

# **Improving Session Effectiveness**

Presentation to the Presbytery of the Pacific

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## **Open in Prayer**

### **Introduction: Why Policy Governance?**

If you have an effective session that thinks strategically and deals with matters of faith you are blessed. Perhaps you feel more like Paul in Galatians believing your session is working on the wrong things and really needs to change.

Hello, I am Mark McGrath. I transitioned Chapel Hill Church from Committees to Policy Governance. Since then I have been talking to pastors around the country. Many are not happy with their session. They feel unsupported and are frustrated that Christ's work is not being done. How the session governs itself is really important. If you get it wrong, it is difficult to make progress. If you get it right your church becomes much more effective in achieving its mission. The wrong organization and governance is like being in the wrong denomination. You spend precious time and effort working on things you wonder make any difference to Christ at all. Ok lets have a show of hands. How many of you think your Session and the organization of your church should be improved?

So what does the Book of Governance mean in §16-10, Session Duties? Letter N says the Session has a responsibility to "organize itself for the advancement of the ministry of the Church and the mission of that congregation". So just what does that mean to us?

I hope to give you a vision of one way to organize the Session and a church. For the note takers among you, I posted all of this material on Chapelhillpc.org under resources, then documents. Also there will be a Question and Answer period before lunch.

## History and Experience

Ten years ago Chapel Hill Church was growing fast, adding staff. Committees operated within their own ministry areas. The elders tended to work on details, contended for budget, contended for staff resources, and gave staff conflicting direction and priorities. The committees were isolated from each other. Session meetings tended to be business meetings, rich in operational detail, lacking in spiritual content. I found it nearly impossible to represent the mind of Christ as a Ruling Elder. We got to talk about budgets endlessly and made decisions about how many bibles would be in the pews.

But our church was still growing; the Holy Spirit was surely helping. We couldn't manage operationally just by adding more volunteers.

As we grew staff, the dysfunction became worse. The problem was that, at a higher level of complexity, no committee can keep up with a dedicated staff, and the sheer volume of input the session and committees needed to process could not occur. The only way for the church to move forward at this higher level of complexity was to give apparent deference to the old governance model while making decisions prior to and outside that very model. Our system of internal governance had failed.

There came a time as a Session when we understood our failure. As ruling elders we just couldn't out work our problems. After prayer and a period of discernment, the Ruling Elders abandoned their committees.

What did we do? **What would you do?** Of course we formed a task force to make a recommendation. It is the findings of that task force and our journey over the past 10 years I've come here to talk to you about.

You could be thinking that these are only big church issues and what I have to say won't apply to where you are. I'd like you to think about what your session does, how it operates, and see if something of our journey could make your session more effective.

The task force found our problems were not due to lack of effort, commitment, or faithfulness on the part of the Ruling Elders. Our problems were not due to lack of organization, management, or operational direction. The way we worked together as ruling elders our internal governance once effective was now ineffective. We went in search of an internal governance model.

We knew:

1. The model had to be a fulfillment of the Book of Order.
2. The authority of the Ruling Elders could not be abridged.
3. The model had to help the session think strategically.
4. The model had to help the Session to grapple with matters of faith.

We found that board of directors, and board of trustees had the same problems. John Carver in his book " the Carver Governance Model, Carver says that Board members are usually intelligent and experienced persons as individuals. Yet boards, as groups, are mediocre. "Effective governance by a board is a relatively rare and unnatural act. Trustees are often little more than high- powered, well-intentioned people engaged in low-level activities" Boards tend to be, in fact, incompetent groups of competent individuals. Wow. That stung but it seemed to fit.

We took the Carver Policy Governance Model defined in his book "Boards That Make a Difference" and adapted it for use at our church. The Task force translated the language of Carver's Policy Governance from secular to church specific. Chief Executive became Senior Pastor. Board of Directors became Session. Board Governance became Session Governance. Ends to be achieved became Ends to be achieved in accomplishing the mission of the congregation.

## Policy Governance Concepts

Summarizing from that book there are four elements of Policy Governance:

**Ends:** What is to be achieved, for whom and at what cost or relative priority.

**Executive Limitations:** The boundaries the Senior Pastor can operate within to achieve the Ends

**Executive Board Linkage:** Documentation on how the Ends and Limitations are to be communicated and monitored.

**Board Governance:** The method or rules the Session adopts to manage itself.

Within those elements there were **our** guiding principles:

