

The Role of Boards in Growing Churches

**No church
can grow
beyond its
leadership
team.**

TOM THATCHER

As churches grow, the roles of their leaders change—if they don't, the growth will stop. This is true not only of paid staff members but also of layleaders. Consider the 5 following questions as you consider how your church Board and its members should evolve as the congregation grows.

QUESTION 1: What is the biblical vision for the “Elder/Overseer” and “Deacon/ Servant” as leaders within a local congregation?

This one assumes what should be assumed: no matter how big your church, any discussion about the role of your Board should start with key biblical teachings on church leadership. Good places to start are Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3, and Titus 1.

QUESTION 2: What are the governance responsibilities of Board members as leaders of a not-for-profit entity?

In Bible times, churches were small, informal, and met in private homes. Modern American churches are not-for-profit corporations, and their leaders must be capable of governing in ways consistent with the laws of the states in which they operate.

QUESTION 3: Will there be “paid Elders” (= paid staff) and, if so, how will these individuals relate to Board members?

The Scriptures envision that some church leaders will be paid (see Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:17). How will these individuals relate to non-paid Board members in terms of authority and responsibility, and which paid staff will be considered members of the Board? Will individual Board members be assigned to work directly with specific staff members and/or ministry areas?

QUESTION 4: Will Board members fill a “representative” role, a “technical role,” or both?

Some churches take a “representative” approach, choosing Board members to ensure that the major population groups within the church are heard. Others treat Board members as “technicians,” meaning that they look for individuals who have expertise in key areas (e.g., IT, HR, Finance, Bible/doctrine). Both models can work, but bigger churches tend to lean toward the technical approach.

QUESTION 5: How will new Board members be chosen?

Who will select candidates for the Board, and who will select from among those candidates? What roles will current Board members, paid staff, and the congregation play in this process? Normally these answers change as the church grows.

LEAD AHEAD OF GROWTH

However you answer the above questions, address them proactively and ahead of your growth. In the end, no church can grow beyond its leadership team.

Let's now tackle them one at a time...

What is the biblical vision for leaders within a local church?

As churches grow, the roles of their Boards and the members of those Boards evolve—if they don't, the growth will stop. No matter how big they get, though, churches are still churches, and as such they should draw their vision and energy from the Bible. Ultimately, the question of what it means to serve on the Board of a church of 1000+ is really just a question of scaling the biblical vision to that size and beyond.

THE TWO TYPES OF LEADERS

Modern churches are large and complex organizations that perform many different functions—this is true even of smaller congregations. Most churches of 100 or less have a highly specialized organizational structure that involves people who hold many different titles, and the number grows exponentially as the church reaches 1000 and beyond.

But despite all the titles we use today, the New Testament recognizes only two basic leadership roles in the church. These are conveniently illustrated by an episode in Acts 6:1-6, which occurred within the first few years of the church's existence. Here, the Apostles select 7 individuals who will oversee the distribution of benevolent funds, so that they themselves can focus on “prayer and the ministry of the word” (teaching and preaching).

A few decades later, Paul's writings reveal that this model had become the standard for congregations worldwide. Some individuals were tasked with the spiritual oversight of the church, while others were called to lead specific ministries that required specialized skills. Paul calls the former type of leader an “Elder/Overseer” and the latter a “Deacon/Servant” (see 1 Timothy 3).

As churches grow, the roles of their Boards and the members of those Boards evolve—if they don't, the growth will stop.

WHAT ARE “ELDERS” AND “DEACONS”?

The term “Elder” covers the visionary leadership of a congregation, people who define the church’s mission and ensure that it is being accomplished. This is evident from the labels that are used for this role in the New Testament: “Elder” (emphasizing wisdom and experience); “Overseer” (supervision/accountability); “Shepherd” (pastoral care); and, “Steward” (management of God’s household).

“Deacon” is based on the Greek word for “servant.” This role covers the technical leadership of a congregation and refers to individuals who get things done. Deacons/Servants execute the mission that Elders establish.

