

Notes on the Soccer Field Model for the Board

The board is responsible for setting and guarding the boundaries, so this is a board “job description” for them! The pastor and staff are responsible to “play” or serve on the field, within the boundaries, and with as many volunteers as possible, so this is a staff “job description” also. Hopefully the picture makes it clear.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE THREE

The congregation or membership: should have clear responsibilities in the constitution for what they do. In this model they do these—

- approve any changes to constitution
- call senior pastor
- call elders or main board members
- approve any sale or purchase of property or building program
- approve budget or audit report

The main board: first, there should be only one policy board, whether called the elder board or church board or board of directors. (Many have two or three, often causing confusion or conflict.) In this “Soccer Field” model, they care for these:

- Foundations: constitution (following it or sometimes changing it); statement of faith (following it or sometimes clarifying it); and the church restoration (better name for it because this is the goal) or discipline policies.
- Resources: budget and finances (often with many details handled by a finance committee, led by members of this main board); any building expansion or campaign; property and buildings (again, with details handled by a properties committee led by one or more members of the main board).
- Guidelines: approving or writing and then guarding the main purpose or mission statement of the church (being sure that ministries and direction are consistent with it); approving and then guarding the values of the church (again, using these as checkpoints now and then, and being sure the church is fulfilling them); overall policies that pertain to all staff and all ministries of the church (abiding policies and even procedures, not events and specific ministries or daily decisions that belong to staff).
- Goals: the culture or mood or main approach to Scripture and church life (what leadership wants the church to “look like” – as in political involvement, mood of grace and love, demeanor of the staff and pulpit, love shown related to minor differences and other churches); and the “product” of the church, what you hope people will “look like” if they join in and are influenced

by the church and its ministries (like what are the characteristics of someone who gets involved there – as in a prayer, a giver, a servant, a worshipper, a person of love and grace, etc).

The pastor and staff

Led by a senior pastor or lead pastor, they are responsible for the daily and weekly ministries of the church. Their mandate is to follow Scripture and also to serve and work “within the boundaries of the Soccer Field. This gives freedom and definition.

The senior pastor is the only person of the staff who is a voting member of the board, in the best use of this. The senior or lead can invite other staff to attend, but they do not report to the board but to the senior or lead.

The staff and the main board have two different closely related agendas, of course.

CLARIFICATIONS AND PRINCIPLES SUPPORTING THIS APPROACH TO FUNCTIONS OF THE BOARD AND STAFF

+ A board can write or approve and “guard” the four sides of the Soccer Field in a church of 100 or a church of 10,000. It can give adequate oversight.

It cannot possibly keep up with all the ministries of the church, as many try to do, without limiting growth and freedom or healthy change. Many try to do that and even become oblivious to their numbers plateau for the church.

+ The pastor is trained and called and burdened (in a good way) to lead and manage the ministries of the church. He should be free to lead in the call of needed staff, and all them should have the mission of recruiting and training many volunteers to carry out the ministries.

Most who study this support the challenge to “give out titles and responsibilities freely,” as one church consultant wrote. The old or traditional way was (and still is in many places) to have the church elect “officers” or “deacons” or “deaconesses” to head up ministries such as worship or youth or children’s or evangelism. Often their responsibilities conflict with their skills or with the responsibilities of the pastor and the staff, especially in churches over 100.

And often that method misuses or at least confuses the idea of a deacon or “servant” or “minister” of the church. Why should every Sunday school or ABF teacher or grade 7 teacher not also be called a deacon or deaconess, for instance? The first ones, in Acts 6 if that passage is used, helped with widows and food ministries! Good! But then, when possible, why not call all who serve in the church by the generic title “servants” rather than electing some.

+ We should not feel bad or small that no one can exactly say what the elders (or even pastors) did in the early church. Churches or Christians who want their main board or elders or pastors to “do exactly what they did in the New Testament” will have a hard time defining that.

Did they lead a house church?

Surely they were all what the term “elders” means – older!

Do we realize that none were doing this full-time or with vocational training for church shepherding?

Are we grateful that the Bible gives principles and character guidelines without giving prescriptive functions? (Like the youth pastor should.....or the evening service might look like this.....or who should visit the hospitals or handle the church budget...)

+ Term limits are healthy. It keeps the church from overloading some, makes a natural way for a person to move to another ministry, makes a careful way for the church to move on to someone better suited for the job, avoids the same lay leaders serving forever, and forces staff and other leaders to train more people for this responsibility. (Most of our new members of the main board came out of the discipleship groups (6-7 men) led by me and our pastors and directors. Each was to have such a group that grappled with Scripture and their hearts on character and the church.)

When this is written into the constitution or by-laws, nothing should be written that creates the assumption they will come back on the board. No “A board member cannot serve two consecutive terms and must stay off a year before....”

+ Nothing is voted on at “first reading.” People hate changes and surprises, and often pastors surprise their board with a change! It will be declined. Even city councils do not vote on changes until the third reading and after research.