1. The Session is the voice of the “ownership”. **Who do you think is the owner of the church? No it is not the members, it is Christ who created it.**
2. All authority in the church organization flows from the Session.
3. The Session defines its’ own governance and retained responsibilities.
4. The authority of the Session is held and used as a body. The Session speaks with one voice. Instructions are expressed by the Session as a whole. Individual board members have no authority to direct staff or volunteers.
5. The Session defines in writing its expectations about the intended effects to be produced, the intended recipients of those effects, and the intended worth (cost- benefit or priority) of the effects. These are Ends policies.
6. The Session defines in writing its expectations the limits on operational means, thereby placing boundaries on the authority granted to the Sr. Pastor. The Session describes those means that would be unacceptable even if they were to work. These are Executive Limitations policies.
7. The Session defines its’ policies to the level of detail where any

- reasonable interpretation is acceptable. These policies replace, at the Session level, more traditional documents such as mission statements, strategic plans and budgets.
8. Ends achievement are delegated to the Sr. Pastor. Delegation must be clear. No subparts of the Session, such as committees or officers, can be given jobs that interfere with, duplicate, or obscure the job given to the Sr. Pastor.
  9. The Sr. Pastor has the right to use any reasonable interpretation of the applicable board policies.
  10. The Session must monitor organizational performance against Ends and Executive Limitations policies. Monitoring is for the purpose of discovering if the organization achieved a reasonable interpretation of these board policies. The ongoing monitoring of board's Ends and Executive Limitations policies constitutes the SR. Pastor performance evaluation.

## **Another View**

For those of you whose eyes are glazed over at this point, another view of the same concepts are in the Book: *Winning on Purpose; How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission*, by John Kaiser.

He writes: The Session sets the rules of the game, how to score points, and what a win looks like. The Pastor organizes the team, sets the plays, and guides, mentors, and coaches. The Congregation does the ministry. So just like professional sports, you have the ownership, the coaches, and the players. They achieve because everyone knows their role on the team. There is no confusion and no lack of responsibility and accountability.

Kaiser says that committees don't work because they have members with influence but no accountability. Calling plays that you expect a committee to run is just not reliable. Having many independent committees is like having the offence, defense, and special teams all on the field at the same time, calling their own plays and expecting to not get in each others way and win. Many Sessions do not tell the Pastor what is expected; do not help in understanding Christ's call; and concentrate on operational details. No matter your church size, is that what your Session does?

For those of you that are not into sports another analogy might be better. The session decides to go on a trip and sets the destination, and rules of the road. The pastor knows where to go and the speed limit. The pastor gets everyone in the congregation on the bus and they do ministry together. The session can know if you are going to the right place and how far from the destination they are.

## So what did this look like in practice?

The Chapel Hill Session defined a mission statement and Ends **show examples?** that further document the intent and success factors of the mission. The Session has defined the Sr. Pastor (Executive) Limitations. Those limitations have been tested and have been effective in providing the level of control the Session intends.

The Sr. Pastor has been delegated the Ends to be achieved with the execution limitations. The Sr. Pastor, staff, and volunteers have been setting overall church budgets, staffing levels, and programs. No additional policies or ends have been needed to manage items like church budgets.

The Sr. Pastor, staff and volunteers have developed a strategic plan to achieve the Ends defined. The Session was asked for input, but no Session approval of that plan was required.

There are no church committees. **Except for the Nomination Committee.** Elders execute authority together within the Session. There are Councils that support volunteer and staff ministry leaders. The ministry leaders are accountable to the Sr. Pastor through the Chapel Hill organization and job descriptions.

The Session has monitored all Ends and Executive Limitations for compliance. That monitoring is the Sr. Pastor performance evaluation.

The Ruling Elders execute their retained responsibilities, are active in worship, teaching, volunteering (without authority) for ministry councils, mission and service. They are active in the life of the congregation, not in an operational role, but participating, and in that participation discerning where Christ calls us.

Policy Governance is working for Chapel Hill.

## How do you implement Policy Governance?

Implementing Policy Governance for your Session and church takes some serious work. Before you start consider if better governance addresses the issues your Session and church have. If substantial theology disagreements exist address them first. The biggest hurdle is education of all the stakeholders. The Session needs to both understand the need for change and how Policy Governance works in practice.

The next step is to define the four key Policy Governance elements: Ends, Executive Limitations, Executive Board Linkage, and Board Governance methods and rules. There are many resources and examples that help in that work. Next is to define Session retained responsibilities (areas like receiving new members and discipline). Then plan the transition from committees to ministry leaders. Assist the ministry leaders recruit volunteers. Assure the Sr. Pastor understands everything delegated and set a start date.

Spend the first Session meetings going through a historically normal agenda, and **teach** each other who has the responsibility for each item. The Session agenda from that time forward should be limited to improving the Ends, setting how the church works through Limitations policy, monitoring Ends and Limitation achievement, execution of retained responsibilities, and advising the Sr. Pastor when requested.

