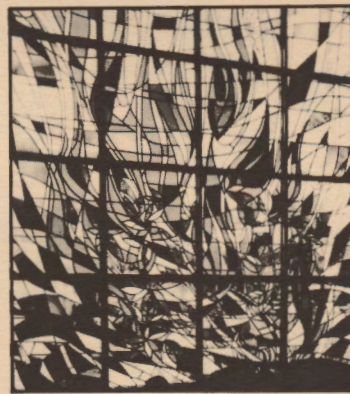


# RELIGION

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## A New Look at Boards and Councils in Local Congregations

By  
Charles M. Olsen

IN the sixties some people questioned the viability of community structures of faith called congregations. Those were "movement" days when alternative forms of Christian community were objects of experimentation. Then came the seventies and new hope for congregations. The learnings from the movements of the sixties were sorted through and appropriated for the development of congregational life. The eighties presented studies of congregations as social, organizational, and behavioral entities. Efforts were made to understand them as they stood on their own — not as they were typed by denominational categories.

Those efforts produced insights about congregations through their stories and narratives, revealed the inner dynamics of conflict and healing, drew implications from their inner life for the potential of limitations for church growth, and identified the unique dynamics of congregations according to their size. The work of James Hopewell, James P. Wind, Carl Dudley, Speed Leas, and Ellis Nelson, among other, is significant in the field of congregational studies. We see each congregation as a unique entity, with its own story, character, ethos, and set of wisdom figures.

Now in the nineties the issue before congregations is spiritual vitality. Lilly Endowment funded studies of six mainline denominations by the Search Institute in Minneapolis, documenting undeveloped, dormant, and lethargic faith in congregations. The study concludes that unless faith becomes vital and mature for members of congregations, the church will continue to decline.

Church growth and evangelism efforts identify the same concerns — the need for a vital, contagious faith at the heart of the congregation as a platform from which to witness.



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*Dr. Olsen has served the church as Senior Pastor in three pastorates in Pennsylvania, California, and Nebraska, and has served on national staff with the PCUS Board of National Ministries in Atlanta. His special interests have been in church renewal and revitalization of faith both on a national and local church level. He was director of Project Base Church, a Lilly Endowment funded effort with the Institute of Church Renewal. Two books, *The Base Church and Cultivating Religious Growth Groups*, were products of this venture in new forms of Christian Community.*

*Currently Chuck and his wife, Joyce, share as Program Directors for the Heartland Presbyterian Center in Kansas City, a new conference facility located near KCI airport. Chuck is formulating a new project aimed at "set apart" lay leaders on church boards under a Lilly Endowment planning grant. A new book, *Set Apart Lay Leaders in Churches*, is in process.*

*The Olsens have four married children to grace their lives!*

New interest in spirituality has affected many aspects of church life. Its first impact was on Christian education, then on worship, then on pastoral care. Now a new arena for spirituality is located in the church board or council.

In the process of preparing for a major ecumenical project aimed at enabling boards and councils of local congregations to function as communities of spiritual leaders, I have taken a year to "reconnoiter" the land of church governance to see what was and was not happening. The inquiry was made possible through a Lilly planning grant. Nearly 200 interviews were conducted with lay church officers, pastors, denominational and judicatory staff persons, seminary administrators and faculty, church resource and consulting organizations, leadership development specialists, and trusteeship projects in the private sector.

From these interviews learnings have been drawn, models developed, and strategies outlined to assist church boards and councils to conduct governance in congregations based on the best understandings from the social sciences along with what is unique to the faith community.

From lay persons we learned that there is a high level of disillusionment with their experience on boards. We have tended to overlook this because we have not asked them to reflect upon their experience. As a pastor in a Presbyterian Church, I was so preoccupied with the selection, preparation, and assimilation of new board members that I had little time and energy for those who were rotating off. One third of the board was new every year and the press of a new year's agenda put the exiting elders out of mind. How many churches conduct some kind of new officer training? How many of those same churches conduct exit interviews at the end? Perhaps we fear what we will hear!