While this model may seem simplistic, it’s actually comprehensive. If you made an exhaustive list of the titled “positions” held by people in your congregation, you could categorize all of them based on whether each role focuses on vision and mission or on execution of vision and mission. If it’s the former, Paul would call that an “Elder” role; if the latter, it’s a “Servant” role.

Of course, in smaller churches, people called “Elder” often do “Deacon work”—since there are fewer hands on deck, they must help execute the vision they have set. As churches grow, however, this approach is no longer effective: if the vision-casters stay down in the weeds, there will be no one pointing toward the horizon. For a larger church, Board members will need to focus their full attention on “Elder” business—spiritual oversight and accountability.



LEADERS, NOT LEVELS

The Bible views leadership, and the technical skills required to lead in various areas, as gifts of God to the church (see Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). As such, the roles of “Elder” and “Deacon” should be viewed as complementary rather than hierarchical—some people are gifted to provide vision and oversight, while others are blessed with the technical skills to run a ministry area. Neither can succeed without the other, and the church cannot succeed if either is missing.

GROW TOGETHER

If your Board hasn’t gone through the biblical teachings on Elders and Deacons recently, do so together. Your discussion will proceed from past and present realities, but should focus on how these two biblical roles will relate to one another going forward as you grow. If you grew by 25%, how would that impact the ways that vision and mission are generated and the ways those ideals are played out?

Members of the Board should be focused primarily on the former, and as the church gets bigger that becomes a bigger job.

What are the governance responsibilities of board members as leaders of a not-for-profit entity?

This question simply acknowledges what is obviously true. While churches are distinct from other organizations in terms of their mission and purpose, the fact remains that North American congregations are also not-for-profit legal entities. How does this fact impact the responsibilities of a church board?

YOU, THE CHURCH, AND THE STATE

Many church leaders resist, or even resent, the question above. The church is “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), and God’s Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom that operates far above and beyond the ways of worldly empires (or at least it should). Jesus himself told Pontius Pilate, a representative of the most powerful empire of his day, “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Most of us view church as a place to escape from the everyday work world and the faith challenges we face there. You can’t run a church the way you run a business, right?

In fact, you can, and some people do; the question is whether or not we should. But even as we respect the fact that the church differs from the “secular” companies for which we work, the reality remains that every congregation is a legal entity of the nation and state in which it resides. For this reason, it is important to consider governance responsibilities in selecting Board members, especially as your church becomes larger and more complex.

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the church to a human body and the various members, with their respective gifts, to the parts of the body. Just as the body needs hands, feet, and a nose to function, the church needs people with very different gifts to work together in unison. He completes the analogy by noting that the individuals who make up the “body parts” of the church come with different gifts—like teaching and leadership—that a congregation needs to survive as an organization.

As your church gets larger, those needs become more diverse and complex, with the result that gifts become more precisely defined. The Bible mentions a “gift” of teaching, but some people are good



teachers of children, while others do better with adults. Administration is a biblical gift, but some people are better at finance while others excel at program operations.

Large churches have larger physical plants, larger staffs, larger budgets, and more complex legal situations. Their needs are therefore larger, more complex, and more specialized—HR problems become more complicated, IT infrastructures are more complex, accounting becomes more sophisticated. In these areas, the operations of the church overlap closely with the operations of “secular” organizations, and they are viewed as such by the state.

For this reason, the leadership teams of larger churches must include individuals who understand these issues and processes and who are gifted to guide the congregation through them. There’s no biblical verse that says an Elder must be an HR expert, but a large modern church really cannot survive without at least one high-level leader who is. Paul doesn’t say a Deacon needs to be a CPA, but larger churches (and small ones) will benefit from the services of a “servant” who brings those skills to the table.

The biblical teaching on gifts indicates that God empowers the church with whatever skills are needed to fulfill the needs of the body (see esp. Ephesians 4:7-13). For a large modern American church, these needs exceed basic pastoral responsibilities.

THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT

While the church needs many of the same services that companies do, it’s important to stress that the qualifications for serving in a church do not align entirely with a secular job posting. Having an MBA does not exempt anyone from compliance with the character profile for leaders in 1 Timothy 3. Leaders of larger churches may need more nuanced expertise, but still must be blameless examples of Christian character.

