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Working With Healthy Church Boards

Pastorpedia is produced monthly by three experienced pastors: Jeff Bogue, of Grace Church, in several locations in the Bath-Norton-Medina areas of Ohio; Jim Brown, of Grace Community Church in Goshen, Indiana, a church known for its strong growth, family and men's ministries, and community response teams; and Knute Larson, a coach of pastors, who previously led The Chapel in Akron for 26 years. Pastorpedia is brought to you by CE National. Visit cenational.org/pastorpedia for more issues and to read the bios of our contributors.

They used to say that when the devil was expelled from heaven he fell into the choir loft of the church; now many would say he crashed into the board room. But we want to dispel that idea and give suggestions for godly excellence and a united ministry for boards.

We three will often vary in viewpoint—we fully agree on gospel essentials!—and we hope that will be helpful to make you think and plan and do very well.

We three are: Jeff Bogue, Jim Brown, and Knute Larson. We all love our Lord and think pastoral church leadership and servanthood is the place to be.

So, here we go with our first Pastorpedia.

1. **What you call the main church body and why?**
   
   **Jeff Bogue, Grace Church**
   
   Grace Church works somewhat differently in that we have a “ruling body” that we call The Elders, and “working boards” we call Campus Operation Boards.
The ruling body of *Elders* is very much modeled after the biblical concept of
eldership, in which men oversee the spiritual health and well-being of the church
as a whole.

The *Campus Operations Boards* oversee the operations of individual campuses.
These boards do not have to be made up of elders, although many elders serve
on these boards.

The *Campus Operations Boards* are a wonderful training ground for church
leadership. There, a man can serve for a while as we understand his ability and
his calling. It can serve as a pathway to eldership. It is also a place that we can
invite women to be part of the leadership of Grace, because the eldership
requirement is not in place on these boards.

*Jim Brown, Grace Community Church*
Our main board is called the Elder Board. This consists of Pastors and Working
Elders (I don’t like the term lay elders, too dated of a word).

*Knute Larson, Pastor Coach*
One essential suggestion that almost every coach or church would agree with—
there should only be one board, not two or three or more. And here “board” is
referring to a policy-making team with some agreed-upon jurisdiction in the
church and with the pastor.

The definition itself implies that you would not want more than one of these, to
avoid confusion, or even competition.

If I got to start from scratch with a church plan, I would want to call this board
“The Board.” Seriously. That’s what most people call it anyway which is the first
reason.

And the other reason is to avoid the confusion or debate about elders or deacons
(think Baptist churches), which can never totally be settled. I mean, when the
original elders were appointed by Paul and his “associate apostles,” we are not
totally sure what they did.
Okay, the texts show they had shepherding and teaching responsibilities, along
with leadership. But was this for individual house churches (then called Home
ABFs 😊), or for an area of a city or region? It is not obvious.
And now we have elders or pastors who give their full time to the work of the church—what does that do to the word “elder”? You saw how Jeff and Jim handled that, in a good way.

I was promoting “the soccer field” as a guide or job description for the board at one church—see the PDF that defines the board’s job as establishing and working the four boundary lines for the church and staff and ministries. One elder there said, “We do elders exactly as they did in the New Testament, and that was not the soccer field!”

I asked him how old he was, and he goes, “34.”
“You’re not an elder,” I said with a smile. “Elders are olders.”

Clearly we must stay true to the Bible, while adapting to the changes in our church life, and while making some distinction between what a staff elder or pastor does and what a board member does. Otherwise, it gets cumbersome and often combative.

2. How do you select board members and what role do you have in that?

Jeff Bogue, Grace Church

When we select Elders and/or Campus Operation Board members, we first look at the individual and ask, “Are they leadership material?” We run them through an acronym filter called F.A.T.E.R.

F=faithful. Are they faithfully serving in the church? Are they faithful in their relationship with God? Are they faithful in their relationships with people? Family?

A=Available. Do they have the time to serve? Some of our best leaders are very busy people. While they are good leaders in the marketplace, and their insights are helpful, if they do not actually have the time to be in leadership at the church that is a major factor in whether or not we ask them.

T=Teachable. To me, teachable is the most important of all the qualities. We are looking for humble, teachable people who are confident in their abilities and experienced in their leadership but teachable in the uniqueness of leading a church and, of course, with God’s Word.

