

The Lean Small Church: A Fitness Regime for 21st Century Mission

Rev. Joel Den Haan and Rev. Shelley Lavenne

It can be more and more difficult to ensure adequate participation and leadership in any congregation. People's lives are busy, and the range of options they have to occupy their time run far beyond their church commitments. The mission-focused, mission-driven "Lean Small Church" is one proven way to help participants serve in meaningful ways, in a streamlined congregational organization.

How fit is your church for the 21st century?

*Rev. Joel Den Haan and Rev. Shelley Lavenne
offer a fitness regime that can help.*

1. The Background: Bulky Bureaucracy Frightens Off Volunteers

It was a stressful time for the small Diamond Valley congregation southwest of Calgary. The church's well-loved minister was on a leave of absence, and would soon choose not to return to work. The situation might have been manageable except that the energy of the congregation itself seemed to peter out at the same time. Volunteers no longer offered to serve on the various church committees (a traditional church Board of almost 40 people was in place), and there was a danger that the basic ministry functions of the congregation would be left undone. The Board Chair found herself in a difficult position: no minister, and many lay participants stepping back from their own involvement. Meanwhile, worship plans needed to be made, finances administered, and basic maintenance accomplished week by week.

Theoretically, there should have been more people available to help out- the Black Diamond and Turner Valley communities outside the church were experiencing significant population growth. But this was not the case. In a busy commuter community, one hour from the major centre of Calgary, people were not prepared to offer precious personal time to do the tasks of the church in the way they had in earlier days. The congregation needed a new way of working together, of governing the congregation's affairs, and of bringing United Church ministry into the community.

United Church Regional staff person Rev. Joel Den Haan was called, to see if there were any new ways that could be found to work together at Diamond Valley. Together with the Board Chair and other key leaders, a new model for congregational decision-making and activity began to be formulated, a "lean" model that as it turns out could be helpful to a whole range of small congregations across the church.

Often people are drafted because they'll say "Yes", not because of their gifts and abilities.

2. The Challenge of Getting Small-Church Fit

It seems like it happens in at least some churches every year, around about Annual Meeting time: the minister and Nominations convener become ever more frantic in their search to recruit a slate of officers to oversee congregational work in the coming season. Congregational leaders do their best to adhere to congregational custom and the United Church Manual, making sure that there are the requisite number of committees and committee chairpersons to look after all the varied dimensions of congregational life. Worship committee, Christian Development committee, Property and Finance, Pastoral Care, Stewardship- the list seems to go on and on. A fully-staffed volunteer Board as envisioned by the Manual needs almost 40 people present and accounted-for. That's a lot of phone calls and arm-twisting!

The problem is tough enough in larger, city churches, where there are more bodies from which to recruit. In a small congregation, however, things can get really absurd: imagine trying to form up a Board of 40-odd people, when your regular participant base for the whole congregation isn't much bigger than that to begin with! The traditional committee structure may be comprehensive and systematic, but the plain truth is that for many small congregations organizing things this way can easily lead to "committee gridlock". There are a whole range of dimensions to this problem:

- We become over-structured, locked into committee groupings designed to oversee and manage the full range of the congregation's activity.
- Often the drive to ensure adequate Board representation results in people being drafted to serve not because of their own spiritual gifts or special abilities, but rather simply because they'll say "Yes". Meanwhile, because folks are placed on committees

whether they really want to or not, and because committee work often involves more “discussing” than actually “doing”, enthusiasm wanes.

- The result is all too familiar: volunteer burnout coming at us from at least two different directions. Those who continue to serve on committees find themselves serving over and over again, doing more and more. Meanwhile, many of our volunteers sign up to be part of the work, only to give up in boredom and frustration as the long and sometimes tedious process of deciding by committee carries on.
- A longer-term consequence of such committee gridlock is that the small congregation stumbles and falters as it tries to grow its ministry and sense of purpose. The committee system was the chosen structure by which the ministry was to take shape- but now, the willingness of people to volunteer is in decline, and the energy of those who lead is becoming overtaxed. Simply keeping the system going becomes so much of a burden that the original purpose of building a faith community and sharing the Good News of the Gospel fades from prominence.

Over-structured, under-inspired: for many small churches there are times when the organization becomes a hindrance rather than a help to spiritual and mission growth. Enmeshed in the malaise of committee gridlock, we are left with frustration and disappointment, rather than the abundance Christ has promised.

Sociologist and church consultant C. Kirk Hadaway describes this unfortunate scenario as “goal displacement” (Hadaway, C. Kirk: Behold I Do A New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp.7-8).

to avoid when selves around The original the congrega- worshiping lives in News- gets by the require- we’ve built that purpose. Despite our best intentions, we end up moving from mission to management, from ministry to administration.