Let's take an example. Budgets. Historically a time consuming very detailed Session agenda item. Under Policy Governance the Sr. Pastor could be delegated budget making and operations with an Executive Limitation that might require 30 days of expected cash flow kept as a reserve. The budget agenda item would be: Did we keep the 30-day reserve last month and do we expect to have that reserve next month? Depending on the answer the Session knows if further work is necessary. And that is all there is...



## **Conclusion and Q & A**

Policy Governance is an effective tool to organize a Session to do the work of that congregation. It takes time and effort to set up. It demands the Session be more strategic, and provides tools to be less operational detail oriented.

We have XX minutes before they are ready for us at lunch. Lets proceed with Questions and Answers.

### **Typical Questions:**

**Denominations have their own unique constitutions, governance, or orders. Doesn't Policy Governance at the church level conflict with governance established at the denomination level?**

Depends how it is implemented. Policy governance is an organizational model. A tool. It provides no direction. It contains nothing that could be defined as "what". Policy governance is the "how". With some exceptions the Book of Governance is silent on how things get done. Policy Governance defines what is to be done through defining Ends. Ends are what is to be accomplished. When Ends are defined they must align and support the "whats" as defined in the Book of Governance. When aligned, Policy Governance becomes the method to ensure the intent and letter of the Book of Governance is supported and accomplished. As stated in the EPC Book of Governance, "the session will organize itself to achieve the mission of the congregation". Policy Governance does that when the Ends are aligned to the Book of Governance.

**Delegated vs. retained Session responsibilities, a.k.a. is everything really delegated to the Sr. Pastor?**

No. Each Session needs to review the Book of Order especially the Book of Governance section on Duties and Responsibilities of Session. Some of those duties require execution by the Session. Receive dismiss, restore, or remove members is a good example. Some of the Session responsibilities cannot be delegated. It is the

Session's duty to execute those tasks. Many duties and responsibilities can be delegated to the Sr. Pastor and through the pastor to the church staff or volunteers either in full or in part. Even when delegated, the Session retains accountability for the successful conduct of the work delegated. Not for the operational conduct, but for the outcome, for the results.

### **Isn't the Sr. Pastor overloaded when so much is delegated?**

No. The volunteers now report to leaders the pastor recruits or hires. The quantity and types of work really doesn't change. The organization and coordination of that work gets much more controllable. Instead of shuttle diplomacy between committees, the Sr. Pastor's job is to achieve the stated ends, manage, set direction. With documented ends and limitations the pastor is free to direct the program to advance the ministry and achieve the mission of the congregation the pastor is called to serve. Having rules of the game gives the Pastor real authority.

### **Isn't Policy Governance just throwing the ball into the Pastors court and letting the Ruling Elders off the hook for real leadership?**

Well what is leadership? Do you have to physically conduct ministry to be a leader? What is the job description of a Ruling Elder?

Leadership is getting the very most from the church to achieve Christ's call. It is movement toward an outcome. It is not an activity without accountability for results. Elders setting the church's mission, describing what is to be achieved, how the church is to operate and being accountable to that direction is leadership worthy of a Session's call.

### **Has Policy Governance been effective at Chapel Hill Church?**

Yes. Chapel Hill Session has used Policy Governance as a tool for the past 10 years. It has provided us with consistency of direction. Changes in Ruling Elders or Pastoral staff have not changed the mission of Chapel Hill. The authority of the Sr. Pastor has provided

greater flexibility to achieve the stated ends. Issues have been managed by use of the Policies. Ministries have clear leaders who can make decisions, and are accountable for performance toward stated goals. The number of volunteers has increased because the ministries are well run and organized. That organization has kept volunteers from being burned out.

### **Ending and Thanks:**

I hope this information is useful to you. All of the materials I discussed are available at [chapelhillpc.org](http://chapelhillpc.org). Thank you.

## Bibliography:

Carver, John. Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations. ISBN-13: 978-0787976163. 989 Market Street, San Francisco CA, 94103-1741, Copyright 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2006. (Note: Chapel Hill Church Taskforce used 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition is currently available).

Kaiser Jr., Edmund H. Winning on Purpose: How to organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission. ISBN 0-687-49502-4. 201 Eight Ave S, PO Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202-801, Copyright 2006.

<http://www.chapelhillpc.org/resources/documents/policygovernance>

1. Policy Governance Introduction
2. Improving Session Effectiveness
3. The Ten Principles of Policy Governance
4. Chapel Hill Church Policies
  - a. Ends
  - b. Executive Limitations
  - c. Global Process
  - d. Session Senior Pastor Linkage

Bond, Dr Stuart. Dissertation, Fuller Seminary, Chapter 4.

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