E=Enthusiastic. We don’t want anyone to lead who is leading begrudgingly. If leadership is an undue burden, or if someone is serving solely because they are a “warm body” they should not be in leadership.
R-Responsive. If someone is asked to lead or is asked to do a project at the church he needs to be responsive with eagerness and intentionality. He needs to have a track record of embracing the opportunities put before him.

If asked, they may serve on the campus operation board for two-to-four years while we evaluate their insight, their wisdom, their chemistry with the rest of the leadership team, and how the people of Grace respond to them. If they should continue in their leadership, the elders of Grace would invite that man to participate with the elder group. If he agreed, we would do a background check on him, run his credit, check his giving records, interview his family, interview people at his workplace and get a sense of how the people of the church respond to his leadership. He would, of course, voluntarily submit to all these screenings. Then, finally, the elders would present his name at a public meeting and the congregation would affirm that he is qualified to lead them and that they are eager to be led by him.

I, as the Senior Pastor, would be very much involved in this process. As a Senior Pastor, I am one of the The Elders, so we would serve as spiritual peers and I would have great input as to whether I felt comfortable with this person assuming this level of leadership.

Jim Brown, Community Grace

On a personal level, I am always looking for future leaders/elders. I am constantly watching men who might be future leaders. Here are a few things I look for:

Are people following them now? Are they serving in the local church now? Are they flexible? Do they acknowledge children when they walk into a room or blow right past them? Are they loving and leading their families well? Do they follow through? Are they willing to sacrifice? Are they life-long learners? Do they take good care of their temples? Are they sharing their faith? Are they people of big faith?

Are they creative and able to adjust to change in a moment’s notice? Are they okay to not get noticed but still serve? Does the love of Jesus ooze from them? And so much more.

The selection process begins by their being nominated by the voting members of our church, who have been provided a list of elder qualifications. These men are
then put into a pool of possible elders based on the total number of nominations from the voting members. We then select from that group the necessary number of men we need to fill the places that are left vacant.

After the names are compiled, I, along with the Working Elders come to an agreement to choose from the list who should be placed on the ballot for the upcoming election.

We then approach the men and lay out for them what the expectations would be for them. They are given a chance to pray and determine whether or not they choose to be placed on the ballot.

Here are the Elder Expectations we have them look over in addition to the qualifications of an elder listed in Timothy and Titus.

Qualifications and Expectations for Grace Community Elders

You have an influence on other people. Think about that for one moment. You impact those around you. You are a person of influence. This is something the Apostle Paul realized. Many times in Scripture he wrote, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.” Paul knew that he had an influence on people. He strove to live like Christ and then he said, “Join with others in following my example.”

As leaders of Grace Community, we have a tremendous responsibility to model Christ before our church body. Our people will only go as far as we go and they need models to follow. Seek to follow the “example of Christ” and set the bar for our congregation.

Six Areas to Model:
Prayer
- Please demonstrate regular time spent with God in prayer.
- Please make the Wednesday night prayer encounter or a prayer-related ministry a regular part of your week.

Attitude
- Please display an attitude that nurtures the spirit of unity in our church body.
- Please subscribe to the optimism of Ephesians 3:20 “God can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.”
Discipleship
- Please seek to be in a mentoring relationship with another man.
- Please have an appreciation for small groups and be involved in a small group at some level.
- Please seek to make leadership training a regular part of your schedule.
- Please involve yourself in men’s activities when possible, retreats, gatherings, recreational sports, etc.

Giving
- Please tithe regularly to the church, giving at least 10% of your gross income.
- Please give gifts, above and beyond your tithe, as you feel led of the Lord.

Worship
- Please demonstrate the importance of personal and corporate worship by model.
- Please reflect Christ in every avenue of life.

Evangelism
- Please actively target and pray for unbelievers and seek to build relationships with the lost.

________________________________ (Signature of Commitment from Elder)

Finally, the voting members vote yes or no to bring them on the team.

Knute Larson, Pastor Coach
Live and thrive where you are planted, of course. But consider some goals or principles that may guide your prayers and incremental changes:

- No one will "eat and sleep" the church as much as the pastor, so he should have a strong role in selecting those who share in overall shepherding and assessing the church.

- The pastor and staff pastors and directors should be leading small groups (3-6 others) for discipleship about character and the church. Many church board members will come out of this group or these groups.

- Nominations by the church at large are built into many church constitutions. At least there should be filters like a nominating committee with the pastor very involved, so that only those ready and able are presented. (Both Jeff and Jim have great goals for these type of people.)
- We should not vote between two good people, sending one of them home as a loser. Say it in a nicer way, but that is the way it feels. Most churches now affirm a name with a yes or no, and the procedure is so good that only names that get almost all yeses are presented.