For many small churches, traditional governance becomes a hindrance to spiritual and mission growth.

land, OH: Pilgrim Press, It’s a process that’s hard we’re organizing our- the committee system. purpose of starting tion- celebrating and together, transform- response to God’s Good shoved aside over time ments of the system supposedly to fulfill

For the small church in the present age, the problem of “goal displacement” is a potentially-fatal concern. We’ve got to find another way of organizing things before all the energy is choked off. A re-appraisal of the whole role of committee work in our small congregations is needed, and in what follows we’re going to explore one way to do just that.

3. The Small-Church Fitness Regime:

Let’s face it: many people maintain a healthy skepticism these days regarding the value of mission statements, vision statements, and the like. Even leading management scholars like Jim Collins (www.jimcollins.com) argue that organizations spend too much time working on mission statement language,

and too little time figuring out how to actually implement all those noble words. Having been through your share of such mission statement workshops, you may be one of the stronger skeptics. After all, how many times have the results of all your verbal cre- activity been posted on the boardroom- wall, and then basically ignored as the group returns to its habitual pat- terns of function- ting? The truth is, though, for the small congrega- tion, getting the mission clear in some kind of focused, summary statement, is a necessary first step toward moving out of committee gridlock.

Organizations spend too much time working on a mission statement and too little time implementing the noble words.

Does your congregation have a mission statement? It doesn’t matter how poetic it is, or how long or short (shorter is probably better)- is there something you can point to that encapsulates what you think your life together is supposed to be about? Here are some samples of mission and vision statements that are currently guiding congregational life:

- A congregation in Southern Alberta has developed this summary statement of why it exists and what it’s seeking to do: “This congregation exists,” they say, “to welcome, nurture, and equip people for Spirit-filled Gospel living (McKillop United Church, Lethbridge, Alberta).”
- Kirk Hadaway, the sociologist mentioned earlier, suggests that the purpose of the Christian community is not something we have to work hard to redefine or recreate. The purpose of the congregation, he argues, is simple: transforming people’s lives in light of the Gospel (Hadaway, p.11).
- The Diamond Valley congregation, mentioned above, was fortunate to have been blessed with a straightforward mission statement developed several years earlier under the guidance of consultant Rob Moore. Taking as a heading Jesus’ Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37-39, the Diamond Valley congregation states:

“As members of Diamond Valley Pastoral Charge, we are called by God as followers of Jesus Christ:

1. *Spiritual Growth-* to foster spiritual growth through Christian Education for children, youth, and adults.
2. *Outreach-* to encourage outreach to our community and to the world, through prayer, education, service, and financial support.
3. *Nurture and Support-* to nurture and support each other through fellowship, visitation, and service to all.
4. *Worship-* to share in worship in our church and throughout the community.
5. *Hospitality-* to provide a welcoming community of faith.

This last mission statement provides a structured summary of the various aspects of ministry within that small congregation and community. Once we’ve encapsulated

our purpose together in this way, we've taken the first step in moving beyond the inertia and decline of committee gridlock. The small-church fitness regime is underway, and having accomplished this first step, we can now take things further as we re-ignite mission vitality for participants in the lean small church.

4. Building Small-Church Strength

Defining the mission of your congregation in ways that actually reflect what you're doing- or want to do- in your own community is a critical first step toward generating renewed health and vitality in the small church. Writing down the words, however, is only the first step. To really get out of our over-structured, under-inspired congregational jam, we need to figure out what the words in our mission statement actually mean. What does it mean in our community and congregational context, for example, to say we "provide a welcoming community of faith"? What does it mean to "equip people for Spirit-filled Gospel living"? What are some concrete illustrations of our church doing what we say we want to do? This is a contextual process of mission definition, the second and most vital step in clarifying our congregational purpose. We need to identify the day-to-day, specific ways we're behaving when we're welcoming, worshiping, reaching out, forming people into fully-developed disciples. Only when we're able to talk in the most concrete, down-to-earth terms about the specific ways we do what our mission statement says, can we begin to reconnect our words and our actions of faith. It's this clear linkage between what we say and what we do that helps overcome goal displacement: we can start to see how we're actually fulfilling our mission together.

