

Governing Board Member

You may call it the church council or consistory, board of deacons or trustees, or simply the church board. Whatever it's called, there is a group elected to carry out the business and mission of the church between congregational meetings. It makes decisions, authorizes expenditures, facilitates and evaluates the programs and purposes of the church and votes on personnel. The board represents the church and acts on behalf of its members.

History and Background

As the early church began to grow, preachers couldn't do all that needed to be done. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, workers of miracles, helpers, administrators and speakers in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:28). Of those, the administrators might be considered early board members.

As churches developed into organizations, they needed a group to help make decisions at times when the whole congregation couldn't gather.

Common Practices

Governing boards are centralized or decentralized. If you struggle with the cost of roofing the sanctuary, working out a schedule for vacation church school and evaluating the youth ministry, your board is **centralized**. Subgroups or committees probably do

preliminary work, but the whole board makes decisions. If you hear reports from the trustees about the new roof, the vacation church school schedule and coordinate the work of the youth committee with the work of other committees, your board is **decentralized**. You consult, coordinate and communicate, but you do not direct and make decisions about the whole mission of the church.

Some governing boards both make policy and coordinate programs. This can create problems. You may slip into policy decisions when you're only trying to set up a good program. For example, if part of your ministry is allowing the community to use your building, is there any group that is not welcome? What guidelines are used? Who makes the guidelines?

Your church may have separate groups to deal with policy and program. If your board does both, you may have separate meetings for policy making and for program development. Or you may have separate agendas for the same meeting. That way you'll know which discussions are about policy and which are about program.

Some governing boards are made up of chairpersons of all the standing committees and organizations of the church. Some churches have decided to include some youth members, as well. All board members, even those representing special groups, are expected to keep the interest of the whole church in mind. The governing board is a servant of the congregation

in its attempt to be faithful to the church's mission.

Responsibilities

Your responsibilities depend somewhat upon whether your board is centralized or decentralized. Your responsibilities will include some or all of those listed below:

- Determining the committee's responsibilities.
- Establishing clear and workable directions, goals and plans of action.
- Helping the church understand and value its role.
- Authorizing expenditures.
- Attending meetings of the governing board.
- Participating in church activities, including worship.
- Carrying out decisions made by the church, or seeing that others do.
- Consulting with and advising the church staff on the general direction of the church's activities.
- Getting an overview of the program of the church.
- Assigning responsibility for new programs and activities to committees or individuals.
- Reviewing reports from officers, boards and committees.
- Guiding, coordinating and evaluating the work of officers, boards and committees.
- Receiving and evaluating new program proposals and relating them to existing program and budget capabilities.

- Recommending a budget to the church.
- Filling officer and committee vacancies between annual meetings.
- Authorizing and issuing calls for special meetings of the church.
- Planning official church meetings.
- Stepping back, evaluating and asking such questions as, "How faithful and effective are we?"

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Knowledge of past procedures and decisions.
- Care and respect for other board members and church staff.
- Diplomacy.
- Sensitivity and vision.
- Understanding of the church's constitution and bylaws.
- Understanding of and commitment to the church's mission.
- Trust and respect of the church members.
- Ability to see the broad view of the church's life and mission.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Get to know the people with whom you work.
- Ask for a position description outlining responsibilities, expectations and accountability.

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- Study the church's constitution and bylaws.
- Read minutes from the last couple of years of board meetings.
- Study annual reports and budgets for the past several years.
- Read important church documents.
- Study guidelines and policy statements adopted by the congregation or board.
- Attend official church meetings.
- Invite specialists to speak at meetings when special decisions must be made.
- Participate in worship and reflection with the board and in other settings.
- Attend workshops and seminars sponsored by your association or conference, ecumenical groups, or colleges and universities on being a board member, evaluation or other pertinent topics.

Questions

- Each church chooses the type of governing board it needs to carry out its work. Does your church have a centralized or decentralized governing board? Why? How does that affect the decisions of the church?
- Does your governing board deal with policy, or programs, or both? How does that affect the decisions of the church?
- What is one thing your governing board does well?
- What is one thing your governing board needs to work on?

Issues Facing the Church

- When governing boards have members on them that represent various groups, those representatives bring certain commitments and advocacies with them. How can they understand the necessity of representing the whole church while feeling responsible to the group they represent? How can diverse interests be honored while maintaining a concern for the entire church?