The disillusionment was expressed in words like, "I'm glad its about over." "I can't wait to get off." "Never again." One observer said that he could predict when disillusionment would hit — at year two, month three of a three year term! But most disturbing were the patterns of apathy, criticism, inactivity and even drop out. In one church the last three presidents of the church council dropped out of activity in the church following the completion of their terms!

What's behind the disillusionment? What are we doing to some of our best people? One explanation is burnout. Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute documents the malady and suggests ways to overcome it. Another explanation is overwork or assignments for which one is ill prepared. We have borrowed a corporate model, making managers out of board members and CEOs out of pastors. Many officers are not prepared to be program managers.

The responses that kept reoccurring were "its run just like a business" and "something was missing." We found that new board members bring a hope or expectation that this experience will deepen and grow their own faith. Working at the heart beat center of the church and close to the pastor and other lay leaders in the church, they expected that church governance would have a qualitatively different slant. When it was business as usual with little to no attention paid to theological or spiritual process they felt that they asked for bread but were given stone. What was missing was the integration of spirituality and administration in the conduct of the meetings.

**From pastors** we learned that church boards look to them for their own development as leaders and for know how in creating an agenda and processing it in a meeting. Just as the pastor has a high calling and special place at the table, baptismal font, and pulpit, the same high calling and role at the administrative table is needed. This does not give license for an authoritarian leadership or inappropriate charismatic personality influence. It does mean that in the sharing of power and ministry with laity, the pastor has a special role in enabling and processing the agenda of meetings.

Pastors have not adequately been prepared for their role in enabling boards to order the life of a congregation within an integrated approach to spirituality and administration. Considering the amount of time and energy that a pastor will give over the course of a year to preparing for meetings, processing the meeting, and implementing the outcomes of a meeting, surprising little attention is given in seminary preparation for the task. So most pastors have borrowed from the world of business management. The management model, with characteristics of hierarchy and efficiency, may not always be appropriate for the church. The parliamentary method may even become one more controlling device which inhibits lay empowerment and leadership.

Any intervention or implementation of creative renewal dynamics for boards and councils will take place through the pastor. A number of pastors are wrestling and experimenting with models where spirituality and governance are integral to each other. These efforts are like the tip of an iceberg — evidence that a broader movement is about to emerge.

Movements are characterized by giving voice to people's pain and frustration, articulating of a new vision, reflecting on meanings within a larger tradition's values, building workable models, and the presence of solidarity and celebration events for the people involved. A movement for the renewal and revitalization of boards will not be accomplished with frosting and window dressing, but with the construction of a new paradigm for councils — a new and different way of "doing board."

**From the seminaries** we learned that "not much is being done" in a focused and concentrated way of preparing pastors to lead church boards. Yes, there are many strands that can be applied, but they are located in different courses and departments. Church polity, leadership development, congregational development, Christian education, theological reflection, spiritual formation, and church administration courses provide locations for work with boards. But what is needed is an intensive and concentrated centering on the uniqueness of the church board and council as a locus for pastoral leadership. Let the board table be elevated alongside the pulpit, bedside, and counseling room.

**From denominational and judicatory staff persons** we learned that cutbacks in funding have depleted large staffs that can specialize on board development. Most have placed this portfolio with lay leadership development offices. Only a limited number of materials are being produced. Some have entered into more active partnership with judicatories, where designs for lay leadership development on boards are being created. When the denominational office sees good designs and effective work being done at a judicatory level, it may assist in publishing it for the wider denomination.

