Shepherding Together: An Exploration of the Relationship Between the Senior Pastor and the Board of Elders in Large Presbyterian Churches

by

Charles Edward Dunn

Date: 11-1-2018

Approved:

Dr. Sujin Pak, Advisor

Dr. Lewis Galloway, Second Reader

Dr. Will Willimon, D.Min. Program Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

2018
ABSTRACT

Shepherding Together: An Exploration of the Relationship Between the Senior Pastor
and Board of Elders in Large Presbyterian Churches

by

Charles Edward Dunn

Date: 11-1-2018

Approved:

[Signature]
Dr. Sujin Pak, Advisor

[Signature]
Dr. Lewis Galloway, Second Reader

[Signature]
Dr. Will Willimon, D.Min. Program Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University
2018
Abstract

The relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders is critical to the flourishing of any congregation, but its importance is amplified by the size dynamics and collective governance polity of large Presbyterian churches. When the board of elders (session) either matches the pastor’s passivity or micromanages the congregation, or when the session either rubber-stamps or resents the pastor’s authoritarian leadership, the senior pastor’s tenure can become tenuous and the congregation will be hindered from carrying out its mission. It may even suffer significant harm. How can a congregation wisely order this relationship so that the senior pastor and the session can jointly pursue God’s vision in a way that enables empowered pastoral leadership, ensures pastoral accountability, and values corporate spiritual discernment? Rooted in real congregational dynamics, this thesis suggests a two-pronged solution to help large, Presbyterian churches better realize this ideal.

First, the Policy Governance model, which is widely utilized by corporate and non-profit boards, can clarify the roles of the senior pastor and the session to help them better lead together. In the words of John and Miriam Carver, who pioneered the model, it’s an approach to governance that “enables extensive empowerment to staff while preserving controls necessary for accountability.” When adapted to the uniqueness of Presbyterian polity, the Policy Governance model can create a framework in which the session truly governs and in which the senior pastor and the session discern and pursue God’s vision for the congregation together.

Second, in order for the elders confidently to discern God’s vision alongside the senior pastor within the framework that Policy Governance creates, a session must also commit themselves to spiritual shepherding. Samuel Miller, an early 19th century professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, provides a learned historical perspective from American Presbyterianism from which we can reimagine the role of the ruling elder not merely as an institutional administrator but as a spiritual shepherd. Miller envisions elders as men and women trained and ordained for an office that differs from the senior pastor’s in job description but not in divine sanction. He expects that an elder’s work of governing and guiding the sheep during session meetings will only be enhanced because of her work feeding the sheep between session meetings. Only if ruling elders possess the training and qualifications concomitant with their high spiritual calling, and only if elders engage in both governing and feeding shepherding, will they grow the spiritual muscles to lead competently and confidently alongside the senior pastor.

Each congregation must determine how best to apply these solutions in light of its own culture and current senior pastor-session dynamic. But the concluding examples of two congregations and one denominational program further illuminate how to put these solutions into practice. They can inspire congregations who also want to experience the benefits of Policy Governance and spiritual shepherding.
Dedication

To the glory of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his flock and who leads us into paths of righteousness for his name’s sake; and in gratitude

To my beautiful wife Brandi, who in the time while I was pursuing this degree became my best friend, my ministry partner, and the love of my life; and who with remarkable patience and interest has supported me throughout this project;

To my parents, who inspired in me a love for learning and who consistently encourage me to grow in the knowledge of the Lord;

To the session, senior leadership team, and congregation of Highland Park Presbyterian, who have formed me in Christ, allowed me to serve as one of their pastors, and taught me far more than I ever could in return;

To Rock and Barbara Pletcher and Jody and Sarah Hawn, whose extraordinary generosity made this work possible;

To friends whose conversations have broadened my understanding;

To my many professors, who have taught me so much, with particular gratitude to Dr. Pak and Dr. Galloway, whose careful edits and insightful questions have greatly enhanced this project.
Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv

Chapter 1: The Senior Pastor and the Session ................................................................. 1
  1.1 Picturing the Challenge ......................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Describing the Challenge .................................................................................... 3
  1.3 Church Size Amplifies the Challenge ................................................................. 12
  1.4 Presbyterian Governance Ensures the Challenge .............................................. 17
  1.5 Toward a Solution .............................................................................................. 22

Chapter 2: Policy Governance ......................................................................................... 27
  2.1 Why Policy Governance? ................................................................................... 27
  2.2 What is Policy Governance? .............................................................................. 30
  2.3 Policy Governance Clarifies the Session-Senior Pastor Relationship .............. 32
  2.3.1 The Board Has Ultimate Governing Authority and Responsibility ......... 32
  2.3.2 The Board Delegates Management Authority ......................................... 38
  2.3.3 The Board Holds the Senior Pastor Accountable to Its Stated Ends .......... 45
  2.3.4 The Board Spends Its Time Discerning and Deciding Upon God’s Vision.. 48
  2.4 Needed Adaptations to Policy Governance in a Presbyterian Context ......... 50
  2.4.1 Adaptation of the “Ownership” Principle ................................................... 51
  2.4.2 Adaptation of Board Authority .................................................................. 53
  2.4.3 Adaptation of the CEO/Senior Pastor Role .............................................. 54
  2.5 Hurdles to Applying Policy Governance in a Presbyterian Context .......... 60
  2.5.1 The Hurdle of Committees ....................................................................... 60
  2.5.2 The Hurdle of Large Boards .................................................................... 66
  2.6 Objections to the Policy Governance Model .................................................... 68
  2.7 Policy Governance: A Helpful but Partial Solution ..................................... 71

Chapter 3: Samuel Miller and Spiritual Shepherding .................................................... 73
  3.1 Policy Governance is Only a Partial Solution ................................................... 73
  3.2 Who is Samuel Miller? ...................................................................................... 77
  3.3 The Historical Context for The Ruling Elder ..................................................... 80
  3.4 Ruling Elders as Spiritual Shepherds ................................................................. 85
  3.4.1 Spiritual Shepherds Ordained By God ....................................................... 87
  3.4.2 Spiritual Shepherds Called to Govern and Feed ....................................... 93
  3.5 “Feeding” Shepherding Enhances “Governing” Shepherding ..................... 103
  3.6 Qualifications for Spiritual Shepherding ......................................................... 104
  3.7 Toward Solutions in Practice ........................................................................... 111

Chapter 4: Solutions in Practice ..................................................................................... 114
  4.1 Moving from the Ideal to the Real ..................................................................... 114
  4.2 Highland Park Presbyterian and the Policy Governance Model ....................... 116
  4.2.1 Recognizing the Problem ....................................................................... 117
  4.2.2 Adopting the Policy Governance Model ............................................... 119
  4.2.3 Implementing the Policy Governance Model ......................................... 123
  4.2.4 Need for Further Implementation of Policy Governance Model ............. 128
  4.2 Second Presbyterian Indianapolis and Spiritual Shepherding ..................... 130
  4.2.1 Selecting and Training Spiritual Shepherds ............................................ 132
  4.3 Flourishing Leader: Spiritual Shepherding and Group Discernment .............. 137
  4.3.1 Flourishing Leader and Spiritual Shepherding ....................................... 139
  4.3.2 Flourishing Leader and Group Discernment ......................................... 141
  4.4 Conclusion: Shepherding Together ................................................................. 144

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 148

Biography ............................................................................................................................. 151
Chapter 1: The Senior Pastor and the Session

1.1 Picturing the Challenge

After an 11-year relationship with their senior pastor, the elders of a large Presbyterian church in Texas ask him to resign. There is not a hint of moral failure or scandal. The church membership, missions, and finances are stable, and there is no evident crisis in the congregation. But in the minds of many of the elders, the pastor’s leadership has been absentee. Though he has been committed to faithful biblical preaching and pastoral care, he has largely left the elders and their committees to govern the church. He has spent few hours working with the session, and over time, they have grown to resent his absence. Each church committee or ministry area is a silo working in its own direction. The elders may disagree on the direction the church needs to go, but they can agree on the problem. More active, visionary leadership is needed, and they decide that it is time for a change. The senior pastor receives his first performance review of his tenure in the church, and two days later, he has announced his plans to step aside. Though he is lauded for his years of service and receives a party to celebrate his “retirement,” his feelings are deeply hurt and for some members, lasting wounds emerge.

In a similarly large Presbyterian church in California, the elders ask their senior pastor of 9 years to resign, this time for different reasons. The senior pastor has a very strong vision for the church. He longs for the congregation to attract younger generations and to reach people far from Jesus. In an effort to move in this direction, he relieves the choir of their weekly responsibility and moves to only contemporary music services, which he believes will appeal more to the unchurched. The session resists this change
among others, and they solicit a denominational representative to help them mediate their conflict. A few months later, the session asks the now hurt and frustrated senior pastor to resign. He leaves the church with a confidentiality agreement, and plants a church down the road inducing a congregational split.

Across the country on the East coast, the senior pastor of a Presbyterian mega-church retires. After 16 years of service, he is a deeply loved and larger than life preacher and pastor for the congregation. The church hires a new senior pastor, who now has big shoes to fill. After years of essentially “rubber stamping” the vision and decisions of the prior senior pastor, the elders look eagerly to the new senior pastor to give them a vision for the future. They expect him not only to preach great sermons and lead the staff but to govern the church as well. To use the corporate language with which many of the elders are familiar, they expect him to be both a great CEO and the Chairman of the Board. Will he be able to carry all of their expectations and succeed?

In a sizable Presbyterian church in the southwest United States, the senior pastor can only dream of such freedom to dream. The session spends most of their time reviewing the state of the budget. Elders raise questions about particular expenses. Elders question the decision to cancel Sunday school in the youth ministry and wonder why they were not consulted. Elders offer ideas on how to preach more engaging sermons like the non-denominational church down the street. The senior pastor and her staff feel little freedom to make day to day decisions or programmatic changes without first getting the approval of their board.
1.2 Describing the Challenge

As these (true) stories illustrate, the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders is critical to the health of a Presbyterian congregation, though it can break down in myriad ways. Consider first the example of the church in Texas in which the board perceived that the senior pastor had become passive in the area of church governance. Very rarely is a pastor equally capable in all ministry areas, and it is not uncommon for a pastor to gravitate toward his greatest competencies, such as preaching or pastoral care. He may witness the most spiritual fruit (and receive the most affirmation) when exercising these gifts. He may even think that this is a wise way to focus his energies given the leadership dictum to “play to your strengths.” Additionally, most pastors tend to be amicable, conciliatory personalities. They may enter the calling of church ministry perhaps in reaction to some of the harsh, cut-throat nature of the corporate world. In their desire to reflect the love and kindness of Jesus, they may hesitate to risk upsetting or offending church members. They may find it appealing to delay potentially upsetting action or to abdicate decision-making responsibility altogether. It can be remarkably tempting to essentially leave the leadership of the church to those with the spiritual gift of governance or those with a “high D” personality.¹

Yet this “hands-off” pastoral approach to governance can lead to disastrous consequences. If the board also chooses to take a passive leadership approach, the church may utterly stall in its ability to make mission advancing decisions. Dan Hotchkiss calls

---
¹ “High D” is in reference to the popular DISC personality assessment in which D stands for dominant, I stands for inspiring, S stands for supportive, and C stands for cautious.
this, “the wait-and-ask approach.” The senior pastor waits to make any decisions until he
has asked the board for their approval. The board, in turn, may either wait to make
decisions until they have asked a committee for more information or they may simply
cede the decision back to a committee.

The wait-and-ask approach, followed consistently, can turn what could have been
an energetic, mission-driven congregation into a ponderous bureaucracy whose
first principle appears to be that nothing gets decided until everybody’s
fingerprints are on it.3

No one wants to be accountable for the decisions that no one is willing to make.

Alternatively, if the board takes a more active approach, as was more the case at
the church in Texas, the elders may begin to pull the congregation in different directions.
Especially in larger churches, ministry programs and departments become silos and their
committees start to operate as their own fiefdoms. The board can function more like a
“house of representatives” with elders advocating for the budget and interests of their
own ministry area. Over time, as different ministry interests come into conflict with one
another, the elders begin to resent the passivity of the senior pastor, who is unwilling to
arbitrate and directly lead. Couple with that the lack of an annual review based upon clear
vision and goals, and the pastor may be shocked when the elders ask him to resign. Dana
Allin, the Synod Executive for the Presbyterian denomination “ECO,” to which my own
congregation belongs, affirms that these requests for a resignation often feel “out of left

---

2 Dan Hotchkiss, Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 197.

3 Hotchkiss, 197.
“field” to the pastor. He or she may believe that everything is going fine in the marriage until the spouse (the church board) suddenly comes and asks for a divorce.  

As the example of the church in California illustrates, however, the same kind of breakdown in the relationship between the board and the senior pastor can occur when the senior pastor’s leadership is too assertive. Though pastors, as a stereotype, may be amicable and conflict-averse personalities, they also tend to choose their profession out of a strong sense of calling and purpose. The best senior pastors long to see God work in and through their congregation. They want to see the power of the Gospel unleashed with new people coming to faith in Christ, longtime Christians transformed, and the community flourishing. When they find that their system of church governance interferes with the changes they want to make, or more often, the pace with which they would like to make them, they may take a more unilateral or authoritarian approach to the governance of the church. They may seek to lead the church apart from the elders.  

Once again, this can lead to a variety of harmful consequences, regardless of the particular polity of the church. For one thing, every redeemed Christian still has personal blind spots and sinful dispositions. No one person possesses all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit or can claim a monopoly on God’s insight or direction. In the post Pentecost era, God speaks through the wisdom and insight of all of those indwelt with the Spirit. It is quite possible then that equally godly, equally mission-focused, equally passionate Christians might disagree on what should be the particular vision for the congregation, who the congregation should target, and how it should best go about reaching them. The authoritarian approach to church leadership removes any accountability for when the

---

4 Dana Allin (Synod Executive, ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians), interviewed over the phone by Charlie Dunn, October 30, 2017.
pastor may be misguided or wrong. And are not the elders also ultimately accountable to Jesus Christ and to the congregation for the direction of the church?

But as was more the case at the church in California, it is possible that the elders even agree with the pastor on the general vision for the church. They too may want to reach a younger generation and the unchurched. They also may recognize the need to make significant changes to do this. But significant cultural changes cannot usually be affected by one person. The authoritarian senior pastor who is unwilling to work with the session may find himself out in front only to realize that no one is behind him. The session may technically vote yes in favor of a change (such as ending traditional, choir-lead worship). But if they are not passionate about it, and if they have not been involved in the decision-making process, they likely will not be willing to take the hard stand needed to implement the vision. When some resistance or complaints come from friends and members, they may back down, leaving the senior pastor to shoulder the criticism alone.

Or, more as was the case at the church in California, though the session supported the senior pastor in his general vision for the church, they disagreed about how to bring it about and the best timing with which to do so. One of the greatest risks to an authoritarian senior pastor is simply impatience. The elders may have a pulse on the pace at which the congregation can handle change or they may have wise ideas about how to lead people into it. The pastor can greatly benefit from this “boots on the ground” knowledge that church members may otherwise hesitate to give him (especially if he comes across as particularly authoritarian). When the elders finally decide to assert their real authority over a decision, it may come as a shock to the senior pastor, who has never
been challenged before. As was the case in California, it may begin a messy end to the relationship.

While God can bring long-term redemption out of any situation, it should be noted how detrimental a pastoral resignation or termination can be. The pastor (much less the pastor’s family) may feel deeply wounded. Amidst high tensions, the pastor and the church may not treat each other in a very loving or Christian way. For wise reasons, the formal end of the pastor’s terms of call may happen behind closed doors, but the face-saving positivity and vagueness of the announcement may provoke a number of questions and rumors among the congregation over whether it was a resignation or termination. Parishioners (or even some elders) may be upset, if they feel that the pastor was treated wrongly, and some may determine not to like the new pastor or even to leave the church as a show of solidarity with the prior clergy. In the church in California, more than half of the church followed the pastor to start a new church down the street! Those who were particularly bothered by the senior pastor may unfairly treat his successor with wariness and suspicion. And leadership continuity, relationship capital, and vision momentum are almost inevitably lost.

Yet even in a case where a broken relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders does not lead to a resignation or termination, the congregation will still suffer for it. Take the case of the church in the Southwest. Though the senior pastor remains in her position, she feels little ability to lead the congregation creatively and strategically. She has years of experience serving in various churches. She has worked hard to develop deep theological understanding, pastoral wisdom, and leadership competencies through graduate degrees and continuing education programs. She has
closely studied the demographics of the congregation’s immediate neighborhood and the
trends in the surrounding culture. She has a great deal of leadership capital to contribute,
yet she has essentially been asked to preach and lead in worship and to leave the decision
making to the body of elders. When she (or a member of her staff) have a great idea, she
is essentially powerless to effect it, referring it instead to the bureaucratic process of
committee discussion, which with study, first and second readings, and the support of the
right elder, may eventually make it up to the session for approval. Let us hope that by
then the idea is still even feasible or relevant. Of course, no board wants to think of
themselves as “micromanagers.” But as Dan Hotchkiss puts it, “Until it is willing to
delegate real management authority to someone else, the board remains the default chief
operating officer.”

Not only may this micromanaged, group decision making process lead to ministry
stagnation and inefficiency, but it can have a seriously negative effect on senior pastor
(and staff) morale. Is it fair to hold the senior pastor accountable for goals she does not
have the freedom or power to actually carry out? Can she really be called “head of staff”
for a staff she cannot hire, fire, or lead? She may wonder, “What qualifies this elder to
know what is the best curriculum for the elementary ministry or the best way to order a
worship service?” Though the elder may be incredibly successful in her given field of
business, law or real-estate, is she best suited to make all church decisions because she is
an elder? What exactly is the job of an elder? As organizational board guru, John Carver,
notes, “It is predictable that in almost all organizations that employees know what their

---

5 Hotchkiss, 6.
respective jobs are with more confidence and accuracy than the board knows its own.” It is a low-trust, low-function ministry environment.

Moreover, when the board is mired in the weeds of day-to-day management decisions and approvals, the board misses its potential to cast real vision for the church. Instead of offering advice on sermons, critiquing ministry programs, and questioning the worthiness of particular budget directions, the governing board could be doing what it is called to do: govern! The session is the singular body charged with discerning the vision and values and future direction for the church, yet a board that cannot entrust real decision-making authority to the senior pastor can never venture into this vision casting territory. No wonder that Carver further observes that in spite of having many capable and talented individual board members, most church boards “regularly exhibit procedures of governance that are deeply flawed.” No one is really thinking about where the car should be going for they are far too consumed with simply working the pedals and keeping the engine running.

In response to the danger of micro-managing, some church boards may be tempted to swing the pendulum in the other way. Though they may not be in favor of a senior pastor who takes on a “self-assumed authority” in a way similar to what happened at the church in California, why should not the board simply give that authority? Rather than meddle in matters and decisions the board is less qualified or present to make, why not empower the senior pastor to run the church and then get out of the way? This might enable the elders to do more ministry and to have fewer meetings. This can seem like a

---


7 Carver, 18.
very appealing approach, especially when the church is growing under a highly capable and charismatic leader, as was the case with the mega-church on the East coast. But this relationship between a highly empowered senior pastor and a “rubber-stamping” board of elders comes with its set of problems too.

First, as great as the senior pastor may be, the church may miss out on the leadership input and involvement of some of its most capable and gifted leaders. In these types of church environments Ted Hull notes that “board meetings often consist of people sitting around, waiting to vote on an idea that’s already been convincingly presented by the pastor.”

In this dynamic, there is little opportunity for the wisdom of the elders to enhance or sharpen the vision for the church. Over time, groups tend to make better decisions than individuals. Moreover, some of the most driven, capable elders may refrain from wanting to participate on the board at all. As Dan Hotchkiss observes, the days are mostly gone when people want to serve on a board purely for the status of the position. “Today’s high-expectation volunteers respond enthusiastically when they believe that their time will be used well.” When spending hours at board meetings will the elders actually deliberate and make decisions? Or will they give their time merely for the honor of endorsing the pastor’s pre-conceived plans? High level volunteers stop volunteering when they feel that their time is being wasted.

Secondly, when a board cedes all of the decision-making authority to the senior pastor, the church becomes very dependent upon the senior pastor. This may work for the short-term, but it is a great risk in the long-term. Eventually, the highly-capable and

---


9 Hotchkiss, 23.
charismatic senior pastor will retire. Or worse, he may suddenly leave to take a position with another congregation. This can either leave a significant leadership vacuum or it may create impossible expectations for the successor to fulfill. Though the senior pastor may have possessed a “blank-check” of elder confidence to lead the church as he saw fit (as was the case with the church on the East coast), usually those decisions (some of which would inevitably create resistance) were smoothed out by long-time relationships with church members or elders. But when the new senior pastor arrives she will not have that bank of relational capital to draw from. There is much assumed in the “we trust our senior pastor to run the church” model that does not come to the fore until the new pastor runs into a sacred cow of which he was not aware. And though the prior senior pastor may have embraced the mantle of solely leading the church (along with carrying out all of his other responsibilities), the new pastor may be a more collaborative leader. She may feel isolated or overwhelmed under expectations effectively to discern the vision and direction for the church alone.

Thirdly and perhaps most concerning, a “rubber-stamping” board neglects the precious responsibility with which it has been entrusted. Whatever the church may call its governing body, that governing body is legally responsible, and more importantly, spiritually accountable for what happens in the life of the church. The board is called to govern the church on behalf of not only its members but also on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ. A failure of proper oversight is usually exposed only when the senior pastor acts in a financially or morally unworthy way. Though nothing of this sort happened at the church on the East coast, the passive board put itself in the uncomfortable position where the reputation and well-being of the church could have been compromised due to neglect.
For all of these reasons and as these examples illustrate, the health of the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders is absolutely critical to the health of the congregation. If the pastor is too passive, the elders may match his passivity creating a church of inactivity. Alternatively, they may actively pull the church in different directions and eventually resent the absence of a leader, who is unwilling to arbitrate and directly lead. If the pastor becomes too authoritarian, she may meet resistance from the elders or the elders may not develop the spiritual muscles to help her discern God’s vision for the church. The church becomes tied solely to the senior pastor’s vision and personality, and the elders may feel that they have little to contribute. They may even neglect the oversight they are charged to provide. And if the elders micromanage the congregation, the pastor can lose her ability to exercise effective, visionary leadership for the congregation, and the congregation and its ministries may experience stagnation, inefficiency and low morale. In all of these scenarios, the senior pastor’s tenure can become tenuous and the congregation will be hindered from carrying out its mission and vision. It may even suffer significant harm.

1.3 Church Size Amplifies the Challenge

This dynamic between the pastor and the lay leadership is present within churches of all sizes, but it becomes amplified in large churches. After studying and consulting with congregations across the denominational spectrum, Dan Hotchkiss concludes: “No one fact tells you more about a congregation than its size, and no statistic better captures the size of a Protestant church than its median worship attendance.”10 We should expect then that the size of the church would have a large impact on the church’s culture and

10 Hotchkiss, 8.
formal governance in general and on the way that the board relates with the senior pastor in particular. Timothy Keller clearly articulates how these fundamental size dynamics impact church leadership:

One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a “size culture” that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and what ministers, staff, and lay leaders do. We tend to think of the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how a church operates. The difference between how churches of 100 and 1,000 function may be much greater than the difference between how a Presbyterian and a Baptist church of the same size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is in many ways making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another. A large church is not simply a bigger version of a small church. The difference in communication, community formation, and decision-making processes are so great that the leadership skills required in each are of almost completely different orders.\(^{11}\)

If Keller is correct in this assessment, which Hotchkiss and my own experience in churches of multiple sizes tell me he is, any church must understand its own size dynamics in order to structure the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders accordingly.\(^ {12}\)

This is where one might expect denominational leadership to prove particularly helpful. After all, is not that the advantage of a denomination? With generations of experience and with so many churches to learn from, should not the larger ecclesial body be able to provide “best practice” wisdom for individual churches to follow? One would


\(^{12}\) Both Hotchkiss and Keller define a “large church,” as a congregation exceeding 400 people in average weekly worship attendance. Keller further defines a “very large” church as a congregation exceeding 800 in weekly worship attendance. All of the four church illustrations in this introduction are based upon churches with an average weekly worship attendance exceeding 1000.
certainly expect that this wisdom would extend to the critical relationship between the senior pastor and the elder board.

As Hotchkiss points out, however, “most denominational advice about governance works best in average-size congregations,” which Hotchkiss defines as congregations with an average worship attendance including kids and adults between 150-400. This limited denominational expertise, of course, is not surprising. It makes sense that denominations would direct their “best practice” wisdom towards the broadest number of congregations to whom it would apply. Yet Hotchkiss also observes that “the number of larger congregations has grown a great deal since 1980, and the percentage of all congregants who belong to them has grown much faster.” There are varied and fascinating theories behind why congregations are moving in this direction. But whatever the reasons why the number of large churches are growing, denominational polity guidance has been very slow to catch up. This would be reason alone for why the senior pastor and board of elders relationship is especially important for large congregations to consider.