Will there be “paid Elders” (= paid staff) and, if so, how will these individuals relate to Board members?

This question may seem so obvious it doesn’t need to be asked. Wouldn’t every church have paid staff members? And how would the size of the congregation impact how these people relate to the Board?

DOUBLE HONOR

You may not have thought about this, but the Bible never mentions a person called “Senior Pastor” or “Worship Minister.” So where do we get the idea that the church should pay people to do these jobs?

I noted earlier that the Bible portrays the “Elder” more as a *type* of leadership than an “office” in the church (see the link to that post below). The “Elder” provides visionary leadership and direction to a congregation. Elders prayerfully listen to God and the congregation to determine priorities and hold the church accountable to them.

The Scriptures envision that some people who fulfill this visionary role will be paid to do so. 1 Timothy 5:17 says that the “Elders” who “lead well should be counted worthy of double honor.” This is especially the case for those who emphasize “the word and doctrine.” “Double honor” is typically understood to refer to respect for the leader combined with financial compensation (respect + money = “double honor”). In the next verse, Paul says it is appropriate to pay these people because, in the words of Jesus, “the worker is worthy of his wage” (see Luke 10:7).

Since ministry staff (at least some of them) generally fulfill a visionary/missional role in a church, they would fall under the biblical heading “Elder.” Those who are paid to serve would thus be “paid Elders.”

THE STAFF AND THE BOARD?

The question then becomes which, if any, of the paid staff will be identified as “Elders,” and why these individuals and not others who are also fulfilling the “Elder function”? Which is to say, how will paid staff members relate to the Board?

Most churches answer this question by saying that the Senior Minister will serve either as an “Elder” or at least attend Board meetings. Some also allow other “lead” pastoral staff—say an Associate Pastor—to attend as well.

As the congregation and the size of its staff grow, however, the question becomes whether the Board and/or its members will be in direct dialogue with paid staff other than the Senior Pastor, or whether they will interact with the other staff and their respective ministry areas only through the channel of the Senior Pastor.

In the latter model, the Elders oversee the ministry areas of the church by hiring and overseeing the Senior Pastor, who is then responsible to run the rest of the system. In the former, individual Elders might be assigned to oversee various ministry areas to ensure that the needs of those areas are met. In that case, members of the

DOUBLE HONOR 2x

Board will typically be in regular direct dialog with staff members other than the Senior Minister. This model obviously requires that the Senior Pastor feel comfortable with this level of engagement.

CHECKS AND BALANCES

Ultimately, the question of how the Board will relate to (which) paid staff is one of checks and balances.

If the Board dominates the staff, the church will simply not be able to grow. I'm not aware of any church of 1000+ where the Board drives the vision and strategy without heavy staff involvement.

At the same time, if the staff dominates the Board, there's no way to ensure that the church's mission transcends the interests and abilities of the present Senior Pastor.

The paid staff and the Elders need to be united in a system of mutual accountability that makes it impossible for either of them as a group, or for individuals within either group, to run the church off the rails.

As the church grows, the Board members will become increasingly invisible to the congregation, while the staff will be very visible and very beloved (at least by some). The bigger the church gets, the more true this is, so that it becomes harder and harder to stop the paid staff from doing whatever they want. That's great when they want all the right things, but not so good when they don't.

Large churches need highly competent staff members who are empowered to do their thing; at the same time, if the Board is not in a position to check what the paid staff are doing, it will be impossible to enact any strategy that transcends what the paid staff wants to do.

The paid staff and the Elders need to be united in a system of mutual accountability that makes it impossible for either of them as a group, or for individuals within either group, to run the church off the rails.

Will Board members serve a “representative” role, or a “technical role,” or both?

In some churches, Board members are selected on a “representative” model: the Board is composed in such a way that different populations in the church are represented. In other churches, Board members are selected on a “technical” model: the Board is composed in such a way that the areas of expertise most needed to oversee operations are represented.