Of particular note is the work that is being done in Roman Catholic parish pastoral councils. The councils were a creation of Vatican II, so they have only a twenty-five year history. At first they were advisory groups for the priests. The next generation tended to be political — representing various constituent groups in the parish. Now a new generation is emerging based on prayerful discernment — both in the selection of council members and in the process of meetings. In many diocese the persons responsible for council development are women who have experience in shared and collaborative decision making. Sister Mary Benet McKinney has been particularly influential. Her book, *Sharing Wisdom*, suggests that every person has a piece of the wisdom, and the process of the

meeting should allow that to surface. Lay pastoral administrators who are investing deeply in councils are bound to have a profound effect on the church.

A forum for ecumenical dialogue could provide an important contribution to the churches today. Traditions with a four hundred year history with boards need to be in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and with the new independent "mega churches" that are finding a role for elders. The Quaker "sense of the meeting" process needs to be discovered by boards that are trying to move toward consensus in the way they make decisions.

**From training, resourcing, and consulting entities** we learned that churches look beyond their own denominational resourcing structures to ecumenical and para church organizations. Pastors roam far and wide for continuing education events. Often successful program churches sponsor seminars for other churches and teach from their own model and experience.

Although these resource organizations often work with church boards in conflict resolution, strategic planning, or program development, their focus has not been on the board as such. Compared to looking through binoculars, they set the focus in the distance. The focus needs to be pulled back to examine the health and vitality of the board itself.

**From trusteeship projects** in the private sector we learned the science of board development. The emphasis on servant leadership which Robert Greenleaf espoused was picked up by Lilly Endowment. The Endowment wanted to make a difference in the private sector. When they identified the proliferation of not profit organizations in the private sector they set about to fund a cluster of projects in universities and leadership organizations which would upgrade the capacity of boards and their member trustees. From these projects a set of themes emerged, sometimes called "depth education." Using the example of the tree, we were invited to look below the ground level to see what factors influence the growth and health of the tree. Those factors relate to familiarity with the *history* of the organization, unified understanding of its *purpose*, recognition of the *publics* it serves and influences, and a *vision* for the future. Research on exemplary boards and trustee members is producing a reservoir of knowledge which can inform the not for profit sector and also the church.

The task in church circles is to glean the learnings from leadership and trusteeship research, bring to it what is unique about congregations as faith communities, and draw upon the resources of faith to create a new model for the transformation of church boards. The church tends to jump on the band wagon of the latest popular wisdom that is in vogue in the culture and not do its own theological homework. It did this with the human potential movement in the late six-



ties. It did it again with management theories in the seventies, and with strategic planning in the eighties. Please understand that the wealth of insight from the social and behavioral sciences is most valuable. But the congregation must know its own history, ethos, traditions, theology and spirituality. Out of that identity and its accompanying reservoir of unique gifts, the church can develop the structures and processes for governance which generates power and vitality.

Using the set of themes from the arena of trustee development, let me expand upon them with the unique resources of the faith to create a model for leadership development and ultimately for a new paradigm for the meeting itself.

1. Knowing the institution's history is important to the trustee, but there is more. The congregation has its own narrative story which gets played out in so many ways. James Hopewell's work (*Congregations*) identifies the ways that these stories provide a kind of script for each church.

Particular events, the roles of wisdom figures in those events and the individual church officer's own faith journey together weave a story. The effective trustee knows the founding stories, story patterns, and his/her own faith story so well that he/she can freely relate and reflect upon them. This weaving of stories often reveals an affective dimension — a real love for the organization and enthusiasm for its mission.

History giving and story telling generate something — an identity for the individual and the organization, a commitment to it, and a new energy and spirit. In observing a five hour segment of a presbytery meeting recently, I was struck with an unusual amount of energy and enthusiasm in this deliberative body. It happened toward the end of the afternoon when most are tired and some start to drift away. Within a fifteen minute time period I observed laughter, tears, and applause. Then I recalled that we had moved out of an announcement and "look to the future" mode and into a story telling mode. Within those fifteen minutes three stories were told (that were not listed on the docket as such). The stories were energy generators. They produced something for the body politic.