The nature of this relationship is made all the more important though by the larger size dynamics in themselves. For one thing, the larger a church grows the more formal its bylaws and governance need to become. This, of course, is true for any organization. Larger organizations require clearly defined roles and hierarchy structures for the organization to be able to operate efficiently. The kind of organizational clarity that can be helpful at a mid-size level becomes an absolute necessity at a large level. This is for

13 Hotchkiss, 3.

14 Hotchkiss, 3.
the simple reason that the more people that are part of an organization the more diverse views arise regarding what should be done and the way decisions should be made. With so many people drawing upon their own experiences of how things are done in their own workplace or how they were done in their prior church, it becomes absolutely essential to clearly define an efficient and timely process for how decisions are made and who makes them. For large churches to function with any missional progress and intentionality, they must venture into the realm of distinguishing governance from management. The board members should absolutely still govern the congregation, but their ability to manage its various ministries, staff, and day-to-day decisions becomes impractical, unwise, and even harmful. This, of course, is different in small churches. John Carver points out that smaller organizations are more likely to be run by a “working board” where board members not only govern but also carry out the role of the staff.\textsuperscript{15} This is a dramatically different board dynamic and board-pastor dynamic. But for large churches it becomes all the more important for the board members, without giving up their governance responsibility, to delegate decision making authority.

On the one hand, boards for large churches have to learn to empower the senior pastor. As Keller explains, “the larger the church the more decision-making falls to the staff rather than to the whole membership or even the lay leaders.”\textsuperscript{16} Without clear and empowered leadership, it is hard for the organization to move toward a singular purpose or goal. To quote Lovett Weems, authority “gives one an opportunity to provide

\textsuperscript{15} Carver, 10.

\textsuperscript{16} Keller, 3.
leadership.” Moreover, without a clear decision maker, the large size of a church can make it easier for ministries to go their own direction and to work in distinction if not opposition to each other. This becomes especially clear during budget season. Instead of the board adopting a common vision for the congregation for which the senior pastor helps to budget accordingly, board members compete for a larger piece of the budget pie on behalf of their perceived ministry constituency. Only by empowering the senior pastor to make management decisions, “can a large institution resist the downward pull of habit and rigidity or the centrifugal effect of subgroups digging themselves into private bunkers.”

On the other hand, boards of large churches must be all the more careful not to abdicate their responsibility for governance, vision and values to the senior pastor alone. In a large congregation the senior pastor is asked to wear a number of hats and to work under a higher degree of organizational pressure. To preach consistently good sermons, lead a large staff team, manage the internal workings and business of the church, provide pastoral care to members, and then discern and shoulder the church’s vision alone, is typically too much for any one person to handle. As the Clergy Health Initiative and various other pastoral studies have demonstrated, it is a recipe for burnout and a temptation to narcissism or even indiscretion.

17 Lovett Weems, Church Leadership (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 3.
18 Keller, 15.
19 Hotchkiss, 9.
Suffice it to say that in a larger church it is all the more necessary to think through how to wisely structure the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders. Without an empowered senior pastor and staff, a large church will fail to function efficiently or pursue its mission. Yet to ask a large church senior pastor to govern the church alone is not only unwise (as already discussed) but quite an unreasonable expectation. The health of the large congregation especially depends on clearly and wisely defining the roles of the senior pastor and elders.

1.4 Presbyterian Governance Ensures the Challenge

The aforementioned challenges apply to churches (especially large ones) of all governance structures. Even formally congregational or hierarchical churches often practically employ a “board of elders” to refine goals and foster buy-in for the vision of the church. Yet though the relationship between a pastor and the lay officers of the church is critical in any congregation, it is especially key within the Presbyterian structure of church governance. The term Presbyterian comes from the Greek word meaning “elder.” The church is governed by a plurality of elders rather than by a bishop or the majority vote of a congregation. Presbyterians celebrate that Jesus governs his church through the collective discernment and wisdom of a group of spiritual leaders rather than solely through an individual. It is through listening to the voices of the many that the singular voice of Jesus is best heard. Teaching elders (pastors) and ruling elders (lay leaders) are expected to govern together.

---


Moreover, Presbyterians are suspicious in their anthropology of putting too much power into the hands of any one individual. Because of the corrupting nature of original sin, which remains present even in a regenerate heart, unchecked power can quickly give rise to domineering, selfishness, or indiscretion. Like the structure of the American government, which in many ways is patterned after Presbyterian church governance, the plurality of elders is designed to help keep the church’s pastor in check.

These theological convictions help to ensure communal and accountable church governance. At the same time, they can also lead to stagnation and an inherent resistance to change. Though all of the elders are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit, practically speaking, it can be difficult for a group of people to determine to move in the same direction. And if it is hard to arrive at consensus on big picture decisions, it can be even more frustrating when consensus or a group vote is required to make time-sensitive decisions in the day to day work of the church. Presbyterians are often mocked for their “decision by committee” governance, wherein “minutes are kept and hours are wasted.” When a group vote is necessary for nearly every decision, the pace of change and the work of ministry can slow to a screeching halt.\(^2^4\)

Accordingly, particularly in a Presbyterian context, it becomes even more critical that the church wisely order the relationship between the elders and the senior pastor. How can the elders and the senior pastor relate in a way where the pastor is held accountable and yet not dominated? How can the church avoid having an autonomous senior pastor and rubber-stamping session on the one hand or a passive senior pastor and micromanaging session on the other? How do you enable a pastor to exercise effective,

\(^{2^4}\) Keller, I-2.
visionary, missional leadership while also ensuring that the senior pastor is accountable to the plurality of elders? In practice, how can the senior pastor and the session operate together in a way where they are jointly discerning the will of God for the church?

Inevitably, many Presbyterian churches have sought to clarify this relationship in a way that works best for their given context, but many have not. According to Dana Allin, the Synod Executive for ECO, though some churches are currently wrestling with this issue, most churches in this denomination have yet to clarify the senior pastor-board of elders relationship. Practically speaking, every church board delegates some level of authority to the senior pastor, but it is *rarely* clear what it is. It is usually assumed, unwritten, and informal. The need for clear definition arises only once a crisis has emerged between the senior pastor and the board of elders. Once this crisis arises, Allin finds that congregations are eager to bring greater clarity to this relationship. These congregations also generally recognize the need to delegate more decision-making authority to the senior pastor, but they are held up by two fears.

First, Presbyterian congregations in the United States have long utilized the somewhat helpful distinction between “teaching elders” and “ruling elders.” As I will later explore, this nomenclature does serve to highlight that both the pastors (teaching elders) and the lay board members (ruling elders) are both *elders* ordained by God to lead in the church. In that sense, it is preferable terminology to the distinction, for instance, between “clergy” and “laity.” And the polity guide of America’s largest Presbyterian denomination, the PC(USA), makes it clear that ruling elders “together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment and

---

25 Allin.
discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation.” Ministers or teaching elders are then included in the role of governance with the ruling elders. However, given this distinction between “teaching elders,” whose primary responsibilities are defined in terms of preaching, teaching, leading in worship and providing pastoral care, and “ruling elders,” whose primary responsibility is defined in terms of governance, many Presbyterian elder boards struggle to cede decision making authority to the “teaching elder” outside of the realm of teaching or worship. In other words, this nomenclature, which highlights the God-ordained leadership role of lay elders, also biases elder boards not to delegate “ruling authority” to the senior pastor.

Secondly, as noted before, Presbyterians have an inherent fear of dictatorial or tyrannical church leadership. Much like the United States form of government that was created out of the shadow of England’s King George, Presbyterian governance was created out of the shadow of the Pope and the Roman or even Anglican ecclesial hierarchy. American Presbyterians, who are heirs not only of Reformation history but also of American Revolution history, have a greater concern for creating checks and balances to prevent the unaccountable exercise of power by a senior pastor. This can, as we have already noted, create a church environment biased against change and inclined towards decision making gridlock.


28 I recognize that Presbyterians would attribute their form of church governance not to a historical reaction but to the teaching of the New Testament Scriptures. I will explore the biblical warrant for the plural ministry and rule of elders later in this paper. Though this form of governance is rooted in Scripture, the application of this form of governance was located in a particular historical moment when fear of tyrannical leadership was high. This is even more the case for American Presbyterian churches in which the concern for “checks and balances” has been reinforced through the American government theory.
Accordingly, even Presbyterian congregations who recognize the need to clarify the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders, and who want to do so in a way that both empowers the senior pastor but also keeps the senior pastor accountable, struggle to know how best to do so. The PC(USA) Book of Order offers little instruction here and neither does the polity of the newly formed Presbyterian denomination, ECO, to which my own congregation belongs and to which my greatest interest is focused. The ECO guide for church polity and discipline has almost nothing to say about how to structure the relationship between the pastor(s) and the ruling elders:

Every congregation is governed by its session. The session consists of the elders duly elected by and from the covenant partners (members) of the congregation, along with the congregation’s installed pastors and associate pastors...29 The pastor shall ordinarily moderate all meetings of the session...30 Elders are given authority and responsibility, along with pastors, to oversee the spiritual health of the congregation as well as the congregation’s faithfulness to God’s mission...31 Pastors are to use the spiritual gifts for ministry, with a particular emphasis on the gifts of teaching and leadership.32

While the polity guide 1) specifies that a session includes both pastors and elders, 2) expects pastors and elders to govern together, 3) assigns the moderator role of the session to the senior pastor, and 4) expects pastors to especially use their gifts in leadership, no specifics are given about how the senior pastor and the board of elders might best relate to each other. Some churches have an assumed dynamic to this relationship, and others more clearly define it based on trial and error experience. But within ECO at least, there


30 “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 1.0602.

31 “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 2.02.

32 “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 2.04.
are no polity rules much less a “best practice guide” to inform how congregations can structure the relationship between the elders and the senior pastor in an optimal way.

Given the Presbyterian commitment to do all things “decently and in good order,” this is clearly a gap to be filled. What are those best practices and principles that can enable the senior pastor and the board of elders to pursue the vision of God for the congregation in a way that enables visionary, empowered leadership while also preserving accountability and the value of corporate discernment? If one could answer this question, I expect that it would be greatly helpful to a number of Presbyterian leaders: senior pastors who want to know how best to relate to their elders; elders who want to know how best to embody their role and how to relate to their senior pastor; and associate pastors who aspire to lead well as a future senior pastor. Though I’m focusing particularly on a Presbyterian context, I suspect that there would be some principles that other traditions could apply to their own governance context as well.

1.5 Toward a Solution

What then is the solution? What are those practices and principles that can enable the senior pastor and the board of elders to pursue the vision of God for the congregation in a way that enables visionary, empowered leadership while also preserving pastoral accountability and the value of corporate discernment? Though possible solutions are manifold, I would like to suggest two solutions that are complementary to each other. Each is helpful when employed on its own, but together they offer a far more comprehensive two-pronged approach.
In chapter 2, as the first part of the solution, I will draw from John and Miriam Carver’s work on non-profit board governance. The “Policy Governance” model is “the most well-known modern theory of governance worldwide,” and its application to non-profit organizations is therefore a reasonable starting point from which to gather insights into how best to structure the relationship between the senior pastor and the session. Though there are admittedly some significant structural differences in Presbyterian polity as compared to a typical non-profit board, for which adjustments need to be made, there is much that can be learned about the logic of good governance.

Logical, consistent, effective governance principles can be applied across multiple contexts, regardless of whether they are first suggested by Christians. Further, as Dan Hotchkiss explains:

> 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 an all-purpose rubric for benevolent work.

The corporation is the current organizational and legal model for American congregations today, so we can learn from how best to govern organizations in general and then make necessary adaptations for a congregational context in particular.

In short, the Carver “Policy Governance” model arises out of the conviction that “boards tend to be, in fact, incompetent groups of competent individuals.” It asserts that a clear, policy driven approach to governance helps the board to fulfill its responsibility.

---


34 Hotchkiss, 5.

to ensure that “its organization works.” It is an approach to governance that “enables extensive empowerment to staff while preserving controls necessary for accountability.” In this way, it is potentially a great help toward avoiding the problems of either a rubber stamping or a micro-managing elder board. I will draw out several of the model’s key principles as it relates to the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders and explain how these can be applied within a congregation. I will also highlight what could be some of the challenges and limitations to utilizing fully the model within a Presbyterian polity. Then taking these challenges and adjustments into account, I will propose that large Presbyterian congregations consider utilizing an adapted Policy Governance model as a way to structure the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders.

As helpful as the Policy Governance model can be, it is an insufficient solution in itself. Though it can clarify the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders both empowering the senior pastor while also preserving accountability to the board, it cannot in itself bring elders into the practice of confidently joining the senior pastor to discern God’s vision for the church. Part of why elders are inclined to rubber stamp or micromanage finances and facilities is because they mistrust their own spiritual discernment and wisdom in matters of theological knowledge and pastoral experience. How can the elder board function as a body of spiritual leaders who are able to collectively discern the will of God for the church?

\[36\] Carver and Carver, “Carver’s Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations,” 2.
In chapter 3, as the second part of the solution, I will look to American Presbyterian history and the writings of Samuel Miller to reimagine the role of an elder and recover a vision of elders as spiritual shepherds. What did elders of the past know and do to equip them to discern God’s will for the church? How did they understand their role as spiritual shepherds? Samuel Miller’s treatise on the office of the ruling elder is a frequently referenced authority on the Presbyterian view of elders. An early 19th century professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller provides a learned historical perspective from American Presbyterianism from which we can reimagine the role of the ruling elder. His chapters on the necessity of ruling elders and on the duties of ruling elders do not just describe the role that these elders play in helping to set the vision and direction for every aspect of the church (governance). Rather, he expects that they are actively involved as “shepherds” in the lives of their sheep: “to visit and pray with the sick…to take part in conducting devotional exercises…to visit the members of the church and their families…to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to caution the unwary; to reclaim the wandering.” In other words, elders are to assist the pastor with the spiritual care and discipleship of their flock.

Moreover, Miller explicates the relationship between the pastor and the elders in such a way that protects the leadership of the pastor while also ensuring pastoral accountability. In this sense, Samuel Miller is trying to address the same issue that my thesis seeks to resolve. His form of Presbyterian Republicanism serves “to guard, on the

---


39 Miller, 162-163.

40 Miller, 144-145.
one hand, against the intrusions of laymen into the functions of the clergy, and, on the other, against the encroachments of clerical ambition.”

He also sets high expectations for the kind of spiritual shepherding that will equip ruling elders to be able to perform their governance role.

Finally, in chapter 4 I will show how these two solutions can be put into practice such that the senior pastor and the board of elders can pursue the vision of God for the congregation in a way that enables visionary, empowered leadership while also preserving accountability and the value of corporate discernment. I will point to my own congregation, Highland Park Presbyterian Church, to exemplify how they have adapted the Carver Policy Governance model to structure their senior pastor-board of elders relationship and how they can implement and leverage it further. This especially includes the need to also embrace the concept of spiritual shepherding. I will then highlight the exemplary way that Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis trains their elders to function as spiritual shepherds. Finally, I will explore how Lisa Johnson, ECO’s Director of Lay Leadership, is helping church sessions not only recover the concept of spiritual shepherding but also learn the practice of collective discernment through a program she leads called “Flourishing Leader.”

---

Chapter 2: Policy Governance

2.1 Why Policy Governance?

Churches are not the only non-profit organizations that require good governance. Nearly any organization that longs to produce social good will gather a group of people (a board) to discern its mission and to ensure its intentions are realized. For sizable organizations, it quickly becomes practical, if not essential, to hire a paid staff executive, who can devote the necessary time and energy to implement the organization’s vision and values. Yet herein a governance tension almost inevitably arises. As governance expert John Carver observes, “Many nonprofit and public organizations have chronic problems with the CEO function, either because it is overpowered or because it is underpowered.”

Organizations have either an autonomous executive and rubber-stamping board on the one hand or a passive executive and micromanaging board on the other hand or they swing like a pendulum between the two. Therefore, not just large Presbyterian congregations, but nearly all large non-profits must wrestle with the question: “How do you enable the executive to exercise empowered, effective leadership while also ensuring that the executive is accountable to the leadership and vision of the board?”

No one has written more extensively about how best to manage this tension and to create effective board dynamics than John Carver. Carver can honestly assert that his Policy Governance model (informally known as the “Carver model”) is “the most well-

---

known modern theory of governance worldwide.” For that reason, nearly everyone who writes about effective church governance interacts with and relies upon Carver’s model to some degree. Its application to non-profit organizations is therefore a reasonable starting point from which to gather insights into how best to structure the relationship between the senior pastor and the session.

Admittedly, there are some significant structural differences in Presbyterian polity (or any church polity) as compared to a typical non-profit board, for which adjustments need to be made. I will suggest those needed adaptions later in this chapter. But there is much that can be learned about the logic of good church governance, even if it does not directly arise from the Bible or church polity. After all, as Presbyterians often quote, Paul tells the church in Corinth that “all things should be done decently and in good order,” and he lifts up the spiritual gifts of governance and leadership, though he gives little detail regarding how exactly to employ them. Therefore, rather than only utilizing the Bible’s teaching on church governance, so long as it does not contradict the Bible, Presbyterians should welcome wisdom about how best to govern, rule, and order the church whether it comes from Christians or non-Christians alike. As John Calvin, the “patron saint” of Presbyterians reasons in the *Institutes*:

---


4 1 Corinthians 14:40.

5 1 Corinthians 12:28.

6 Romans 12:18.
The mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God…we ought not to forget those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind.7

In other words, logical, consistent, effective governance principles can be applied across multiple contexts, regardless of whether they are first suggested by Christians. And as I have already quoted from Dan Hotchkiss, congregations in the United States are legal as well as spiritual organizations. Since the late nineteenth century, the non-profit corporation has provided the organizational model for American congregations. Accordingly, a governance model that works well for non-profit corporations translates in manifold ways to the governance of a church.

Moreover, the Policy Governance model is particularly suited to addressing the relationship between the board and the executive staff member. Affirming the importance of a strong and active board, it asserts that a clear, policy driven approach to governance helps the board to fulfill its responsibility to ensure that “its organization works.”8 At the same time, the model offers a great deal of management authority to the chief-executive. In Carver’s own words, it is an approach to governance that “enables extensive empowerment to staff while preserving controls necessary for accountability.”9 In this way, it is a significant step toward avoiding the problems of either a rubber stamping or a micro-managing elder board, and it promotes a framework in which the senior pastor and the board of elders can discern and pursue God’s vision together.


2.2 What is Policy Governance?

Before exploring how the Policy Governance model can positively structure the relationship between the board of elders and the senior pastor in large Presbyterian churches, it is necessary to first describe the model itself. One of the advantages of the Policy Governance model is its holistic and systematic approach to governance. The problem with many board designs is that they are only a reaction to problems. Accordingly, because “the solution often outlives the problem that justified it,” many decision-making structures only help an organization for a limited period of time.\(^\text{10}\)

Moreover, in contrast to much of the wisdom on “board best practices” that is piecemeal and experience based, Policy Governance offers principles for governance that are interrelated and in many ways dependent upon one another. As the “Policy Governance Official Source Document” states,\(^\text{11}\) Policy Governance is not a specific board structure, a set of “best practices” or a guide to group dynamics. Rather, it is “a comprehensive set of integrated principles that, when consistently applied, allows governing boards to realize owner-accountable organizations.”\(^\text{12}\)

While the clearest definition of Policy Governance comes from the Source Document and those who have the right to officially define the model, in my own words, I will briefly summarize these principles before showing their relevance to the board of elders-senior pastor relationship.

1. Ownership: The board acts on behalf of the organization’s owners (however defined in a non-profit context, which lacks financial shareholders).

\(^{10}\) Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference*, 24.


\(^{12}\) “Policy Governance Official Source Document.”
2. Position of Board: Though the board is accountable to the owners, it is the highest authority in the organization (not merely advisory).

3. Board Holism: The board only has authority when it speaks as a whole (authority does not reside in the opinions of individual members but in the group).

4. Ends Policies: The board defines *in writing* the desired ends of the organization.

5. Means Policies: The board defines the means by which it will go about its own work as a board.

6. Executive Limitation Policies: The board does not prescribe specific means for achieving its chosen ends, but it does limit the acceptable or ethical means by which the executive can achieve them.

7. Policy Sizes: The board tries to write policies in a way that first capture the broadest goal or value the board wants to achieve and then more specific policies “nested” within that more widely encompassing container.

8. Clear and Coherent Delegation: The board should clearly delegate and not duplicate or interfere with the authority given to the CEO.

9. Any Reasonable Interpretation: The person or committee with delegated authority from the board has the right to interpret what the policy means, as long as that interpretation is “reasonable.”

10. Monitoring: It is the board’s responsibility to monitor if the organization is meeting its stated ends, which usually includes evaluation of the CEO’s performance.\(^{13}\)

To be clear, those with the right officially to define Policy Governance insist that all of these principles are interrelated and that “all of the above pieces must be in place for Policy Governance to be effective.”\(^{14}\) I will take exception to that dictum later in this chapter, as I explain how the model must be adapted to fit within Presbyterian polity. In other words, if you are thinking, “this would never work in my congregations for these

\(^{13}\)“Policy Governance Official Source Document.” Though the titles of these principles arise from the “Policy Governance Official Source Document,” these much abridged descriptions are in my own revised words and should not be mistaken as official Policy Governance language.

\(^{14}\)“Policy Governance Official Source Document.”
reasons,” keep reading. I hope to address those concerns later on. For now, however, let us consider how Policy Governance’s most essential principles (as I see them) can greatly aid the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders in large, Presbyterian churches.

2.3 Policy Governance Clarifies the Session-Senior Pastor Relationship

Though Policy Governance presents itself in terms of these ten principles, when we apply them to the context of the senior pastor-board of elders relationship, we can reframe them under four headings. First, we can restate the principles of board position and board holism as “the board of elders (or session) has ultimate governing authority in the congregation.” Second, we can connect the principles of clear delegation along with those about ends, means, limitations, and reasonable interpretation under the heading “the board delegates management authority (not governance responsibility) through a clear, singular point of delegation – the senior pastor.” Third, the principle of monitoring can be restated as “the board of elders holds the senior pastor accountable to its stated ends.” Fourth, because the board embraces its governance responsibility yet delegates its management authority, “the church board can spend its time discerning and deciding upon God’s vision for the church.” Let us consider each of these four re-stated principles in turn.

2.3.1 The Board Has Ultimate Governing Authority and Responsibility

First, the Policy Governance model begins with the assertion that the board has the ultimate governing authority and accountability (which can be delegated to other people). “The board is where all authority resides until some is given away (delegated) to
others."\(^{15}\) On one level, this assertion may seem self-evident. Those who work in the corporate world may quickly assent that the board has a fiduciary responsibility for the organization on behalf of the shareholders. But in many churches this conviction is far from self-evident. Though the polity of ECO Presbyterian churches, for example, may clearly state “the session has responsibility and authority for governing the congregation and guiding its mission for Christ in the world,”\(^ {16}\) this \textit{in no way ensures} that elders (or staff) recognize the session’s authority in the church. After all, if you were to ask most Presbyterian Christians “who owns this congregation?” they would hopefully be quick to say “Jesus Christ.” We will explore later what this means for the “ownership” concept in the Policy Governance model. But beyond that, members, elders or staff may be unclear about who has the ultimate authority to make decisions and the ultimate responsibility (especially when things go wrong) for the congregation. After all, elders usually serve on rotating terms. It may seem as though the long-time senior pastor, the executive pastor, the worship committee, or even some of the congregation’s long-time, influential members have far more de facto authority or at least institutional memory. Some new elders are simply honored to be ordained and to have the opportunity to serve their church, but they would be slow to recognize the mantle of authority and responsibility entrusted to them.

Here is where Policy Governance starts with such a necessary conviction. As John Carver puts it, “the purpose of governance is to ensure, usually on behalf of others, that an organization achieves what it should achieve while avoiding those behaviors and

\(^{15}\) Carver and Carver, “Carver’s Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations,” 2.

situations that should be avoided.”

Policy Governance, in keeping with Presbyterian polity, requires the session to own the fact that it, not the staff leader (pastor, executive director, etc.), is ultimately accountable and responsible for whether the organization is fulfilling its mission and vision.

For many congregations, this alone would be a significant shift. “The Policy Governance model is not designed to please today’s board members or today’s managers.” There are some pastors, individual elders, and even some committees, ministry leaders, and members, who might be resistant to such a shift in thinking. In the case of the church in Texas, it would require the initially passive session to provide top-down vision and direction for the congregation rather than simply approving committee motions (more on this later) or essentially sending plans back to a committee for a final stamp or decision. A change in this direction might be (and in fact has been) upsetting to certain staff and committees. In the case of the church in California, it would require the senior pastor to yield his vision and ideas to the authority of the board. He would have to surrender any notions of being the sole visionary and decision maker in the church. In the case of the session of the congregation on the east coast, it would require them to take a more active monitoring role to ensure that they are faithfully stewarding their governance responsibility. This conviction of board authority does not align with a group of elders who simply want to show up for a few meetings a year and have inside access to the pastor’s decisions. When a real crisis does occur, the board will quickly find out that it is responsible, whether it has owned that decision or not. And in the case of the church in

17 Carver, Boards That Make a Difference, xxvii-xxviii.

18 Carver, Boards That Make a Difference, xxvii-xxviii.
the Southwest, it may be immensely relieving for the senior pastor, who has felt that she
has to politically weave in and out of various bodies for any decision to be made. In a
church context in which it can often feel like there are multiple bosses and authority
sources, this can be incredibly clarifying and helpful. There is one ultimate authority for
the organization – the board.