- Term limits are good. This helps all of us keep developing new board members, and is a nice way for some board members to escape (or for the church to escape from them!).

- No one should ever be steered this way because he is a good giver, or to get him more involved, or to keep him happy. Yes, it happens.

- Remember the “rule of eight,” an old adage that says that more than that can be too many for a decision-making meeting. When there are more board members than that, the hard and specific discussions should go on in the board committees or teams. (See “Notes on the soccer field.”)

3. What is the main focus of your church board?

   Jeff Bogue, Grace Church

   The general responsibilities of our leadership teams are as follows:

   A. **They are to serve as a multitude of counselors.** Our pastors and campus pastors are not to be seen as employees being governed by the board. Instead, they are to be seen as fellow elders and leaders working in partnership with our boards and while it is true that the elders have authority over our staff, it is very important that they think of themselves as partners. So, they serve as a multitude of counselors, not a multitude of bosses.

   B. **They oversee the finances of the church for the purposes of accountability and wise investment.** They approve all budgets and approve expenditures that are over a certain financial threshold. When those expenditures go public we can say that the board has thought it through and recommends it.

   C. **They oversee the Statement of Faith of Grace Church.** They are to be the protectors of the theology and doctrine of the church. They are to intervene if there were to be a false teaching or confusion coming from any of the pastors, directors or lay leaders.

   D. **They serve as the “emergency brake” for Grace Church.** The Elders do have authority, at any given time, to pull the “emergency brake” and stop a process if they feel it is unbiblical, unwise, or deceitful. To that end, they could exercise their authority over the staff. If a pastor was being immoral or unethical or teaching falsely, it would be the role of the The Elders/Campus
Operations Board to raise that issue, deal with that issue, and, if necessary, bring it before the people.

Jim Brown, Grace Community
We have transitioned to a staff-led church over the last few years and have worked with our Working Elders to define what their role or job description looks like with us. It can be described as this adaptation from Sticky Teams, by Larry Osborne:

The 4 primary responsibilities of our Working Elders:

1. Wise counsel. The larger our staff-led church gets, the more I need advice from those who are outside the day-to-day grind. If the staff makes up our royal court, the board makes up our council of wise sages and advisors.

2. Brakes. Our board holds the keys to accountability. Should anything go amiss with the staff or me, the board is the one group that can immediately slam on the brakes.

3. A crisis team in waiting. When a genuine crisis hits, it’s too late to try to throw together a team of godly and wise folks who have enough history and understanding of each to work through the tough calls, sharp disagreements, and dicey issues that come with any major mess. If these people aren’t already in place, it’s hard to throw them together on the fly and even harder to navigate your way through the landmines. Our board provides the security of knowing we have such a team already in place. Like firefighters playing cards in the firehouse, they’re prepared, connected and ready if the bell should ring – and some days, bored enough to wish it would ring.

4. Overseeing and approving the salaries of staff and the affirmation of budget. This is especially helpful and keeps integrity in-check.

Because of the pace at which our church operates and the mere size of it, we must be able to move in a fluid way and not be thwarted by the third Tuesday of every month when the board is scheduled to meet.

Much of the decision-making happens in the hallways with the Working Elders giving approval, too, if need be.
We also utilize technology to expedite the process of decision-making. We have a closed Facebook page for Elders to interact. This page allows files to be downloaded, photos updated, and quick response times. Plus, it keeps a running track of conversations. Our Elders must be social-tech savvy.

In addition to that, we keep records of all meetings in electronic and paper formats.

This transition has helped the Pastor Elders to move as God moves and not miss the move of God. I wonder how many times a great move of God has been squashed because of some hardline meeting and approval time on the calendar.

I love the premise that Henry Blackaby drove home in one of his books, *Experiencing God*, “Find out where God is moving and go join it.” So we try to keep our ear towards heaven to see where God is moving and position ourselves structurally in such a way that allows us to move at a moment’s notice.

Our church moves at a very rapid pace, and we do not want to miss out on a great opportunity to lift up Jesus because of blocked systems. A church board must be very fluid.

*Knute Larson, Pastor Coach*

For sure the working Elders are not responsible for everything! A dangerous question the board leader or pastor might ask at the end of the meeting is, “Anything else?”

“Yes, why did we sing ‘A Mighty Fortress’ that new way two weeks ago? Martin Luther would get drunk if he heard that!”