When stories move from the new officer's training seminar or annual organizing retreat to the board room they can become an important part of the agenda. Some boards become more intentional about listening to and loving the people in their church, whose stories can be relayed to the council. Often boards are so preoccupied with planning the future and figuring how to get people to attend special events that they do not take time to tell stories about what has happened in the past. Personal faith stories of the members of the council can also be shared, thereby building the community which is foundational to the working of the board. Following a period of story telling let prayers flow from the sources of thanksgiving or confession which the stories have surfaced. The dis-

cipline of prayer does not need to be limited to a perfunctory opening or closing of the meeting. Prayer can lace the whole meeting as it moves in and out of the agenda.

2. Theological reflection is too often relegated to the professional clergy who in turn offer or remind the board of its theological heritage and mandate. But theological reflection should be part and parcel of most connecting or allowing the master stories from the tradition to interact with the stories of the church.

The news commentator listens to 25 minutes of the evening news, then draws upon memories of the tradition and lets them interact until meanings or values emerge. This same process takes place as Latin American base communities read the Bible in light of their own life experiences, as preachers prepare with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and as a governing board or council weaves institutional stories and personal faith stories with the master stories from the tradition.

Moral valuing is always tied to deep traditions. Theological reflection as a process in boards combines the enabling of a skilled pastor and sensitivity of participating lay persons to produce a core of values and beliefs which define the purpose of the organization. The church's unique contribution to the purpose themes in governance is the place and role of tradition. The Biblical master stories are at the heart of it, surrounded by the history of the church, its creeds, music, and exemplary spiritual wisdom figures.

Theological Reflection in meetings may be related to a single issue, may occupy a stated time in each meeting, or may be connected to an issue, problem, or opportunity, the master story may stand over against the issue, may bless or affirm it, may tease and slightly alter it, or may transform and convert it.

3. Prayerful discernment relates most closely to the "publics served" in depth education. Here goals, objectives, and specific action plans relate to concrete persons or groups in specific settings. But the church board has to go beyond the "bottom line" or most reasonable thing to do. The board must discern the will of God. "What is God calling us to be or do in this specific time and setting?"

The hallmark of the corporate board model, with its emphasis on power, efficiency, and rationality, has limits for use in the church board. A new paradigm has been introduced, producing decisions which may not make much sense, which the little people have influenced, and which may have taken a long time to make. The corporate model, reinforced by Robert's rules of order, makes way for the Apostle Paul's rules of the Spirit. Prayerful discernment does not lend itself to coming together, getting down to business, making the decisions, and getting home by 9:30. Prayerful discernment leads to consensus decision making, which is much more costly in time spent. Those who work actively in this arena say that the first thing

you have to do is slow a board down. "Most boards," says Dr. Tom Savage, President of Rockhurst College, "can only make one or two real decisions in a single meeting (perhaps in a year!)." If "everybody has a piece of the wisdom" (According to Mary Benet McKinney) then domination by the loudest ones, or the most loquacious, or the most rational members will make way for silence, patience, prayer, and right brain knowledge. Decisions will take longer to make, but will have more ownership and will meet the test of discerning God's will. The classic text is Jesus' promise that where two or three are gathered together he will be in the midst, and that when they agree on anything God will respond. Coming to agreement is a work of prayer and of grace. Many lay persons have said to me, "If only we had just stopped and prayed about it!" Discernment calls for petitions for open minds and hearts. A recent book on group discernment has as its title, *Listening Hearts*. (not listening ears, minds, etc.)

1. Creating and holding a vision for the church is the final mark of effective leadership and a component of the new paradigm for board meetings. If prayerful discernment is the application of the organization's basic purpose and values to a particular time and setting, then visioning is the process of projecting basic core values into a new and future setting. The biblical "seers" were adept as visioning the future. Their pictures were laced with righteousness, justice, love, and mercy.