One should note, however, that the ultimate authority is the board as a whole, not
any of its particular members (elders). As Ted Hull puts it, “Board holism is one of the
key principles of Policy Governance.”19 The necessity of this principle is better first
illustrated than explained. In most large Presbyterian churches, in addition to serving as
members of the session, elders also serve in various ministries of the church. But in these
other ministry settings, do elders have decision making authority simply by virtue of
being an elder or a board member? Suppose that an elder serving on the missions
committee would like to see more attention given to the congregation’s global missions
during the Sunday worship services. Can she instruct the senior pastor to add a missions
announcement to the upcoming order or worship? Or suppose an elder serving on the
facilities committee does not like the senior pastor’s decision to move to a smaller office
and to turn his larger office into a classroom space. Can he instruct the pastor to move
back because he is a member of the board? Or suppose an elder sits on the worship
committee. When he does not like the senior pastor’s decision to sit on the first pew
rather than on the chancel, can he instruct him to return to the chancel? Perhaps not too
shockingly, each of these actions and those like them, recently occurred at a Presbyterian

church in the Dallas metropolis (not my own, to be clear!). And not too surprisingly, their senior pastor recently resigned.

Now of course, it would be one thing if the elder had brought her concern to the board and the board had collectively affirmed a particular course of action. But to not practice board holism is to essentially affirm that individual board members (elders) hold an authority independent from or in some cases even greater than that of the board as a whole. After all, if the board votes on a particular course of action can an individual board member then choose to ignore or work around that decision to pursue his personal preference? Does an individual elder get to ignore or override a decision made by the board?

In order to avoid this contradictory and dysfunctional board behavior, Policy Governance lifts up the importance of “board holism.” The board is an it not a them. Though individual board members rightly bring their diverse perspectives to the board, and though they might disagree on particular issues or motions, the board speaks with “one voice” authority “only when it passes an official motion at a properly constituted meeting.”20 This way of thinking about the board almost entirely aligns with stated Presbyterian polity, which locates governing authority in the session of elders (not in individual elders), but it could be incredibly clarifying for churches to begin to recognize this in practice. Here are at least three key implications.

First, it means that though individual elders might disagree on a topic, once the board votes on a particular decision, individual board members have three options. They can support the decision because they personally supported it. They can support the

decision because the group supported it, and even though they disagree, refuse to speak against it. They can step down from the board. The board speaks with clarity and will not send contradictory messages.

Second, board holism means that individual board members must distinguish between what role they are playing in a given context. Of course, for an elder to serve on the board in no way means that he or she can no longer serve in other ministries of the church. But when serving in those ministries the elder must acknowledge that she does not do so with the authority of the board. Her opinions are only her opinions, which she must submit to whatever other decision making structures are in place. Of course, some churches may rightly see this as incompatible with the notion of a “working board” where certain elders are assigned to oversee particular tasks or ministries. But based upon Policy Governance, while an individual board member may serve in children’s ministry or usher in the sanctuary, he does not do so with the authority of the board. As Ted Hull puts it, “Someone who happens to sit on the board may volunteer to visit church members, but unless the entire board goes and visits someone, you don’t have a working board.”

Third and finally, board holism ensures that the church actually has a singular (though collective) point of authority and that the board is in fact responsible for the decisions it makes. To fail to see this can lead to an incredibly fragmented church. And nothing could be more confusing for a senior pastor than to essentially report to ten or twenty different bosses, each of whom may issue their own edicts and often contradictory opinions. Though the board is the ultimate authority and ultimately responsible for the congregation, the senior pastor reports to one boss, the board as a whole.

---

21 Hull, 32.
2.3.2 The Board Delegates Management Authority

The second major conviction of Policy Governance is that the board delegates management authority (not governance responsibility) through a clear, singular point of delegation – the senior pastor. Of course, any board (especially one made up of volunteers) must delegate management or decision making within the organization to some degree. No church board attempts to make decisions at every level. By virtue of this delegation, the board does not in any way give up its ultimate governance responsibility.

As Ted Hull helpfully explains:

Authority is directed downwards, whereas responsibility is directed upwards. It’s helpful if you use the right preposition in the right place. When using the word responsibility follow it up by using the preposition to. When using the word authority, follow it up by using the preposition over....A board cannot delegate its responsibility, it can delegate its authority.22

In other words, the board must maintain its sense of responsibility for whatever happens in the congregation down to the lowest level, even if it delegates authority over decisions made at lower levels. Again, every board must delegate authority in this way to some extent. The significance of the Policy Governance model, however, is not then in its encouragement to boards to delegate its authority but in its insistence that this authority should be delegated to a single individual. As John and Miriam Carver put it, the board is encouraged to “use a single point of delegation and hold this position accountable for meeting the board’s expectations for organizational performance.”23

The second half of this sentence is what justifies the first. As mentioned before, Presbyterian elder boards are often hesitant to delegate too much power to one individual.

22 Hull, 38.

Accordingly, they will employ various different committees to execute or manage the board’s decisions as they pertain to various areas of the church. These might include, for instance, governing bodies such as a worship committee, a youth committee, or a missions committee. But if the board delegates the accomplishment of its ends to staff or committees that are not under the oversight of the senior pastor (but which report to the board), it becomes very difficult for the board to actually hold anyone accountable for whether its vision is or is not being achieved. If there are many people or groups who are determining the best way to carry out the board’s vision, there will inevitably be disagreement about how to do so. The board will find itself in the role of arbitrating disagreement. Additionally, if the senior pastor has to gain the approval of these various committees in order to take action in their areas, she can very reasonably protest that she is being held accountable for management decisions that she was not actually enabled to make. Of course, this does not mean that the senior pastor will not in turn delegate decision making authority to other pastors, staff, lay-people, or even teams of lay-people, but singular-delegation does mean that all of these individuals and groups report to the senior pastor not around the senior pastor.

Most importantly then, this singular delegation has the effect of creating role clarity between the board and the senior pastor. And though no relationship in a non-profit organization is more important,24 very few churches take the time to clarify the specific responsibilities and authorities of the senior pastor. Though the church may spend months, if not years, carefully searching for the best senior pastor to hire, they do little to think through how, once hired, the senior pastor can best work together with the

---

board of elders. Instead, church boards are notorious for creating committees, officers, and board sub-parts that duplicate, obscure, or interfere with the job of the senior pastor. Boards will often delegate one responsibility to the senior pastor only to then delegate the same responsibility to a committee or to a task force. But Policy Governance refuses to allow for this level of authority ambiguity by insisting that the board delegate its decision making authority through the senior pastor. The board has one employee – the senior pastor.

This principle not only has the capacity to reduce role ambiguity for the senior pastor and the board, but it also enables the board to actually make sure the congregation lives out its mission and vision. Delegating all of the execution, management authority through the senior pastor has the twofold effect of both empowering the senior pastor to truly lead and holding the senior pastor accountable for her leadership. The model has a bias toward “empowering the staff, leaving to their creativity and innovation as much latitude as possible.” It enables a senior pastor to exercise her God given gifts of teaching and leadership to communicate and carry out the vision in the best way she discerns. At the same time, it enables the board of elders not to be merely a rubber stamping body but actually to hold the senior pastor accountable for whether he is achieving the organization’s desired ends.

What does this principle of singular delegation through the senior-pastor look like in practice? What does the board of elders actually do or control and what does the senior pastor do or control? Well, in short, the board seeks to govern not to manage. The board

25 Hull, 39.

makes decisions about desired ends for the organization. The board of elders carefully define and redefine the reason for why the congregation exists. As John Carver puts it, “ends” refers to the organization’s product (changes in or for people), the organization’s beneficiaries (which people), and efficiency (worth of that change in terms of monetary cost or cost in other results or recipients forgone).”27 In other words, the board is not simply concerned with staff morale, the efficiency of the org chart, or especially in a church context, the services and programs that the church is providing. Instead, the board is constantly asking questions like the following. Why does this congregation exist? How can we know that we are meeting that goal? What change do we want to see happen in the people who worship in this church? How can we know when that is happening? What impact do we want to make upon our surrounding community? Who are the people whom God has primarily called us to reach? Based on our history, gifts and resources, what has God uniquely positioned us to accomplish for his kingdom?

The job of the board is to consider the ends, goals, or outcomes that God is leading the congregation to pursue. These ends may be as specific as the board desires. John Carver uses the analogy of mixing bowls. The largest bowl is the broadest written policy, and each smaller bowl narrows in upon more specific ends.28 The board can determine the appropriate level of specificity given the particular needs of the congregation at a given time. For example, the board may conclude that the congregation should focus upon leading more people to become new followers of Jesus. The board may specify this end further with a particular measurable result – to see one hundred


people come to faith in Jesus through the ministry of the congregation over the next 5 years. In so doing, the board defines the desired end or outcome and narrows this end by attaching to it a measurable goal.

But here is where the board seeks to restrain its specific instruction or direction. Though the board defines the ends, the board does not venture into prescribing the specific means or programs through which the congregation will go about meeting that desired end. This is incredibly helpful to the health of the board of elders-senior pastor relationship because as John Carver wisely observes, “unless they are unable or unwilling to make decisions, people do not work best when told how they must do things.”

Generally speaking, people are far more creative, invested, and energetic when they are empowered to determine the most effective means by which to meet their assigned goals. So in the case of the above example, though the board would determine the end and measurable result of seeing one hundred people become new followers of Jesus, the senior pastor would then have the authority to determine the best way to reach this goal. She might make some changes in the worship service to make it more seeker intelligible. She might add a new class or program for those who are exploring Jesus. She might even choose to redirect some budget dollars or staff resources toward this end. She certainly would be wise to recruit many lay leaders and delegate significant authority to help carry out this goal. The important point to note though is that based upon this principle, Policy Governance insists that the board actually delegate the power to the senior pastor to accomplish the very goals they have tasked her to achieve.

---

Now of course, there are some means by which the senior pastor could achieve the desired end that the board may consider unethical, unbecoming, or simply unwise for the current health of the congregation. For instance, if the board asks the senior pastor to work to achieve the goal of seeing one hundred new people become followers of Jesus, the board might want to include certain executive limitation policies for how this goal can be achieved. The board might specify that in order to achieve this end the senior pastor cannot cancel a worship service or dissolve a staff department, or spend beyond the current budget. They might also specify that they do not want to pursue new followers of Jesus in ways that are unbecoming of the Gospel (manipulation or exploitation). The board of elders can limit the range of means with which they would be comfortable for the senior pastor to achieve the desired ends, but otherwise, the board authorizes the senior pastor to lead the congregation in achieving its vision and goals. So long as the senior pastor does not violate the executive limitation policies, and as long as he effectively carries out the board’s stated ends, the board proactively and by definition supports the action of the senior pastor.\(^\text{30}\) In other words, the senior pastor has the backing of the board to take actions that he or she thinks will help carry out the vision and mission without having to bring every decision back to the board for approval, unless, of course, the board provides a specific executive limitation.

Dan Hotchkiss helps to describe this board of elders-senior pastor relationship through the language of governance and ministry:

> Governance includes top-level tasks of articulating mission, selecting strategies for getting there, making sure the strategy is followed, and ensuring that people and property are protected against harm. Ministry is everything else: the

---

\(^{30}\text{Carver, \textit{Boards That Make a Difference}, 125.}\)
congregation’s daily, practical work, including all the rest of decisions about what to do and how.\textsuperscript{31}

And in keeping with the Policy Governance model, the board is responsible for governance though it delegates the work of the ministry to the senior-pastor and the staff and lay teams he or she may choose to create. In terms of differentiated outcomes, while the board writes policies, strategic goals and determines the core values of the congregation, the senior pastor utilizes programs such as the worship services, classes, programs, curricula, and service projects to help realize the board’s clearly articulated ends.

To summarize then, rather than delegating authority to overlapping entities (various committees, task forces, board officers, senior pastor, other staff, etc.), the board of elders delegates the authority to execute and accomplish its stated goals and ends through one person – the senior pastor. It’s easy to see how this practice empowers the senior pastor to feel that she can use her creativity, education, and congregational resources to achieve the board’s vision. The board avoids the danger of micromanaging the senior pastor or handcuffing his ability to make decisions to advance the church’s mission in necessary or timely ways. But as the third principle will make clear, the practice of delegating through a singular person is also what enables the board to actually hold the senior pastor accountable for whether the congregation is meeting its desired ends. It is unfair to hold someone accountable for what they have not been empowered to achieve. But it is also essential to the board’s responsibility to ensure that the organization successfully achieves the purpose for which it exists.

\textsuperscript{31} Hotchkiss, 49.
2.3.3 The Board Holds the Senior Pastor Accountable to Its Stated Ends

Because the board has delegated authority for the execution of the desired ends to the senior pastor (and his staff, lay leaders, etc.), the board is actually able to hold the senior pastor accountable for whether he is achieving those desired ends. This, of course, requires that the board very clearly communicate the criteria by which the senior pastor’s performance will be assessed. This is admittedly a challenge, especially in non-profit organizations. In for-profit companies, the measurable “bottom lines” of profits, market share, and stock price can help the company to know whether it is performing well and successfully realizing its purpose. But the positive outcomes that a church seeks to provide of God-honoring worship, spiritual transformation, community renewal, and kingdom advancement are often far harder to measure. Though (a) it may be difficult to determine what the board should evaluate and measure, (b) the measurements may need to be qualitative as much as quantitative, and (c) these measurements may have certain limitations to them, the far greater problem for most non-profit organizations (including churches) is that they fail to measure or evaluate at all! As a result, the board has no way of actually ensuring that the church is realizing its reason for existence. “You get what you inspect, not what you expect is a valid principle of behavior.”

For example, suppose the board determines that one of the ends the congregation should pursue is forming mature followers of Jesus Christ. Most churches would consider this a very worthy end. But in order for the board actually to carry out its responsibility and to hold the senior pastor accountable for this end, the board must arrive upon some

---

32 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 107.

33 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 109.
way to measure whether this is happening. At a base level, the board might, for instance, choose to measure involvement in particularly transformative programs. The board could, therefore, state its desire to see a thirty percent increase over three years of members participating in small group community, believing that studying God’s word and sharing life in community helps to mature followers of Jesus. Or at a deeper level, the board may adopt an annual spiritual growth survey, through which they can measure if members are growing in key beliefs, spiritual practices, behaviors, and attitudes. For many congregations, the Reveal Study, which started at Willow Creek Community Church, can be a helpful starting point.34 But in order to realize its desired ends, the board must have some way of measuring whether it is actually accomplishing what it has set out to pursue.

Evaluation not only helps the board faithfully to steward its responsibility and to hold the senior pastor accountable to its stated ends, but it also enables the senior pastor to know whether he is doing what is required. In many churches, such as the church in Texas, the senior pastor did not know the criteria by which the elder board was measuring his performance. As Ted Hull wittily explains, “The board’s targets are missed by pastors, less because they’re moving targets and more because there are a variety of targets and pastors are left to figure out which ones to hit. Eventually there is only one target: the one on his or her back.”35 Through clearly defined goals and annual evaluation, the board can give performance feedback in such a way that the senior pastor can make adjustments, account for variations and unforeseen circumstances, and hopefully avoid being blindsided with termination.

34 Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

35 Hull, 84.
Dan Hotchkiss provides some helpful direction for how the board of elders can carry out this senior pastor evaluation.\textsuperscript{36} First, he suggests that a small committee of rotating elders, acceptable to both the board and the senior pastor, should conduct the review. Though evaluation is necessary, it is not always easy or enjoyable, especially if the size of the evaluating group is too large. In order to avoid unnecessary criticism and to maintain clarity and focus in the review, this small committee of three or four members conducts the evaluation. They do so, however, gathering feedback from the entire board, which they synthesize and communicate to the senior pastor. On certain years, it may also be helpful to gather wider feedback from staff, lay leaders, and the congregation as a whole. Secondly, Hotchkiss emphasizes that this review should be regularly scheduled so that it is based upon proactive goals and not reactive complaints. Thirdly, he emphasizes that the senior pastor should be able to help speak into what goals to measure in advance, how they should be measured, and how she feels that she has done in working towards them. Fourth and finally, Hotchkiss notes that in a church context, Carver’s approach to CEO evaluation must be slightly adapted. According to Carver, “The board need not be concerned with what job responsibilities fall to the CEO. The board’s concern is confined to what it holds the CEO accountable for.”\textsuperscript{37} While this dictum might hold for some non-profit organizations, the board’s measure of whether the senior pastor is effectively carrying out her role must be more comprehensive than organizational performance.

In addition to her role as head-of-staff and her responsibility to help execute board determined ends, the senior pastor relates to the congregation as preacher and pastor. She

\textsuperscript{36} Hotchkiss, 138-139.

\textsuperscript{37} Carver, \textit{Boards that Make a Difference}, 159.
has prophetic and priestly responsibilities in addition to her kingly role. Any true
evaluation must also then take performance in these areas into account. Since the pastor’s
spiritual authority is so closely tied to the integrity of her relationships with God, her
spouse, her family, and her own self, the committee must also ensure that the senior
pastor is not being overworked and that she is prioritizing these important relationships.

With these adjustments made, however, this annual evaluation both enables the
board to hold the senior pastor accountable and allows the senior pastor to know which
goals (or whose goals) to pursue. Not only can an annual evaluation (based upon
predetermined goals) align vision and deepen the senior pastor-board of elders
partnership, but it can help to spotlight issues or differing assumptions before they
become irresolvable. Though potentially uncomfortable and at times painful, no practice
is more essential to maintaining a healthy and effective relationship between the senior
pastor and the board of elders.

2.3.4 The Board Spends Its Time Discerning and Deciding Upon God’s Vision

Finally, because the board 1) sees itself as ultimately responsible for the vision of
the congregation, 2) delegates the management and execution of its defined ends to the
senior pastor; and 3) evaluates the senior pastor to ensure that its ends are being met, the
board can 4) begin to redirect how it spends the majority of its time when meeting.
Though the board might receive some updates about the implementation of its vision,
rather than spending most of its time approving staff plans or listening to reports from
committees (it has delegated this approval authority in large part to the senior pastor), the
board would spend most of its time learning, praying, discerning, and then deciding upon
the big picture directions for the congregation. To use the language from John and Miriam Carver, “the board’s meetings become the board’s meetings, rather than the management’s meetings for the board.” While the board might appoint task forces or committees to research particular issues of interest to the board, the real work of decision making would take place not in committees but in the context of the board meeting. Though the board might still do some necessary work of approving omnibus motions and monitoring vision implementation, the board would use much of its time to determine a vision statement, articulate annual goals, approve a budget to support those goals, and outline a 5-10 year strategic vision for the congregation.

More specifically, when a board adopts the Policy Governance model, John Carver expects that it will spend its time in primarily three ways. First, the board ensures that it is connected to the organization’s ownership. I will say more about this below and then in much greater detail in chapter 3. But the first purpose of the board is to spend time listening to the voice of Jesus and sharing with one another about the spiritual needs, triumphs, and challenges that exist within the life of the body. Second, the board produces direct governing policies. As already mentioned, this primarily includes discerning a vision statement and the ends that the congregation should pursue. Meetings can be spent debating important decisions like what is a helpful spiritual pathway to mature followers of Jesus or should the congregation add a new time for a worship service or where should the congregation strategically look to plant a new church or what city-wide partnerships or initiatives can help the congregation seek the welfare of its city? In addition, the board can also create policies about how it organizes itself, trains its

---

elders, and delegates authority to the senior pastor. Some of the actual meeting time may be devoted to an ongoing process of elder training. And then thirdly and finally, the board spends some of its time reviewing the necessary monitoring information to help it determine if the board’s ends are being achieved.

By approaching its task of governance in these ways, the board of elders can create a clear, empowering, and yet accountable relationship with the senior pastor. As Ted Hull helpfully summarizes:

Policy Governance is a two-way street. In one lane, your pastor will have freedom to drive the church bus towards the board’s stated ends and within the rules the board has put in place. [The board must also] stay on its side of the road by stating how it monitors its own values and how it treats its pastor.\(^{39}\)

To continue Hull’s analogy, when this general governance framework is adjusted in light of the unique elements of Presbyterian policy, it has the potential not only to help the church drive more quickly and smoothly towards God’s directions but also to avoid unnecessary board-senior pastor collisions.

### 2.4 Needed Adaptations to Policy Governance in a Presbyterian Context

Though the Policy Governance model has the potential to enhance the relationship between the board of elders and the senior pastor, there are some ways in which it must be adapted in light of Presbyterian theology and polity. And admittedly, adaptability is not the greatest strength of the model. Some Policy Governance advocates such as Ted Hull suggest that the model is an internally consistent set of mutually dependent principles that should not be modified or changed. “You either have Policy

\(^{39}\) Hull, 78.
governance in its entirety or you don’t have it at all.”

The supposed “one-size-fits-all” nature of the model have led some critics, like Vic Murray, to contend that Policy Governance fails to account for the uniqueness of organizational culture. It is essential to adjust any governance model in light of the history, mission, culture, constituents and personnel of a given organization. I am inclined to agree. The uniqueness of Presbyterian polity and theology requires at least three substantial adaptations to the Policy Governance model. With these adaptations, a large, Presbyterian church can retain its core identity while still benefiting from the empowered and accountable church governance that the principles of the model offer.

2.4.1 Adaptation of the “Ownership” Principle

The Policy Governance model asserts that the board members are to be servant leaders who “represent and speak for the interest of the owners.” John and Miriam Carver assume that in a non-profit, membership organization, “its members are the owners.” A significant responsibility of the board then is to know what the “owners” in their diversity desire and value. This should be true in some sense, since, after all, the elders are elected by and from among the congregation’s members. But the ultimate responsibility of a Presbyterian session is to govern the congregation in such a way that it

---

40 Hull, 23.


pursues “Christ’s mission for the world.” This means that the owner to which the elders are truly accountable is Jesus Christ. This has two huge implications in a Presbyterian context.

First, the session’s responsibility is not primarily to listen to the voice of the members and to govern accordingly. Its responsibility is to discern collectively the voice of Jesus for the congregation and to lead toward that end. The call of Jesus is rarely comfortable or agreeable to our initial preferences or patterns. Jesus says things like “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Jesus constantly invites his sheep and those who shepherd them to pursue a deeper integrity of internal transformation and a greater commitment to outward mission. The session’s job then is not simply to lead the congregation in the direction it wants to go. Often, the session is leading most in alignment with the will of Jesus when instead of simply giving the congregation what it wants, it teaches the congregation to desire something new.

Though the session has some accountability to the members who elected it (more on this below), “achieving the mission is what the board is accountable for.”

Moreover, not only does the session have the responsibility to discern and pursue the will of Jesus, but the session also benefits from seeing the church as a whole. Instead of looking at matters from the vantage point of one age demographic or ministry area, the

---

44 “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 1.0603.

45 Mark 8:34-35.

46 Hotchkiss, 68.

47 Hotchkiss, 71.
session can carefully study an issue as it relates to the entire congregation. This leads to the second major implication of the principle that the session must see Jesus and his mission, not the members, as their primary source of accountability. In short, the session cannot see itself as simply a representative form of government with each representative responsible to her constituents. This is often an issue in the governance of Presbyterian churches. Elders are not elected to “represent” the areas of the church in which they may regularly participate and serve (youth ministry, choir, facilities, etc.). Even if elders may also serve on a committee (which we will speak to below), they do not come to the session meeting to speak on behalf of their committee. If the primary owner to whom the session is accountable is Jesus and his mission, then Jesus’ interests and the interests of the congregation as a whole must trump those of any particular constituent group.

2.4.2 Adaptation of Board Authority

Along with adapting the Policy Governance concept of ownership, Presbyterian churches must also adapt for the authority vested outside of the board. In contrast to the Policy Governance model, the session does not have all of the authority for the organization. This is consistent with the aforementioned Presbyterian anthropology, which out of concern for the unchecked power of the few, distributes some authority outside of the session. Some of the governance authority rests with the congregation. In my own congregation’s denomination (ECO), the polity guide specifies the actions that can only be taken through a congregational meeting. These actions include a) electing elders; b) calling a pastor; c) buying, mortgaging, or selling property; d) requesting dismissal from presbytery or the denomination; e) and amending the bylaws of the
church.\textsuperscript{48} Additionally, a certain amount of authority is located in the presbytery and in the wider national governing body (synod or general assembly). It is at this authority level that Presbyterian denominations such as ECO, PC(USA), the PCA widely diverge in terms of what amount of oversight is vested in a body beyond the local congregation. ECO’s polity guide, for instance, places almost all of the governance authority in the local congregation, reserving for the presbytery and the synod mostly service oriented roles along with some responsibility for vetting and approving pastors and assisting in disciplinary cases.\textsuperscript{49} Other Presbyterian denominations reserve a wider governance authority for their councils and governing bodies, which may even include some oversight and ownership of the church’s property. Large PC(USA) or PCA congregations would most likely, therefore, need to make further adaptations to the “board as final authority” principle in order to apply the Policy Governance model in their context.