At the same time, there may be places where we recognize that the things we're doing and the mission we'd like to achieve don't match up. Here is where we may encounter the negative effects of goal displacement in our church's affairs. There are hundreds of ways we can become stuck in this fashion, directing our efforts to things that don't actually help our ministry grow simply because we think we need to keep doing them. Thankfully, though, there's a way to get unstuck as well. What we need to do is change our way of looking at things. Instead of seeing our mission statement as a fixed set of ideals we have to live up to right here, right now (or feel guilty about failing), we begin to see the goals of our mission as outcomes, the process of living and in faith, over a safe, welcoming this process-oriented things, no longer separated in our gritty, day-to-day maintenance. to see such an result of a whole do together- everything from shoveling the snow in winter to ensuring that adequate insurance is in place year by year. The goal, or outcome, is visibly linked to the actions we do day by day, instead of something that's idealistically separated in our minds from the mundane routines of looking after a building.

We need to understand our mission statement in concrete, down-to-earth terms for the congregation's daily work

end results of a pro-working together time. For example, facility would, in ented way of seeing be a fixed ideal thinking from the realities of church Instead, we come outcome as the end range of things we

By changing our way of looking at things, we become newly aware of congregational life and mission as a process, a series of steps we take, moving toward our goals. Suddenly, we can see the reasons why we do what we do once again. We may recognize that we're not fulfilling the outcomes just yet, but at the same time we still see the connections between the everyday things that are part of church life and our long-term mission goals. Everything is considered in context of fulfilling our mission, and the debilitating stranglehold of goal displacement is broken.

The benefits of this new way of looking at congregational life are significant. Planning becomes much easier: we've clarified what we want to achieve, and we've taken time to describe what it will actually feel like when we attain our mission outcomes. These vivid descriptions of our desired future now become part of our planning as "indicators", the elements of our lived experience that show we're on track. Consider again the mission outcome of "creating a safe, welcoming facility" for our ministry. We can describe what such a safe, welcoming facility would look and feel like for our participants (clean, well-signed bathrooms, for example; freshly-painted entry doors; a convenient and visible area where folks can gather for coffee before or after worship). From there, it's pretty clear what we actu-

"As minister, I find myself spending less time in meetings and more time working directly with people on ministries pertinent to the needs of our congregation and surrounding area."

Importantly, a clearer idea of we need to take our desired mis-also easier to ask In fact, experi-when the linkage and mission into a real, living will actually

and their time, freely and without pressure. This, then, is an important key to revitalizing ministry, mission, and enthusiastic participation in the small congregation. Instead of the desperation of committee gridlock, the clarity we've discerned about our mission outcomes and the things we need to do to get there opens up an enthusiastic atmosphere of grace and generosity, true marks of a Gospel community.

To use a technical term, what we're engaged in here as we move out of committee gridlock and "goal displacement" is something called "Outcomes-focused Planning". We've taken our mission ideals, the ways we describe the difference we want to make in the world, and begun to visualize those as the end results, or outcomes, of the process of our congregational life and work together. Then, we've described in vivid, living terms what those outcomes will actually feel like as they're being fulfilled. Having generated that colourful description of what our mission will "live" like, we are ready to consider the various things we can do to help make it happen. The basic "mission structure" that will guide our work together has been established; the small-church fitness regime we've worked on has shown real results.

Learning From Our Mistakes: Communicating about the changes we're making.

While the Small-Church Fitness Regime we're working on is aimed at building a simpler, mission driven congregational model, the fact is that the whole concept is new and somewhat bewildering. At Diamond Valley, the main work of learning and developing the new model was done by a small group of leaders drawn from the Board. They faced a tough challenge in coming to grips with this new way of doing ministry, while at the same time ensuring that the necessary aspects of congregational life were indeed being covered within the new design. Sharing the new learnings, and the new structure, with the wider congregation proved difficult as well. The committee system is a longstanding way of doing things in the United Church, and people needed to understand why we were changing it, along with what were the critical components of the new, lean model. At Diamond Valley, we left this communication until the model had been largely finalized, which in hindsight was probably too late. Trying to tell people about an entirely new way of being a church, at the same time as we sought to persuade them to embrace a mission statement despite all their skepticism, was a very big job. Really, it took more than a year- and a change in ministry staff- before the mission-driven model was understood enough to take root in the congregation's life. In the meantime, there was some significant organizational confusion as the Board struggled to do its work without committees.

Better, therefore, to develop an ongoing communication plan for each aspect of the mission-driven development process, so that people can learn about the Small-Church Fitness Regime, and the lean small church model, in a step by step fashion. Begin by sharing the work to clarify the mission outcomes, and don't forget to engage people in the full description of what things will feel like when the mission is being fulfilled. Then, after laying the foundation in the mission, people will be better able to comprehend the mission-driven organizational design that flows from it. Communicate early and often, and it will take less time for people to understand and embrace the lean small church.

