

Explainer 2: Transforming Boards to Standing Ministries

There are currently seven boards: Christian Education, Deacons, Fellowship, Membership, Mission and Service, Music and Fine Arts, and Stewardship. As explained elsewhere regarding Council, we are proposing blending Stewardship with Council. We are also proposing transforming the six remaining boards into Standing Ministries directed by staff.

These new Standing Ministries would go from nine to six members and the number of meetings they need would be up to each one. Their chairs would no longer serve on Council.

We do not believe this will result in a “staff run church.” To the contrary, we believe that a more focused and engaged Council will result in the church being more directed by the membership.

Council will set the agenda by stating goals each year and overseeing the implementation of staff-created strategies. These strategies will flow through staff into the various Standing Ministries that will still discuss and advise on the best way to implement the strategies in their particular area.

We believe this structure reflects the way we are already operating. However, the change would also clarify our governing structure and reporting relationships, something that was called for a few years ago in the report by our Plymouth Continuity and Operations Planning (or PCOP) Committee. The current structure of semi-independent boards has led to confusion as to who has responsibility in various situations.

While we have made many changes through the years, there remains a structural legacy running through the changing language. This is reflected in the nature of independent boards and a large umbrella council.

The current boards are not creatures of Council the way committees (e.g., Personnel) are. These boards are empowered to make independent decisions:

Each board shall have authority to make decisions to carry out its responsibilities, provided those decisions are not in conflict with the powers and responsibilities of the Council and the Congregation. Such decisions may be modified by the Council or by the Congregation at Annual or Called Meetings. (Article VIII, Section 3.B.)

Yet our practice has largely evolved to where boards make recommendations to Council rather than just allowing Council to “modify” their decisions if it chooses.

For most of its existence, Plymouth had three boards, Deacons, Trustees, and some form of Christian Education. Committees under these boards were formed as issues required more focus, but one of the boards remained in charge of the various issues. It was not until 1976 that Mission was created as a board, followed by Membership, Music and Fine Arts, and Fellowship. Plymouth was familiar with boards, so it created these as boards with responsibility for their area.

In the extended history, we attempt to explain how Plymouth has evolved to where it is less operated by members and more by staff but with members determining priorities, overseeing the work, and still doing much of the work. Our proposal is to change boards from semi-independent entities run by

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members to Ministries headed or directed by staff but advised and assisted by members. This is the relationship that now seems to exist for all boards except for Stewardship.

We are proposing two types of Ministries. The first would be Standing Ministries created by Policy that most closely reflect current practice. These would be smaller groups than current boards, and the number of meetings would be set by each. Their purpose would be to work closely with staff to provide advice, feedback, help with planning, work on goals, and whatever else the staff person needs to move forward with that Standing Ministry's purpose. We believe this is close to how current boards operate but providing more flexibility on meetings and operations.

The second type would be Ministry Teams. Ministry Teams would be "doing" groups rather than "meeting" groups. Whether knitting prayer shawls, helping with church repairs, working with the language program, helping with Family Promise, helping organize on justice issues of importance, working in a winter shelter, helping with childcare, making casseroles, reaching out to the elderly, and on and on, these would be either staff- or member-organized efforts of a few or of many members designed to find ways to live our mission.

Many of the Standing Ministries would create Ministry Teams for ongoing efforts or a one-time event. These would be fluid and easy to adapt to new circumstances and energies. One of the exciting possibilities of these Teams is helping members find their strengths and passions without having to worry about attending multiple meetings of administrative planning and discussion. Some (we hope at least) will still want to be involved at the Standing Ministry level, but we need to recognize that in today's world, people need to be met where they are instead of a one-size opportunity for living their faith.