\subsection*{2.4.3 Adaptation of the CEO/Senior Pastor Role}

The most significant adaptation of the Policy Governance model needed in a Presbyterian context is due to the unique role of the senior pastor compared to a typical organization Executive Director or CEO. The Policy Governance model adamantly argues that the CEO should be present at board meetings “but not the central figure.”\textsuperscript{50} The CEO should neither set the agenda, mediate board conflict, or orient board members to their role.\textsuperscript{51} There is a practical reason, a biblical reason and certainly a Presbyterian

\begin{footnotes}
\item[48] “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 1.0503.
\item[49] “ECO Polity and Discipline,” 3.01-3.02.
\item[51] Carver and Carver, “Carver’s Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations,” 5.
\end{footnotes}
polity reason why this executive role in the Policy Governance model needs to be changed for a church context. The first two of these apply to nearly any congregation, whether the congregation is Presbyterian or not.

First, practically speaking, there are very few church boards that can discern a vision for the congregation without strong participation and leadership from the senior pastor.\(^{52}\) No one lives and breathes what is happening within the congregation and where God is leading the congregation like its pastor. Moreover, though elders may rotate on and off the session, a pastor who stays for a lengthy tenure will likely be a source of continuity throughout whatever vision or long-term plan the session may adopt. It would be very foolish for the session not to draw upon the wisdom of the senior pastor and what she believes God is speaking to her for the good of the church. And practically speaking, it is hard for any group to arrive upon a clear and coherent vision without a starting point or “straw man” idea from which to work. Often, though not necessarily always, it can be helpful for the senior pastor to offer an initial idea or proposal to the group as a whole, which the group can then test, modify, and improve upon until a better vision is reached. Or at the very least, the senior pastor can take the generative ideas from a brainstorming session, synthesize them, and then bring them back in a more coherent form for further tweaking from the session. Further still, whatever vision the session arrives upon will require clear communication to the congregation. Since the senior pastor often has the role not only of CEO but also of primary preacher, it is incredibly important that the senior pastor buy into and participate in the formation of the church’s vision. And perhaps most importantly at a practical level, no matter what formal authority rests with

\(^{52}\) Hotchkiss, 229.
the session, many members of the congregation and even members of the session vest a certain informal authority in the senior pastor. By contrast with a non-profit organizational board structure, the board of elders (who are to hold the senior pastor accountable as an employee) also look to the senior pastor as their spiritual leader.

In addition to this practical reason then, there is a biblical reason to expect a higher level of board participation and leadership from the senior pastor than the Carver model would typically allow. Biblically speaking, the senior pastor is not just an employee of the church or an employee of the board. She is a fellow elder, a spiritual shepherd of the congregation. She is just as much called into the task of shepherding, leading, and governing the congregation as any other ruling elder. On top of this, among the elders, she is called and especially gifted to teach God’s Word. As 1 Timothy 5:17 expresses, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Given the senior pastor’s gifts in teaching and preaching God’s Word, it seems unwise to limit those gifts from the discussions of the session or even the training of new elders. As John Kaiser clearly explains: “Carver would exclude the pastor from the board and therefore from decisions on mission and boundaries. That exclusion is antithetical to a senior pastor as the primary spiritual leader of a congregation in any biblical sense.”

Clearly, the biblical teaching on the role of an elder (including the senior pastor) must trump this particular restriction of the CEO function in the Carver model.

Perhaps even more than the practical and biblical reasons, Presbyterian polity itself requires that the senior pastor play a much greater role in the board meeting than the

53 Kaiser, 175.
Carver model would advise. As suggested above, in Presbyterian polity, pastors are not only staff, they are also elders and thus members of the governing board. But on top of this, not only are Presbyterian pastors afforded voice and vote within the session, Presbyterian polity proscribes that the senior pastor should serve as moderator of the session. Because the senior pastor plays the role of session moderator, she at times seems to function as both the CEO and the chairman of the board. At the same time, however, she is an employee of the board as a whole, in the sense that she is accountable to the session. How can the congregation then still benefit from the clear lines of senior pastor accountability of the Policy Governance model, while still allowing for this unique role of the senior pastor? Is it possible for the senior pastor to moderate the session meetings and genuinely participate and even lead out in the session’s deliberations, while still remaining accountable to the session as a whole? While every congregation needs to carefully think through how to define this in its context, here are a few suggestions for how best to approach this.

First, anyone who has attended a meeting of any kind knows how much the agenda matters. Whoever sets the agenda significantly shapes the direction in which the meeting will, and more importantly perhaps, will not, go. If the senior pastor as moderator of the session meeting also solely sets the agenda for the meeting, much of the accountability of the Policy Governance model and the principle of ultimate authority resting with the board (not an individual pastor) is lost. The board must consider: how might the senior pastor share with other board members the task of creating the agenda for meetings? The Policy Governance model encourages boards to create whatever internal committees of the board are needed in order for the board to best carry out its
function. This certainly could include a governance committee (of which the senior pastor could be a member), which could work together to create the agenda for meetings.

Second, it’s important for the board to consider, apart from the necessary speaking role of moderating the meeting, the amount the senior pastor should speak throughout the meeting. Even if this is not formally defined, it’s worth agreeing to in principle. Though I will cover this more in chapter 4, in short, the senior pastor should do his best to hold back his opinions on particular motions or questions until other board members have had the opportunity to speak their views. Given the senior pastor’s informal authority, it would be easy for him to sway the board to a particular outcome before elders have time to hear differing views.

Third, instead of then coming to a session meeting with an agenda that she wants to see the board enact, the senior pastor could put a couple of options before the board and then allow the board to use the relevant information to make a collective decision. This approach is fairly consistent with the executive role suggested by Carver. Though Policy Governance emphasizes that the CEO is an employee of the board as a whole, he also recognizes that the CEO and board members are equals and colleagues. The senior pastor can then play the important role not of making persuasive recommendations but of “helping the board to develop their policy options and their various implications.”

Personally, I find this to be an incredibly servant-hearted and transparent approach. In so doing, the senior pastor says “I’m not going to push my agenda or perspective on this issue. Instead, I am going to lay out the alternatives and the relevant information, and

---

54 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 231-235.

55 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 160.

56 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 173.
then I will let the board as a whole come to a conclusion. Though I may have an initial preference or opinion, I believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to and through you too. I am therefore going to give space for this body to weigh our options and then allow the Holy Spirit to guide us to the best decision.” It’s just possible that after hearing diverse opinions and perspectives the pastor may even change her initial opinion.

Fourth and finally, the senior pastor can use her moderator role consistently to prompt the board to take responsibility for the church, remember their ultimate accountability to Jesus, and stay committed to whatever vision and model of governance the board has adopted. John Carver captures this dynamic well:

Pressing, cajoling, and even embarrassing a board toward greater integrity are far greater gifts than pressing, cajoling, and embarrassing it toward specific content recommendations – that is, getting the board to give the CEO what he or she wants. It is difficult for a CEO to do the latter without sacrificing the former. A leader will choose the former path.57

With these necessary adaptations made, the Policy Governance model has the potential to provide a clear framework within which the board of elders and the senior pastor can discern and pursue God’s vision for the congregation. The board retains its ability to hold the senior pastor accountable for her leadership, and the senior pastor is empowered to use her gifts and resources to pursue the session’s vision. The senior pastor is still able to offer leadership and insight as a fellow member and moderator of the session. But the board is also able to take a hand in shaping its own meetings, make real group decisions, support the senior pastor where helpful, and offer firm feedback or redirection when needed. A congregation can apply the model without abandoning any of its Presbyterian theological and ecclesiological distinctives. But in order to reap the

57 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 177.
benefits of both empowered and accountable leadership and a board that truly governs, large congregations will have to rethink some of their long-entrenched institutional memory from the 20th century. For Policy Governance to bring its promised benefits, a congregation must overcome the hurdles of bureaucratic committees and large board size.

2.5 Hurdles to Applying Policy Governance in a Presbyterian Context

Simply put, management committees that report directly to the session (rather than to the senior pastor) tend to obstruct, confuse and stall empowered and accountable senior pastor leadership. A large board risks being passive, reactionary, and constrained in its ability to truly govern. Unless a large, Presbyterian congregation is willing to evaluate its committee governance structure and the size of its session, the Policy Governance model will be rendered far less effective.

2.5.1 The Hurdle of Committees

In the early 20th century, Presbyterian sessions began to embrace the “committee” model as the most efficient means for effective governance. William Henry Roberts, who would later become the renowned Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church of North America, wrote in his manual for elders:

The oversight of the general interests of the congregation by the session, can be most efficiently conducted by the appointment of permanent committees upon the more important matters of sessional business…These committees may be five in number – viz. on the Sabbath School, Systematic Beneficence, Church Music, Missionary and Young People’s Societies, and Conference with Deacons and Trustees.58

---

By 1931, Cleland Boyd McAfee in his *Manual for Presbyterian Elders* observed, “most sessions operate through committees of two, three, or more, expecting monthly reports of their work, each committee securing from the session authorization for anything out of the ordinary which needs to be done.” The Policy Governance model, however, is strongly opposed to committees for the reason that they remove deliberative questions from the board and because they interfere with clear lines of accountability between the board and the CEO:

Traditional boards frequently create committees to assist or advise the CEO or staff, such as committees on personnel, finance, program, property maintenance, and other such staff means issues. In Policy Governance, such committees are illegitimate. They constitute interference in the CEO’s sphere of authority and accountability, and damage the board’s ability to hold the CEO accountable.

In other words, when committees function as part of the chain of command by which the congregation makes decisions and oversees programs in various ministry areas, the board ceases truly to govern and the senior pastor lacks the authority truly to execute. The agenda of the board meeting is shaped by reports and motions from committees. While the board may hear these reports and tweak or approve them, the board is in a reactionary position, essentially signing off on decisions that have already been made at a committee level. Further still, the congregation is likely to experience fragmentation and to lack a single vision, as each committee crafts the vision and direction for its own ministry area.

The board becomes the setting where committees compete for limited resources and seek approval for their agenda, rather than the setting where that agenda is set. When ministry is driven by committees, the congregation is likely to become very fragmented.

---


Moreover, in a typical committee driven organizational structure, the senior pastor lacks the authority actually to execute the vision of the session. Suppose that the session looks at the spiritual survey results for the congregation and determines that the church must change its discipleship model to help people start engaging in spiritual practices that can catalyze their spiritual growth. Suppose that the senior pastor then decides that the best way to do this is to move away from the current weekly Sunday school classes and to instead create opt-in, short term training courses on topics such as how to pray, how to read and apply the Bible, how to share your faith, etc. One could certainly debate whether this is the best way to achieve these desired results, and in the committee model, that is almost guaranteed to happen.

As Hotchkiss notes, “standing committees, by their nature, resist new ideas because new ideas require new work and new expenses….standing committees resist change naturally.”61 If the senior pastor can only move forward with her planned changes to the congregation’s discipleship model with the approval of the Christian education committee or the Sunday school committee, then not only will any changes be slowed through the additional debate and politics of trying to persuade this committee to support the changes, but the committee may vote against the pastor’s plan altogether. Or suppose the senior pastor is tasked by the session to pursue an increase of participation in the worship services, but when the pastor wants to remove some of the formality of the worship service elements, the worship committee votes against it. When committees oversee various ministry areas of the church, the senior pastor then lacks both the authority to carry out the session’s vision and the session cannot hold the senior pastor

61 Hotchkiss, 31.
accountable for it. She has been given a vision that she does not actually have the
authority to pursue.

In addition to these ways in which committees run counter to the Policy
Governance model, they have other disadvantages as well. In a committee driven
governance model, each elder is typically required to serve on a committee of a particular
church ministry in addition to serving on a board. If the session has monthly meetings,
the committee likely does too. If anything, this model ensures that each elder will spend
plenty of time deliberating in church related meetings leaving little time for the essential
elder work of shepherding people or witnessing on behalf of Christ. We will turn more to
this in chapter 3. Additionally, elders who serve on a particular committee may begin to
see themselves as representatives advocating for their particular constituency rather than
as shepherds for the congregation as a whole.

To be clear, however, to say that the Policy Governance model requires a shift
away from a committee driven governance structure does not mean a diminishment of lay
participation in the ministry and management of the church. Herein Hotchkiss suggests a
very helpful distinction between committees and teams. “In contrast to committees,
which write reports, make recommendations, and gather information for the board, teams
produce practical results for the congregation and the world.”\textsuperscript{62} In other words, though the
session is the context in which deliberation about the vision and direction of the
congregation takes place, and though the senior pastor has the authority to determine how
best to execute that vision, the senior pastor can and likely will find it incredibly
beneficial to appoint teams of staff and lay leaders to effectively do the work of ministry.

\textsuperscript{62} Hotchkiss, 57.
Though teams may not determine “what should we be doing?” they will be incredibly involved in the doing of it and in some ways even how it can best be done. With the leadership of the senior pastor and likely other staff as well, lay members are empowered to carry out all sorts of ministry work such as teaching classes, leading small groups, visiting sick members, singing in worship, ushering for services, tutoring inner-city kids, making meals for the homeless, and so many other things.

Unlike boards and committees, which are usually elected or appointed, ministry teams are gathered based on people’s passion for the goal, with an eye to making sure group members have among them the gifts and time and energy and mutual commitment that the work requires.63

Does this mean then that there is no room for any decision making bodies or committees other than the session? While Policy Governance does take the daily ministry of the church out of the hands of committees, it does not necessitate the dissolution of committees altogether. Ted Hull explains this distinction with great clarity:

There’s nothing within the Policy Governance system that restricts the use of any kind of committee, including an audit committee. However, any committee must be a committee of the board, which assists the board in its understanding of certain matters….It will have the latitude to review the numbers and underlying assumptions to assure the board that the projections are credible. It’s not the job of an audit committee to advise the pastor or any of the staff regarding how money should be allocated.64

The key distinction here is that these committees function as committees of the board, sub-groups who may provide essential information to the board or help draft policies for the board to help it do its governance job better. But these are committees to help improve the board’s governance not committees to manage the ministry of the church. Hotchkiss suggests four committees the session might choose to create to help it with its

63 Hotchkiss, 54.

64 Hull, 73.
work of governance. A finance committee does not determine the budget or how it should be spent, but it does manage an annual audit of the church’s finances and may help regularly provide accurate financial information to the board. A personnel committee does not write staff job descriptions or evaluate staff or resolve staff conflicts (thus interfering with the senior pastor’s role as head of staff), but it might help write personnel policies for how the church wants to manage and care for its staff as a whole. A governance committee is not a sub-group of more powerful elders, but it may remind the board of its governance role and help to create the agenda for the meetings. A nominating committee may help identify and train future members for the session, usually operating under well-defined by-laws and whole board policies.\(^{65}\)

Admittedly, for some Presbyterian churches, the very idea of removing committees with oversight for various ministries may seem like a non-starter hurdle to adopting the Policy Governance model. Decision by committee is so embedded into the institutional memory of many Presbyterian churches over the last century that it is hard to imagine running the church in any other way. But in order for the session truly to govern, for the board to truly empower and hold the senior pastor accountable, and for the gifts and time of some of the church’s most mature lay leaders to be unleashed into the work of ministry rather than the work of more deliberative meetings, congregations must consider this level of organizational change. No wonder Dana Allin, the ECO Synod Executive, says that for larger Presbyterian churches, one of the best possible steps they

\(^{65}\) Hotchkiss, 55-56.
can take to better pursue their mission and vision would be to “get rid of committees as we know them.”

2.5.2 The Hurdle of Large Boards

How many ruling elders should a Presbyterian church have? While each congregation may answer this question differently in its bylaws, given the Presbyterian propensity to do everything “decently and in good order,” many churches have adopted a member to elder ratio. For instance, the church may choose to have one ruling elder for every one hundred members on its rolls. For small to medium sized congregations, this ratio ensures that as the church grows the governing body will remain more diverse and representative. New people with fresh perspective will join the session. But for larger congregations, a session made up of forty or fifty elders can quickly lose its ability to truly govern.

The first and most essential principle of the Policy Governance model is that the board should possess the highest governing authority and responsibility within the organization. In a Presbyterian context then, it is the session that must be setting the vision and direction for the church, not a group of committees or even the senior pastor on her own. But when a session has too many members, it becomes very difficult for the group to do any real brainstorming, deliberation and vision discernment together. Almost out of necessity, most of the meeting is conducted via spoken reports or proposals from various elders who may also serve as committee leaders. Elders may ask questions about a given report or motion, but the group does not do much deliberation or creating

---

66 Dana Allin, (Synod Executive, ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians), interviewed over the phone by Charlie Dunn, October 30, 2017.
together. They mostly function as a passive and reactive body, listening to staff or committee-generated ideas and giving their stamp of approval. Though the session may have a large and diverse number of elders, few of these elders actually speak in a meeting. Imagine how long a meeting would last, if forty people each expressed their thoughts and opinions on a given topic. Thus the wisdom of many elders is essentially silenced. Given the fact that few of the elders verbally participate in a meeting, attendance easily becomes more inconsistent, making it more difficult to build on a topic from month to month. And when there is a topic that generates more opposing opinions, the large size of the group makes it unlikely to have the intimacy and trust needed to debate ideas openly but then support each other with unity once the session makes a decision. For “the board’s meetings [to] become the board’s meetings, rather than the management’s meetings for the board,”\textsuperscript{67} the congregation must reduce the size of its session. No wonder then that Dan Hotchkiss observes that “larger congregations, interestingly enough, more often see the value of a smaller board.”\textsuperscript{68}

Now to be clear, a reduced session size does not mean that the board should never consult with larger, more representative groups of members. Many Presbyterian churches distinguish between active elders and reserve elders, who though the latter are ordained for life, they are not currently serving on the session. It may prove very wise for the session to regularly consult with this wider body for their feedback, especially on long-range vision decisions. But the session itself must have fewer members for it to take an active role in its governance responsibility. Dan Hotchkiss recommends a board size of

\textsuperscript{67} Carver and Carver, “Carver’s Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations,” 15.

\textsuperscript{68} Hotchkiss, 82.
six to eight with no more than twelve.\textsuperscript{69} While for some large congregations this target may require too great of an initial size reduction, a congregation will need to be willing to move towards a smaller board size in order to effectively implement the Policy Governance model.

2.6 Objections to the Policy Governance Model

Vic Murray rightfully recognizes that Policy Governance fails when it is applied without accounting for the culture of a given organization,\textsuperscript{70} which here includes the unique nature of a church in general and the polity and theology of a Presbyterian church in particular. But if a large, Presbyterian congregation is willing to make the aforementioned adaptations regarding ownership, board authority, and the role of the CEO; and if the congregation is willing to clear the hurdles of committees and large board size, it can vastly clarify and improve the relationship between its board of elders and senior pastor through the wise governance principles of the Policy Governance model. But even after accounting for the “one-size-fits-all” objection, there are still at least three significant objections to applying the model within a church context that are worth addressing.

First, John Kaiser, who advocates for his own church governance model of “Accountable Leadership,” warns that the Policy Governance model can treat the senior pastor like an employee of the elder board rather than as a key fellow ruling elder and

\textsuperscript{69} Hotchkiss, 45.

\textsuperscript{70} Murray, 11-14.
spiritual leader. He finds this antithetical to the biblical description of the role of elders wherein those “who labor in preaching and teaching” are still included among “elders who rule.”  

Admittedly, an un-adapted Policy Governance model can have this tendency, though the model itself expresses that “board members and the CEO are colleagues.” The CEO is herself a member of the board. So at the very least one could say that though the senior pastor is an employee of the session as a whole, she is not an employee of each elder, but a fellow elder with them. But Presbyterian polity itself guards against this potentially disempowering view of the senior pastor, as does the informal authority the senior pastor possesses as the congregation’s primary preacher. Policy Governance does not, therefore, remove the senior pastor from the realm of leadership and governance, but it does clarify that the senior pastor is accountable to the board as a whole, which is the highest governing authority in the congregation.

Second, and more significantly, Ted Hull acknowledges that “the principle of ends is too nebulous and undermines the importance of church ministries.” Though Hull still strongly advocates for congregational use of the Policy Governance model, he recognizes the substance of this objection. Suppose a session adopts a set of ends and measurable goals to pursue and prove whether they are meeting this stated end. If the principle is true that you value what you measure, does that mean that the session no longer values the ongoing but vital ministries of the church? If the church is consistently gathering for worship, proclaiming the gospel, providing discipleship programs for

---

71 Kaiser, 175.
72 1 Timothy 5:17.
73 Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference*, 160.
74 Hull, 92.
people of all ages, reaching out the community, caring for its members, serving the poor, is not the church fulfilling its calling? Does the idea of clarifying specific ends and measurable goals just complicate things? And what if the staff come up with creative idea to achieve the measurable goals (such as a goal to see one hundred new people come to faith in Christ), do these efforts count for anything, if they do not achieve the desired ends? Is not God the one who must build the house, even though we labor?\textsuperscript{75}

These are legitimate objections. They are at worst real drawbacks and at best worth bearing in mind. In a church context, it may be necessary for a session to not merely adopt ends and a set of measurable goals. The session may also want to specify that certain programs such as worship, caring for sick members, teaching, ministries for the poor are essential ministries of the church, which, regardless of the vision or how they can be aligned with the vision, must continue. Though most congregations would assume this to be true, if it can alleviate this concern, it is worth acknowledging. Furthermore, though it may be hard for a church to measure success in every respect, it is necessary and beneficial for a church to seek to do so, especially if in qualitative and not just quantitative ways. The church cannot exist simply to offer programs. The session must have a way to know whether those programs are achieving the intended mission. It would be foolishness and a neglect of God-given responsibility for a church board blindly to offer the same programs without a view to intended results. And apart from the way in which Policy Governance can help a church to focus its vision and evaluate its work, it has the chief benefit of clarifying the relationship between the board of elders and the senior pastor in how they pursue the vision.

\textsuperscript{75} Psalm 127:1.
Third and finally, some people may wonder, “If the session delegates management authority to the senior pastor rather than to a group of elder moderated committees, will fewer lay people be involved in the work of ministry?” The short answer to this fear is no. When you shift away from a committee-centered governance model to one that empowers the staff leader (senior pastor), you do not suddenly cease to need lay volunteers who will help make the ministry of the congregation happen. The same people who did the work before will also do it after, and you may gain some new volunteers who are more interested in doing the ministry rather than simply taking minutes and passing motions. But through the Policy Governance model, now the paid staff will be accountable for making sure that the ministry happens, and if they are wise, they will recruit all of the lay leaders who are willing to pursue the session’s stated ends.

2.7 Policy Governance: A Helpful but Partial Solution

After a lengthy discussion of the principles and benefits of the Policy Governance model, the adaptations necessary to apply it to a Presbyterian church context, and the hurdles and objections that must be overcome or addressed in order for it to succeed, it is worth restating the problem it is intended to address. Essentially, we are seeking to clarify and improve the relationship between the board of elders and the senior pastor. How can the elders and the senior pastor relate in a way where the pastor is held accountable and yet not dominated? How can the church avoid having an autonomous senior pastor and rubber-stamping session on the one hand or a passive senior pastor and micromanaging session on the other? How do you enable a pastor to exercise effective, visionary, missional leadership while also ensuring that the senior pastor is accountable to the
plurality of elders? In practice, how can the senior pastor and the session operate together in a way where they are jointly discerning the will of God for the church? The Policy Governance model at its core seeks to clarify these questions. In Carver’s own words, it is an approach to governance that “enables extensive empowerment to staff while preserving controls necessary for accountability.”76 It therefore promotes a framework in which the senior pastor and the board of elders can discern and pursue God’s vision together.

But Policy Governance is only a governance framework. As Ted Hull puts it, “it is not a silver bullet.” Hull uses the metaphor of a gym membership to illustrate that you only see improvements to your health when you actually put your membership to use.77 Similarly, like any model, Policy Governance’s benefits come not when it is merely adopted but when it is practiced with discipline. But far more significantly, policies and structures alone cannot create the kind of governance wherein the senior pastor and board of elders collectively and efficiently lead the church on mission. This requires not just a change in a governance structure or model, but a spiritual change in the board and the board members themselves. In order for the senior pastor and the board of elders to pursue and discern God’s vision for the church together, there must be a distinct spiritual culture to the session as a whole and a high level of theological and spiritual competency among its individual elders. Though helpful, Policy Governance is an inadequate solution in itself. A congregation must recover the historic, Presbyterian practice of “spiritual shepherding,” which we will consider in the following chapter.