Both models are viable, and both have biblical precedent. In general, the representative role may work best in small to mid-size congregations. As the church grows, however, the Board will most likely evolve toward the technical model.

THE BOARD OF REPRESENTATIVES

Many churches take a “representative” approach to the development of their Boards, seeking to include individuals who represent various populations within the congregation. This model takes its biblical cue from the work of the “Elder” as a “shepherd.” If the congregation has a large number of Millennials, or blue collar workers, or middle aged people with children at home, the Board might include individuals from these various groups to ensure that the spiritual needs of each are being met.

As a variation on this theme, some churches, including larger ones, load their Boards with individuals who serve in various ministry areas. This model takes its biblical cue from the work of the “Elder” as an “overseer.” If the congregation has a large Children’s Ministry, or a significant recovery ministry, the Board might include lead volunteers from those programs to ensure that the needs of those ministries are being addressed.

Positively, the representative model ensures that the needs and interests of various groups and/or programs in the church are represented and resourced at the highest level.

THE BOARD OF EXPERTS

Many churches take a “technical” approach to the development of their Boards, seeking to include individuals who have expertise in areas that are key to the congregation’s operations. This model takes its biblical cue from the principle of giftedness. If God has gifted leaders in the congregation with insight in interpreting and teaching the Scriptures, or in overseeing HR concerns and accounting, or in managing IT needs, the Board might include skilled individuals who can oversee those areas of the church’s operations.

Of course, the technical model does not exempt Board members from meeting the lifestyle standards for leadership outlined in passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. If Board members are viewed as technical experts, they must *both* fulfill these biblical expectations *and* possess skills that empower them to guide a particular aspect of the congregation’s operations.

Positively, the technical model ensures that the church’s key operational areas are overseen by individuals who are capable to provide real guidance.

PICK WHAT WORKS

Since the representative and the technical models of Board development both have biblical foundations, congregations should adopt whichever is most relevant to their particular circumstances.

While both models can be effective, as churches grow larger they may naturally gravitate toward the technical model, so that the composition of the Board follows the same logic as the grid for paid staff.

No matter how big the church gets, Board members will need to be in close touch with the actual needs of the congregation, including each individual sub-population. At the same time, as churches grow, their institutional needs and the systems that serve them become increasingly complex. As the systems grow more complicated, the level of expertise required to oversee them elevates—the HR needs of a congregation with 30 staff members are exponentially more complex than those of a church with 3 paid employees.

Whichever model you choose, review your current approach to ensure that ensures the congregation's needs are met.

How will Board members be chosen, and who will be involved in this process and in what ways?

Once you've worked through the first four questions about the role of your Board and its composition, it remains to determine how new Board members will be chosen. What process will be followed, and who will be involved in that process?

IGNORE THE BYLAWS

Well, you can't ignore your Bylaws, even if you might want to. For both legal and ethical reasons, and to act fairly toward the congregation, all stipulations in your Bylaws regarding the processes for selecting and seating Board members must be followed.

The same will also apply if your congregation is a member of a denomination, convention, or association that stipulates that members must follow certain processes for seating a Board.

But Bylaws and denominational regulations are not written on stone tablets. Nor can they rise to the level of the authority of Scripture. Like all regulations, your Bylaws reflect the spirit and concerns, and probably real challenges, of the era in which they were produced. They need to reflect the needs and concerns of today.

If they don't, change them. Seek legal counsel if you need help determining how best to do this in a fair and ethical way.

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

In many smaller churches, and in some larger congregations that have outgrown their Bylaws and some processes, Board members are selected through typical Western democratic processes. Sometimes anyone in the congregation can nominate anyone for any position. Sometimes the congregation at large votes to seat a Nominating Committee that forwards and reviews candidates. Sometimes the current Board advances candidates for a congregational vote.

This system has weaknesses, but its strength is that it gives the congregation formal input into the selection process. Congregational input is critical for at least two reasons.

First, it's possible that someone in the congregation may know something important about a candidate that the staff and current Board members don't know. Even if this doesn't disqualify a candidate, it's important to be aware that the perception exists.