I really like the soccer field as a guide for the main board and the staff. It is clear. You can see it. And the “job description” for the pastor and staff and volunteers is plainly implied: “play” (serve) in the field, and stay in bounds.

Board members can jump in and serve in any area of course, but as servant-volunteers, not as individual elders or deacons or trustees, or whatever you call them!
You know the challenge! When a church is started, the pastor gathers a team around him and assigns areas – “Eric, you take youth.” “Brian, what about missions, local too?” “Jed, you have worship; no loud drums!” And so on.

If the board keeps such ministry assignments individually or even as a team, either the church will never grow past a low number, or there will be strife when staff or strong volunteers are appointed for the different areas.

Couldn’t the board serve best by caring for the boundaries and the overall direction of the church? Then allow the pastor and the team to go strong in the “field.” Both Jeff and Jim above exemplify how that works in their churches, and so do almost all churches over 200-300.

When a board member says this plan of staff-led and board-protected or governed churches gives the pastor and ministries too much freedom, I ask him why the board would not want ministry freedom for their ministry leaders. And I remind them that pastors who like to play out of bounds should be given an exit opportunity!

4. **Should staff pastors be on the board?**

   **Jeff Bogue, Grace Church**

   It is my view that certain staff pastors should be elders. As we understand the Scriptures, to be a pastor you must be able to be qualified as an elder. The pastor and the board should be working together as peers. The only time a board should “tell the pastor what to do” is in the case of an emergency or when the pastor has stepped outside the biblical parameters of his leadership. For a normal church, who might have one or two staff members, I do recommend that they be on the board. However, there should always be more lay leaders than staff leaders so that there is no temptation to manipulate.

   **Jim Brown, Community Grace**

   We have a weekly staff meeting for Pastor Elders, and our Executive Administrator. The daily and weekly business is handled in this meeting. We include all of our staff pastors in our elder board meetings. But making sure there is always one more Working Elder than Pastor Elders on the board.

   **Knute Larson, Pastor Coach**
Of course there is no right answer. The three of us all do it with slight differences, and all of us are going to heaven. And many churches have only one pastor, of course.

I like that only the lead or senior pastor is a voting member, and that he can invite any staff pastor to any or all meetings. But none of them report to the board, but to the senior (or an associate he designates).

Reasons: Staff and boards have two different agendas, one for boundaries, including finances and culture-mood of the church and more; and one for daily and weekly ministries.

Also, since the senior is always going to use the board as advisors in any area, he has more freedom to discuss staff needs or problems when necessary when the staff are not voting members.

5. **Would you share some of your guidelines for the board?**

*Jeff Bogue, Grace Church*

General thoughts: My general guideline for our team is that we **function together in godliness.** They are to interact with me and our staff as partners, not bosses, and they are to be afforded the same courtesy. If they have a question, I need to slow down. If I have a question, they need to let me process, and in godliness we lead the church together.

Secondly, I ask that the board **raise issues with me before they raise them with the board** and certainly before they raise them publically. If one board member has a question, I would ask for the courtesy of him and I having a one-on-one conversation about that question before it goes to the whole board. I believe this avoids undue controversy and it keeps the board meetings “out of the weeds” and allows us to stay focused on the grander vision of Grace.

Lastly, we do have the mindset that **we speak with one voice. However, we do not require unanimity.** I do not ask for unanimous votes. I ask for discussion, wisdom, and different points of view, but when we “leave the room” we speak as one leadership voice.

**Practical thoughts:**
On a very practical level, we meet once a month over dinner. We spend the dinner hour socializing, catching up and being “friends.” Then, we spend approximately two hours talking about the issues and the necessities of leading the church. I try to dismiss those meeting always by 9 PM. I believe that when meetings go too long and we get tired, we make quick decisions and we get tunnel vision. Therefore, we are fairly quick to “table an issue” in order to make sure that we’re giving our best and brightest thoughts to it.

As a second practical matter, I always email the agenda ahead of time to give the leadership teams at least a few days to start to wrap their minds around what we’re going to talk about. It’s very important to remember that they have difficult jobs, and they come in as tired and as distracted as we would if we were to go to their job. So, get out ahead of it.

Thirdly, we start every meeting with encouraging stories. Nothing is more energizing or focusing than telling stories of God’s working in people’s lives. This is what we all work for, so I work hard to share that with them. In addition, whenever I receive an encouraging e-mail from someone in the church, I remove their names and forward it to our leadership. They deserve that same “paycheck” that we get, because this is our heart and this is our goal.