77 Hull, 101.
Chapter 3: Samuel Miller and Spiritual Shepherding

3.1 Policy Governance is Only a Partial Solution

The principles of the Policy Governance model can only partially facilitate a relationship in which the senior pastor and the board of elders a) lead together in a way that avoids either rubber stamping or micromanaging and b) discern and pursue Christ’s vision for the church together. Part of why elders are inclined to rubber stamp is because they mistrust their own spiritual discernment and wisdom. They feel so woefully undertrained compared to the pastor in terms of both theological knowledge and pastoral experience that they often lack their own sense for where God might be leading the church. Most church board members sit quietly through meetings not wanting to reveal their lack of understanding. As Ted Hull puts it, “Better to be thought a fool by the minority than to open one’s mouth and prove the minority right.”\footnote{Ted Hull, Focusing Your Church Board (Winnipeg: Word Alive Press, 2015), 2.} Because these elders are not particularly versed in pastoring, passivity passes for wisdom!

Not all elders, however, take this passive approach. Some elders, who may regularly utilize their gifts of leadership in other settings, and who rightfully cringe at the idea of giving their time to simply approve the senior pastor’s persuasively presented plans, desire a more active approach. They want to feel that their service on the session actually makes a difference. After all, who wants to serve on a board on which they feel they have little to contribute? So where will these elders make their contributions? Most likely, they will make them in the sphere they know best. Often, though elders may feel
out of their league in matters of practical theology or pastoral care, they may gravitate toward micromanaging financial budgets, facilities issues, or attendance reports because they feel more comfortable in these areas. Though they may have to overstep the delegation boundaries of Policy Governance in order to do so, elders may express strong opinions on these matters because they feel capable of contributing to them.

Of course, any senior pastor would be wise to consult with church members about subject matters for which their expertise exceeds her own. Yet if elders start to “manage not govern” in the areas they are used to managing outside the church, the benefits of Policy Governance are lost. The senior pastor will likely feel disempowered and the board cannot hold her accountable to the authority it fails to actually give her.

Accordingly, Policy Governance in and of itself is only a partial solution by which to enable the senior pastor and the board of elders to discern and pursue effectively the vision of the church together. A congregation must further ask questions like: Who should become an elder? What are the qualities, training, and ministry experience that an elder needs in order to lead with competency and confidence? How can the elder board function as a body of spiritual leaders? How can they learn to listen to the will of God and genuinely shepherd the church? How can they participate in decisions of governance without merely operating as a body of bureaucrats? How can elders develop the spiritual muscles both to feel equipped to join the senior pastor in discerning God’s will for the church and for the senior pastor to trust their spiritual discernment?

The current *modus operandi* of many Presbyterian churches does not prepare or expect elders to serve in this way. As noted in the prior chapter, Cleland Boyd McAfee in his 1931 *Manual for Presbyterian Elders* observed, “most sessions operate through
committees of two, three, or more, expecting monthly reports of their work, each committee securing from the session authorization for anything out of the ordinary which needs to be done.”

Fast forward to nearly a century later, and Dan Hotchkiss observes that most Presbyterian congregations and sessions organize in essentially the same way today. This means that in addition to serving on the session, elders are often expected to serve on various committees each of which also writes reports, takes minutes, and submits motions to the session for approval.

Think of what this means then for the typical job description of an elder. How do elders spend most of their serving hours? In addition to attending regular (often monthly) session meetings, they may attend one or more committee meetings as well. They are asked to spend so much of their time reading reports, passing motions, and taking minutes that they likely engage in very little of what one might call pastoral ministry. When do they teach, encourage, warn, comfort, challenge the members of the church? When do they engage in ministry where they can witness the Spirit’s work of spiritual transformation in a person’s life? And when they gather together, how much time do they spend prayerfully seeking God’s will and passionately discussing, even debating how the church can best carry out its vision? If the call of an elder is to what can often become “an empty discipleship of committee service, finance, and building maintenance,” elders will continue to question their ability to come alongside the senior pastor to discern God’s will for the church. Sessions will continue to attract and nominate the kinds of

---


4 Hotchkiss, 13.
elders who are far too comfortable to serve in this way, even as the church may experience stagnation or decline.

But Presbyterian elders and sessions have not always functioned in this bureaucratic, at times monotonous, and often spiritually anemic manner. Those who were called to rule on the session were also ordained and called to engage in pastoral ministry. Along with the pastor or teaching elder, ruling elders were invited to shepherd the church’s members and to discern God’s direction and vision for the church. In the history of American Presbyterianism, no one has written more extensively about the high ministerial calling and spiritual shepherding responsibilities of ruling elders than Samuel Miller.

An early 19th century professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller used his vast understanding of ecclesiological history to advocate for the important role of the ruling elder. His treatise *The Ruling Elder* remains one of the most significant expositions of this office. Miller explicates the relationship between the pastor and the elders in such a way that protects the leadership of the pastor while also ensuring pastoral accountability. In this way, Miller is seeking to address the same issue that my thesis seeks to resolve. More significantly, as Miller describes the duties of ruling elders, he does not just describe the role that these elders play in helping to set the vision and direction for every aspect of the church (governance), he also envisions elders as “spiritual shepherds.” As shepherds, they do not simply gather to make decisions in committee meetings or even session meetings on behalf of the flock. Rather, he expects

---


6 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 157-159.
that they are also actively involved in the lives of their sheep, “to visit and pray with the sick…to take part in conducting devotional exercises…to visit the members of the church and their families…to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to caution the unwary; to reclaim the wandering.” In other words, elders are to assist the pastor with the spiritual care and discipleship of the flock. Miller recognizes that it is precisely this sort of spiritual shepherding that will equip ruling elders to govern with competency and confidence. Accordingly, Miller provides a historical perspective from American Presbyterianism through which we can reimagine the role of ruling elders as “spiritual shepherds.” By entering into this reimagined role, elders can develop the muscles to join the senior pastor effectively in discerning God’s will for the church.

3.2 Who is Samuel Miller?

Before considering Samuel Miller’s vision of the ruling elder and the unique historical context from which it developed, it is helpful to provide a brief sketch of Miller’s life and work. Miller’s keen intellect, deep piety, and exemplary service to the American Presbyterian church in general are as noteworthy as his contributions to church governance in particular. Born in Dover, Delaware in 1769 as the son of a Presbyterian pastor, Miller spent his formative years not only watching the formation of America’s Presbyterian Church but also the formation of the United States government. Having moved to Philadelphia to attend the University of Pennsylvania (where he graduated first in his class at the age of eighteen), he had the unique opportunity to stand outside the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and then just two years later, to attend the first meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of

---

7 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 162-163.
America (PCUSA). After training for the ministry through the personal tutelage of both his father and Dr. Charles Nisbet, a minister in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Miller received a call in 1793 to serve as one of the three pastors of the collegiate churches of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. John Rodgers, who moderated the first General Assembly, served as senior pastor, while John McKnight and Samuel Miller served under Rodgers’ oversight to minister together among the three campuses spread throughout the city. This arrangement continued until 1809, when the New York Presbytery enrolled the campuses as separate congregations, and Miller continued pastoring the Wall Street congregation until 1814. Altogether then, Miller spent twenty-one years serving as a pastor in New York City, preaching every Sunday, visiting the church members, and spiritually caring for those afflicted with the many diseases of his day.

Though Miller would spend the latter part of his career serving as a seminary professor, his insights into church governance in general and to the office of the ruling elder in particular were rooted in more than twenty years of pastoral experience. In fact, Miller was one of the very few Presbyterian pastors of his day who served in a large, growing Presbyterian congregation. First Presbyterian Church NYC became a congregation with three campuses in order to handle its burgeoning membership. Though it is hard to estimate the congregation’s membership during Miller’s tenure, we know that one hundred and ninety-eight members of Miller’s church died during the epidemic of

---


9 Webb, 36.

We can safely assume then that the church had many more members than that. It was in the context of serving in a large, multi-site Presbyterian church, long before the multi-site church movement of today, that Miller developed his initial vision for the office of the ruling elder and how with the pastors they can collectively govern Christ’s church. Given that my thesis is directed to the relationship of the senior pastor and the board of elders in large, Presbyterian churches, Miller’s substantial experience in this very church context should not be overlooked.

Even when serving as a pastor, Miller made multiple contributions to the wider Church and to academia in general. In 1803 he published an intellectual history entitled *A Brief Retrospect of the 18th Century* in which he detailed with great insight the most noteworthy literary and scientific achievements in Europe and America. This book was widely acclaimed in academic circles garnering him honorary doctorates from both Union College and the University of Pennsylvania. Three years later, in 1806 Miller served as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. In 1809 he preached his famed sermon on “The Divine Appointment, The Duties, and the Qualifications of Ruling Elders,” which would form the basis for his later work on this topic and serve as a seminal guide to other congregations.

---

11 Webb, 37.


13 Webb, 37.

In 1814, two years after he gave the inaugural address at the formation of Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller was appointed as the new seminary’s Chair of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government. In this role Miller devoted most of his attention to teaching and writing for the interests of the wider Presbyterian Church. From his post at Princeton he was known as “the authority par excellence in matters of church government. Presbyteries and sessions frequently sought his council on the fine points of ecclesiastical law.” In fact, historian Belden Lane further notes that “Among Presbyterians, no one gave more attention to such matters of church polity than Samuel Miller of Princeton Theological Seminary.” It was from Princeton that Miller wrote his acclaimed essay on the office of the ruling elder. In fact, the renowned Scottish churchman Thomas Chalmers called Miller’s essay on ruling elders “the very best work that has been given to the church on that subject.” But before exploring Miller’s inspiring and helpful vision for the ruling elder, it’s important to understand the unique historical moment that gave rise to it.

### 3.3 The Historical Context for The Ruling Elder

While church governance may not be the most fascinating topic among American Christians today, there apparently was a day and age when it garnered greater interest. When John Adger was installed as the Professor of Church History at Columbia

---

15 Webb, 38-40. Though many men previously trained for pastoral ministry through Princeton University, it was in 1812 that a separate institution, Princeton Theological Seminary, was formed for this purpose. Samuel Miller was integral to the planning and fundraising for this new school.

16 Lane, “Miller and the Eldership,” 219.

17 Lane, “Miller and the Eldership,” 211.

Seminary in 1859 he summed up the driving concern of the nineteenth century American church with these words:

The question of our age is, the Church, her nature, her mission, her functions, her powers, her officers, her members. The question is not about points of abstract doctrine, nor questions of systematic divinity; but points of church-order, church-office, church-powers, church-membership, church-work, church-discipline.\(^\text{19}\)

Given the novelty of the American government experiment, it should not be too surprising that American Christians would take an equal interest in church governance. Along with the political spirit of the age, there were spiritual experiences that contributed to a rethinking of church politics. Belden Lane notes that “Tensions between clergy and laity ran high as a result of the confluence of ideas brought about by Jacksonian democracy and revivalist religion.”\(^\text{20}\) In other words, even as Jacksonian politics encouraged the common man to vote and take a greater part in his government, the revivals of the Second Great Awakening also encouraged lay people to take a greater part in the ministry. The experience of God’s presence felt through these spiritual outpourings had a very equalizing effect. Those who attended the revivals became less concerned with titles and credentials, and lay preachers and movements often emerged from the gatherings. It was in this climate that “laymen were far more involved in positions of leaders; clergymen could no longer command the unrequisitioned respect they had known in the past.”\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{19}\) Lane, “Miller and the Eldership,” 211; quoting from John B. Adger, “Inaugural Discourse on Church History and Church Polity,” at his installation as professor of church history, Columbia Theological Seminary, *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XII (1859), p. 163.


\(^{21}\) Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 312.
Of course, Samuel Miller was aware of these broader, cultural trends. In fact, Lane observes, “In the history of Presbyterian polity in America few figures perceived the political character of American church life as keenly as Samuel Miller.”\(^{22}\) In other words, Miller understood that one cannot approach church polity without appreciating the uniqueness of ecclesiastical governance in an American context. Americans are skeptical of unchecked, absolute power. There is thus a strong propensity towards lay rule in American churches, perhaps more so than in Scottish or Continental Presbyterian churches. It would be foolish to seek to pastor an American church without recognizing the way in which church dynamics are influenced by this wider culture. Miller was no stranger to this.

In keeping with the spirit of his day, Miller was an advocate for greater lay involvement in church governance. He too was concerned with the danger of vesting too much power in the clergy to the detriment of the participation and influence of lay members. In fact, it was Miller’s 1807-1808 exchange with Episcopalian priest (and later bishop) John Henry Hobart, who advocated for a high church episcopal form of church government, which initially catalyzed Miller’s defense of the office of the ruling elder.\(^{23}\)

As Miller would later articulate in *The Ruling Elder*:

> Even if it were reasonable or possible, that a pastor should, alone, perform all these duties, ought he to be willing to undertake them; or ought the Church to be willing to commit them to him alone? We know that ministers are subject to the same frailties and imperfections with other men. We know, too, that a love of pre-eminence and of power is not only natural to them, in common with others; but that this principle, very early after the days of the Apostles, began to manifest itself as the reigning sin of ecclesiastics…Does this not plainly show the folly and danger of yielding undefined power to pastors alone? Is it wise or safe to

\(^{22}\) Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 312.

\(^{23}\) Lane, “Miller and the Eldership,” 219.
constitute one man a despot over a whole Church?...Ought the members of a Church to consent that all their rights and privileges in reference to Christian communion, should be subject to the will of a single man, as his partiality, kindness, and favouritism, on the one hand; or his caprice, prejudice, or passion, on the other, might indicate? Such a mode of conducting the government of the Church, to say nothing of its unscriptural character, is, in the highest degree, unreasonable and dangerous.24

Suffice it to say then that in keeping with the political spirit of his day, Miller first viewed the office of the ruling elder as an important check on clerical power and a means by which to promote lay involvement in the church. Though Miller certainly believed that the office of the ruling elder was also strongly warranted in Scripture and church history (as we will see below), his political context undoubtedly contributed to his initial interest in the office. In fact, in 1809 Miller would gather his developing thoughts on the ruling elder in a sermon he was invited to deliver at the ordination of the ruling elders of a nearby congregation in New Jersey. This published sermon would form the basis for his fuller length essay, which he later wrote and published in 1831.

Miller was not, however, a congregationalist. He openly opposed the Presbyterian “New School” movement, which sought to lessen the ordination standards for ministers and generally minimize the importance of church office. Miller believed that the training and ordination of church officers was essential to the purity and flourishing of the church. Though he affirmed “the need for representative church government through ruling elders, pure democracy, he urged, could lead only to anarchy.”25 In other words, Miller did not believe that all of a congregation’s members, though gifted by God, had the spiritual maturity, theological understanding, wisdom and discernment to govern and

24 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 144-145.

25 Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 315.
pastor the church. In one of his lectures on church governance, Miller expressed: “Is it not notorious, that by far the greater part of the members of each church are unqualified for the exercise of the power of ruling the church?” Miller’s thinking on this topic became even more settled when one of his childhood friends, a Presbyterian minister named James P. Wilson, openly challenged the office of ruling elders altogether, suggesting that Congregationalist governance was more in keeping with the New Testament Church. He contended that the ruling elder was an invention created in the mind of John Calvin. This challenge incited Miller to explore and articulate the scriptural and historical warrant for the ruling elder’s unique office.

In summary then, Miller viewed the office of ruling elder as a way “to guard, on the one hand, against the intrusions of laymen into the functions of the clergy, and, on the other, against the encroachments of clerical ambition.” Though some, like Belden Lane, might conclude that this church polity was simply a mirror of the “republicanism of the new nation,” Miller himself certainly did not see it in that way. Though he might use the language of his political context to describe his preferred polity, he appealed to the Bible and church history for its warrant. Moreover, Miller genuinely believed that ruling elders were the answer to the question “how best should we structure the life of the church?” On the one hand, he recognized how a plurality of leaders could protect against the abuse of

---


27 Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 316.


29 Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 316.
pastoral power, even as the office provided a greater opportunity for lay leadership, which he strongly affirmed. On the other hand, he acknowledged the necessity of restricting lay leadership to only those leaders who were spiritually qualified for it, lest the church be driven by the will of the congregation as a whole or simply by its loudest and most persuasive members. He believed that a strong ruling eldership “promised the greatest sense of order and success.”

But even more than just a system of checks and balances and well-ordered governance (somewhat akin to Policy Governance), Miller believed that the office of the ruling elder had the potential to provide needed support to the pastor in the work of spiritual shepherding. Indeed, Miller contended that treating ruling elders as spiritual shepherds akin to ordained ministers, calling them to approach their governance work with a distinctly spiritual character, and unleashing them to feed the flock in ways similar to ordained ministers can best promote the flourishing of the church. This spiritual shepherding is essential to creating the kind of session in which the senior pastor and the ruling elders can effectively discern and pursue God’s vision for the congregation together.

3.4 Ruling Elders as Spiritual Shepherds

In order to promote the kind of church polity in which on the one hand, the laity are empowered and the pastor held accountable, and on the other hand, wherein the pastoral office is upheld, honored, and supported, Samuel Miller emphasizes the essential and God-ordained office of the ruling elder. When ruling elders serve as spiritual shepherds along with the teaching elder – i.e. the pastor – it not only promotes the order

---

30 Lane, “Presbyterian Republicanism,” 316.
of the church but the overall “edification and welfare of the body of Christ.” That spiritual shepherding is one of Miller’s favorite images for ruling elders is evident throughout his writings. Miller begins his 1831 lecture “On Ecclesiastical Polity” with the following description:

The visible Church, with which we are all bound to be connected, and which is the means of so many blessings to its members and to the world, is a social body. It is called in our text [1 Peter 5:1-3] a ‘flock,’ under the care of the great ‘Shepherd and Bishop of our souls,’ and under the immediate superintendence of the under shepherds, commissioned and sent for this purpose. ‘The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ. Feed the flock of God which is among you.’ The word here translated ‘feed,’ literally signifies to perform the work of a shepherd; – to guard and govern, as well as to dispense food to the flock.32

Herein Miller summarily expresses his understanding of the office of an elder. First, an elder, whether a teaching elder (pastor) or a ruling elder, is someone “commissioned and sent” by none other than the “great Shepherd,” the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a divinely appointed office of great spiritual significance that should not be overlooked in favor of either clerical ambition or congregational populism. Second, the “work of a shepherd” is twofold. It is both “to guard and govern” and “to dispense food to the flock.” One can effectively capture Miller’s understanding then of the office of the ruling elder with the phrase spiritual shepherds. Spiritual in the sense that Miller believes that ruling elders are just as much ordained and appointed by God as teaching elders and should therefore grasp the spiritual significance of their calling and possess the character and training appropriate to it. Shepherds in the sense that ruling elders have a responsibility not just to rule (guard and govern) but also to minister (feed) by joining the pastor in the work of

31 Miller, The Divine Appointment, 28.
personally discipling members of the flock. It is precisely as the ruling elder engages in
this latter and often neglected work of “feeding the flock,” that the elder is better
equipped to do the work of “governing the flock.” We will look at each side of this
phrase then in turn, first *spiritual* and then *shepherds.*

3.4.1 *Spiritual Shepherds Ordained By God*

Miller begins with the assumption that the office of ruling elder is not simply a
concession to lay desire for greater participation in church leadership. Though Miller, in
keeping with the spirit of his day, certainly supported the increase of lay involvement in
ecclesiastical affairs, he did not ground his support for the office of the ruling elder in its
practical benefit:

For although other forms of church government provide for associating laymen
with the clergy in ecclesiastical business; yet, according to them, there is no
divine warrant for it. It is a mere human exigency, for which those who make this
acknowledgement, suppose that the law of Christ makes no provision for it.\(^33\)

As we will see below, Miller absolutely recognized the many practical benefits of
including lay people in the leadership of the church. But his advocacy for this office was
first and foremost rooted in scriptural warrant. In order for ruling elders to a) serve
effectively alongside the pastor, b) lead the church towards the purposes of Jesus, c)
restrict the abuse of clerical power, and d) rule in a way that the other members of the
church might receive, Miller believed that it was absolutely critical to affirm, and for
ruling elders themselves to acknowledge, that their office is divinely appointed. Only if
the pastor, the ruling elders, and the congregation uphold the divine appointment of the
ruling elder office can this office bestow its intended benefits and enable the pastor and

\(^{33}\) Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 259.
ruling elders to govern together in such a way that promotes the good order and flourishing of the church.

Accordingly, Miller believes that congregations and ruling elders must first embrace the scriptural warrant for the office. Towards this end, Miller cites a number of New Testament passages to support his conviction that God divinely sanctions ruling elders along with pastors for the governance of the church. Perhaps the most important of these texts for Miller is 1 Timothy 5:17. He believes that those who read the passage with “plain good sense” will conclude that “there were two kinds of Elders, one whose duty it was to labour in the word and doctrine, and another who did not thus labour, but only ruled in the church.”

In other words, for Miller, the difference between pastors and elders is not in their divine appointment but in their job description. Pastors, in addition to ruling, are called to teach the Word both regularly and publicly. Ruling elders are gifted and called primarily (but not exclusively) to the work of governance. In reference to Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, Miller writes: “In both of them there is a plain designation of an office for ruling or government, distinct from that of teaching.” Further still, Miller looks to 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and Hebrews 13:17 to demonstrate a class of New Testament church officers who had the responsibility not just to teach and exhort but to “exercise official authority in the church.” Finally, he draws upon Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 to


36 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 53.
support his claim that the appointment of elders was a regular and widespread practice in the early church.\textsuperscript{37}

It is worth noting here that Miller never questions the genuine Christian faith and fellowship of those who take a different view of the Bible’s teaching regarding church polity. “Men may be of different opinions on the subject of ecclesiastical government, and yet, in other respects, be equally excellent and exemplary as practical Christians.”\textsuperscript{38} But Miller makes no qualms about asserting that Presbyterian governance is “more closely conformed to the Apostolic model than any other; and better fitted, by far, than any other, to promote all of the other great ends of government in the Church of Christ.”\textsuperscript{39} It is no surprise then that Miller spends much of the early chapters of The Ruling Elder marshalling not only Scriptural arguments for the office but also the testimony of theologians throughout the history of the Church who favor its use. Simply put, Miller contends that the office can only benefit the church so much as those who hold it and submit to it affirm its divinely commissioned character.

Though Miller sees the warrant for the office of ruling elder in the pages of Scripture, he recognizes a number of practical benefits to it as well. These practical arguments, however, should not be seen as a divergence from Miller’s initial line of argument for the divine appointment of the office. To the contrary, Miller presents these practical benefits of the office as further confirmation that a good God would ordain such an office for the governance of his Church. These benefits include but are not limited to the assistance that these elders can provide in the work of discipleship (see below) and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{37} Miller, \textit{The Divine Appointment}, 11.
\bibitem{38} Miller, \textit{The Divine Appointment}, 37.
\bibitem{39} Miller, “On Ecclesiastical Polity,” 211.
\end{thebibliography}
their ability to relate with the church members in a way unique from that of a pastor. As Miller puts it, an elder “may promote her [the church’s] interests in ways, and on occasions, in which a pastor cannot; because he can gain access to many who feel some reserve in the presence of a minister of the gospel.”\(^{40}\) In other words, because ruling elders are elected from among the members of the church and because they are not “professional Christians,” they may share a relatability with the members of the congregation that makes them seem more approachable than the senior pastor. This can express itself in a number of ways as members may be more willing to share concerns about the church and open up about spiritual struggles with a ruling elder, and they may assign a greater weight to the opinions of the ruling elder. Particularly in cases of church discipline, which admittedly were more of a common practice in Miller’s day than our own, the ruling elders can collectively help shoulder the difficult judgments that a pastor might struggle to make or uphold alone.

Given that these dynamics are in no way unique to Presbyterian congregations, Miller notes that nearly every Protestant church, whether it affirms the office of “ruling elder” or not, will appoint lay people to serve in a similar sort of function:

Our Episcopal brethren reject them [elders]; but they are obliged to have their vestry-men and church-wardens, who perform many of the duties belonging to such Elders. Our Congregational brethren also reject this class of church officers; but they too are forced to resort to a committee, who attend to those details of parochial duty which their ministers can’t perform.\(^ {41}\)

In short, Miller believes that the office of ruling elder is so important that no congregation can flourish without lay members operating in a leadership function. But

\(^{40}\) Miller, *The Divine Appointment*, 37.

the true benefits of this office are unleashed when it is recognized not just for its practical value but for the scriptural warrant behind it.

Because Miller strongly believes in the divinely appointed, spiritual character of the office of ruling elder, he is even careful about the language with which he describes the office when contrasted with the office of a teaching elder (pastor). Though Miller initially used the distinction between clergy and lay-elders, as he matured and reflected, his opinion changed. “When we speak of the one as Clergy-men, and the other as Laymen, we are apt to convey an idea altogether erroneous, if not seriously mischievous.” Miller argues that initially in the second century the term Clerici was used in reference to all persons who held a spiritual office, including ruling elders, not just pastors. As he summarily concludes:

Ruling Elders ought not to be styled Laymen, or Lay-Elders. They are as really in office – they as really bear an office of Divine appointment, an office of a high and spiritual nature, and an office, the functions of which cannot be rightfully performed, but by those who are regularly set apart to it – as any other officer of the Christian Church.