And now, having established our mission process- the goals, what they'll feel like when we've met them, and what we need to do to get there- we're ready to take a major step. We can shed the bulky bureaucracy of all those permanent committees, and instead put our participants' energies into actually doing the things that will make our desired future real. Some comments from Rev. Shelley Lavenne, current minister at Diamond Valley, give us an illustration of how all of this has come together for the lean small church she serves:

"The model had some familiarity for me. Prior to entering ministry, I had worked in public relations in the non-profit sector where the organization's mission statement was the springboard for our work and the evaluation of those tasks. And while completing my theological training, I had studied how to apply a strategic marketing model to a congregation. But probably what was missing in that work was the need to have the congregation's structure simple and streamlined to capitalize on planning efforts specific to a congregation and its setting.

The model developed at the Diamond Valley congregation was particularly freeing. Without standing committees, as minister I find myself spending less time in meetings and more time working directly with people on particular ministries pertinent to the needs of our congregation and surrounding area. The model allows us to more freely encourage people to explore their gifts, listen to where God is calling them and use their gifts in service to Christ."

5. Now That We're Feeling Stronger

If we've worked on our Small-Church Fitness Regime to this point, we will have established the basis for mission-focused ministry without the kind of bureaucratic bulk that previously held us in committee gridlock. Through the process outlined above, we'll have clarified our mission outcomes, offered imaginative descriptions of what our church will look like when we're fulfilling our goals, and established the outlines of the things we need to do to get there. Now it's time to

work out the specifics of a plan, the actual activities we need to do right now in order to get started on meeting our mission priorities. Here is one model for planning congregation work based on the mission structure we've established. This approach is the one currently in use at Diamond Valley, and it takes into consideration not only the congregation's mission, but also the unique United Church identity we carry with us, combined with an understanding of our specific community needs and interests.

Some comments from Rev. Shelley Lavenne help clarify how this approach can work in practice:

"When the Project Administrative Coordinator (we'll talk about this job description below), the Official Board and

I sit down to plan, this model (see next page) is in the back of our minds. The five-pronged mission structure (seen earlier as one of the sample Mission Statements) is always before us. On the topic of Denominational Identity:

we know that as a United Church congregation

we are distinct from the evangelical churches down the road and that people have chosen us because of that. Sometimes as United Church people we have a hard time defining what makes us distinct. It goes back to our roots.

Many of our United Church people are grounded in the social gospel, even if they don't know what the term means nor the history behind it. They understand that their personal faith has a correlation with being active in helping others and concerned about a just society. We value a 'learned' theology and encourage people to ask questions about how the Bible is put together

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A MISSION-DRIVEN PROGRAM PLANNING MODEL

CONGREGATIONAL MISSION STRUCTURE

(The result of the process above)

+

DENOMINATIONAL IDENTITY

(The unique ministry we can offer as United Church Christians, based on our Denomination's beliefs)

+

CONGREGATIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

(Who is active in our congregation)

+

COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

(The shape of our community and its needs)

=

CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

and who Jesus Christ is and what the Trinity means.

Regarding Congregational Demographics: we know who our people are and continue to learn more about them. For starters, we know that at Diamond Valley we have a high percentage of people in helping professions such as health, education and municipal affairs; that our average age is slightly higher than the surrounding community as is the educational level. We also know that one-third to 50 per cent of our people commute two hours each day, limiting their time for church activities. We know how to keep them at evening meetings. Their lifestyle also means they prefer short-term ministry projects to long-term ones. We continue to learn about our people's interests through focus groups and even simple two-question surveys during announcements prior to worship ("raise your hand if you would be willing to... or would like to – remember, we are a small church). Effective planning involves consulting with your people – not simply planning events we think people will be interested in and being surprised when no one shows up. Finally, when considering Community Demographics, we know and continue to learn who is in our surrounding neighborhoods. We use the information from Statistics Canada on who lives in our communities. We also continue to talk to people involved in municipal affairs and business owners about who is in our neighborhood and trends they are seeing."

"Effective planning means consulting with your people – not simply planning events we think they'll be interested in."

On the basis of this mission-driven program development model, leaders in the lean small church can put in place activities that work toward fulfilling the congregation's mission outcomes, while at the same time doing ministry that really connects with the wider community's interests and needs. Some illustrations of how this process has worked- and one "oops", when things didn't connect- follow.

6. Using Our Strength

It may be helpful now to take a moment and look at some specific examples of how mission-driven program planning can work. Rev. Shelley Lavenne comments once again:

A. Planning for Adult Faith Formation

When I arrived, the regular program for adult faith formation, a major part of the mission goal of Spiritual Growth, was a Wednesday afternoon Lectionary Bible study. The interim minister who had served Diamond Valley prior to me had questioned whether this program was the best use of the minister's time and after a few months, I saw merit to his query. Only a handful of people attended the Bible study, in part because it was scheduled during a time that only those not working during the day could attend. At the same time, the weekly task of preparing for the one study limited time for other initiatives.

