

# **Transforming Reactionary Church Boards**

*Inspired by the New TSA Airport Security Procedures*

*A Travel Free Learning Article*

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By

George Bullard

Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 803.622.0923, E-mail: [GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

Web Site: [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

## **The Situation**

As the new Transportation Security Administration screening procedures went into effect during November 2010, I was on six airplanes in six days. That took me through several airports in four different states. I not only had the opportunity to observe the new procedures at work, but also to think about how they reflect on life—including congregational life.

When congregations are getting over a conflict, a less than excellent relationship with a senior or solo pastor who has now moved on, or an empowering vision that has diminished, policies and procedures to create more control are often put into place. Typically these changes are focused on correcting what was perceived as wrong or missing in the past. They place requirements on the next pastor based on what they did not like about the last pastor. They move towards deeper accountability with less freedom and permission-giving.

In other words, move forward into the future by protecting yourself from what went wrong in the past and just might happen again. Always be looking for where you were rather than where you are going. As many next senior and solo pastors who come into these situations will testify, they spend years trying to overcome what happened before they arrived, and for which they are held accountable going forward. It is also these same controlling practices that keep congregations without an empowering vision of their future from being embraced by the new thing God is seeking to do in and through them.

Such circumstances are unfair to the current or next pastor, and a major disservice to the congregation. It not only keeps them from going forward, but it blinds them to both opportunities to soar and a different set of challenges that might arise unexpectedly. The chatter about the new restrictive policies put in place by the church board creates a reaction that absorbs an overwhelming amount of energy, and can lower the morale of the congregation. It can create a reaction against the new policies and procedures that ends up punishing innocent people by doing violence to them and making them the victim.

## **The Solution**

The new TSA screening procedures have created entirely too much talk as to how to prevent another underwear bomber such as we experienced Christmas of 2009. Unnecessary rhetoric and action has focused around random searches of men, women, and children—such as an eight year old boy. A lack of personalization has arisen from demeaning searches of women with breast prostheses and men with urine bags. While certainly these examples are highly infrequent exceptions to an otherwise smooth running process, it still speaks to a lack of respect for the person in the name of having a system that prevents harm. Are the two—security for the nation and respect for the individual—incompatible?

Unfortunately the same disrespect often happens in congregations when boards try to fix what they perceive to be a problem. The action taken is frequently reactionary and punitive to innocent people. It is also deflating to morale and destructive to true spiritual vision.

What is the solution to this situation in congregations? As I begin to provide the solution, let me say it is easier to state the solution than it is to deliver the solution. However, that should not stop us from talking

about and working on the solution. Here are ten actions or conditions that exist in congregations who no longer have reactionary church boards.

- 1. Signs of Health and Strength:** The congregation has a pattern of discovering signs of health and strength in people, and in the life and ministry of the congregation. Too many congregations are looking for signs of illness and weakness. They want to know what is wrong so they can fix it. Congregations who require their board to be empowering look for signs of health and strength in their congregations. They affirm what is right and build on it. Their board spends more time supporting places of health and strength than punishing places of illness and weakness.
- 2. Rewarding the Good and Loving:** Congregations should reward what is good and loving in people, in their relationship with God, their relationship with one another, and their missional relationships beyond the congregation. Rather than looking for what is bad and unloving in people, they focus on the God presence in people and magnify this. This spirit is exemplified in their pastor and staff, in the board, and in program leadership.
- 3. Pathways to Yes:** When new proposals arise in congregations, too many times the board as a group and some individual leaders seek to focus on what is wrong with a new idea or why we ought to say “No”. In congregations seeking to transform any reactionary tendencies is a bias towards saying “Yes”, seeking to discover in the spirit of Gamaliel in Acts 5 if the idea or movement is of God, and believing experimentation with new ideas may actually move the congregation forward.
- 4. Principle vs. Position:** Reactionary boards tend to focus on position. This refers to the way they and their friends prefer the congregation to operate. A superior approach is to focus around the spiritual and congregational principles that produce an excellent and focused spiritual community that is on mission. When boards are transformed they diminish what they prefer in favor of what is helpful in moving the congregation forward.
- 5. Continual Improvement:** Congregations who lack a reactionary board have a bias toward continually improving their programs, ministries, and activities. They are never satisfied with things the way they are. They have eliminated from their vocabulary the seven last words of the church—“we have never done it that way”. Their commitment to continual improvement actually moves the congregation forward in ways that achieve a transformational pace.
- 6. Strategy over Style:** Too often reactionary boards support the style of ministry with which the congregation has become comfortable. They support the desire to retain the style even if it does not match the strategy needed to attract the next generation of congregational participants or help the congregation be more missionally focused. Proactive boards look at empowering strategies and seek to modulate the style of programs, ministries, and activities in the congregation to support those strategies.
- 7. Relationships over Programs:** The 21<sup>st</sup> century is about relationships more than it is about programs. The last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was about creating successful programs. The focus of congregations is now more about creating significant relationships with God, one another, and the context in which we serve. Non-reactionary boards do not defend programs, but advocate strongly for new and deeper relationships.
- 8. Permission-giving over Control:** Proactive boards seek to be permission-giving to new, creative opportunities that arise in the congregation. They seek to have strategies and finances that support new things God leads individuals and teams in their congregation to pursue. They realize that new things need to continually be created, and old things may need to be eliminated when they become ineffective and cannot be revitalized with reasonable effort.
- 9. Spiritual Discernment Focus:** Proactive boards have a significant spiritual discernment focus to their work. They are always seeking the direction and focus that best comes from God. They see

spiritual guidance as the supreme guidance. They experience the congregation more as a spiritual organism than a business organization. They leave secular business at the door and practice spiritual discernment supported by wise practices of significant Christian communities.

- 10. Empowering Vision:** Vision is mentioned last in this list not because it is least, but because it is probably the most important condition that can exist and the most commonly assumed. Boards who are captivated by God's vision for the congregation tend to be positive, passionate, and proactive. Boards who are not captivated by God's vision for the congregation—especially when one may not be apparent to anyone—tend to be negative, indifferent, and reactionary. Vision continues to be the most important thing by which a congregation can be captivated, and at the same time the most elusive thing in the life and ministry of many congregations.

## The Conclusion

To what extent are these actions or conditions true of your congregation? To what extent is your board reactionary or proactive? On a scale of one to ten with one being reactionary and ten being proactive, where is the governing group in your congregation regarding each of these actions or conditions?

What would you add to this list? What would you delete? What would you modify? What and how would you clarify any of these actions or conditions?

## Important Things to Know

George Bullard is a Ministry Colleague and the Strategic Coordinator with The Columbia Partnership. He is also General Secretary [executive director] of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. He is the author of two books: *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* and *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*. With The Columbia Partnership he is part of the Transforming Congregations, Transforming Denominations, and Sharing Knowledge teams.

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