Given this conviction, Miller believed that ruling elders should be ordained in a manner similar to the ordination of teaching elders or pastors. In fact, in 1809, when Miller was invited to help with the ordination of a group of ruling elders to serve in the Presbyterian Church at Powles Hook, New Jersey, Miller acted in an unprecedented way. Though the practice may not have previously been done in a Presbyterian church, Miller ordained these ruling elders through the laying on of hands. Belden Lane describes this

42 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 165.
gesture as a “revolutionary action, giving to elders a heightened sense of identity and important.”

All of this adds up to make a very clear point. If a) the office of ruling elder is just as divinely warranted as the office of pastor or teaching elder; b) if the rituals of ordination should reflect that both pastors and ruling elders have been called into their church office; and c) if the terminology by which we refer to elders should not be distinguished by ordination (clergy versus laity) but rather by job description (teaching versus ruling) or something along those lines, then pastors, elders, and congregations should recognize the spiritually significant character of those who are called, alongside the pastor, to shepherd the church.

If this is true, it leads Miller to a very important implication. If the senior pastor along with the elders are divinely sanctioned to shepherd the congregation together, then just as the congregation closely attends to the selection and training of the pastor, so too it ought to attend closely to the selection and training of ruling elders. Just as the spiritual character of the pastor is critical to his ability to shepherd the church effectively, so too is the spiritual character of those who share in that shepherding (the ruling elders). “It is much better to get along with three or four pious, wise and prudent Elders,” Miller reasons, “than to add two or three dozens to their ranks of men of an opposite stamp,

---

45 Lane, “Miller and the Eldership,” 220.

46 Acts 20:28. From Miller’s perspective, it seems that Richard Baxter’s classic work on this Scripture text, The Reformed Pastor, could just as much apply to the ministry of ruling elders as to the ministry of pastors, as they share in the work of shepherding the flock.
who, by their want of piety and wisdom, might be a nuisance instead of a comfort: a curse instead of a blessing.”

In other words, if a congregation wants to benefit from a governance structure in which the senior pastor and the board of elders are jointly discerning the will of God together for the church, the spiritual character of the office of ruling elder cannot be overlooked. It is not enough to select those who have simply been longtime members or who have positions of power or influence in the community. If the job of the session is to govern and spiritually shepherd the church on behalf of Jesus Christ, the congregation must ensure that the elders selected to the ruling office have the spiritual maturity and theological understanding with which to do so. We will return to Miller’s incredibly helpful guidance on the qualifications for ruling elders after we have first considered his proposed job description for ruling elders. For it is this job description that makes the spiritual prerequisites and character of this office even more important. For as Miller makes clear, ruling elders are called to be spiritual shepherds. It’s particularly in his description of this shepherding work that Miller can most help us reimagine the role of ruling elders today.

3.4.2 Spiritual Shepherds Called to Govern and Feed

Miller classifies the shepherding responsibilities of a ruling elder under two headings: “to guard and govern, as well as to dispense food to the flock.” Elsewhere in his writings, Miller refers to these same shepherding categories with the terms “public

---

47 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 223.

and formal duties” versus “a more private sphere of duties” or duties conducted “in their collective capacity, as a judicatory of the church” versus the duties incumbent upon elders between session meetings by which they are “constantly edifying the body of Christ.” We will consider each side of this shepherding work in turn.

Perhaps not too shockingly, the first part of an elder’s shepherding work is to “guard and govern” the flock through their governance work on the session. This part of the elder’s job description should not be too surprising to anyone familiar with Presbyterian governance. Part of the calling of the ruling elder is to do precisely that – rule. But there are at least three noteworthy ways in which Miller describes this governance work, all of which might call for something of a shift in the typical *modus operandi* of many Presbyterian sessions.

First, Miller expects that a session will frequently discuss at a high level how best to promote the spiritual health of the flock. In Miller’s own words, the session will “take order respecting everything which may be considered as affecting the spiritual prosperity of the congregation.” Though Miller does not use the John and Miriam Carver language of “discerning vision” or “writing governance policies,” I believe that he is essentially describing a very similar elder function. To paraphrase John and Miriam Carver, it is fair to say that Miller expects that the session’s meetings are the session’s meetings, rather than the management’s meetings for the session. When gathered as a session, Miller

---

49 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 159.


assumes that the elders are regularly discerning “what the Scriptures reveal as God’s will,” and then discussing and voting upon “the best measures to promote the spiritual interests of the congregation.” Rather than simply rubber-stamping or voting upon the senior pastor’s persuasively presented, predetermined plans or, equally problematically, micromanaging the line items of the budget, elders are engaged in “frequent and serious consultation” on “great subjects.” When gathered together they are “digesting and executing plans for promoting a spirit of inquiry, of reading, of order, and of universal holiness among the members of the church.”

In other words, when gathered together as a session, elders are frequently asking actual governance questions like: how can we best promote the welfare of the church? What initiatives can be most helpful to this? Are the people in our church experiencing transformation? How can we know this? Are we fulfilling our Christ-given mission? Are we reaching new people with the Gospel? By God’s grace, how can we seek to move more towards this in the next year? In the next 5 years?”

Miller describes the shepherding work of governance as having a deeply theological and spiritual character to it. Elders do not gather simply to sign off on predetermined committee decisions or to preserve the existence of the institution and its facilities. They are the ones who are charged with asking: how can we help to guide our flock in the path of righteousness for Jesus’ sake? As we will see below, it is the “feeding” work of shepherding that elders do between session meetings, which enables them do the “guarding and governing” shepherding work most effectively.

53 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 14.
54 Miller, The Divine Appointment, 30.
Second, Miller expects that ruling elders will be actively involved in the sphere of church membership. As shepherds who are called to “guard” the flock, this is part of their gatekeeping function. In Miller’s words, “It is their province to judge of the qualifications of candidates for church members; to receive and dismiss members.”56 In many large Presbyterian churches, this role is diminished to simply receiving a list of those who entered into membership the prior month and voting “yes” on an omnibus motion to make this acceptance official.

Miller expects that elders will be more actively engaged in this process. After all, if the realm of church membership presented no danger to the flock, then there would be nothing for shepherds to guard. In other words then, Miller expects that ruling elders should think through questions like: what should be the qualifications for entry into this congregation? How can we set the bar as low as it can be but as high as it needs to be in order to promote and protect the purity of the congregation? What should be the process by which a regular attender enters into covenant partnership? Perhaps the ruling elders, as we will consider below, might personally interview and meet with those seeking membership to welcome them and hear their faith story. They might also ask the following. What are the expectations of membership? How do we enforce these? Many Presbyterian churches may have members who remain on the rolls years after they have moved away or stopped participating in the life of the church. Does the church expect anything of its members in terms of regular worship, community involvement, service, and giving? Though many churches may have some written expectations of membership, few do anything to uphold them. Finally, what is the responsibility of the session when a

56 Miller, The Divine Appointment, 30.
member of the church is living in open rebellion to the Gospel? It is the unique provenance of the ruling elders to step into any cases where discipline is needed to protect the flock from harm. Because membership is so central to the overall culture, protection, and well-being of the church, Miller lists this as a particular way that ruling elders can carry out the “governing” aspect of their shepherding work.

Third, Miller neither removes the senior pastor from the realm of governance nor does he elevate the senior pastor over her fellow elders. This is particularly worth noting given how important it is for Presbyterian congregations to avoid either an authoritarian senior pastor and a passive session or a domineering session with a disempowered senior pastor. On the one hand, Miller makes it clear that though the senior pastor may be termed a “teaching elder,” her authority is not restricted to teaching:

The advocates of the office of Ruling Elder do not contend or believe that the function of ruling is confined to this class of officers. On the contrary, they suppose and teach that one class of Elders both rule and teach, while the other class rule only. The essential character of the officer of whom we speak is that of an Ecclesiastical Ruler...The Teaching Elder is, indeed, also a ruler. In addition to this he is called to preach the Gospel, and administer sacraments. But the particular department assigned to the Ruling Elder is to co-operate with the Pastor in spiritual inspection and government.

In other words, contrary to some Presbyterian congregations today which essentially say to the senior pastor “you handle the teaching and worship, but we will govern the church,” Miller expects that the senior pastor and the board of elders will engage in this work of governance together.

---

57 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 160.

58 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 55.

On the other hand, though the pastor is a vital member of the board (which is consistent with Policy Governance), his voice should not be weighted over that of any other elder:

In the Church Session, whether the Pastor be present and presiding or not, every member has an equal voice. The vote of the most humble and retiring Ruling Elder, is of the same avail as that of his Minister, so that no Pastor can carry any measure unless he can obtain the concurrence of a majority of the Eldership....Every individual of the Session is, of course, competent to propose any new service, plan, or measure, which he believes will be for the benefit of the congregation, and if a majority of the elders concur with him in opinion, it may be adopted.  

Miller insists that in the deliberations of the session, the ruling elders and the senior pastor are called jointly to discern and pursue the will of God for the congregation. After all, it is the session as a whole (the board), which has the ultimate governing authority and responsibility for the congregation, not the senior pastor or any individual elder.

For Miller, however, the governance work that a ruling elder performs at session meetings is only part of the way in which ruling elders are called to shepherd the congregation. In addition to “guarding” and “governing” the flock at session meetings, ruling elders, as under-shepherds of Christ’s Church, are also called to help “feed it” during the intervals between session meetings. This is the second aspect of an elder’s job as a shepherd. They are to “cultivate a universal and intimate acquaintance, as far as may be, with every family in the flock of which they are made ‘overseers.’” Of course, in a large Presbyterian church context, like the very church in which Miller himself served, no individual elder could be expected to shepherd personally every church

---

60 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 161.
61 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 162.
62 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 162.
member any more than could the senior pastor. But what makes Miller’s “ruling elder job description” so refreshing and perhaps counter cultural today is that he expects that every elder, in addition to their work of ruling, is engaged in spiritually feeding and ministering to people within the congregation. It is the ruling elder’s duty, Miller writes: “to visit the members of the church and their families; to converse with them; to instruct the ignorant; to confirm the wavering; to caution the unwary; to encourage the timid.”\(^{63}\) They are called to meet with, talk with, and spiritually disciple the members entrusted to them. And as we will see below, it is precisely this “people work” of “feeding the flock,” which equips the ruling elders with the spiritual muscles and wisdom to be of greatest service to the church when they gather to do the governance work of the session.

Miller describes five ways in which a ruling elder can engage in the kind of “feeding” shepherding work that he envisions. First, ruling elders are called to feed the spiritually seeking. “It is their duty to attend to the case of those who are awakened and inquiring concerning their eternal interest; to converse with them.”\(^{64}\) Miller expects that elders will engage in conversations with those who may not yet be followers of Jesus but who are willing to explore a relationship with him. In a modern church setting, this could take on a number of different forms. Perhaps elders help lead a program like the Alpha Course. Or perhaps they are part of the follow up ministry to new guests or potential members. Or even if not serving through a particular program, they are intentionally inviting new visitors to lunch after church or inviting spiritually awakened coworkers to coffee. But especially for a church that desires to see new people come to faith in Jesus

\(^{63}\) Miller, *The Divine Appointment*, 31-32.

\(^{64}\) Miller, *The Divine Appointment*, 31.
Christ, it is so vital that the ruling elders engage in these conversations to set the example for other members and to deepen their own experience of the saving power of Jesus.

Secondly, the ruling elders, as some of the most mature Christ followers in the congregation, ought to feed the spiritually growing. “It is their duty to attend to the case of those who are serious, and disposed to inquire concerning their eternal interests.”65 Every flourishing church should want to see its members growing in the grace of the Gospel and should always have an eye out for how to develop future leaders. Here is where ruling elders can especially contribute to the “people work” of feeding the flock. We might think of this as a form of mentoring. This might look like leading a small group Bible study, helping to mentor an engaged or newly married couples, or simply meeting individually with a few church members in whom they discern a serious interest to grow in their faith. Many of these people may even become great candidates to serve as future elders or ministry leaders.

Third, ruling elders are called “to visit and pray with the sick.”66 This sort of shepherding work could absolutely transform congregational care in large Presbyterian churches. Given the demands on the pastoral staff, it is not uncommon for a person who is hospitalized to receive only one visit from a member of the pastoral team during her surgery or sickness. But what if each hospitalized person were to also receive a visit from one or more of the ruling elders? There are fewer more sacred moments to minister to a person’s deepest spiritual needs than when that person is facing the throes of illness. Through these sorts of visits, ruling elders could not only bless the members of the

---

65 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 162.

congregation, but also inevitably grow from learning to extend spiritual care to people in adverse circumstances. In fact, the book of James describes praying for the sick as one of the central elements of the elder’s job description. “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.”

Miller expects that along with the pastor, ruling elders should engage in the sacred duty of feeding the sheep by praying for them in their sickness and distress.

Fourth, ruling elders are called to feed the wavering. “It is their duty to converse with and admonish, in private, those who appear to be growing careless, or falling into habits, in any respect, criminal, suspicious, or unpromising.” In other words, ruling elders, perhaps especially because church members might be more inclined to open up to them more than they might be to the senior pastor, have the unique ability and responsibility to speak into places of struggle in the lives of their sheep. Is someone’s marriage struggling? Is someone wrestling with spiritual doubts? Is someone having an affair, battling an addiction, feeling a check of conscience in their workplace or showing a lack of concern for obedience to Jesus in an area of her life? It is the elder’s job to invite that person to lunch and check in and ask personal questions and call that person back to obedience. Some elders may even lead accountability groups towards this end where men or women meet together and regularly confess sin to each other.

Fifth and finally, ruling elders are called to feed the flock through leading occasional prayer and devotional meetings. Miller writes:

---

67 James 5:14.

It is incumbent on them to assist the Pastor in maintaining meetings for social prayer, to take part in conducting devotional exercises in those meetings...and if they are endowed with suitable gifts...occasionally to drop a word of instruction and exhortation to the people in those social meetings.\(^{69}\)

Herein ruling elders have the opportunity to set the example for the rest of the congregation in a way that the paid staff of the church cannot. It is one thing to attend these sorts of “non-Sunday morning” meetings when you are a full-time paid staff member of the church. It is your job to do so. When a ruling elder prioritizes her time, amidst all of her work and family responsibilities, to gather together to pray with the people of God, she can set a powerful example for the rest of the flock. Moreover, if in these prayer and devotional gatherings, she offers a testimony of how she is seeking to pursue Jesus, it may have an impact upon the other members of the congregation in a way that the pastoral staff cannot produce. To see a person who though not a pastor is nevertheless knowledgeable about the Bible, clearly in love with Jesus, and willing to give of her time and efforts to the kingdom of God, can be immensely encouraging to the members of the church. In fact, were a large church to embrace this unique relatability of the ministry of ruling elders, they might consider reducing their amount of paid staff in order to deploy more elders into this shepherding ministry.

For Miller, therefore, the job description of a ruling elder includes just as much the shepherding work of feeding as the shepherding work of governing. Ruling elders are called to converse with the spiritually seeking, disciple the spiritually growing, pray for and visit the sick, encourage or confront the wavering, and set an example to the rest of the flock through their spiritual disciplines and leadership in various settings. Of course, this assumes that the congregation as a whole values this level of intimate discipleship.

\(^{69}\) Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 163.
and that the church members do not regard it as overbearing or invasive. But for a church that is committed to life together, this “people work,” which might also be termed “pastoral ministry,” should be as much part of what it means to serve as an elder as to sit on a committee or to deliberate in a meeting of the church’s session. In other words, it is an incredibly significant aspect of a ruling elder’s ministry in itself. Nevertheless, Miller also recognizes that it is precisely this work of feeding the sheep that can equip an elder to better guard and govern the sheep as well.

3.5 “Feeding” Shepherding Enhances “Governing” Shepherding

If one were to ask Samuel Miller “how can the elders help the senior pastor ‘in forming and executing plans for the welfare of the Church’?” Miller’s answer would be that it is precisely as the elders freely consult with the pastor during and outside of the session meeting regarding “the interests of the flock committed to their charge.” Here is one of the most important implications then of Miller’s emphasis on spiritual shepherding. How can ruling elders wisely discern the will of God for the congregation? What experiences will inform their ability to recognize the kind of instruction, consolation, challenge, encouragement, and opportunities their flock most needs? How can they develop the spiritual muscles and pastoral competency to engage in those conversations without passively sitting in silence or opting instead to actively micromanage the seemingly less “spiritual” areas of the church? The ruling elders can only effectively lead their sheep when they are spending time with their sheep and feeding their sheep.

70 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 163.

71 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 163.
One could say that Miller advocates a certain “feedback loop” between the ruling elder’s feeding-shepherding and their governing-shepherding. It is precisely when a ruling elder is spending time in conversations with spiritual seekers that he will know better how to lead the church in a way that pursues those who do not yet follow Jesus. It is precisely when a ruling elder is spending time discipling and mentoring church members that she will recognize the importance of discipleship, small groups, and the church’s programs for spiritual formation (or recognize when changes need to be made to see real transformation). It is precisely when a ruling elder is visiting sick members that he will develop a Christ-like compassion for the trials that church members (often its oldest members) endure. It is precisely when a ruling elder has experience speaking to the struggles and challenges and temptations of the sheep that she will know better where new ministry initiatives of care and recovery are needed. It is precisely when ruling elders have experience teaching God’s Word and leading the people in prayer that they will feel more comfortable both reasoning from God’s Word and prayerfully seeking God’s will when gathered as a session. In short, the session forms and executes better plans when those plans are informed by the experience of feeding the flock. It is when ruling elders engage in this regular people work (not just governance work) that they develop the wisdom and insight to speak into the best policies and vision for the congregation. The governing and guarding shepherding work is better because of the feeding shepherding work.

3.6 Qualifications for Spiritual Shepherding

Because Samuel Miller believes that the difference between pastors and ruling elders is found not in divine sanction but in job description, and because Miller believes
that part of a ruling elder’s job description as a shepherd is not only to govern and guide
but also to feed the flock, it becomes all the more essential that the ruling elders are
properly qualified and trained for their office. As Miller once expressed in his sermon at
the inauguration of his friend, Princeton Professor Archibald Alexander:

How can a man who knows only the theory of religion, undertake to be a practical
guide of spiritual things? How can he adapt his instructions to all the varieties of
Christian experience? How can he direct the awakened, the inquiring, the
tempted, and the doubting? How can he feed the sheep and the lambs of
Christ?...If he make the attempt, it will be the blind leading the blind.”

Unfortunately, though Miller committed the latter half of his career to training future
pastors toward this end, he has little to say about his methods for training ruling elders in
similar fashion. While he assumes that ruling elders will have a theological understanding
and spiritual maturity suitable to their office and ministry, he offers little practical
instruction for how to help them get there. Accordingly, we will have to give
consideration in the next chapter to how a large, Presbyterian congregation can
effectively equip and train ruling elders to be spiritual shepherds in the manner that
Miller envisions. However ruling elders are prepared for their ministry and then further
trained in the midst of that ministry, Miller offers some very practical guidance regarding
the necessary qualifications for someone to enter this sacred calling. Miller uses the
vocabulary of his day to capture these qualifications under seven headings, which for the
sake of use in our current day, I will rephrase and summarize under four.

---

72 Samuel Miller, *The Sermon Delivered at the Inauguration of Archibald Alexander, P.P., As
Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological seminary of the Presbyterian church in the
First, Miller contends that the most essential qualification to serve as a ruling elder is a deep spiritual life. Miller calls this “unfeigned and approved piety,”73 “ardent zeal,”74 and “a spirit of importunate prayer.”75 A ruling elder is a believer who knows how to dwell in the presence of God and, therefore, whose “inner nature is being renewed day by day.”76 This, without a doubt, is the most important qualification, and one that many large, Presbyterian congregations must vigilantly embrace. Given the political nature of the Presbyterian system of governance, it is and has been a temptation to nominate for a position of apparent power and supposed status those from among the congregation who already possess apparent power and status. These might be men or women of substantial wealth, notable pedigree, vocational success, or simply long-standing membership in the church. Of course, none of these things are bad in themselves and can of course be helpful resources to an elder’s ministry. But just as it needed to be said in Miller’s day so it needs to be said in our day the, “design of appointing persons to this office is, not to pay them a compliment; not to create the pageants of ecclesiastical ceremony; but to secure able, faithful, and diligent rulers of the church.”77

Accordingly, the elder nominating committee must ask questions of elder candidates like the following: Do they get excited thinking about and working towards the extension of God’s kingdom or do they seem much more consumed with other connected but less significant church matters? Do they speak well of other churches in

73 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 201.
74 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 209.
75 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 209.
76 2 Corinthians 4:16.
the area or do they speak of them as if competitors? Are they surprised you have not yet asked them to serve as an elder or do they have a genuine sense of their own unfitness, making them “more likely…to apply unceasingly and Importunately for heavenly aid”?78 Do they have “hearts filled with love to Jesus, and to the souls of men”?79 Does their ability to lead others flow from time spent connecting with God through Scripture and prayer? Perhaps most tellingly, who are the people whom they are currently leading into this deeper spiritual life? Given that ruling elders are not just called to rule but to feed the sheep, ruling elders cannot fulfill their calling without this deep spiritual life:

Without this [deep spiritual life], he cannot sincerely, nor with skill, watch over the spiritual interests of the flock; without this, he is not qualified to converse with, and direct the awakened, the inquiring, the anxious, the tempted, and the doubting.80

Secondly, Miller argues that like all good governors, a ruling elder must be a person of good judgment. This is a quality that is far easier to recognize and affirm than to impart or to train. In Miller’s words, “Whoever is called into this role must “deliberate and decide upon some of the most perplexing questions that can come before the human mind.”81 They must have the ability to set aside their personal preferences and perhaps even the approval of their friends to ask “what is best for the church as a whole and not just the area in which I am most involved?” A ruling elder must be able to exercise discretion when she is entrusted with sensitive information and to keep confidences when needed. Though she may have the instincts to discern quickly what must be done, she

78 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 211.


80 Miller, The Divine Appointment, 34.

81 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 203.
must also have the patience to discern the best way to bring it about, valuing the peace
and unity of the congregation:

There is no other than practical Christian wisdom, which not only discerns what is
right, but also adopts the best mode of doing it; which is not at all inconsistent
with firmness, and the highest moral courage; but which happily regulates and
directs it. It has been often observed, that there is a right and a wrong way of
doing the best things. The thing done, may be excellent in itself; but may be done
in a manner, at a time, and attended with circumstances, which will be likely to
disgust and repel, and thus prevent all benefit.82

Think back to the situation of what happened at the Presbyterian congregation in
California. Though the elders agreed with the modernizing, seeker-sensitive direction in
which the senior pastor wanted to lead the church, they had the good judgment to slow
the pace of change in hopes of bringing the congregation along with them. If elders are to
serve as anything of a check on the plans and whims of the senior pastor, then they must
absolutely possess the quality of good judgment.

Nominating committees would thus do well to ask: In your prior service at the
church, when have you had to exercise patience or restraint as you have sought to bring
about change? What did you learn through this experience? Have you ever been involved
in or been brought into an interpersonal conflict in the church? How did you handle it?
What change do you think our church most needs? What groups in our church might be
most initially resistant to it, and how would you help them to accept or even support it?
By asking these questions, the nominating committee can discern if the potential ruling
elder possesses the prerequisite gifts of ruling and government.83

82 Miller, The Ruling Elder, 205.
83 Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28.
Third, Miller argues that a ruling elder must be biblically literate and theologically informed:

Although all Elders are not expected to be profound theologians, any more than all ministers; yet that the former, as well as the latter, should have a general and accurate acquaintance with the Gospel system, and be ready to defend its leading doctrines, by a ready, pertinent, and conclusive reference to scriptural testimony, and thus be able to ‘separate between the precious and the vile,’ in theory as well as in practice, is surely as little as can possibly be demanded of those who are placed as leaders and guides in the house of God.  

If we adopt the vocabulary of Policy Governance, then ruling elders are a) accountable to the owner of the organization, who is Jesus Christ and b) expected to govern not just to preserve the organization or to satisfy its members but in keeping with the mission of Jesus. But how can they do so, if they have little familiarity with the teaching of Jesus? When church policies or vision are being discussed, how will they have the courage to speak up and contribute to the conversation? How can they help the senior pastor discern God’s specific will for the congregation, if they have no familiarity with his revealed will for his people? If the senior pastor suggests a course of action counter to sound doctrine or Christian character, on what grounds will they disagree? Perhaps the greatest reason why ruling elders are inclined passively to rubber-stamp is because they lack the theological understanding to join the conversation with confidence. If elders are called not just to guard and govern but to feed the sheep, how much more so is this Gospel clarity essential to the shepherding work elders do between meetings:

The Elder who is not orthodox in his creed, instead of contributing, as he ought, to build up the Church in knowledge and love of the truth, will, of course, be the means of scattering error, as far as his influence extends. And he who is not well

---

84 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 204.
informed on the subject of Christian doctrine, will not know whether he is promoting the one or the other.\textsuperscript{85}

Though a session can and should train its elders and equip them with an ever deepening theological understanding throughout their time of service, a baseline biblical literacy and doctrinal clarity must be a prerequisite for ordination.

