

The Size and Shape of Governance

Rev. Stefan Jonasson
UUA Director for Large Congregations

Nowhere is the one-size-fits-all approach to church life more likely to cause difficulty than when it is applied to congregational governance. Most churches organize their affairs according to the established polity of the denomination of which they are members. The basic problem with this approach is that the overwhelming majority of churches are small ones, so the models of church organization recommended (or required) by most denominations tend to be biased toward the needs of smaller churches (150 members or fewer). As a result, large churches (550 members or more) often find it necessary to operate counter to the norms of their own denominational polity. While the large church's organizational structure ought to embody the *principles* of its denomination's polity, it is not always practical or possible to incorporate all of the *practices* customarily associated with that polity. Every church needs an organizational structure that is commensurate with the size of its membership and scope of its activities.

Church consultant Herb Miller identifies five key components in the governance system of congregations (although his precise arrangement and terminology differ somewhat from what follows):

1. Visioning and policy setting;
2. Coordinating, calendaring and communicating;
3. Planning and program management;
4. Serving in shared ministry and implementing programs;
5. Recruiting and training.

Strictly speaking, the fourth category is really *volunteer staffing* rather than *governance*, but many categorize it as governance nonetheless. In smaller churches, boards will typically express an interest in all five categories, but tend to focus on the middle three, while well-focused boards in large churches will devote their attention almost exclusively to visioning and policy setting. In between, churches adapt their organizational structure to fit the needs of their size – unless, of course, their boards are especially fond of day-long meetings!

Visioning and policy setting are – or at least *ought* to be – common to the work of boards in all sizes of congregations. Naturally, this role is a more refined and sophisticated art in most large churches, where boards fulfill their responsibilities largely by articulating ends (or vision) and developing a body of policies to govern congregational life.

Coordinating, calendaring and communicating are typically board work in both family (50 people or fewer attending weekly) and pastoral (50 to 150 people attending weekly) churches. By the time a congregation grows to the size of a program church (150 to 350 people attending weekly), this work becomes burdensome if it remains with the board, so congregations establish “program councils” or “all-church councils” to undertake this function. If a church continues to grow until it is a corporate congregation (350 or more people attending weekly), then the church will generally find that such a council is far less useful than it once was, since much of the council’s work shifts quite naturally to paid church staff.

Very little of the work commonly performed by committees is properly understood as governance. Program planning, management and implementation, along with various shared ministries, are staffing matters rather than governance. Some find it difficult to separate the two and most churches cannot be bothered doing it, fearing that it might be seen to diminish the value of program work. Yet it is important to make the distinction in large churches, where volunteer staffing is increasingly coordinated by paid program staff rather than through the governance structures of a congregation.

“For God so loved the world, he did not send a committee – he sent a minister,” I recall John Cummins, an esteemed Unitarian Universalist minister, remarking several years ago. With few exceptions, people do not join churches in order to attend board or committee meetings. So if we feel inclined to complain about the shortage of volunteers to fill committee spots, we would do well to remember that most people would rather devote their precious time to the work of shared ministry. Although committees are indeed important, salvation by committee is not sound doctrine! The fifth aspect of governance – recruitment and training – yields happier results when churches strive for an economy of committee work and an abundance of ministry!

Church size authorities universally agree that the larger a church becomes, the smaller its governing board needs to be! Seven to nine board members is all that a large church really needs to get the job done. This is not because large congregations are any less committed to member participation and democratic process than smaller ones. Instead, it is simply a consequence of the differing nature of the board’s work in congregations of different size. As the board in a large church comes to sharpen its focus on governing through policy-setting rather than direct management, it benefits from reduced size. Similarly, large churches need *fewer* standing committees and not more! Although it seems counter-intuitive, leaner and more focused governance actually enhances democratic accountability and, by helping to free up volunteer resources for shared ministry, can contribute to increased participation in church life!

