

When it's time to change Shaping a new ministry model

by Stephen Lien

They read the signs: a large congregation with a waterlogged governance of boards and committees designed for 50 years ago, and now lay leadership stretched to the point of collapse. Here's what they learned when they threw it all out to free up mission.

"I'm sorry, Pastor, I just can't do it. I want to serve the Lord and the church, but I just can't see my way clear to continuing to commit to one meeting a month. I've got a two-year-old son, a growing business that requires long hours, and we're out of town on occasion to visit family. The demands on my time are just too great. I'm sorry. I have to resign from the youth ministry board."

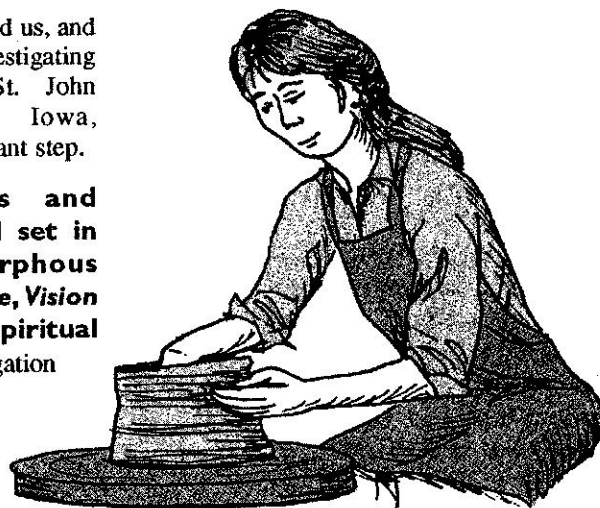
It was another of what had become a typical conversation with the 72 members of our eight boards. So much so that it had become routine to spend a good part of each board's meeting time seeking replacements for those who had only

our organizational system behind us, and after several months of investigating alternative structures, the St. John American, Cedar Falls, Iowa, congregation council took a giant step.

Dissolving all boards and committees, the council set in place a more amorphous framework for Governance, Vision and Ministry, driven by spiritual gifts. Essentially, the congregation council made three major decisions. They

- cleared the decks by dissolving the organizational system of eight boards, each with nine members,
- created a three-component structure of *Governance, Vision and Ministry*, and
- replaced the boards with four ministry divisions, each based on a verb from our mission statement: *inviting, celebrating, growing and serving.*

At the time, the first decision seemed to be most dramatic, but it was probably



sibilities of the council intact. What was left of the old organizational structure had been shaped by continuing resolutions and permissible "may" rubrics.

Upon reflection and after implementation, the council decision to create a new three-component structure proved to be liberating — particularly for its members. Previously and theoretically, the council was charged with all three responsibilities — governance, ministry and vision. However, they seldom felt that they did justice to any of them. Because the old structure required that council members chair a board, they struggled with knowing which role took priority. They were overworked and stretched thin.

The new ministry model allows council members to concentrate their energies and resources on governance issues. It also decentralizes power and spreads responsibilities among a greater number

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recently been elected. Other members didn't have the courage to resign, so boards struggled to conduct monthly business without a quorum, and would often adjourn without addressing agenda items.

It was increasingly apparent that the way we've always done it was no longer working. So on March 8, 1997, with many months of growing frustration with

the easiest to make. The council had experienced the frustrations of the previous system firsthand. They'd investigated alternatives and decided that they had to make a change. Before the actual decision, they examined the constitution and determined that the contemplated change was within their prerogative. The decisions would leave all constitutionally mandated respon-

of people. Council members who had served under the old model and voted themselves into a new one were now forced to decide whether their gifts and interest lay in *Governance*, *Vision* or

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Ministry. Eventually, two council members decided that their gifts were better and more effectively used in *Ministry* and resigned their council positions. They found a better match and greater fulfillment in the *Ministry* area.

For the professional staff, the decision to empower four ministry divisions has proved to be the most sweeping, dramatic and challenging. We woke up the morning after the council retreat and realized that on May 1, the date selected for the dissolution of boards and committees, we would no longer have an infrastructure to accomplish ongoing ministry in our large and growing congregation. While on the one hand we felt good about being freed from old structures that seemed to hinder the ministry to which we felt called, we were overwhelmed at the enormity of the task ahead. While we were firmly committed to our mission — reaching out with Christ’s love and inviting all people to celebrate God’s presence, grow in God’s grace and serve God’s people — now that mission would have to grow hands and feet. We were empowered by the council to begin implementing the new structure. We were charged with making the body come alive. The goal was to complete the transition substantially by September, 1997. We were on our way!

What we are learning is that the emerging model at St. John is “chaordic.” That is, it borders between chaos and order. Leonard Sweet calls it “constant, creative chaos!” We are also learning:

- People are excited about the concept

of spiritual gifts, appreciate the opportunity to study their biblical basis, and are eager to discern their own.

- The intuitive *rightness* of helping people discern, develop and deploy their God-given spiritual gifts has almost been a “Duh!” moment. We wonder how we could have been so dense for so long that we failed to comprehend this First Century principle that is so plainly laid out in the Bible.
- Our new model for ministry at St. John has an almost instinctive authenticity about it. It is indigenous to ministry in both our congregation and lives. This new ministry model has created an incredible synergy and allowed us to mobilize better around our mission statement. Huge pieces of our mission have finally made sense, and have fallen into place like the tumblers in an opening lock.
- Experimenting with and adopting a new model for ministry is exhausting, and requires huge expenditures of energy. At times the ministry staff felt alone, dazed, discouraged, bewildered, overwhelmed and over-worked.
- The emergence of a new ministry

model requires a passionate tenacity, perseverance, and a dogged determination.

- There is great joy and revitalized energy in creating a new ministry model, and that being spiritual midwives, as Bill Easum calls it, is gratifying and satisfying.
- God is alive, well and doing wonderful serendipitous things among God’s people. We have all been amazed — almost dumbfounded — at the way so many things have *coincidentally* fallen into place.
- Our new ministry model has been timely for our congregation and, perhaps in a broader sense, for the changing milieu in which we find ourselves.
- Indeed, we are learning that such dramatic changes are critical for the survival of the church in the new millennium.



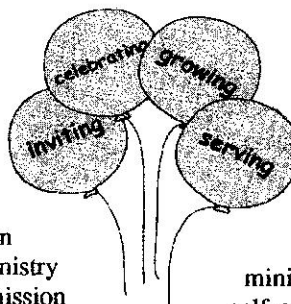
Stephen Lien is senior pastor of St. John American Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa. For additional information regarding the congregation’s organizational restructuring, contact the staff at <www.stjohncf.org>.

Revisiting our reorganization to Shape a spiritual gifts ministry

The years since doing away with boards and committees in 1997 have been exciting, rewarding and challenging for St. John American, Cedar Falls, Iowa.

We look back on the decision to mobilize and empower ministry based on the verbs of our mission statement (inviting, celebrating, growing and serving) and see:

- For almost four years we have had no board structure. The congregation council has met six-to-eight times a year, and the executive committee has met monthly.
- By teaching a class on *Discerning our Spiritual Gifts* several times a year,



we’ve sought to empower members to begin and continue ministries in keeping with our mission, vision and values by using their own spiritual gifts. We often quote the Nike slogan: *Just do it!*

- Ministry staff work with ministry teams that are primarily self-organizing, self-governing and self-dissolving. People can serve as long as they feel called and motivated without regard to terms of office.
- Our ministry is flourishing and the congregation is growing.

— Stephen Lien, senior pastor