure and a biblical governance system can't *create* church health. Only God, by His Spirit, working through His people, can do that.

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1. Do you see your church's governance system and structure as being helpful or hurtful to the overall functioning of your church?
2. Go through each of the suggestions above (the italicized headings) and discuss them in relationship to your congregation. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

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