At the start of my second year, I suggested to the Board that we needed to take a look at what people wanted to have happen for adult faith formation. One of the issues to be considered was whether the weekly Bible Study should continue. The Board agreed that the whole program area should be examined by an advisory group, whose findings would then give direction to further work.

Approximately eleven people were asked to participate in two evenings of discussions: some men, some women, some older, some younger. Most were regular worship attendees, although one important participant had dropped out of weekly worship despite continuing to donate. The individuals were selected in order to try and provide an accurate reflection of congregational and community demographics as described above; all were interested in adult faith formation.

The findings were insightful and “common sense”. Participants wanted short-term, three to five week-long studies and weren’t interested in a weekly commitment. We learned also that the supper hour was a good time to hold learning events. At the end of the two evenings, we had an exciting list of topics on which to follow through, including:

- Book Studies on current and relevant texts
- Opportunities for learning in the field of contemporary theology
- Taize prayer evenings
- Meditation using the Labyrinth
- Men’s activities focused on outdoor activities and special projects
- And more!

We have found that shaping our evening study sessions around the supper hour is best for our people. We begin at 6 pm with a meal, and then move into our study time. People are able to head home soon after 8 pm, knowing they have enough time to wind down from their day and get ready for the next workday. Usually I’ll provide supper for the first-session – perhaps a simple casserole, salad and light dessert. At the end of the evening, participants volunteer for the remaining evening meals. I’ve come to realize that preparing the meal at the outset of a new seminar series is one way as a leader that I model the “hospitality” aspect of the congregation’s mission statement, and those who participate in the evening study sessions have responded with grace and enthusiasm.

In terms of our congregation’s mission goal of Outreach, two new ministries have begun. Several in our congregation who love to quilt gather one morning a week during the winter months. I particularly love coming in the church door on Thursday mornings; the quilters’ excited and creative voices and the whir of sewing machines waft up from the basement. Their quilts benefit various social service agencies in our community. The quilters have also provided a base group for some of our adult spiritual growth events around sacred fabric art.

A further outreach project has taken shape as a community kitchen for low-income families started in our church kitchen. Several of our people work

with the local food bank that also distributes food out of our multi-purpose church basement. We noticed a need for people to know how to cook economical meals as well as to build social support for themselves through friendships. Working with the local Social Service agency, a program was established that not only provides healthy food for people of limited means, but also offers another link between participants from our congregation and members of the community at large.

It’s important to note that all of these programs have been able to get started without waiting for specific Board approval beforehand. Having reviewed the mission goals of Spiritual Growth and Outreach, the Board set a direction for programming in general terms. The actual activities that take place move forward based on the energy and inspiration of congregational participants, with the support of the staff. No further review or authorization is needed provided the program fits within the mission structure and direction the Board has established (see the Project Decision/Implementation Flow diagram at the end of this article).

B. An “OOPS!”, and what we’ve learned from it

Adult spiritual growth, a community kitchen, quilting for charity – we’re excited about how these ministries came about and the enthusiasm they generated. But let me tell you about one definite flop – our youth work. And it’s all because we didn’t follow our model.

When I was offered the ministry position at Diamond Valley, I was told that the search committee had liked my previous work with young people. Consequently, I thought it was important that I start a youth group. Seemed like a good idea at the time, but the reality was that there were few teenagers in the congregation, for a variety of very good reasons that had more to do with education and life activities than anything the church might do. I planned nine separate events that first Fall, at times with only one to three people attending. It was a frustrating amount of effort, with little to show

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for it. Later on, in looking at figures from Statistics Canada, I found that the number of teenagers in the surrounding community was relatively small compared to other age groups. So paying attention earlier on to congregational and community demographics, rather than wishful thinking about youth involvement, would have led to a better program result. Those same Statistics Canada figures showed, however, that there were a number of younger children in the community at large, so our congregational focus turned accordingly to building up our Sunday School. I know that by providing a good program and community for our children now we can help ensure they’ll want to participate in programs available for them as they grow older.

A Lean Way to Deal with Big Congregational Changes

A Lean Small Church can still tackle emerging issues and decisions successfully, without having to rely on permanent committees to process the information and supervise the work. Specific task groups, formed from participants who have particular skills and abilities for the work at hand, can be deployed to meet the need. Rev. Shelley Lavenne, describes one way this came about:

“In the Fall of 2002, when I first arrived, Diamond Valley was a two-point pastoral charge facing the task of closing one church. Several administrative tasks were before the Board, such as what furniture to keep, what to sell, etc. We looked at the gifts of people needed for the task – people who understood the history and tradition of the church, others with the determination needed to throw out what is no longer necessary, and a further group with an understanding of carpentry and construction. It was a short-term ministry task. When we approached people to be on the task group, they also learned how we valued them because of their particular gifts and talents. The task group was very effective. They carefully chose and kept furniture useful to us, threw out a lot of junk and raised \$10,000 in selling what we didn’t need towards buying new furniture for our sanctuary.”