Fourthly, we **pray first**. It’s been my experience that if you wait to have your prayer time at the end of the meeting, it gets cut short. And, how contradictory it would be for elders to talk details and never get to prayer. So, we spend our prayer time first. We actually spend the least amount of our time doing the business of the church.

Fifthly, when we are working on big projects and/or a crisis we will meet twice a month—our regular evening meeting and then we will often add a morning meeting so as not to demand the same time frame. Those second meetings are always temporary in nature. When the project is finished or the crisis has passed, we cancel the meeting.

Sixthly, we communicate electronically as much as possible. This is what allows us to keep our meeting times relatively short, because the “small details” that need to be covered can be done with **yes and no** votes over e-mail.

In summary, I believe strongly that the structure of your board is much less important than the culture of leadership in your church. I would recommend
**working harder on relationships** than designing whatever structure makes sense in your local church.

**Trust is paramount over all things.** As your leaders trust you and you work to trust your leaders, the people of the church will trust you as well. When there is trust, there is the ability to make change, to implement new ideas, and to see God do fun and exciting things!

*Jim Brown, Community Grace*

We have very open discussions and give all men the right and freedom to disagree. We have different personalities, gifts, and talents and they surface in meetings. But once the doors close and we leave the room we agree to be in 100% agreement. We agree to disagree in private and choose to agree in public. But it must be a majority consensus before we move on.

We work as a team with one mind. The problem with most factions or disunity is that it happens way before the meetings. It begins in the selection process and I would say, “You should fire when you hire.” Much prayer and fasting should go into the process of selecting a Working Elder or Staff Elder because it will help alleviate the pain and damage of problems later. We do not have yes-men on our board, but we have Jesus kind of men!

Here is a random observation to add for procedure or guidelines. We meet in the early morning, because men get grouchy, irritable, impatient and tired at night and there really isn’t a deadline to when the meeting will be over at night. In the morning there has to be a deadline because most men have to go to work.

In addition to that, most men are much brighter, awake, and more alert after a good night’s rest, instead of a long hard day in the workplace. I cringe sometimes to think of all the decisions that have been made in the flesh because a man was tired and grumpy and wanted to see the meeting just get over so he could go home and sleep.

Why in the world would we ever schedule a meeting so important as a meeting when people’s lives for eternity are affected, when men are not at their best? We need to bring our very best to the table and mornings are when that most likely happens. Plus, who wants to sit with a bunch of grumpy and cranky men at night that should be home with their families loving on their wives and kids.

*Knute Larson, Pastor Coach*
These are a must. For sure. God’s will! Human need. To avoid pain, and there still will be some! To help your marriage. To have more unity and fun.

Jeff and Jim gave excellent ones, so I will not dwell on those.

+ Say anything with grace in the meeting. Say only what the board agreed on outside the meeting. On controversial issues, or really tough things like a staff dismissal, there should be two or three talking points that all agree to.

+ When there is not clear, strong direction, we wait and pray more. This does not mean a unanimous decision, but very strong.

+ Confidentiality, not only until a decision is reached, but about who might have opposed the decision. One report only—no minority report. This is not Congress or the Court.

+ Prayer and spiritual commitment are primary.

+ No surprises. People hate changes and surprises, so no new goal or budget change is voted on at first glance. And agendas and information are given out days before the meeting.

+ Best meeting time is chosen. In Akron, we liked 5–6:45 p.m. for the board and the sub-committees also. Everyone still got to be home for much of the evening.

+ The pastor and the chair will not surprise each other at the meeting, or even disagree there. If the chair and I could not agree on an approach, we waited and kept working on it. (And I never quoted II Timothy 2:7 to him, or to my wife.)

+ No one “elds” or “deacs” or directs individually in the halls or with the church people. We are in one sense only the board when we are all together. Which is why there is more than one of us!

In one church I was coaching, a board member walked into the junior high room and pronounced, “We do not use that kind of music in this church!” Yo.

+ Policies and procedures are written and carefully kept. Memories can be wrong.
So, there it is, our first Pastorpeida! Our hope is not to replace Wikipedia, but to serve churches, especially pastors, with ideas and suggestions that show love and wisdom.

Some ideas you will take, and others you will leave, of course. But all you might consider.

We are open to suggestions as to topics or questions as to application. Address them to cenational@cenational.org.

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