

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Leadership and Organizational Development
(bob@efcawest.org)

July 1, 2014

Governance Documents – Friend or Foe?

Note: This is the third in an ongoing series of postings intended to facilitate and serve as a guide for church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams

I struggled with the title of this article. I figured that many church leaders will see the words “governance documents” and skip right past to the next topic. Governance documents are not something we like to read about, or talk about. And that’s my point. Governance documents govern what we do. They both empower and confine us. They set both direction and boundaries. And they are the documents that people both inside and outside the church hold us accountable to use when we find ourselves involved in some nasty situation. Governance documents matter. They are something to talk about.

Governance documents can be a pain in the neck for churches and leaders, and it is almost always in a negative context when we find ourselves thinking or talking about them. When I mention governance documents with church leaders, I most often receive one of two responses:

- Our church governance documents are holding us hostage to the past and preventing us from undertaking effective ministry, or
- Some in our church, sometimes including leaders or board members, seem to hold our ancient governance documents at the same level of sanctified authority as Holy Scripture, perhaps even higher. They have become sacred, and cannot be changed.

I believe it is important for churches, church leaders, and church boards to talk about church governance documents (constitutions, bylaws, articles of incorporation, policy manuals, etc.) on a regular basis. Here are some topics that could result in a conversation worth having.

1. When were our governance documents last updated? Many of the churches in crisis that I have heard about or worked with have this in common – their governance documents are woefully inadequate and out of date. If the last time your church modified its governance documents was over ten or fifteen years ago, you should suspect that they are out of date, inadequate for today’s legal climate, or otherwise limiting your ministry. I suppose there might be bylaws that were divinely inspired in 1925 and amazingly prescient regarding the ministry and social environments of the 21st century, but I have never seen them.

2. What do our governance documents actually say about what authorities, responsibilities, behavioral, ministry, and procedural requirements exist in your church? To properly answer this question, pastors and board (and other leadership teams in larger churches) will need to actually read the documents. At my home church, we have begun the practice of talking about the church constitution and bylaws during our first meeting of the calendar year. We specifically review and discuss the authorities and responsibilities of the lead pastor, the elders, and all powers reserved to the congregation/membership. It's an interesting exercise, a good reminder, and helps to keep us in our lanes during the year.
3. What in our governance documents is frustrating, ineffective, outdated, or holding us back from effective ministry, and why? Even if church leaders do not intend to undertake revisions in the near future (or ever), this is an important conversation to have because the surfacing of these issues is healthier than ignoring them. These conversations eventually form the basis for any subsequent changes that might be proposed.
4. Would our church family willingly support making needed changes, or would they be resistant or suspicious? This is an important question because, in many cases, trying to change governance documents in a stubbornly resistant or suspicious congregation can be dangerous or even fatal to a leader's tenure. Sadly, many leaders stop here, believing needed change is not possible. The healthier alternative to status quo, however, is to lead. Leaders move followers from where they are toward where they need to be. As leaders, it is our responsibility to prepare and equip our church family to be comfortable with, rather than fearful of, such beneficial changes. If we never talk about governance issues except when we want people to vote on proposed changes, we may find ourselves quite disappointed with the results. Our congregations will be unprepared for change if we never talk about it.

One way to deal with anticipated congregational resistance to change is to talk about the need for changes at an annual or other business meeting, then to propose the actual changes later, at some subsequent meeting. This might take a year or more to accomplish the needed changes, but it might be time well spent if it can mitigate conflict. Another option is to propose a "test drive" of the needed changes. You might ask the congregation to vote to allow the church to operate under the proposed bylaws for two or three years, review the results, then vote on their permanent adoption in a subsequent meeting when the "new" way of doing things will have already started to feel like the "we've always done it that way" method of doing business.

Governance documents actually do impact our ministry. They can help, they can hinder, and, they can harm. Our church governance documents truly are – something to talk about.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob@efcawest.org.