Second, whether your church adopts a "representative" or "technical" approach to building the Board, at the end of the day Board members have some level of pastoral responsibility for the congregation. You can't lead people who won't follow you. It's a good idea to find out whether the congregation will trust and follow a Board member. If they won't, effectiveness will be impossible.

In some churches, this congregational input takes the form of a "vote" for Board candidates. Since this is cumbersome in larger congregations, many larger churches opt to announce candidates and then invite the congregation to comment on them during an established vetting period.

THE VOICE OF THE STAFF

A key issue in Board selection is whether or how paid staff members will be involved in the nominating and vetting process. In many respects, the involvement of the staff is a classic "catch 22." On one hand, staff members may be most aware of the personal strengths and limitations of prospective candidates, and thus best able to speak into their potential as Board members. On the other hand, if staff members are involved in the selection process, they can potentially manipulate the system to create a situation where they choose their own boss. In that case, the Board may naturally enlarge the staff's blind spots.

As noted above, in many smaller churches the congregation nominates Board members at large or through a nominating committee. This means that anyone could potentially become a Board member, even if the paid staff would not want that person.

But because this process is cumbersome, as churches grow they often adopt a model where sitting Board members choose new candidates for the Board, in dialogue with the staff. There are advantages to this system in terms of streamlining the process. But it can also create a self-perpetuating culture within the top-level leadership, whereby no one who disagrees with the status quo can ever rise to a position where they could really challenge it.

Here again, the best system will invite and account for input from the paid staff while also preventing the Board from simply reflecting the staff's interests and weaknesses.

DO WHAT WORKS

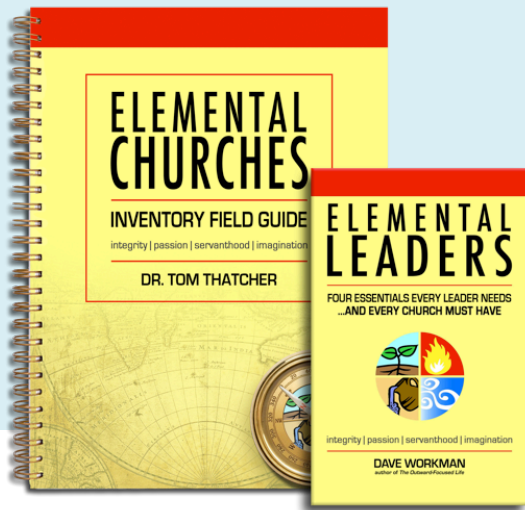
Here as always, since there are biblical precedents for several different approaches, the best choice is to do what works best for your congregation. As your church grows, it will likely become necessary to streamline the Board selection process. At the same time, it remains critical that the congregation's at-large input play a role. And of course, no system that allows the Board to become inbred and self-perpetuating will be healthy for the church in the long run.

Dr. Tom Thatcher is co-founder and Chief Analyst of **Elemental Churches**. He has served as Dean of the Russell School of Ministry and Cincinnati Bible Seminary and professor of Biblical Studies. As a teacher, Tom has spent more than 20 years in seminary and congregational classrooms leading courses and presentations on Biblical Studies and early Christianity. He has served on numerous research committees in the Society of Biblical Literature, has authored or edited 20 books on the New Testament, edits an academic series of books, and regularly writes mass-market adult curriculum materials.

www.elementalchurches.com

INTRODUCING THE ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY

The **ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY** is a unique web-based assessment to measure church health and effectiveness. Combining individual and team learning through online surveys and videos with personalized coaching, the Inventory provides a comprehensive report with action steps. It's a roadmap based on your own uploaded reports and surveys as you and your team work through the personal and group exercises. For more info and pricing, visit www.elementalinventory.com.



THE ELEMENTAL CHURCHES INVENTORY includes:

- 12 ELEMENTAL LEADERS BOOKS
- 12 ELEMENTAL CHURCHES FIELD GUIDES (85-page workbook)
- 16 online videos
- web access to organization assessments & surveys
- interactive team exercises
- personalized consulting
- a comprehensive report with action steps

