

*Building Effective Boards for Religious Organizations*, edited by Thomas P. Holland and David C. Hester

reviewed by [Donna Schaper](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

If you are a member of one of the thousands of congregations or religious nonprofits that are in the middle of "strategic planning" or "visioning" or "long-term planning," this book is for you. If you have been waiting for a hands-on sequel to Robert Greenleaf's 1977 *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, wait no longer. The ten essays presented by Thomas Holland and David Hester include four on faithful governance and six on improving organizational performance--a welcome combination that contradicts the myth that it's impossible to have both faith and performance. The essays are written by experts--by people who rely on boards to direct their work.

Malcolm Warford develops a scriptural model for organizing the board's work, a model focused on stewardship and servanthood. Holland gives a much needed primer on the basic duties and responsibilities of the board. Nonprofits that stay focused on their purpose will do better than those that do not. Obvious though this may seem, it is not obvious to most meeting attenders.

William Sachs gives an historical perspective on the purposes of religious organizations, and Hester concludes the first section with an emphasis on the organization's mission statement, which he defines as its ongoing "practical theology." Warford's insistence that "thoughtful questions" guide an organization to genuine mission is recapitulated here.

The book's second part begins with Holland's proposal for developing a more effective board. His years with the Lilly Endowment, researching and consulting with boards, are shown to good advantage. Holland provides a plumb line for allowing boards to see themselves at various stages of development. The distribution of power and authority on a board--a vital issue too often ignored in the religious world--is the subject of another essay.

Thomas Savage presents a series of case studies of nonhierarchical restructuring--examples of how structure can reflect the purpose and identity of a particular

organization. From each case, Savage draws a lesson for governance; he concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at helping boards reflect on ways they might move beyond hierarchies and toward greater flexibility.

The book pays attention to the relationship between institutions and their social and religious contexts. The "boundary work" of the board is not negative baggage at all, but part of an organization's wider partnership with denominational sponsors, fellow tenants, ecumenical organizations and the like. This book makes clear just how much boards and committees have in common in their work.

In the competition between organizations for members or students or patients, merger or closure is a crucial issue. We fight each other for our "market" share or niche. Shifting population trends and aging members have left many small congregations economically vulnerable and depleted of institutional energy. Merging two small churches seems an obvious answer--but doing so with integrity is not easy. This book gives valuable guidance on how to do so.

The obvious question about strategic planning is, Who is responsible for doing it? The board? The president? The pastor? Or does that role belong elsewhere, to the full congregation or, perhaps, to a consultant? Richard Chait argues that shared authority is key and that the responsibility for the future rarely belongs to only a part of an organization.

Finally, the book presents a diagnostic tool for assessing the health of the organization. When that is done, the board becomes free to devote itself and its precious, volunteer time to other important issues. Religious institutions, Holland and Hester declare, are at a turning point. This millennium-friendly notion gives organizations the permission and encouragement to turn and not be embarrassed at how much turning they seem to need to do.