

The following is an article that I found on the UUA web-site and presented it to our community on the day of our Annual Business Meeting. It was well received by our community, as we have been struggling with the issue of governance in our own small group.

The Art of Governance

by Dan Hotchkiss

Religion transforms people; no one touches holy ground and stays the same. Religious leaders stir the pot by pointing to the contrast between life as it is and life as it should be, and urging us to close the gap. Religious insights provide the handhold that people need to criticize injustice, rise above self-interest, and take risks to achieve healing in a wounded world. Religion at its best is no friend to the status quo.

Organization, on the other hand, conserves. Institutions capture, schematize, and codify persistent patterns of activity. A well-ordered congregation lays down schedules, puts policies on paper, places people in positions, and generally brings order out of chaos.

Organizations can be flexible, creative, and iconoclastic, but only by resisting some of their most basic instincts.

No wonder "organized religion" is so difficult! Congregations create sanctuaries where people can nurture and inspire each other—with results no one can predict. The stability of a religious institution is a necessary precondition to the instability religious transformation

brings. The need to balance both sides of this paradox—the transforming power of religion and the stabilizing power of organization—makes leading congregations a unique challenge.

A special risk for leaders is that a congregation can succeed so well at organizing that it loses track of its religious mission. Congregational life becomes so tightly ordered that it squeezes out all inspiration. The challenge of organized religion is to find ways to encourage people to encounter God in potentially soul-shaking ways while also helping them to channel spiritual energy in paths that will be healthy for them, the congregation, and the world beyond. Religious leaders who write bylaws would be well advised to do so, as theologian Karl Barth admonished preachers, with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, holding realism and idealism in a salutary tension.

In facing this challenge, many clergy and lay leaders have expressed the wish for a clear, up-to-date model of what they should be doing. What clarity they do have generally is patched together from denominational guides, experience in various civic and work settings, and reference books like *Robert's Rules of Order*. All of these have value; none quite fills the bill. Congregations are different from other kinds of organizations; and the world is different from what it was in 1876, when General Roberts wrote, and from the years after World War II, when much of the received denominational wisdom about congregations seems to have been set in lead type. Here are some things that seem clear to me as I attempt to meet this need:

There is no one right way to organize a congregation. I do not believe that an original, correct model of leadership can be found in history or Scriptures. History, as I read it, shows that people of faith have chosen a wide range of organizational forms to meet the challenges of their particular times. At any one time, different congregations organize differently because of their different values and the different roles they play in the wider community.

Religious institutions have often borrowed organizational forms from the society around them: the early Christian churches took on some of the forms of Hellenistic mystery cults, the medieval popes behaved like kings, and the New England Puritans cloned the structure of an English town. Congregations have looked like extended families, noble fiefdoms, parties of reform, cells of resistance, and leagues of mutual protection. Christians often give lip service to the "apostolic church," but few have seriously followed its example of communal property or cheerful martyrdom. Likewise, though Jews love to sing the song "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*, you could look hard at a Russian shtetl and find little that resembles a Reform temple on Long Island.

I cite this varied history not to be cynical but to free our thinking from a narrow sense of binding precedent. An awareness of the wide range of forms that congregations of the past borrowed from the world around them frees us to draw wisdom from our own environment. For better or for worse, the main organizational model for contemporary

congregations is the corporation, and specifically the nonprofit corporation, which emerged in the late nineteenth century as the all-purpose rubric for benevolent work. For congregations, the nonprofit garb fits pretty well, though not perfectly. What works for other charities may not be so effective or appropriate for congregations. On the other hand, our culture's vast experience with corporate governance offers us much wisdom to draw on. Our challenge is to draw on corporate experience selectively, with a critical awareness of what makes congregations different.

Some mistakes have been made often enough that it is only fair to warn against them. At the very least, some choices have foreseeable consequences. For example, if a board tries to manage day-to-day operations through a network of committees, it will inevitably spend a great deal of its time on operational decision making. This outcome follows simply from the fact that if there is no other place for a buck to stop, it will stop at the board table. Many a board resolves to stop "micromanaging," but until it is willing to delegate real management authority to someone else, the board remains the default chief operating officer.

We can know good governance when we see it. For all the variety of workable ways to organize a congregation, certain patterns consistently appear when governance goes well. My own list of criteria for measuring the effectiveness of governance in congregations includes the following signs of health:

- *A unified structure for making governance decisions.* The governing board represents the membership by articulating mission and vision, evaluating programs, and ensuring responsible stewardship of resources. Boards go under various names, including vestry, session, council, trustees, and directors (here I simply call them boards). Boards are usually accountable to the congregation, and sometimes also to a regional or national authority as well. Most well-run congregations have a single board with primary responsibility for governance, with clearly defined relationships with other boards, committees, staff, the congregation, and denominational bodies.
- *A unified structure for making operational decisions.* Program leaders (paid and unpaid) work harmoniously to create effective programs with the support of a structure that delegates authority and requires accountability. Anyone who works successfully in a congregation soon learns that multiple accountabilities are unavoidable. Every staff position has a natural constituency whose wishes sometimes conflict with the expectations of the staff leader or the board. Effective congregational systems do not eliminate those tensions but give clear guidance about how to manage them. Full-time senior staff members are expected to manage the politics of their positions, while part-time and lower-level staff members have supervisors to do that for them. Above
- all, delegation and accountability are matched. When a

program's goals are set, responsibility is assigned to its leader, and sufficient power is delegated so that it will be fair to hold the leader accountable for the fulfillment of the stated goals.

- *A creative, open atmosphere for ministry.* Members take advantage of many opportunities to share their talents and interests in an atmosphere of trust and creativity in which structure, goals, and purposes are clear. One of the most helpful findings from research on corporate effectiveness is that the command-and-control approach works for only a narrow range of tasks. Even the military, which highly values obedience, has learned that delegating as many decisions as possible to lower-level people, while giving clear guidance, reduces errors and improves adaptability to changing circumstances. Likewise, no congregation can succeed by relying on its board or staff to come up with all of the ideas. In the most effective congregations, programs and ministries "bubble up" continually from outside the formal leadership.

No list will capture every variation, but where these three criteria are met, I have learned to expect high morale among lay and professional leaders and enthusiastic ownership among the members of the congregation.

Leaders of communities of faith are never simply managers of institutions, nor do they have the luxury of being purely spiritual leaders. Congregations are vessels of religious growth and

transformation—but to be vessels, they need firmness and stability. A congregation easily becomes an end in its own mind—recruiting people to an empty discipleship of committee service, finance, and building maintenance. Institutional maintenance is a necessary, but ultimately secondary, function of a congregation. If souls are not transformed and the world is not healed, the congregation fails no matter what the treasurer reports. Paul of Tarsus put his finger on this tension when he said, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6 KJV). That is why governance in congregations is not a science but an art. Leaders must continually balance the conserving function of an institution with the expectation of disruptive, change-inducing creativity that comes when individuals peek past the temple veil and catch fresh visions of the Holy.

Adapted from [Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership](#) by Dan Hotchkiss, copyright © 2009 by the Alban Institute. All rights reserved.