Dr. Lovett Weems, President of Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, points to vision as the key ingredient in a leader. But he says that identifying and holding up the vision is not enough. It must be embodied and worn by those espousing leadership. The product of vision which is embodied is really character. Character generates trust and models basic values. If this is so crucial for pastors, what about boards and councils in congregations?

I often say to boards, "Do not expect the level of spirituality, commitment, or vitality and maturity of faith in the congregation to rise above that of the council!" The work of the board goes far beyond making month to month decisions. Their work is to become a community of faith, life and hope which can serve as a model for the congregation. When John wrote the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, he addressed them to the "angel" of each church. That angel, I believe, was the community of Elders who embodied the ethos and personality of the church. Their task was to pay attention to "what the spirit" was saying to the church and to live it out.

Having identified four basic themes from the science of leadership development on boards and having suggested how these can be further developed for use by boards of congregations when the faith dimension is incorporated, let me now suggest where they can be applied.



In the selection process for church officers, nominating committees need to look within the faith community to identify persons who have spiritual sensitivity, unique spiritual gifts, and commitment which will build up the church in its life and mission. Too often nominating committees look for persons who have proven leadership in the community, business, education, or the professions to serve on the boards as a sole basis for selection. Their leadership expertise will not necessarily translate.

The preparation process will need to move beyond indoctrination with the "duties of the office" and orientation about the committees on which one serves to skill development in story sharing, theological reflection, prayerful discernment, and visioning. If "board" is to be done differently, lay people will need to be prepared for it not only in understanding its philosophy and process, but in being able to work it. Riding this two wheeler may take some practice. If people are rendered inadequate, they will become frustrated and angry.

Finally, the board meeting itself can be viewed as "friendly environment" for depth education in the themes of history, purpose, publics, and visions. The model which I have suggested takes seriously the integration of spirituality and administration. It attempts to address the problems which lead to disillusionment in church boards. When spirituality and administration "mesh" like the cogs on two gears rather than spinning separately from each other, certain outcomes are desired. They need to be tested.

1. Church officers will stay engaged in the life of the congregation when they rotate off of the board or council
2. The meetings will be energized with new vitality.
3. Council members will grow in vitality and maturity of faith.
4. Lay members on boards will develop a new capacity to theologize.
5. Clergy will develop new enabling skills for board meetings.
6. The laity will be empowered as they share ministry with clergy.
7. The congregation will be affected by new ways of "doing board."
8. The potential for conflict will be reduced.
9. Corporate spirituality, as well as individual spirituality, will be recognized and valued.
10. Incentives to serve on boards will be heightened.
11. The climate for recruiting new board members will change to become more positive.
12. The experience of serving on a church board or council will be seen as a training ground for "trusteeship" outside the church.

Insofar as a movement is afoot for the renewal of boards and councils through the integration of spirituality and administration, I would invite readers to share with me any models that they are developing which deal with the agenda, structure and process of

board meetings as well as efforts to enable lay members of boards to enrich their own spiritual journeys via service on the board or council.

C.M.O.

## Excerpts from "Adult Life Changes Through a Spiritual Lens"

In the fall of 1991, the annual Kansas School of Religion Conferences were held in Parsons, Salina, Hutchinson, and Topeka. The presenter at each conference was the Reverend Vincent Krische, Director of the St. Lawrence Catholic Campus Center at the University of Kansas. If you were able to attend one of the conferences, you know why Father Krische is such a respected and sought after presenter. (The participants at each conference gave him the highest evaluation possible.)

If you were not able to attend, you may recall that in an earlier *Religion*, Father Krische set out four objectives for his four presentations. He hoped that participants would be able to:

1. Identify individual and family life changes within the context of spirituality.
2. Identify life changes as part of the natural process advancing toward a fuller life.
3. Describe the relationship between life changes and the principal virtue of love.
4. Describe ways to enhance human dignity through life changes.