Fourth and finally, an elder must have good rapport inside and outside of the church. Any new elder will quickly join the senior pastor in discovering that formal authority means far less in a church context. The church is a voluntary organization, which follows a leader who humbly refuses to coerce people to follow him. While elders are called to exercise at times their formal authority when making decisions as members of the session, church members will only submit to them, respect them, and listen to them when they recognize in them a corresponding informal authority of a life sincerely, though imperfectly, lived for Jesus. Elders must be well respected by others in the church for their decisions and actions in order to possess spiritual authority and weight.

Moreover, in an increasingly post-Christian context, ruling elders enter into a more public faith. In the workplace and in the community, people will rightly look to these church leaders to see how they live out their faith in Christ. It is vitally important that the ruling elder be a person whose character “promotes its [the church’s] benefit every day by his active services, and extend[s] its influence by the lustre of his example.”\textsuperscript{86} A nominating committee might even ask: Are there any church members whom you have discipled and are there any neighbors or coworkers who could serve as character references? Not only for the sake of her governance, but also for the sake of her

\textsuperscript{85} Miller, \textit{The Ruling Elder}, 204.

\textsuperscript{86} Miller, \textit{The Ruling Elder}, 207.
ministry among the sheep, it is critical that a ruling elder possess not just the authority of her office but the informal authority of a life humbly, graciously, and consistently lived for Christ. Indeed, when the church’s ruling elders enjoy a strong rapport inside and outside the church, govern from an ample and growing theological understanding, lead with the gift of good judgment, and most importantly, shepherd the church and others out of a deep spiritual life, not only will the church flourish, but the elders will be able to join the senior pastor in discerning and pursuing God’s will together. Perhaps just as significantly, the senior pastor may trust their ability to do so.

3.7 Toward Solutions in Practice

Serving as a ruling elder does not, therefore, have to be “an empty discipleship of committee service, finance, and building maintenance.” Nor does a ruling elder, as one very capable and godly elder recently put it, “have to step down from the session in order to engage in ‘people ministry.’” To the contrary, Samuel Miller helps us to envision a way for ruling elders to serve as spiritual shepherds. Ruling elders must be men and women trained and ordained for an office that differs from the senior pastor’s only in job description, but not in divine sanction. Not only can their work of governance shepherding reflect a spiritual character, as they prayerfully discern God’s will and form plans (policies) for the church, but they also can do the shepherding work of spiritually feeding the sheep. Far from being an add-on to the job description of a ruling elder, this

87 Hotchkiss, 13.

88 These are the haunting words (in my opinion) that an elder at my own congregation spoke a few years ago, as part of his address to the session at the end of his service. He explained to me afterwards that while he enjoyed his time serving on the session and the many committees that came with that, he felt he had no time to engage in the work of helping men and women to know and follow Jesus. Would that this work of feeding the sheep had not only been encouraged but even incorporated into his initial job description!
sort of pastoral ministry is precisely what enables them to wisely, sensitively, rule on behalf of the flock. Only if a ruling elder possesses the training and qualifications concomitant with their high spiritual calling, and only if an elder is encouraged and required to engage in both governing and feeding shepherding, will she grow the spiritual muscles to lead confidently alongside the senior pastor.

Of course, some may argue that Miller’s vision for the ruling elder is idealistic. Can a congregation really expect to nominate such qualified ruling elders? Can a church really expect that its elders will have time to engage in spiritually feeding individual sheep even as they are already asked to attend so many meetings to govern the flock as a whole? At the very least, this vision might require rethinking the requirement for ruling elders to also serve on various other church committees in addition to the session. But the objection is nonetheless fair. In fact, Miller himself realizes that his vision for the ruling elder is at best aspirational:

Were the foregoing views of the nature and duties of the Elder’s office generally adopted, duly appreciated, and faithfully carried out into practice, what a might change would be effected in our Zion!89

But envisioning and striving for the ideal is what has the potential to change the real. With this assumption in place, the question then arises, how can we take steps towards this ideal? How can we put these solutions into practice? Of course, this applies not only to Miller’s vision for spiritual shepherding, but also to the Carver’ vision for Policy Governance. How does a large, Presbyterian church actually change its governance model in a way that incorporates the principles of Policy Governance but remains true to its Presbyterian polity? How can it practically structure the relationship

89 Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, 171.
between the board of elders and the senior pastor in a way that empowers pastoral leadership while preserving accountability and the value of corporate discernment? How can a church begin to select and train its ruling elders to serve as spiritual shepherds? How can a congregation rewrite the job description for ruling elders so that they grow and exercise their spiritual muscles not only when they are meeting as a session but also as they spiritually feed the flock? How can a congregation actually develop and deploy the kind of ruling elders who are able to join the senior pastor in leading the flock as under-shepherds of Jesus Christ?

In the final chapter, we will turn to these solutions in practice. First, I will highlight how my own congregation, Highland Park Presbyterian Church, has adapted the Policy Governance model to structure its senior pastor-board of elders relationship and how they can further implement the model, which would especially include also embracing the concept of spiritual shepherding. I will then highlight the exemplary way that Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis selects and trains their elders to function as theologically informed, spiritual shepherds. Finally, I will explore how Lisa Johnson, ECO’s Director of Lay Leadership, is utilizing the “Flourishing Leader” program to help congregations transform the culture of their session. The program not only helps elders individually and corporately recover the notion of spiritual shepherding, but it also helps pastors and elders learn how they can jointly discern the vision of God for their church. Though the program does not prescribe a particular relationship between the senior pastor and board of elders, it teaches sessions how to have the strategic and generative meetings that the Policy Governance model can free the session to pursue.
Chapter 4: Solutions in Practice

4.1 Moving from the Ideal to the Real

A consultant can only take a congregation so far. The most gifted and committed consultant will spend time getting to know the congregation, gathering information, learning the church culture and language, and then developing a diagnosis or situational assessment of the congregation’s current problem(s). Only after such careful work will the consultant prescribe any viable solutions. Even then, if the congregation embraces these solutions, they will still have to take what is perhaps the hardest step of effecting cultural change and embracing tangible ways to put the solutions into practice.

At the beginning of my thesis, I started with a diagnosis. Based on a) the many ways that the critical relationship between the senior pastor and board of elders can break down, b) how large-size dynamics add stress to this relationship, and c) the gap in Presbyterian polity to define this relationship clearly, I suggested that for many large Presbyterian churches, this relationship is a dynamic to clarify before it becomes a dire problem to solve. I suggested that an ideal relationship is one in which the senior pastor and board of elders can jointly pursue the vision of God for the congregation in a way that enables empowered pastoral leadership, ensures pastoral accountability, and values corporate spiritual discernment. I then offered two proposed solutions to help realize this ideal: an adapted version of the Policy Governance model and a recovery of the concept of spiritual shepherding.
This approach aligns in many ways with a consultant’s typical process except it does not account for the uniqueness of each congregational context. While I have tried to tether my diagnosis and my prescriptions to a number of real church situations, only a deep knowledge of a congregation’s history, culture, and current senior pastor-session dynamic could enable someone to know how best to put my proposed solutions into practice. Further still, even if someone were to possess this important contextual knowledge, it might still be challenging to know how to take steps from the real toward the ideal.

Accordingly, each congregation still has to do the hard work of identifying how best to implement these solutions in their own context. It can be immensely helpful, however, to learn from how other congregations have taken their own steps to put these solutions into practice. Their example may provide inspiration to churches who desire to improve upon the leadership dynamics within their own congregation as well.

Beginning with the congregation I serve and know best, I will describe how in the wake of a broken senior pastor-session relationship, Highland Park Presbyterian Church has adapted the Policy Governance model to structure their senior pastor-board of elders relationship. I will also note some ways they can further benefit from the model, the most important of which is also to embrace the concept of spiritual shepherding. Some of the additional steps that Highland Park Presbyterian could take to equip its elders as theologically trained, spiritually deep, pastorally experienced shepherds, Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis has already taken. Though they have not fully embraced the Policy Governance model, they have found their own ways to ensure the spiritual dynamics of their session meetings and, most significantly, to train their elders
to serve as spiritual shepherds. Finally, I will lift up ECO’s denominational program called “Flourishing Leader,” which aims to help sessions transform their leadership culture. This program not only helps elders individually and corporately recover the notion of spiritual shepherding, but it also helps pastors and elders learn how they can jointly discern the vision of God for their church. In this latter respect, while the program does not prescribe a particular relationship between the senior pastor and board of elders, it teaches sessions how to have the strategic and generative meetings that the Policy Governance model can free the session to pursue.

4.2 Highland Park Presbyterian and the Policy Governance Model

In May of 2013, after thirteen years of service to the congregation, the senior pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian Church resigned. His resignation was gracious, and his time of service well-celebrated by many in the congregation, including me. I saw and still see him as a godly man and a faithful pastor to whom I am deeply indebted for my own early growth in ministry. His departure came, however, on the heels of a petition circulated by many elders and members, who while they may have thought highly of him as a person, felt that a leadership change was needed. For the first time during his leadership tenure, the senior pastor received a performance evaluation. The team conducting the evaluation concluded that the senior pastor’s preference to focus on preaching and counseling and his corollary passivity in church leadership were contributing to the congregation’s division and lack of vision. But in the course of their evaluation, as the team spoke with elders, pastors, committee leaders and other staff, the team also concluded that the session was failing to fulfill its governing role. Effective,
empowered leadership and clear accountability were missing throughout the whole congregation.

4.1.1 Recognizing the Problem

At the time of this transition, Highland Park Presbyterian had forty-five elders, following a general principle of one elder for every one hundred of its forty-five hundred members. There are ways to create community and trust among large groups, but doing so is inherently more challenging. As one elder from that time period put it, “To a person, the elders didn’t know each other.”¹ Because they did not know each other, the meetings were marked by a general character of mistrust. Instead of collective discernment, the meetings were dominated by a few particularly vocal elders. Perhaps more significantly, partially due to the content and brevity of the training process, the fifteen elders who would roll onto the session every year (elders served three year terms) had little clarity about their role. Though they were ordained to lead as elders and though they were equipped with some knowledge of the history of the Presbyterian church, they were given little explanation of their governance role, how they relate to the senior pastor and staff, or how their role differed from the one they may have previously held, for instance, on a management committee. When any person is thrust into a new role without a clear description of it, that person will gravitate towards what he or she knows, which is usually to dive into the details. The session would often quickly slip out of governance into management.

¹ Doug Smith, (Elder: Highland Park Presbyterian Church), interviewed in person by Charlie Dunn, August 14, 2018.
Consequently, the session meetings were marked by what could be called a “bottom-up” style of governance. Each session agenda was on average ten to twelve pages in length including thirteen or fourteen agenda items, most of which were reports or motions from committees. An elder who served as the moderator of a given committee would offer a report or read a motion. Then the elders would predictably fall into one of two traps, either passively rubber-stamping a committee plan or micromanaging the details within it, therein crossing over the non-existent boundaries of delegated decision-making authority. As a result, the session developed a reputation for having long meetings that seemed to accomplish little. Not too surprisingly, many of the church members who were most gifted in governance consistently turned down nominations to serve on session, and the role of elder became either a way to reward committee service or a platform to voice particular grievances or interests.

Perhaps most significantly, the session was failing in its governance role to discern and gather consensus around a vision for the congregation. They spent little time thinking about their short or long-term goals for the church. As a result, not only did the congregation lack a galvanizing vision, but the senior pastor was receiving no clear direction from the session. The session gave the senior pastor no performance review to determine if he was achieving the session’s goals because the session had failed to set any goals for the senior pastor to pursue. Moreover, even if the session had provided specific goals for the senior pastor, they had no agreed upon boundaries of delegated-authority (what they would entrust to the senior pastor’s management), and they had direct oversight of most of the committees. Accordingly, the session was holding the senior pastor accountable for everything, though they had delegated to him authority over
almost nothing. For example, if the senior pastor wanted to make a change to the worship service, he first had to receive approval from the worship committee. When the senior pastor started occasionally finishing his sermons on the chancel instead of the pulpit in an effort to help make traditional worship in a transcendent sanctuary feel more personal, he was redirected by the worship committee, which saw itself as a committee of the session. If the senior pastor wanted to make any changes to any of the church furnishings, he would first have to receive the blessing of the architectural integrity committee. Accordingly, when the senior pastor evaluation team presented their report to the session, they recommended that the session form a governance task force to determine how Highland Park Presbyterian could improve its governance structure going forward. Hopefully, this effort would reduce the risk of future breakdown in the relationship between the elders and the next senior pastor the congregation would call.

4.1.2 Adopting the Policy Governance Model

It is hard to make changes to an organization’s culture, particularly when that organization has a long history (Highland Park Presbyterian was founded in 1926), and when in spite of its governance issues, the organization is made up of many wonderful people, who are making an impact for Christ’s kingdom in myriad ways. Such was the case in 2013 at Highland Park Presbyterian Church. It took not only the disruption of the senior pastor’s resignation, but also the guidance of a trusted visionary elder, to help Highland Park Presbyterian Church rethink its governance model.

That leadership largely fell to a man named Doug Smith. Doug had gained the respect and trust of the elders by serving in nearly every leadership role in the church. He
had moderated the officer nominating committee, the evangelism committee, the outreach committee, and most importantly, he had co-moderated the senior pastor evaluation team. Through his conversations in that process, he gained a first-hand view of the congregation’s internal governance issues. Perhaps just as significantly, Doug had spent thirty-two years as a partner at Accenture, where he helped lead massive change initiatives for client companies. The session knew that Doug loved Jesus, was committed to the good of the church, and was keenly aware of the church’s governance dynamics. They also knew that he possessed the consulting experience to help propose a way forward. He was therefore appointed, along with another elder named Jim Johnston, to co-lead the governance task force.

Through their board involvement in various corporate and non-profit settings, members of the governance task force were already familiar with the clarifying benefits of the Policy Governance model. As noted in the first chapter, the “Policy Governance” model is after all “the most well-known modern theory of governance worldwide.” It thus seemed a reasonable starting point for the task force. They then proceeded to identify Presbyterian congregations that had already adopted the model, and they examined the details of how these congregations had applied it to their respective contexts. They became convinced that Policy Governance could be useful to Highland Park Presbyterian’s context and that it would help the session get out of the weeds and start discerning vision for the congregation. It could also allow the session to empower the senior pastor to accomplish the vision, while at the same time enabling the session to hold the senior pastor accountable to that vision. As Doug Smith believes, that is Policy Governance.

Governance at its essence. It helps the church set a boundary so that elders can both elevate their focus towards where the church is headed and avoid disabling the whole system through micromanagement. The session can only hold the senior pastor accountable for goals they clearly state and which they actually empower the senior pastor to pursue.

When the governance task force proposed the Policy Governance model for Highland Park Presbyterian, they met some initial objections, each of which required a thoughtful response. For instance, there were some elders who were concerned that if the session limited its focus to ends and then delegated authority to the senior pastor to determine means, it would be giving too much power to the pastor. The governance task force heard this objection by clarifying the way that the session would monitor and audit the senior pastor’s work to make sure that the means were consistent with the session’s adopted ends. They agreed initially to create a group called the management council, which would report to the senior pastor, but which would help the pastor to vet staff plans and budgets. But they also had a tough conversation about the fact that if you want to set and reach goals, you have to be able to hold someone accountable for the realization of them. It might be through committees or it might be through the senior pastor, but the session needs to know whom to hold accountable for the goals it sets. The session decided that the senior pastor should be the accountable person. The task force then said, if you believe it is the job of the senior pastor to help realize those goals and you plan to hold her accountable for them, then you have to delegate the authority to her to accomplish them. Additionally, if there are other things the session expects the senior
pastor to do beyond executing the goals (preaching, counseling, self-care, etc.), then put those clearly in the job description and the annual evaluation.

There were other elders who raised the concern that though the senior pastor is technically the head of staff, there are also associate pastors called by the congregation, who serve on the session and oversee various ministry areas. These pastors are effectively “tenured” in that they have voice and vote on the session, and they can only be removed through a congregational vote. Generally this is not an issue, but one can imagine how it could be. Is it really fair to say that a senior pastor should be held accountable for the performance of those he may feel powerless to direct? The session determined that if they were to adopt the Policy Governance model, they would have to make it clear to the senior pastor and to the other pastors that every staff member reports to the senior pastor (not directly to the session). Accordingly, the senior pastor has the authority to assign job responsibilities and compensation (in keeping with session-set Human Resources policies). The session concluded that most people want to contribute and add value to the organization. Yet if someone should remain unproductive or uncooperative after candid feedback, coaching, reassignment, etc., then a senior pastor should know that with appropriate supporting evidence, he can ask the session to pursue the termination of an associate’s call.

With these objections addressed and after additional months of consideration, the session voted to adopt an adapted version of the Policy Governance model. At first, this was little more than embracing a set of principles. Over the next couple of years, as the session began to implement the model, it began to take shape and change the congregation’s governance culture.
4.1.3 Implementing the Policy Governance Model

As the session started to implement the new governance policy, they learned several important things along the way. Within the Policy Governance model, the session is responsible for creating essentially four types of policies: 1) ends policies (our vision and the goals we feel called to pursue); 2) governance process policies (how we ensure we are fulfilling our job as the session; 3) session-staff linkage policies (how the session relates with the senior pastor); and 4) senior pastor limitation policies (the limitations on appropriate means to achieve the session’s stated ends). The Highland Park Presbyterian session found that it was best to start with the session-staff linkage policies, then move to the governance process policies, then write (but do not get carried away with) the limitation policies, and only then patiently start to discern the ends policies. We will consider how they approached each of these four types of policies in turn.

First, the session started to clarify its staff-linkage policies. They got out the org chart, and they clarified the most important arrow of oversight and delegation. The senior pastor alone (in Highland Park Presbyterian’s case – the senior leadership team, which also includes an executive pastor and an executive director who work under the authority of the senior pastor), reports directly to the session. The senior leadership team in turn delegates authority to the management council (made up of staff and ministry team leaders) that helps the senior leadership team to vet important plans. Then associate pastors or department directors oversee staff and lay ministry teams. Eventually, the session would find that the management council was an unnecessary link in the chain and would create a smaller team made up of the moderators of the facilities, finance, and HR committees of the session that could help the senior pastor vet important decisions when
needed. Otherwise, the senior leadership team now manages the congregation directly through staff leaders. When the session first adopted Policy Governance, the management council helped to alleviate the initial (but ultimately discarded) fear of a “staff-run” management structure. Additionally, and just as importantly, the session clarified that it was responsible for discerning critical goals, which it would hold the senior pastor accountable for achieving through an annual evaluation process. The session also restricted itself and its individual elders from exercising authority over staff or interfering with ministry departments.

It is significant to note that the session quickly found that clarifying the session-staff linkage policies was very helpful to their search for a new senior pastor. Finalist candidates had questions about the church’s governance. They wanted to know what they would be accountable for and what authority they would have to achieve the session’s ends. Especially given the context of the prior senior pastor’s departure, candidates were somewhat wary about whether they would fall prey to a sudden senior pastor-session breakdown. In fact, the candidate who would become the new senior pastor made it clear that he would only come on condition of an annual review process. He wanted to make sure that he could make corrections along the way before suddenly discovering that he was not meeting unknown expectations. The clarified roles between the session and the senior pastor became a great asset to the congregation in their senior pastor recruitment.

Second, the session began writing governance process policies, which are essentially the ways in which the session seeks to govern itself. From their conversations with other churches using the Policy Governance model, they knew it was important to charge someone with making sure that the session did not drift from its new model.
Toward this end, the session created a governance coordinating committee, which was initially made up of six elders (at that time the session had forty-five elders). This group was not supposed to function as an executive board, but it was tasked with creating session meeting agendas, ensuring that policies were being written and remembered, keeping the session in its lane while holding the senior pastor accountable for his lane, and training new elders. Now that the Highland Park Presbyterian session has reduced its membership to twenty-four elders (each serving a four year term), the governance coordinating committee consists of four people: the clerk of session, the clerk’s successor, the moderator of the officer nominating committee, and the senior pastor.

More significantly, the governance coordinating committee was given the task of helping to educate the whole session about the new governance model in a way that was memorable and clear. For five months, Elder Doug Smith, now serving as the moderator of this committee, helped to explain the session’s five new principles of governance, which were rooted in Policy Governance: 1) on behalf of Jesus Christ; 2) govern, not manage; 3) ultimately accountable; 4) one voice; 5) accessible, available, and attentive.

To govern on behalf of Jesus Christ means that the session, though elected by the congregation, must always seek first the will of Jesus (more than the congregation’s interests) and spend time discussing and praying about how to lead towards Jesus’ purposes. To govern not manage means that while the session writes policies and determines critical goals, the session and individual elders will not interfere with the senior pastor or the staff in the implementation of those goals. To be ultimately accountable means that though the session may delegate authority for management to the senior pastor, they are ultimately accountable for the achievement of the vision, the
stewardship of resources, and the avoidance of unacceptable actions. They must therefore hold the senior pastor accountable and monitor finances, metrics, and actions accordingly. To govern with one voice means that after discussion and debate, when the session makes a decision, all elders will respect the decision and communicate to church members accordingly. Moreover, elders who serve on a ministry team or a committee, do not possess the authority of the session. They too must submit to the management structure. Finally, to govern well requires being accessible to the members and available to hear their thoughts and opinions and actively attending to their hearts and spiritual life. These five principles, which are written on the bottom of every one-page session agenda sheet, help remind the elders of the governance model the session has embraced.

Third, the session began to write its senior pastor limitation policies. At this point, there was more anxiety about entrusting too much management authority to the senior pastor. There were some elders who wanted to write policies enshrining particular ministries or programs, lest the new senior pastor should make too many program changes. The session wisely determined, however, to keep the limitations to a few types of necessary policies. These include limitations regarding 1) general ethics, 2) human resources and compensation, 3) financial auditing, budgeting, debt and property, 4) contracts, 5) new church development, and 6) the formation or ending of worship services.

Fourth, only after these new governance policies were in place did the session start the process of discerning critical goals. This delay was helpful, as the session wanted to ensure that the new senior pastor could participate in this discernment. His buy-in to the vision and critical goals would be essential to their communication and
implementation. They also recognized that discerning ends and critical goals was difficult to do when they had never done it before. Eventually, in April of 2017, years after adopting the new model and through much deliberation, the session adopted its vision and goals. The current vision sheet answers questions like: Why do we exist? How do we do this? What does transformation look like? What do we stand for? Where is God leading us next? And what goals will help us measure transformation? The vision statement now reads: “to lead all generations to become transformed followers of Jesus for the flourishing of our city and beyond.” Each part of this vision statement has a particular end or aspiration associated with it. Perhaps most significantly, the session has adopted five critical goals by which they can measure if this vision is being accomplished. By 2026, when the congregation “turns 100,” Highland Park Presbyterian aspires to see 1) one hundred percent of its covenant partners growing as transformed followers of Jesus; 2) ten new church plants; 3) one hundred new leaders raised from the next generation for Christ-centered ministry; 4) ten thousand new followers of Jesus, near, here and far; and 5) one-million hours of prayer directed towards these goals. The senior pastor has in turn appointed teams of staff and lay leaders to define, measure, and most importantly, chase after these goals.

Finally, the session has learned that though it now delegates to the senior pastor the authority to execute the ends and goals it discerns, it is still helpful for the session to stay informed about the various means the senior pastor and his staff are employing to pursue them. In other words, though the senior pastor may not need approval for a given course of action, he is wise to keep the session well informed so that they are not

---

surprised. Additionally, the more informed they are, the more they are able to help support the senior pastor, as they field questions or critiques from church members.

4.1.4 Need for Further Implementation of Policy Governance Model

Highland Park Presbyterian has greatly clarified their senior pastor and board of elders relationship. They have largely adopted a model that can help the session truly govern, embrace the value of corporate spiritual discernment, empower the senior pastor, and hold the senior pastor accountable. Yet they still have need for further implementation. There are some elders who believe that the session size is still too large. The session could devote more time in meetings to spiritual discernment and generative discussion. A culture of greater accountability is still needed. Most significantly, the church must enhance its ability to nominate and train the kind of elders who are able to spiritually shepherd. Only then can the church maximize the potential benefits of the Policy Governance model.

First, there are some elders who believe that the level of intimate trust and opportunity for genuine discussion needed for the session actively to govern the church (rather than passively vet the ideas of a few elders or of the senior pastor), requires further shrinking the size of the session. As noted earlier, Dan Hotchkiss believes that for a session to truly govern, it should not exceed twelve elders.⁴ Though this reduction may prove too radical for Highland Park Presbyterian, there are some elders who believe that they should move from the current twenty-four to eighteen.

