

OUR BYLAWS ARE OUT-OF-DATE WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO FIX THEM?

Bylaws. Wow, does that just send electric juices up your spine? Probably not.

Most pastors avoid dealing with bylaws like the plague. They just are not that fun, particularly when there are a lot “funner” fish to fry. Besides that, who wants to deal with Joe Layman Bylaw-Watcher if you do not have to?

Bylaws generally are not the drawing card to bring the masses to the church. Further, they do little to evangelize or disciple people. However, they can be built to allow for greater and quicker structural changes to happen in the church, or they can be built to keep the church small and impede growth.

It’s your choice. Leave them as they were last modified in the 70s, or step up as the leader and make the changes necessary to position the church for growth through bylaw provisions allowing for that same. How does that look?

Consider this. When the church was small it was much more lay-driven. There was one of you, the pastor, and the rest were laity. Sometimes in those settings, the church is board-driven by dictate of the bylaws. No growing church of any size is board-driven. Therefore, the bylaws of the church of 75 people on this bylaw dictate are not sufficient to the real world of what a church of 500 and larger needs.

Further, it is typical that bylaws of a smaller church delineate such functions as various departments and committees. Problem! Departments and committees change as the seasons in the life of the church change. What is needed in the church of 110 is not needed in the church of 750.

Here is some food for thought on how to deal with outdated bylaws.

In most cases, be sure to run wholesale changes to your bylaws by legal counsel. Certainly, the more incidental changes do not need the lawyer's meter running. However, if you are going top to bottom, talk to people who are paid to understand this stuff.

When making changes, consider not only where the church is currently, but where you expect it to be over the next five years. Bylaw changes should set you up for the future, not just fix your present. Do not waste your time just trying to get current. If you are intending to fix them, then fix them. That means looking beyond today.

Consider models. Richard Hammar has created an outstanding model at www.ag.org. Download it and use it. He is the best in the business. There are others out on the web. Be discerning. You certainly do not have to reinvent the wheel.

Governance is a huge issue in setting the stage for growth. The larger the church gets, the less visible the board becomes. They are not less important. They are more important. However, they are less visible. In like manner, many churches find that the larger the church gets, the less likely individual members are to know individual board members. Some of the larger churches have begun to move to the creation of self-perpetuating boards.

This should be done only with complete counsel. It does not fit the stereotypical church model but it does work in the right church with the right leader. Not without risk, but it does streamline nicely and frankly makes a lot of sense when done right.

When listing doctrinal positions, it is often preferred to give a brief paragraph statement of support of something like a denominational doctrinal listing rather than listing those same specific doctrines in your own bylaws. In the rare event doctrine is adjusted even in the least, your bylaws do not have to be adjusted.

Departments should not be listed in bylaws because they will change in the varying seasons of the church.

Staff positions other than the senior pastor should not be listed for the same reason.

From a housekeeping standpoint, many churches find the convergence of both the "Constitution" and the "Bylaws" into one document called "Bylaws" is the most effective. Over the years, people in the church have asked what the difference is between the two and why have both. Make it simple. When possible go to one document.

Whatever is done to the bylaws, it is important that the position of the senior pastor not be diminished. In fact, it should be strengthened. There is obvious risk with building this into the bylaws. It is not for the faint-of-heart. Due diligence should be the order of the day as you process through the necessary changes that will allow for growth of the church.

At the end of the day, bylaws do not draw non-believers. Bylaws do, however, set the stage for the future. Restrictive bylaws mean slower or no growth. "Growth" bylaws allow for just that. You work hard on the exciting new initiatives in the church.

You love to see people giving their hearts to Jesus. Streamline your bylaws properly and you will see even more of those types of things happening in the months and years to come.

Churches fail to grow not because they do not do good things or even right things. They fail to grow because impediments to growth are inbred in their system, into their DNA. Bylaw revisions can remove those impediments and when they do, God smiles.

Happy “Bylawing”!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dick brings a wealth of experience to the table for pastors when dealing with the tough issues of the church relative to growth, organization, leadership, administration, and change. His service as Administrative Pastor at two mega churches and as Vice President at a flagship denominational Bible college makes him a resource your church will want to retain.

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