7. Staying Fit

British management expert Charles Handy writes often about bureaucratic habits and presumptions that dominate our thinking even as they limit organizational effectiveness in changing times. One of the presumptions Handy describes is something we might label the “bureaucratic myth”: the belief that higher levels of authority within any organization are more effective at meeting the organization’s objectives than those lower down (Handy, Charles: *The Age of Paradox*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994; pp. 133-139). Numerous illustrations come to mind: for example, until recently, school supply budgets in a number of Alberta school divisions were administered not by the individual school principal and staff, but rather by the central administrative office. The rationale was that the central staff could meet the need more efficiently- a justification that proved false once local principals and staff were given authority over securing their own supplies in the mid-1990s. As the new policy evolved, in most cases costs went down even as supply needs were met more efficiently by people closer to education’s front line.

The “bureaucratic myth”, in Handy’s view, affects many situations in 21st-century organizational and business life. What we need to recognize, however, is that this myth has also made its mark within the United Church of Canada. In times past, General Council administrative units and Conference organizations have often been called upon to implement programs and plans over and above the authority of congregations and Presbyteries. The reason? The assumption in at least some cases has been that the General Council and Conference levels of the church are more effective at leading program and policy development work (the establishment of the Divisional system at the General Council offices in the mid-1970’s was touted at the time as a major thrust in this direction, according to General Council documents contained in the Records of Proceedings of 1972 and 1974).

Our local congregational structures have been shaped by the bureaucratic myth, too. In many churches, before a new program is initiated, the governing Board or Council- or at least the appropriate official committee- must give full approval. Without such approval, the new idea or venture is just not

considered legitimate, and is certainly subject to review and revision from above. Here we can see the bureaucratic myth at work in the local church: the presumption seems to be that people serving on the Board are more effective at deciding and doing things than the rest of the congregation’s participants. So, no matter how much creativity is bubbling up from the congregation at large, everything must be duly debated and approved by the Board first.

Those who offer themselves to serve on the governing Boards and Councils of our United Church congregations do so with sincere commitment and an honest desire for the well-being of their church. That they are doing their best is not in question here. Neither is the fact that in many areas (finance and liability policy, for example), official due diligence is highly necessary and must be carried out effectively in order to remain within the law. The reality is, however, that the influence of the bureaucratic myth fails in most churches to produce enhanced mission effectiveness. Asking the Board to approve everything we do stretches the expertise of even the wisest, most experienced church leaders, and virtually guarantees that only the things those Board leaders understand and support will actually get done. Put another way, requiring the Board to approve everything is almost a guarantee that the time-worn church phrase, “We’ve always done it this way,” gets enshrined in the ongoing governance of our congregation. Further, in large congregations a dynamic can develop

in which those on the front lines experience a gap between their activities and the overall direction of the church as the Board decides it. Sometimes this can turn into major, conflict-riddled misalignment between participants and leadership within a congregation (see Handy, *Paradox*, pp. 135-138; see also Jim Collins: “Aligning Action and Values”, www.jimcollins.com). But even a low-level disconnect between leaders and participants can dramatically sap mission and ministry energy.

In a small church, the negative effects of perpetuating the bureaucratic myth show up much more directly. Things simply stop happening, as people become overwhelmed and disempowered by the need to get approval for everything from their Board. Involvement and commitment are threatened as a “passive church” mentality sets in (see Schaller, Lyle: *Activating the Passive Church*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981; pp. 66-70).

The mission-driven, lean small church model assumes the congregation’s participants, inspired by Christ’s Spirit, have all the gifts necessary to fulfill the mission.

The mission-driven, mission structured lean small church turns the bureaucratic myth completely on its head. Instead of assuming that members of the Board have some unique expertise that makes them especially effective at doing the mission of the congregation, the lean small church model

then, is a critical role for the governing board in the lean small church: overview of the congregation's activities in support of the mission outcomes, overview of the financial and human resources available, and overview of the story of the congregation's life and work.

Learning from our mistakes again: Whither Stewardship?

The long-serving, long-suffering Stewardship Committee in most congregations is directed to generate funds and support for the ministry. Yet congregational stewardship is often little understood in the local church, and there is usually a stressful atmosphere of crisis surrounding stewardship work that makes the job seem tougher.

