

BOARD WORKS

Cultivating a Sense of God's Presence in Our Work

By: Rick Stiffney, President/CEO, MHS Alliance

“Our work is in vain unless God is working in it” (adapted from Psalm 127).

How might this text speak to the life of organizations whose missions are rooted in the larger mission of the Christian church? What significance does the idea of “God with us in our work” have for our sense of corporate vocation? What difference does a sense of God’s presence have for our decision-making as boards of faith-based organizations?

PSALM 127 (NRSV)

¹Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

²It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

What implications come to mind as you consider this text in relation to the organization you serve?

MHS Alliance organizations all exist today because people of faith – Mennonites with vision, passion, and commitment – responded to a need at some point in the past. The founders believed that “the work” they were creating was one way to extend God’s work in the world. The organizations and services they created were viewed as an expression of the community of faith.

The founders also believed they were responding to God’s call to act with compassion to address a need. This response embodied “corporate vocation” at its most profound level. Is the story of your organization’s founding still alive? Is the story still being told in ways that new staff and board members, as well as other key stakeholders, see the services provided today in the context of the vision and mission that gave birth to the organization? Is this sense of corporate vocation alive and strong? Or has it diminished over time?

Cultivating corporate vocation

How do you cultivate a sense of the presence of God in your board meetings? Most boards of church-affiliated organizations begin their meetings with devotions or a prayer. Many conclude their meetings with prayer. These acts of worship frame the meeting with an awareness of the reality of God.

Some boards have experimented with opening meditations and prayers that are linked to particularly challenging or complex matters on the agenda. Other boards have developed a practice in which an individual or even the entire group is invited to reflect at the end of the meeting on ways they had sensed the presence of God during the board meeting itself. Still other boards are learning to pause during their deliberations to take time for quiet reflection and prayer as they contemplate making major decisions. Boards can also take time to celebrate and offer prayers of thanksgiving for the ways in which they have sensed God at work.

How can your board become a spiritual community of discernment? One helpful approach that some boards have adopted has been to focus on developing a stronger sense of community and group bonding throughout the meeting, creating time on the agenda for personal sharing. During these moments, board members have the opportunity to express genuine concern for each other. By paying attention to both the fondest hopes and felt concerns of board members, they themselves can nurture a sense of God’s presence as the board carries out its responsibilities for governance.

DATES TO REMEMBER:

- **August 2-4 - MHS Alliance Board Meeting, Wichita, KS.**
- **October 21—Peace Church Dinner at AAHSA, Orlando, FL**
- **November 8—10—MHS Alliance Board Meeting, Chicago, IL**
- **March 27—30, 2008—Mennonite Health Assembly, St. Louis, MO.**

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Finally, how do you reflect your personal sense of passion about the organization you serve? How does it affect the way you share your organization's story with family and friends? Or with strangers whom you engage in conversation on its behalf? Does your communication reflect God's greatest intentions to show love to everyone and help them find deep joy and fulfillment in their lives? Does your communication convey an awareness of God's grace and empowerment as you share the good news that flows from your organization's service to others?

For organizations to continue to have a meaningful faith-based mission and culture, boards have a responsibility to reflect and sharpen their practices in cultivating an awareness of the presence of God in all that they do. If this vision is not kept fresh, the organization may over time become simply a very good not-for-profit provider that has lost its distinctiveness, if not its heart.

Questions for Thought and Action

1. How does your organization's mission statement today relate to its original statement? How are they similar? How are they different? Have any key ideas been lost? What new insights have been gained?
2. What are the value-added practices, services, outcomes, attitudes, and/or policies that distinguish your faith-based organization from other very good not-for-profit providers that also serve your community? What evidence do you have that these value-added components have penetrated the thinking of your employees, clients, donors, and the community that you serve?
3. Do an informal content analysis of some of the recent promotional materials published by your organization, e.g., web site, newsletter, brochures, etc. How consistent is the language used in these materials with your understanding of the organization's mission? Does the language used reflect a sense of God's presence in the organization's work? What suggestions for changes, if any, would you make?

Our Vision

To be a community of Anabaptist health and human service ministries committed to God's work of healing and hope in Christ Jesus.

Our Mission

To develop the capacity of health and human service organizations to provide care and service to those in need in a way that expresses the unique vision, values and beliefs of MHS Alliance.

Mennonite Health Services Alliance

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For further information or to suggest topics for future issues of Board Works, please contact MHS Alliance at Emily@mhsalliance.org.