To give you an idea of what he said in these sessions, consider these quotes, taken from the notes which he thoughtfully provided participants. These excerpts and notes were taken or adapted from *Christian Life Patterns* by Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, published by Image Books, Doubleday and Company.

In the adult life span there are periods of special developmental importance:

1. In young adulthood, it's a question of how to be close to people.
2. In the mid years, it's the question of the breadth and direction of one's effective concern for the world.
3. In the mature years it's the question of finding or giving meaning to one's own life.

Love, care, wisdom are the spiritual terms for stages of developments in the span of adults years. Intimacy, generativity, integrity are the psychological terms.

The role of spirituality and religion in the process:

1. Personal change is the central concern of all world religions.
2. This change is to be a transformation, not mere development.
3. This personal change has social consequences.

Religious development is a growth in one's ability to discern and respond to God's presence within human life.

Religious growth is growth *toward* adulthood rather than in adulthood.

Religious maturity, rather than being a plateau of perfection, involves an unsteady and mysterious combination of weakness and strength.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, virtue in the most basic sense refers to faithfulness to God.

At the heart of religious growth is the discipline of self-knowledge. The self-knowledge which comes through spiritual awareness comes through

1. prayer
2. submission to a spiritual master
3. personal reflection
4. personal journal
5. exercises in value clarification.



# HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL PROFESSOR TO PRESENT KANSAS SCHOOL OF RELIGION LECTURE ON APRIL 9, 1992



Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza of the Divinity School of Harvard University will present the annual Kansas School of Religion Lecture on April 9 at the annual banquet in the Adams Alumni Center beginning at 6:00 p.m. The title for her lecture will be "Envisioning the Past in Creating the Future."

Professor Schüssler Fiorenza's career began in Germany where she earned a Licentiate in Practical Theology and a Doctorate in New Testament Studies. She taught for 15 years in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and in the fall of 1988 joined the faculty of Harvard Divinity School in her present position as Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity. She has also been Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York and *Gastprofessorin* at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen.

Professor Schüssler Fiorenza is internationally recognized as scholar, lecturer, and teacher. She combines her scholarly work on New Testament interpretation with her pioneering research in feminist theology. Her publications, both in English and German, are extensive. They include her first book on ministries of women in the church in 1964 and subsequent books *In Memory of Her* and *Bread Not Stone*. She is an editor of *Religious Studies Review* and co-editor of *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. She has also served on the editorial boards of several other scholarly religious publications including the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

**Reservations for the annual banquet (\$15 per person) should be made by Friday, April 3.** Checks for reservations may be sent to the Kansas School of Religion, 1300 Oread, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045. Telephone: 913-843-7257. Interested persons unable to be at the banquet may attend the lecture beginning at 7:00 p.m.

**Friday morning, April 10, 8:30 to 9:30** in the Moore Library of Smith Hall (Room 109), Professor Schüssler Fiorenza will discuss "*Feminist Biblical Interpretations*." Open to all interested persons.

## F.Y.I.

Professor S. Daniel Breslauer, professor of religious studies, has published "From Curiosity of Commitment: Religion and Modern Higher Education" in *Reconstructionist*, Fall 1991. His article "Teaching of Jewish Ethics" was published last Fall also, in *Shofar*.

I have not read the second article, but highly recommend the first paper. It is an excellent review of the importance of religious study for undergraduate students (for that matter, graduate students and faculty as well). Consider Professor Breslauer's following statement:

Thus, the study of religion in secular universities activates curiosity, stimulates self-improvement, encourages social conscience, and affects daily living because it addresses the central concerns of democratic society. When we seek education, when we strive to satisfy our curiosity and actualize social values, we participate in the divine process of salvation, of enabling people to reach their full potential.

As one who has viewed the activities and faculty of the Department of Religious Studies over the past three years, I believe that Professor Breslauer's statement is reflected daily in the courses which the department offers students at the University of Kansas. (Ed.)



1110

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