One of the things we realized as the lean church model took shape at Diamond Valley was that the task of generating revenue for the ministry was still a necessary challenge that had to be addressed even without a formal, standing Stewardship committee. Somebody needed to take charge of communicating the congregation's story and its mission direction so as to encourage healthy support.

For a short while at the outset of the new ministry model, stewardship issues were not well communicated and the task of promoting the ministry and seeking support ended up falling onto the minister's desk. Now, however, a task group reporting to the Board has taken on the work of stewardship development. Using a three-year cyclical model this group is establishing an ongoing stewardship plan that can be utilized and monitored directly by the Board with a minimum of stress. The focus is not on establishing a standing committee on which to off-load stewardship work. Congregational stewardship fits directly into the Board's mandate of overview, so establishing a systematic stewardship process for the Board to use is the key (see Joiner, Donald W.: "Which Fall Campaign?". *Clergy Journal*, Sept. 1998, pp.36-38). Such a process allows the stewardship story to be told to the wider congregation and community as an integral part of the Board's activities on into the future.

assumes that the participants of the congregation, inspired by the Spirit of God in Christ, have all the gifts necessary to fulfill the call. Once we've defined and described the mission outcomes toward which the congregation is aiming, we can back away from requiring higher-level Board approval for everything before it happens. Instead, with the mission design (outcomes, indicators, program options) guiding the congregation's affairs, participants are free to do the mission rather than waiting for others to approve or direct things over top of them.

The governing board in a lean small church is, then, no longer a gatekeeping body. This does not mean that there isn't a real role for the board in the ongoing affairs of the congregation. Not at all, in fact: there are actually three key roles for the board or council to play. First of all, there is the function of overview. Board members are aware of the mission design the congregation has developed- the outcomes toward which people are aiming, the indicator signals of mission fulfillment, and the program options that are available to help fulfill the goals. With this broad-based knowledge of the mission, the Board is in a solid place from which to survey the congregation's affairs at any given moment, and assess where priority shifts might need to be communicated to the wider constituency. Further, based on this overview position, the governing board of the congregation can marshal resources to fulfill the mission appropriately- budget and staffing directions can be laid out, always with the mission outcomes guiding the way. Finally, the board's overview role allows it to look after telling the story regularly and enthusiastically to the wider congregation- the story of all the diverse ministries a small church takes on in pursuit of mission fulfillment, and the story of how participants' gifts are used to achieve the goals. Overview,

Flowing from the overview function is the second critical role for the governing board in a lean small church: alignment. Here we use a word that reflects the thinking of management scholar Jim Collins, and what we're getting at is the ongoing activity of ensuring that what participants are doing and experiencing in the ministry of the congregation stays linked in to the overall mission design. For the board leadership of a lean small church, ensuring alignment between congregational activities and the wider mission design means keeping in touch with people from throughout the congregation, keeping abreast of the things that are happening and the things that need to happen. There is no place here for the "figurehead" Board member, someone who sits in a position of authority yet remains inactive in the congregation. Those who serve on the governing board need to be actively connected in to the life of the church, in order to ensure that good communication circulates from the participants to the leadership and vice versa.

Of course, when one is considering the mandate of alignment, the staff become an obvious resource. As people who are involved professionally with the affairs of the lean small church, the minister and other church staff are well-positioned to maintain the vital link between congregational activities and the mission design. Thus it becomes important for the Board to ensure accountability and communication with the staff as part of their ongoing leadership. Links with staff need to be designed in to the way the board functions in the lean small church; where in some traditional congregations the staff sometimes end up isolated from the governing groups or committees, under the model we're developing here there can be no such separation. Staff and board members need to work closely together to ensure the ministry activities of the

congregation stay aligned with the overall mission outcomes. At Diamond Valley, a specific staff role was developed to assist the minister and the board in implementing and overseeing effective, well-aligned programming.

Early in the organizational redesign at Diamond Valley, it became clear that there was one useful function of the old committee system that could get lost as the new, lean structure emerged. While there is little doubt that traditional committees can become bottlenecks choking off ministry energy, nevertheless they do generally help Board leaders keep track of what's going on within the congregation. In the new, lean small church model, some way would have to be found to fulfill this reporting and monitoring role. It couldn't be assigned to the minister, since the tasks of worship and spiritual leadership on the Charge already encompassed a full-time position. Instead, what took shape was a specific job description aimed at keeping track of congregational activities. Initially conceived as a volunteer position, the job of Project Administrative Coordinator was later developed into a part-time position, combined with the administrative duties of the church secretary. The Diamond Valley Charge's Project Administrative Coordinator helps participants access the resources and support they need to do what they've taken on. The Coordinator also keeps track of church facility usage along with program scheduling, communicating on a regular basis with the Board regarding what's happening, how it's going, and what further action may be needed. Functioning as a supplemental staff person to the congregation's minister, the Project Administrative Coordinator takes care of keeping things organized, while at the