Second, though the session now spends far less time listening to committee reports and spends more time strategically thinking through the Vision 100 goals, the session would still benefit from spending more time in spiritual discernment and generative discussion. Rather than starting with a brief prayer and devotional at the beginning, and then spending the rest of the time on vision and business, how can the session spend more time a) listening for the voice of God regarding where the church needs to be going and b) sharing what they are seeing in the life of the church, particularly in their conversations with the members? The session’s ability to determine a vision for the future will only be so good as their ability to discern the needs of the people and the work of God in the present. The session could benefit from spending more time in generative conversation about topics that do not demand action in the present, but could certainly inform vision for the future. For instance, are there articles they can discuss about what is happening in the surrounding culture or about ways that other churches are addressing the challenges of the day? Perhaps various elders could go visit churches that are leading the way in reaching new followers or developing leaders or engaging the culture and then report back on their findings to the session. How can the session become leaders who are helping the church to think beyond its current horizons?

Third, though the Policy Governance model creates a clear framework for accountability, it cannot infuse a willingness actually to hold people accountable. While the session does provide the senior pastor with an annual performance review, greater accountability is needed throughout the rest of the organization chart. Many staff leaders may not yet see how their job description or expectations align with the session’s vision
and critical goals. Though the senior leadership team is working to increase accountability along these lines, they still have a ways to go.

Fourth and most significantly, Highland Park Presbyterian must enhance its ability to nominate and train the kind of elders who are able to spiritually shepherd and thus maximize the potential benefits of the Policy Governance structure. A governance structure can only take a church so far. Like a referee and a rule book, it outlines the norms within which the team should play the game, but for the team to succeed, it needs the right players. The new model requires the kind of elders who can dream about the big picture without getting bogged down in the details. The skills required to serve on a ministry team or a management committee are not identical with the skills needed to govern well on the session. More importantly, if the session now has the time and freedom not just to listen to reports but actually to join the senior pastor in discerning God’s will for the church and if elders need to have the theological understanding and ministry experience to competently and confidently join the pastor in this work, then Highland Park Presbyterian must take further strides to train its elders to be spiritual shepherds. Indeed, elders who are suited and trained for the great spiritual significance of their work and elders who are personally feeding the sheep between session meetings are the ones who are best able to guide and govern the sheep when gathered as a session.

4.2 Second Presbyterian Indianapolis and Spiritual Shepherding

Unlike Highland Park Presbyterian, Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis has not embraced the Policy Governance model. They value the wide input of a larger session (thirty elders). The session chooses to delegate many management responsibilities
through working ministry committees on which elders are assigned to serve. The session seeks to remain informed about and to approve and bless the work of management committees. The session is hesitant to delegate all executive authority to the senior pastor (or to hold the senior entirely accountable), partially given the dynamics among their various ordained pastors, who are each entrusted with helping to oversee specific ministry areas. They find that this governance model has worked effectively in their context, perhaps in some part, due to the humble, empowering, and consensus building personality of their recently retired senior pastor.

While Second Presbyterian has not embraced the Policy Governance model that I have previously recommended, they have taken significant steps to enhance the strategic and spiritual dynamics of their governance work. Prior to 2009, the agenda of the session meeting was largely driven by committee reports with eight to twelve reports given on a single night. The session made a deliberate decision to change the agenda of the session meeting to create more time for spiritual discernment and strategic thinking. Now, after a time for biblical reflection and ongoing elder training (which we will revisit below), the session uses the bulk of its meeting to discuss a substantive issue or ministry area within the church. They then transition from round tables to a rectangular table in order to conduct the business portion of the meeting. They receive a few brief committee reports, and then vote on an omnibus motion, which they were able to review several days in advance. Altogether then, this business component typically occupies only fifteen to twenty minutes of the session’s time when gathered. Far more of the meeting is devoted to spiritual discernment and strategic thinking, which enables the elders genuinely to discern vision for the church alongside the senior pastor. Moreover, though Second
Presbyterian continues to manage much of the congregation’s ministry through the work of committees, these committees begin their meetings with biblical reflection and interweave times of prayer into their work so as to consciously remember the spiritual significance of their administration.

My intention, however, is neither to commend nor critique their particular model of governance, which regardless of its structure, allows elders to govern in a spiritually significant way. In my opinion, Second Presbyterian is most exemplary for the way they create a culture in which the senior pastor and session can discern and pursue God’s vision for the church together because of how they call and train elders to serve as spiritual shepherds. Consequently, their session resists the urge to micromanage staff and committee reports on facilities and finances because they feel equipped to contribute to conversations regarding vision and ministry. Their elders feel competent to engage substantial discussions about the congregation’s ministry and vision (without rubber-stamping), and their senior pastor need not push through preconceived plans because he has good reason to trust and appreciate the elders’ spiritual authority and wisdom. Second Presbyterian Church Indianapolis thus provides a tangible example of a congregation that enjoys the benefits of putting the solution of spiritual shepherding into practice.5

4.2.1 Selecting and Training Spiritual Shepherds

Though a session can help deepen a new elder’s theological understanding, enhance her spiritual formation, and equip her for the work she is called to do, it cannot,

---

5 My understanding of the governance, elder training, spiritual shepherding, and session dynamics of Second Presbyterian Church Indianapolis is mostly derived through phone conversations with the congregation’s recently retired senior pastor, Dr. Lewis Galloway and through email correspondence with its Director of Stewardship and Endowment, Dr. John Koppitch.
to use the language of Scripture, replace a heart of stone with a heart of flesh. It cannot impart a heart that loves God, loves others, and is actively pursuing transformation and community in the life of the church. If the job of the session is to govern and spiritually shepherd the church on behalf of Jesus Christ, the congregation must nominate elders who have the spiritual maturity from which to do so.

Accordingly, Second Presbyterian first demonstrates its commitment to spiritual shepherding in the way it nominates future elders. The congregation receives a nomination form, which provides a biblical description of the spiritual qualities that characterize a good elder candidate. Members are encouraged only to nominate people whose lives align with these qualities. A nominating committee then sorts through the nominations according to a set of carefully written criteria. As they evaluate each nominee, they seek to answer questions like: Is this a person who demonstrates spiritual maturity and responsible discipleship? How is this person growing in Christian community? How is this person already engaged in significant ministry with other people? Is this person giving generously according to their means? Does this person demonstrate the requisite gifts to govern and lead in the church effectively? Only when the committee and a potential elder both discern that God is calling this person to lead, does the committee nominate the person and ask for the congregation’s affirmation.

Once elected by the congregation, newly elected elders enter into an intensive elder-training process, which Second Presbyterian incorporated in 2013. This is perhaps the most significant way that Second Presbyterian prepares its elders to serve as spiritual shepherds. For a season of four months, elected elders meet on a weekly basis for training

---

sessions that include up-front teaching, small group discussion, elder presentations, and significant preparatory reading. The elder-training overview resembles a seminary course syllabus. Along with its high bar of commitment, the elder-training process includes four especially noteworthy emphases.

First and foremost, the training process emphasizes the spiritual significance of an elder’s calling. The training explains that God equally calls teaching and ruling elders to their office, and though their roles differ in some responsibilities (namely preaching), all elders share a common calling to shepherd the people of the congregation. Given this significant spiritual calling, all new elders are expected to “engage in daily prayer, devotions, or Scripture reading.” Only by caring for their own spiritual life and relationship with Jesus will they be able to shepherd their flock. Even more importantly, each elder elect is asked to prepare and present a “Faith Journey Statement.” Herein they have the opportunity to reflect on their own journey with Jesus and to consider how God has worked in their lives in general and how he has prepared them for their new calling in particular. This exercise has proven very impactful for a number of reasons, but it especially helps elders-elect to realize the spiritual nature of their calling. It is not their success in business, their experience on other boards, their notoriety in the community, or even their resume of church service that qualifies them for their role as an elder. It is the work that God has done to call them and transform them in Christ. Moreover, as elders-elect share their faith statements first with their fellow elders-elect and then later with the session as a whole, it fosters a greater level of trust, understanding, and intimacy among

---

7 “2018 New Officer Training Syllabus,” Second Presbyterian Church Indianapolis, 1. Much of my explanation of the training program relies on this very helpful and thorough training syllabus.

8 John Koppitch, 1.
the session. They begin to see that amidst their differences, they share a common unity and spiritual life in Christ.

Second, the training process includes a high level of theological training. The training begins with a half-day workshop taught by the senior pastor on how to read and interpret the Bible. Elders, who may already be familiar with various parts of the Bible, learn to understand the grand narrative that ties the parts into a whole. They recognize major themes of Scripture, learn helpful guidelines for interpretation, and practice reading the Bible in meditative, prayerful ways. With this excellent foundation in place, they then proceed to study the various creeds and confessions contained within the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. In so doing, elders deepen their theological understanding, sharpen their grasp of the Reformed faith, and especially hone their ecclesiology, focusing on the nature, mission, and work of the Church. Far from finding this teaching abstract or academic, elected elders consistently share how much it helps them to understand what they are about to do and why they are doing it. Moreover, the teaching format includes not only lectures and small group discussions but also elder presentations on a particular confession. Herein, each elder-elect is assigned to study one confession and then present on its context and major themes along with their personal reflections. Given that one of the best ways to learn is through teaching, elder-elects especially internalize the theology of the confession on which they present. Since this training began in 2013, there has been a notable increase in the level and regularity of theological discussion at session meetings, as elders may at times refer to a confession, or more frequently, incorporate confessional language when expressing their opinions.

---

9 John Koppitch, 1.
Third, the training describes the shepherding work of an elder in a way that includes not only sheep governing but also sheep feeding. Of course, Second Presbyterian Church elders are expected to fulfill their call to govern and guide the sheep at session meetings. In Second Presbyterian’s governance structure, they also do so through serving on various committees. Yet elders are also expected to feed and care for the sheep between these meetings. Elders are expected not only to look proactively for ways to listen to the various needs of church members, but they are also called to “daily seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.”¹⁰ In other words, elders learn in this training that though the session meeting is where elders gather to discern and agree upon God’s vision for the congregation, attending session meetings is only part of what an elder does. Accordingly, many elders continue to lead small groups. Others help to run a city-wide outreach ministry called “The Indianapolis Great Banquet,” in which a number of the elders give talks aimed at spiritual renewal. Other elders shepherd in less structured ways, seeking out people in the church for whom they can pray. As a result of this emphasis on shepherding the people, the spiritual quality of the session’s governance work has improved. The recently retired senior pastor notes that as the elders spend the bulk of the session meeting exploring a significant question such as “How can we develop new leaders for ministry?” or “What is the best way to maximize our counseling center?” or “Where do we long to grow as a church?” they regularly draw upon their

¹⁰ John Koppitch, 1.
sheep feeding experience to inform their thinking. In other words, their work of sheep-feeding helps them better carry out their work of sheep-governing.

Fourth and finally, the elder training process does not cease with the training of newly-elected elders. Biblical and theological reflection continues as a significant part of each monthly session gathering. Whether they read a book of the Bible such as Galatians or Philippians, or whether they read through a book on Christian ministry, they begin each meeting with guided reflection followed by focused small group conversation. Herein they connect the topic to what they see in their own lives and what they observe in the members of the congregation. Through this ongoing training and group formation, elders demonstrate “a tremendous growth in their ability to articulate their faith and their ability to see people from a spiritual perspective.” In summary then, because their training before and during their service prepares and encourages them to serve as spiritual shepherds, elders who rotate off of the session do not leave saying “now I can return from governance to ministry,” but “I’m going to really miss this season of significant spiritual service.”

4.3 Flourishing Leader: Spiritual Shepherding and Group Discernment

One of the hardest things about making cultural changes is having the vision to recognize or the courage to admit that there is a problem. If you ask a fish about water, it will likely say “What is water?” The same is often true in a church. It may be difficult for the elders or senior pastor of a congregation to recognize that their governance dynamic

---

11 Lewis Galloway, (Senior Pastor of Second Presbyterian Indianapolis; retired in July, 2018), interviewed on the phone by Charlie Dunn, August 18 2018.

12 Lewis Galloway.
is dysfunctional or could at least be enhanced. Even if the senior pastor or some elders recognize that change is needed, it may be difficult to create the buy-in needed for that change without causing additional conflict and offense. For these reasons, it can be immensely helpful when someone from outside of the congregation can help facilitate the cultural change. This is what the Presbyterian denomination ECO is seeking to do through its Flourishing Leader program.

According to Rev. Lisa Johnson, who directs the program, the primary purpose of Flourishing Leader is to help sessions make a cultural shift in the way they lead their church.\textsuperscript{13} The program longs for session meetings to become less like a board room and more like an upper room. Through eighteen months of video trainings, readings, exercises, coaching, and small group discussions, the program helps a session to reimagine its approach to governance in three phases, each of which is captured by a question. In phase 1, the session asks “Who am I and who are we?” They explore the calling and unique spiritual autobiography of each elder along with how they can function as a Christ-centered community of leaders. In phase 2, the session asks “What are we leading?” Herein they clarify their understanding of the mission of the church and how to understand their governance role in light of it. In phase 3, the session asks “How do we lead?” The session reflects upon how they can make Spirit-led, prayerful discernment part and parcel of their session meetings.

The Flourishing Leader program does an excellent job helping church sessions rethink their approach to governance in general. But as it relates to enhancing the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders, the program’s

\textsuperscript{13} Lisa Johnson, (Director of Lay Leadership Development, ECO), interviewed on the phone by Charlie Dunn, August 31 2018.
contributions are primarily twofold. First, the program provides specific guidance for how elders can corporately and individually approach their work as spiritual shepherds. Secondly, though the program does not suggest a particular way to structure the senior-pastor and board of elders relationship, it teaches sessions how to do the work of corporate discernment and generative discussion. In other words, Flourishing Leader outlines how the senior pastor and the elders can discern the will of God together, which is precisely what the Policy Governance model creates the space for a session to pursue.

4.3.1 Flourishing Leader and Spiritual Shepherding

As previously referenced, Samuel Miller classifies the shepherding responsibilities of a ruling elder under two headings: “to guard and govern, as well as to dispense food to the flock.” I referred to these distinct but related shepherding responsibilities as sheep-governing and sheep-feeding. Flourishing Leader helps ruling elders to embrace their call to spiritual shepherding in both of these respects through what they call “the one-third rule.”

When it comes to the session’s collective work of sheep-governing, Flourishing Leader challenges the session to devote the first third of the session meeting to connect with God. Whether reading from and reflecting upon God’s Word or sharing ways that God is at work in the congregation and then specifically praying for them, the session should begin its meeting with the conviction that their sheep-governing has value only to the extent that they are doing it in accord with and on behalf of Jesus, the “great shepherd

---

of the sheep.”  Rather than quickly moving from the opening prayer to hear committee reports, a session of spiritual shepherds should first take time to hear from its true overseer. Not only is this consistent with the concept of spiritual shepherding, but it also aligns with an adapted version of the Policy Governance model, which asserts that an effective board must spend time listening to the voice of its ownership. If the “owner” of the organization is Jesus and if the session therefore is called to govern on behalf of Jesus Christ, every session meeting should consciously begin in keeping with that conviction. Lisa Johnson attests that the congregations that have adopted this one-third rule for their meetings have often found that they are not only able to complete the rest of their governance work without extending the meeting time, but they approach this work in a more unified and Christ-centered way.

Along with the one-third rule for the work of sheep-governing, Flourishing Leaders also suggests a one-third rule for the work of sheep-feeding. Except here the fractions are reversed. The program counsels that for every one hour an elder gathers with the session to govern and guide the flock, the elder should spend two hours feeding particular sheep in the flock. This guideline not only incorporates sheep-feeding as part of an elder’s job description, but it expects that an elder will devote the bulk of her time in this way. To help elders to appreciate this important aspect of their spiritual shepherding role, the program invites them to contrast two competing conceptions of the role of an elder. Do elders see themselves primarily as “institutional superintendents” or “shepherds of people”? Do they envision elders as “spiritual leaders” or “committee chairs?” Do they

---

primarily feel “responsible for people’s growth” or “responsible for things?” Of course, the Flourishing Leader program recognizes that oversight and administration are necessary and important parts of an elder’s gifting and calling. But the program wants to help elders to experience a paradigm shift in which they see the sheep-feeding work of meeting with spiritual seekers, mentoring future leaders, visiting new members, leading small-groups, praying with the sick, encouraging the wavering, and teaching the Scriptures as essential to a ruling-elder’s work. As we have noted before, this very work of sheep-feeding helps elders to exercise the spiritual muscles with which they can more confidently and competently do their work of sheep-governing. Elders can join the senior pastor in discerning where best to lead the flock as those who share the responsibility of ministering to the flock.

4.3.2 Flourishing Leader and Group Discernment

One of the benefits of the Policy Governance framework is that it allows the session to spend less time listening to committee reports and more time discerning and deciding upon God’s vision for the congregation. Because the board 1) sees itself as ultimately responsible for the vision of the congregation, 2) delegates the management and execution of its defined ends to the senior pastor, and 3) evaluates the senior pastor to ensure that its ends are being met, the board can 4) begin to redirect how it spends the majority of its time when meeting. But the question then arises, for a session that has opened up time in its meeting for this sort of visionary discussion, how can it actually go about that work? Practically, what does it look like for the board collectively – the senior

---

pastor and the elders together – to discern and decide upon God’s vision for the church? The Flourishing Leader program offers very helpful instruction along these lines.

First, the Flourishing Leader program suggests that the work of a session should include three kinds of conversations: fiduciary, strategic, and generative. For a church utilizing the Policy Governance model, fiduciary conversations would include both those related to executive limitation policies and those related to monitoring the work of the senior pastor to ensure that it is in keeping with session ends. Strategic conversations are those in which the session discerns a vision statement, the ends the congregation should pursue, and the critical goals to measure their achievement (both long-term and short-term). They might even include discussion of how the session can better train and organize itself to fulfill the vision. Generative conversations, are those which “generate new content or ideas.” Generative conversations do not require a decision, but they invite the session to reflect together about what is happening in the church, the surrounding community, and the wider culture so that the session can continue to see beyond the church’s current horizons. These are conversations that do not demand immediate actions but which may certainly inform the strategic ends or policies the session adopts in the future.

Flourishing Leader offers tangible advice for how congregations can approach these generative and strategic conversations in a way that truly enables the whole session (not just the senior pastor) to discern God’s will together. This advice can be reorganized into six guidelines.

---

17 “Flourishing Leader Guidebook,” 62.
First, build into the session meeting agenda times for decision-free discernment and discussion. Assuming that the session meeting is one and a half hours long, half an hour of the meeting could be devoted to discussing a question that does not have a pre-determined answer. Though the senior pastor and the elders who create the session agenda might help choose the questions, they should resist the temptation to answer them in advance. Second, begin this portion of the meeting with a time for silent, personal prayer. It is important that each elder “become aware of God’s presence” and “invite the Holy Spirit to help you be open to the voice and desires of God.”

Third, introduce the strategic or generative question that the session will discuss. There may have been some advance reading to inform the conversation. For instance, a session may read an article about how millennials are not abandoning belief in God but are less inclined to participate in a church. The session might then discuss questions like: why do you think this trend is happening? How have you seen this evidenced in our city and our community? In our church? How do you think our church is doing at helping to reach and engage the next generation? Do you know of any churches that are doing this well now? What changes will the American Church have to make to connect with the next generation in the future? Or, if the conversation is more strategic in nature, the session might key in on a particular end within the session’s vision. We have said that we want to plant five churches over the next ten years. How will we know that a church plant is successful? To what extent should we allocate personnel and financial resources towards this end? In what ways do we hope for these new church communities to help transform the culture of our own congregation?

---

18 “Flourishing Leader Guidebook,” 65.
Fourth, in a generative conversation or in the early stages of a strategic conversation, start with only dialogue. In other words, the facilitator sets ground rules that preclude interruptions or feedback to the comments of individual elders. Allow all of the elders the opportunity to share their opinions, and encourage everyone to listen closely to each other’s perspectives, resisting the urge to think about what they will say.

Fifth, for strategic discussions, or for generative discussions that become strategic discussions, revisit them later in a phase that allows for disagreement and debate. Herein elders are invited to agree or to disagree with each other. This sort of discussion allows elders to offer persuasive reasons behind a particular perspective and to identify what could be competing values. Sixth and finally, only after the phases of open dialogue and debate, should the session seek to adopt a policy decision or vote upon a particular motion. The purpose of distinguishing these phases is to create a process of real group discernment “that allows for the Holy Spirit to work and decisions to unfold without urgency or pressure.”19 Each session will have to determine its own ground rules for session discussions, but Flourishing Leader’s guidelines for group discernment can help a congregation begin living into the opportunity for collective vision discernment, which the Policy Governance model enables.

4.4 Conclusion: Shepherding Together

Most congregations will not attempt to clarify the relationship between the senior pastor and the board of elders until a crisis emerges. As the old adage goes, “If it isn’t broken, why fix it?” Length of tenure, personal relationships, and familiar systems can cover over a multitude of governance disfunctions. Yet the risks of a broken senior

---

19 “Flourishing Leader Guidebook,” 68.
pastor-session relationship should not be underestimated. A congregation in which neither the pastor nor the session is willing to risk making decisions can become ineffective in its mission, as its membership dwindles or divides. A congregation in which the session rubber-stamps the senior pastor’s preconceived plans may suddenly find the church going in a direction they do not support, or worse, they may be shocked by a pastoral burnout or scandal. A senior pastor who feels that she and the church ministries are micromanaged by the session, may suddenly depart for a new calling. Some crises are unavoidable, but others are the product of neglect. Why not clarify and strengthen the senior-pastor session relationship before a crisis arises?

Some might also question whether all of this talk of empowered pastoral leadership, pastoral accountability, and group decision making suggests an un-Christian pre-occupation with authority. Is the above discussion really just a lengthy negotiation of “who has the power in the church?” Did not Jesus say, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.”20 Belden Lane, for one, suggests that Samuel Miller’s desire to see the pastor and the ruling elders govern together is overly preoccupied with the “equitable distribution of power” and “management techniques” rather than how the “community’s common servanthood should be expressed in the world.”21 But I believe that this is a false dichotomy. Even a church composed of the most Christ-centered, servant-hearted leaders is still an organized institution in which decisions must be made about which equally Spirit-filled leaders may

---


disagree. To use the spiritual nature of the church to justify an “appeal to ‘informality’ is a cover for governance or administration that is sloppy and lacks transparency.” Given the remaining effects of original sin, how much more important that authority only be extended and wielded within a framework of accountability.

One should not interpret this to mean that a church’s senior pastor-session relationship is the most important determinant of the church’s health or that church governance is as important as fulfilling the church’s mission. Both the Carvers and Samuel Miller recognize this well. “Ends are about the organization’s impact on the world,” and Policy Governance is only a structure that helps an organization to discern those ends and empower the necessary means to pursue them. Samuel Miller acknowledges from experience that “the Presbyterian form of government and discipline may be administered with so little of the spirit of charity, and of zeal for the glory of God, and the extension of the Redeemer’s kingdom, as to make it little more than a course of vexatious and unedifying litigation.”

To borrow language from the Policy Governance model, a clarified and strengthened senior pastor-board of elders relationship is only a means to the higher end of a flourishing church in pursuit of the mission of God. An adapted form of the Policy Governance model can help large Presbyterian churches to empower their senior pastor to make efficient decisions about the means while remaining accountable to the ends that the pastor and the session have jointly discerned. A recovery of the concept of spiritual shepherdling not only helps sessions to attract and train elders with the gifts and character

---

22 Hotchkiss, vii.


in keeping with their high spiritual calling, but it allows these elders to develop their pastoral muscles through the between session meeting work of feeding the sheep. In turn, they will become more competent and confident to join the senior pastor in discerning God’s will for the flock. The senior pastor and the board of elders will be empowered to shepherd together as under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd. Of course, the flock and mission of this Shepherd are more important than the structure that supports them. But as Samuel Miller so ably puts it: “It were unwise, indeed, to insist on adhering to form at the expense of substance; but it were equally unwise to cherish the hope, that the substance will be long retained, when form is abandoned.”

---

Bibliography


**Biography**

Charlie was born in Austin, Texas on January 25, 1988, though he has spent most of his life in Dallas. In 2009 he graduated *summa cum laude* from Dartmouth College with a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Languages and Literature. He completed his Masters of Divinity at Redeemer Theological Seminary in 2013, and he submitted the preceding dissertation as the final requirement of Duke Divinity School’s Doctorate of Ministry degree.

Charlie currently serves as the Teaching Pastor at Highland Park Presbyterian Church, where he was ordained as a pastor in 2014. He is passionate about teaching Scripture in a way that helps people to know, trust, and enjoy the living God.

In keeping with his desire to see Presbyterian elders embrace their call to spiritual shepherding, Charlie’s favorite Scripture passage is John 10:1-30, in which Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Charlie frequently returns to this passage to remember Jesus’ redemptive love to lay down his life for his sheep, his pursuing love to call his sheep, and his preserving love to protect his sheep, even unto eternity. Love so undeserved, yet so vast, consistently calls his heart back to the Shepherd.

Charlie is married to his best friend, Brandi. When not at the church, he enjoys playing tennis and golf, working out at the Y, traveling, cheering on the Texas Longhorns and having good conversations with friends.