

Elder Update: Governance Review

Willow Creek Elder Board

MAY 02, 2019

Willow family,

In the New Testament, Elders are charged with the responsibility of overseeing, caring for, and protecting the congregation. The apostle Peter wrote:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)



In the summer of 2018, the previous Elder Board appointed a Governance Review Core Team. The charter for the Core Team included an evaluation of Willow's governance model in the wake of last year's events and recommendations to help restore trust in Elder Board oversight. As the current Elder Board, we appreciate the forethought of our predecessors and their cooperation with the independent governance consultant. We would also like to acknowledge the work of the Core Team, which was led by an independent governance consultant and consisted of congregants, staff, and previous Elders. Their work has resulted in actionable steps for improved governance at Willow Creek Community Church.

As Elders, we are committed to serving the church in the spirit of 1 Peter. We value the work of the Governance Review Core Team in examining past events. We are listing out the recommendations verbatim, followed by actions taken to date. Our work also requires looking forward and discerning how to implement governance improvements for the next season of ministry at Willow Creek. We ask for your continued prayers as we seek God's direction.

The 14 Governance Review Recommendations

1. Retain Policy-Based Governance: Policy-based governance did not cause or allow the problems the congregation faced in 2018. Moving away from this form of governance would be a mistake. The board needs to clearly understand the distinction between ends and means, or governance and operations. The board needs to continue to stay out of operations and focus on governing. With an organization with this level of complexity, the board needs to stay in their lane.

2. Increase Accountability: Consider changing the governance structure so that the Senior Pastor reports to the Elder Board, is not an elder, does not vote, but instead serves under the authority of the Elder Board. Increase accountability and develop a

practice for asking soul-keeping questions. All Willow ministry staff need a personal accountability group of some kind. These can be with people inside or outside of the congregation. Unfortunately, no board can effectively hold a pastor or ministry staff person accountable unless they are willing to invite trusted people into their private life. But creating a culture of accountability can go a long way toward preventing future scandals.

3. Clarify Communication Protocols: Revisit the Board Chair role and former restrictive communication patterns. Clarify which staff the elders can contact directly, if any, for additional information. Set this in board policy. Reclarify what kind of contact staff can have with board members. Consider launching an annual retreat or quarterly informational meeting with board and executive team meeting together.

4. Redefine Consensus Decision-Making: Train for proper understanding and use of consensus, voting, alignment, and the “one voice” principle. Under policy-based governance, if the board cannot achieve consensus, then they should take a vote. It is not ideal, but it usually serves the organization better than waiting too long to act. After the meeting, the board members should speak with one voice, only saying what action was decided by the board, and should not report the outcome of the vote or who was opposed and why.

5. Conduct Regular Executive Sessions: Executive sessions, where the board excuses the Senior Pastor for a part of the meeting, is a best practice in governance. The Elder Board should consider conducting routine executive sessions at beginning and end of each meeting. These can be formalized in the typical agenda for a board meeting.

6. Enhance Elder Board Policy Governance Manual: The current board policy manual is generally in good shape. The board needs to review bylaws and all policies annually. The board started well in 2008 but the board policy manual did not get much attention during the 2014 through 2018 time period. Many of the recommendations listed here will need to be formalized as new or revised policies in the board policy manual. Several formatting improvements would make the board policy manual easier to reference for elders.

7. Upgrade the Crisis Management Plan: In a time of crisis, a governing board sometimes needs to go beyond existing policies and act, especially if the crisis involves the Senior Pastor. If a Senior Pastor is suddenly incapacitated, the board should act immediately to appoint an interim Senior Pastor. Strengthen the existing crisis management plan with examples of various moral crises and how to respond, including how to handle allegations against the Senior Pastor or a Lead Pastor, and when to put a leadership staff person on an immediate leave of absence.

8. Form Theological Subcommittees: As new theological issues emerge; the incoming board should continue the practice of appointing ad hoc subcommittees of the Elder Board or special task forces as needed to develop theological statements for Willow on specific issues. Tapping outside experts can provide valuable assistance to the board in working through challenging issues.

9. Establish New Board Member Pipeline: Consider creating a new elder development program that invites those who may wish to be candidates to the Elder Board to attend governance training and increase the opportunities for them to be informally vetted to produce fewer negative surprises. Perhaps these candidates could observe the opening segment of several board meetings as a part

of this experience. This will increase the pool of capable candidates ready to serve.

10. Adjust Elder Selection Process: Improve the elder selection process with an emphasis on balance between chemistry and courage. In the past, the current Elder Board made the final selection of new elders. For theological reasons, some will want to keep that practice in place. For the purpose of rebuilding and maintaining trust of the congregation, consider changing the elder selection process so the official elder selection committee makes the final decision instead of the Elder Board. Ensure that the selection committee is populated by a majority of non-elders.

11. Improve Elder Onboarding: Improve onboarding and mentoring for new board members. All new board members need to be fully briefed on key information and events from the past that may not be public knowledge. All new board members need to receive training or read materials about policy-based governance. This will allow new board members to step in and start contributing productively from their first meeting.

12. Review Relationship with the WCA: Given all that happened in 2018, Willow Creek Community Church and the WCA, now called the Global Leadership Network, should undertake a special review of the relationship between the two organizations. These legally separate organizations have a written cooperation agreement that may now need to be updated. For example, going forward, no staff should be employed by both organizations to increase accountability on both sides. Special attention should be given to the use of the name and the brand of Willow Creek.

13. Send Out Elder Teams: The church may benefit by encouraging more interaction between the elders and staff. Consider developing a policy where more than one elder will be sent to represent the Elder Board at any campus or with any group of staff.

14. Build Bridges with Staff: Except for the practice of inviting staff from specific ministries for dinner each month, the leadership staff and elders have been kept in separate compartments. This lack of familiarity can allow mistrust to fester in a time of crisis. Schedule events and venues where board and staff can get to know each other as fellow believers in Jesus and co-laborers at Willow Creek.

To date, the following improvements have been implemented:

- The senior pastor reports to the Elder Board, is not an Elder, and does not vote. (#2)
- Consensus decision-making has been redefined. (#4)
- Executive sessions are now standard for board meetings. (#5)
- Elders have begun quarterly visits with each Willow Creek location. (#13)
- Elder and staff communication has increased, including more Elder representation at events and meetings. (#14)

We are working through all 14 recommendations. We are also prayerfully considering the governance and structural changes required for the future of Willow Creek. We will continue to provide updates on our current activities, including the senior pastor search and completion of the annual financial audit.

View the full Governance Review report [here](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/dfd0f4e0c107728235d2ff080/files/6d3bafc4-0b43-)
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In His service,

The Willow Creek Elder Board

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