GOOD GUIDELINES FOR THE MAIN BOARD

They only are FUNCTIONING as elders (directors, board members) when they are meeting as a board. This is not about character and example, but to say that a member of the board does not walk through the halls saying, “Let’s not have that kind of music in the junior high,” or such individual opinion-sharing.

They share only ONE REPORT OR DECISION when the decision is made. They walk out of the room where there has been healthy debate, with plenty of time for prayer and research and hearing the pastor and each other – they walk out united, and the report is clear. No one says, “And two of the members did not want to do it this way...”

There is no romance given to the old idea that every decision must be unanimous. None of us would necessarily do what one person asked the church or board to do, but this policy allows one person to hold up everything and not do what others believe the church should do.

The CHAIRMAN AND THE SENIOR PASTOR AGREE to be united on an issue before it goes to the board. This may be unacceptable to some leaders, but I promised our chairman I would not disagree with him at a board meeting, and asked the same from him. In 41 years as senior, it never happened. We would do our praying and discussing before it went to the board.

The previous idea means there are no surprises for the pastor or the chairman.

No meeting starts without SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER AND WORSHIP and a mood of trust and commitment to our Lord and his Word. Unless absolutely necessary, this rules out emergency or surprise board meetings.

The FOUR SIDES of the Soccer Field are the four headings of the board agenda, as a help to stay on target. They follow the Scripture and prayer time led by the pastor, and precede the “pastor’s report,” which can be where the pastor gets advice on any issue at all, including staff issues (another good reason all the staff is not a part of the main board), or professional needs, or other church concerns or hopes.

Clearly MEMBERS OF THE MAIN BOARD should be able to join in ministries on “the infield” of the church, but not as “elders” or board members as such, but as individual Christians and servants.

This one is disputed by many good people: that THE MEMBERS OF THE MAIN BOARD DO NOT become liaisons or people responsible for the various ministries of the church or the staff. All staff report to the senior pastor ultimately, whether through an executive or associate pastor or not. Even filing reports with the main board gives a feel of reporting to that board instead and muddies the report lines. And when an elder or board member is a liaison to them, that too can cloud the reporting lines.

That is the good of the Soccer Field diagram -- it clearly defines the roles of the board and the staff.

This main board RECOMMENDS TO THE MEMBERSHIP OR CONGREGATIONAL MEETING all voting decisions (see responsibilities of the membership listed above). If this makes the membership a “rubber stamp,” as one who enjoys the old way of congregational government when they were small is sure to say, smile and blame it on the need for a lot of research and prayer and that the real ministry of the church is not who makes the decisions but who serves Christ and represents him well when the church, the people, are “out there” where they live and work and play.

This board has a clear way, with membership ratification of course, to RELEASE THE SENIOR PASTOR if he is not fulfilling his duties or the clear ethics required. But they allow him to lead the ministries from the pulpit and through the staff and ministries while he is pastor. This is for many reasons, many of them the commands to the pastor in the Bible.

Teams or committees for FINANCES-BUDGET AND PROPERTIES AND SOMETIMES FINANCES should be chaired by members of the main board to avoid the centuries-old clashes between the vision board and the finance team. And the main responsibilities of finances and buildings should have more than one member from the elders or main board. For sure, other members of the church can serve on the finance team, for instance, but only if they are qualified by expertise and spirit. In best practices, these “adjunct” members of the committees which report to the main board must be approved

by that main board before being asked.

The FINANCE COMMITTEE, with a few members from the main board, meets at a separate time to carefully study the finance report, and then the chairman gives the report at the board meeting. The “fine-tooth combing” is done at the finance team meeting.

Same with BUILDING OR PROPERTIES TEAM – especially in a church that has a large complex. This team does not handle who mows the lawn or cleans the church -- “give away titles and responsibilities freely” -- but major purchases and capitol items.

The MISSIONS FINANCES TEAM might be chaired by a member of the board who presents recommendations for church budget support of missionaries. The work of caring for missionaries and correspondence and reports is handled by a smaller team with the involvement of the staff point person for missions. This procedure gives unity to the budget issues of the church, but does not get the board involved in details of missions procedures. (Most churches over 100-200, by the way, find that there should also be a point person on staff and some appointed volunteer ministry managers for local missions and support of nearby para-church ministries. The people in the church who care about missions often define it as overseas and not local.)

The TIME AND LENGTH OF BOARD MEETINGS are important. Some boards have enjoyed setting their meetings at 5:00 pm until 6:30 both to avoid late evening meetings but also to avoid having decisions be made late in the evening. Many believe, “No decisions should be made when people are tired.” Other boards have worked well with early morning meetings. And a 90-100 minute meeting only works if detail work is done by the finance team and the building team in separate meetings, and the Soccer Field agenda is trusted, and there is no time for, “Anything else, or any thoughts about music, or have you heard any good rumors...?”

As with all changes in the church, there is wisdom in careful incremental change, with no surprises, and patience.