The Project Administrative Coordinator provides a personal and administrative link between the participants involved in the congregation's ministry and the Board leaders.

mission-driven, mission-structured character of the lean small church is up and running properly, then the Board leaders need not revert in their evaluation function to an authoritarian, gatekeeper role. Not at all: as the governing board stays in touch with the unfolding ministry, and as the leaders retain their awareness of the overall mission outcomes toward which the congregation is aiming, it will become obvious which activities are working well in support of the mission and which are less effective. Further, participants in those activities themselves will provide feedback as to how they are experiencing the ministry. The board leadership will not be required to provide enforced evaluation as long as there is opportunity for feedback and reflection to flow. What the board needs to do is provide suggested tools and resources for such ongoing feedback analysis, and to take the time on a regular basis to review what participants are saying. The "feedback loop" model can be very helpful here, as described in the Sidebar. There are other suitable tools as well.

We can see, then, that the function of evaluation forms the third significant mandate for the governing board in a lean small church. Through simple, ongoing evaluation we can determine our progress toward the mission outcomes we've discerned together. Such evaluation takes place in light of efforts to ensure proper alignment between congregational activities and the mission design. And, as we have seen, both the alignment and evaluation functions take shape in light of the board leadership's overview of the lean small church's total mission direction. Overview, alignment, evaluation: these are the critical roles the board needs to play in a lean

Two Permanent Committees We Can't Set Aside

Right from the outset, there was a critical recognition at Diamond Valley that even within a lean small church, healthy staff management was crucial. So, while other standing committees were disbanded in favor of a mission-driven, project-oriented model, the Ministry and Personnel Committee was retained to manage the relationship with paid accountable personnel. Not only that, but effort has been made to enhance the training of M&P members through participation in Presbytery learning events whenever possible.

The same enhanced functioning has been a goal for another standing committee that can't be set aside: the congregation's Trustees. According to United Church practice, the Trustees administer the legal affairs of church property and insurance, and are mandated to ensure that congregational facilities and capital matters are conducted in accord with the law. At Diamond Valley, the Trustees have been given an extra set of tools to do this work, through the establishment of a Capital Fund for major facility needs. The Trustees administer the Capital Fund under the guidance of the Board, and advise on emerging capital needs. In this respect, Trustees in this particular lean small church have taken on a measure of responsibility for the long-term maintenance of the physical plant.

same time providing a personal link between the participants involved in the ministry and the leadership.

If the board tasks of overview and alignment outlined above are being fulfilled adequately, then the final critical mandate for a governing board in a lean small church will readily take shape: evaluation. But let's be very clear that if the mis-

small church. It's also worth mentioning that the fulfillment of these three mandates by a congregational board or council need not require a huge number of volunteers. Without the need for committee and Board approval for every activity, the Board itself can become a smaller, well-informed, committed core group of leaders for the congregation's affairs.

Much like an elder's circle in a First Nations clan or tribe, the governing board for the lean small church is a mission-focused, spiritually-mature, faith inspired group in touch with both the character of the congregation and its ongoing activities. From that base, the "elders' circle" of the congrega-

tional governing board can discern the effectiveness and the direction of the lean small church as it seeks to fulfill its mission- and the incredibly mission opportunity that awaits our Christian communities in 21st-century North America.

Feedback Loop analysis for project and program evaluation.

We begin a feedback loop analysis by detailing the initial goals behind a given activity or initiative. It's helpful as we begin evaluation to bring these initial objectives to mind once again, since there can be quite a time lag between the inception of a venture and its endpoint. So we take the time to note again those original objectives, and from there we can move forward in the feedback loop by describing exactly what in the implementation of the project was helpful in fulfilling the goals. Then, moving further ahead, we spend time reflecting on things that were unhelpful in addressing the initial goals. It's important to begin with positive feedback before considering the negative; such a discipline will help overcome the tendency we all have to criticize after the fact. Both positive and negative feedback from the implementation process need to be considered fairly and honestly, however. Then, to complete the feedback loop, we consider again the original goals in light of the implementation process. We should now be able to discern which goals have been met, which goals have yet to be fulfilled, and which goals may have been lost or permanently affected by any unhelpful aspects of the implementation process. This simple "feedback loop" evaluation process can be performed by participants themselves- the board doesn't actually have to do the work. Commentary is then simply fed into the board's discussions in order to determine what new directions might be needed.