

Reflections from Pastor Mark Ziemer

on using the model of Governance and Ministry at Grace Lutheran Church, Tomahawk

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Here is my summary of three benefits that I experienced from Grace using the Hotchkiss model of Governance & Ministry.

Background: Grace went through several years of conflict, a major building program and a significant staffing arrangement that did not work. In 2012 three of us attended a several day long Alban event at which Dan Hotchkiss was the presenter. Our goal was to find and develop a better way of structuring Grace that 1) fit the social and technology realities of the 21st Century, 2) would provide less time in meetings and more time in action (volunteers were burning out and refusing meetings), and 3) would center our congregation and empower individuals on God's mission. Wow—did this ever!

I saw three powerful results of using the Hotchkiss "Governance & Ministry" model. It profoundly deepens clarity, ministry, and our being the Body of Christ.

CLARITY:

I find Lutherans notorious for doing things because A) that's how we always do it, B) according to the loudest voice(s), and/or C) someone has the passion and is willing to do the work.

The pastor may be the initiator of all three of these. Or long-term members. Or extroverted or very confident people. Regardless there is much overlap between pastor(s), staff, committees, council, members and groups. Priority, rationale or vision is not clear or even stated. Much is open for micro-managing. Power of persuasion is often the only response to criticism. Pastor(s), staff, committees, council, members and groups might all have a feeling or expectation of needing to know, be involved or have oversight of everything that is happening.

The result is that a common response is to say no, identify reasons to not do things, name/create hurdles, and focus only internally on congregational life.

This Governance model provides a means of establishing vision, rationale, and priorities for what the congregation will do. It is annually updated and annually evaluated. AND it is the Church Council that does this. It is clear who establishes this as is the process of how this is done. The pastor is of course a part of the Council. And an essential key is that the Council listens well to God, the congregation, each other, and to the community—which also develops clarity on for the purpose and goals.

MINISTRY:

This is the essence of our following Jesus and being church. But congregations can get stuck in all the details, in permission giving, and in doing what we have always done.

What I loved about the Governance model is that it frees people to act. In fact the emphasis becomes acting. For if anyone has any idea and it fits that year's vision and priority, follows established policies, the resources are available, and the person(s) understand to the process and to whom they are accountable—that idea can instantly take off. No permission is needed. People are empowered to act

AND they know how to carry actions out because policies, vision, priorities and accountability is all established. This is where the consent agenda at Council becomes very important as a quick and clear means for keeping the Council informed. Also why it is helpful to not have Council members assigned to one committee since it is important for them to be focused on the broad view of vision and priority for all that happens.

Being “nimble” is a word used to describe this. Action is fast and actions are quick to adapt. All of which is important in our fast changing reality.

Ministry is the primary focus of the Pastor and Staff. They are the people called and hired to resource all the actions and ministry happening in the congregation. This is a HUGE change. Pastor and staff are not to do it. They are to encourage, support, resource and guide the congregation in ministering to all the needs, ills, and opportunities of the immediate community and world. This takes time but increasingly increases the involvement of people. There are few meetings. Most time is spent in acting. A person and small groups can take action. This is made possible because pastor and staff are told the policies, vision and priorities that the Council develops and are evaluated and held accountable by the Council—monthly in the consent agenda and annually in an evaluation.

Pastor and staff are also freed to do ministry because the fiduciary responsibilities of budget, building, vision and policies is done by the Church Council. Council is freed of overseeing endless details and giving permission because the pastor and staff are overseeing the ministry. Thus the Council can focus on the big picture.

This will take time to develop and to trust each other as the focus becomes Council developing policies, vision and priorities and pastor and staff faithfully following those policies, vision and priorities.

BODY of CHRIST:

Too often few are involved. Too often criticism can be comfortably stated without responsibility for acting.

All of us are the Body of Christ. But each of us have different gifts, different callings, and different functions within that Body of Christ.

The Hotchkiss Governance model is faithful in lifting up and developing this Body of Christ into reality.

In this model all can act—even instantly. Evaluation and accountability is built in. Another very important key is the Council fully involving the congregation in the discernment process of determining the vision; i.e. everyone does get opportunity to speak up—so that rather than criticism of what is wrong the annual process includes and involved everyone to name and discern what can be done. Our world is lost and changing fast. Congregations, staff, pastor(s) and individuals will fail. A key part of this Hotchkiss governance model is knowing and expecting failure. BUT instantly having the evaluation and discernment to learn from what did not work. It also clearly defines who will guide this learning and evaluation. AND this is why the Council creating policies is so important so that the congregation does not continue making the same mistakes but Council—focused on the big picture—can respond and establish policies to guide and save people from making the same mistake in the future. Acceptance of failure, respect for people when things fail, and attention to learning are all very important in being the Body of Christ.