

## POLICY GOVERNANCE® in small sizes

A board member of a growing fellowship wrote asking for some guidance about Policy Governance. This is a rather large and unresolved topic relative to her congregation's size. So I sat down and spun out the following reflections, aiming to encapsulate the wisdom I'm aware of out there at the moment.

We need to start with congregational size theory. Alice Mann, a senior consultant with the Alban Institute ([www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org)), is the expert in this field, and you can learn lots more from her two books on this subject (also, there's a video). In a nutshell, the structure of a church needs to fit the size it is, and these are usually described in this way [with the more familiar UU terms bracketed]:

- > Family [fellowship] size, with up to 50 adults & children attending on an average Sunday
- > Pastoral [small church] size, with 50 to 150 in average attendance
- > Program [mid-size], pulling up to 400 (or more) each Sunday
- > Corporate [large] churches [the UUA uses 600 as a base figure here]

There are plateaus between these sizes, where congregations may go aground, or get tangled in the turbulence of roles and structures in flux. Fellowships and small churches thrive effectively as organisms. They are "group-centered" in *fellowship* life, evolving to minister-centered in *small-church* size. In fellowship size, the board (or core group) are active participants in all that's going on; in effect, it's a big family. If the congregation grows, more and more will be going on, and a volunteer board can't easily or adequately contain it all. So there's a shift to "pastor-centered" church life, with someone present everyday at the heart of things to interconnect it all.

If a small church keeps growing, that pastor/person approaches burn-out, and the church bumps up against a ceiling in the number of people and activities it can nourish and sustain. The shift from pastoral (small) to program (mid) size is particularly difficult, sometimes very conflicted. Congregational life has grown complex. The church is evolving from an organism into an organization. There's need to resume a "group-centered" focus again, employing the minister and a growing staff to coordinate and support a variety of programs and the lay leaders that engage members with each other in activities they care about.

"The role of the governing board shifts away from hands-on management toward concern with overarching goals, policy, and oversight," Alice Mann says (in Raising the Roof, her book on the pastoral-to-program size transition). People wonder if there are other governance models that achieve this. So far anyhow, there are none. [The November-December 2002 issue of the Board Leadership journal details a valiant search for one.]

John Carver has observed the longing of board members to keep in touch with everything that's going on, and he notes that when a board can do that "there's not enough going on." Clearly this is true at program-church size. To sustain that shift in dynamics from organism to organization a way of governance is needed that can free the board from managing church activities and return it to leading and articulating the

vision of what the church is here for and why all these good folks are doing all of this in the first place.

Let me hint at the difference with an actual item from the agenda of a real church board meeting this month: a proposal for one coffee hour between services [vs. coffee after each]. Granted, a fellowship would not be having double services, but to use this as an example anyway, a “family-size” board might aim to coalesce members’ thinking about the idea. A small-church board might receive a synopsis of thoughtful opinions, discuss them and decide the question. — whereas none of this would normally command board-meeting time or attention in a mid-size or larger church (even if the leadership of a church that size were to try containing everyone in one coffee hour).

There are no “shoulds” here. Each size has its own real and rich value. A fellowship board is *expected* to have warm hands on all that’s happening. A small-church board continues to live with that expectation and responsibility, even as some of the weight of it shifts onto someone’s shoulders. —Because these congregations are *organisms*. A church’s owners, leaders, actors and beneficiaries are very often the same people. Congregations are unusual in the degree to which roles are multiple and interknit. And ours share a faith in which the relational nature of life is a core value. As they grow, however, a board can no longer both lead and manage them, and roles need to be distinguished and separated if the church is to thrive in its increasing complexity.

John Carver’s Policy Governance model achieves this, effectively freeing all levels of leadership to fulfill their focused roles the best they can—while safely and prudently containing all that activity without the board having its hands on everything. One can intuit an emerging need for this at the upper end of pastoral size, when members begin to experience the board as suppressing creativity and bottlenecking ideas; fellow members elected to the board become “them” rather than “us”.

In the meanwhile, whether the separation of roles that’s a principle of the Carver model can dynamically serve a closely interknit organism is a significant question and one far from settled. But are there any principles of the model that *can* fit, and are helpful?

I think so. In particular: the distinction between Ends and Means, and the magic of governing them differently (charting Ends powerfully and positively, and framing Means limitations clearly, stating what is *not* allowable rather than continue trying to direct what *is*). And further: the strength of the “nested set” principle, stating policies as largely as possible so that greater specificity will be contained within them. These two principles enable a board to safely empower others and to delegate, insofar as possible, whole jobs. I’d call it “shared ministry” in the most luminous meaning of that phrase.

I dare venture that it need little matter whether a congregation has a lot of committees, teams, task forces or a few—or which ones they are—so long as they each serve ends the congregation holds in common, and do so accountably.

Margaret Keip  
January 28, 2003