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All that Jazz: The Significance of Shared Governance in Theological Education
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Whether you're a jazz aficionado or not, chances are that when you hear a jazz combo play, you know if it's good. The musicians play in unison, each one proficient at their instrument. They perform tunes with technical precision and joy. They've got energy. It's obvious that members of the group listen to each other, trust each other, and support each other as they take turns in the spotlight, contributing what they do best before stepping back and letting one of their colleagues do the same.

Good jazz combos make what they do look easy. Anyone who's struggled through beginner-level music lessons knows that it is not.

Robin Steinke, president of Luther Seminary—and a trumpet player—said that a jazz combo is an apt metaphor for shared governance. "Sometimes the best thing I can do is to stand back and say, 'I'm going to let the saxophones take it, and I'm just going to enjoy the riff.' Knowing when to step back and let others take the lead, that's the give-and-take of shared governance. It requires a high degree of trust. You've got to know the scales, the modes that are operative."

The term "shared governance" gets thrown around a lot in theological education—sometimes in a way that suggests it's either not really shared or that it's an unnecessary hassle that impedes a school from fulfilling its mission. But savvy practitioners disagree. They have seen how shared governance done well makes for a stronger and more dynamic institution. And while it takes

time and effort to establish helpful processes, get all the players to commit, and to hone the necessary skills, and the outcome is worth it.

What is shared governance, really?

In general, shared governance at a theological school works this way: the board, the president, and the faculty share overlapping spheres of authority. The board has primary legislative authority; it authorizes primary institutional responsibility to the president and delegates primary educational authority to the faculty. The president shares in the legislative authority, even though that's the board's primary responsibility, and the president has oversight of educational matters, even though that's the faculty's primary responsibility. Finally, the faculty can provide input to the board and the president on legislative and institutional matters. This complex system of checks and balances exists to protect and support the mission of an institution. The basic framework differs from school to school, depending on denominational affiliation, structure (whether a school is freestanding or embedded in a larger institution), and other factors.

"At the most basic level, I might say shared governance means, 'Who does what, and why, and how would we know?'" said Heather Campain Hartung, director of accreditation for ATS on a recent episode of In Trust's *Good Governance* podcast.

So what's the problem?

Hartung's basic-sounding questions can be challenging to answer. It requires applying

knowledge about institutional foundational documents, job responsibilities, personalities,

policies, and procedures to fluid (and sometimes fraught) situations.

 Deeper forces can also challenge shared governance. "Shared governance gets stressed in

times of dynamic change and upheaval, and theological education has been in the midst of that

now for at least a decade," said Steinke. The upheaval leads people to want a quick fix for

difficult situations, but quick fixes aren't an option in shared governance. "The faculty cannot fix

the enrollment by just tweaking a curriculum," she said. "The board can't fix the financial

unsustainability of the business model by just going out and finding more donors." A board or

an administration that wants to rush the process is likely giving shared governance short shrift.

"When leaders start to say things like, 'Let's just tell the faculty what they're going to do,'"

Steinke said, "that's where the eruptions occur. Because vocations are at stake."

"Basic community wisdom"

Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology is an example of a particularly intricate

governance structure. As part of a Benedictine archabbey, it has a board of trustees and a board

of overseers. The president rector of the seminary and the school reports to the abbot of the

larger Benedictine community who is not directly connected to the school. Sr. Jeana Visel, OSB,

is dean of the School of Theology programs. Part of her job is making sure that everyone's roles

and responsibilities are clear. "These are fundamentally community issues," Visel said. "If we're

all serving a common mission, we need to know how we can best serve given the gifts we have.

In a community, everyone's voice matters at some level. We also all have our blind spots. It's important that we're able to draw on the best strengths of each person in their particular role. It's basic community wisdom—you don't want to commit to some action and then realize it was stupid or a waste of your time and energy."

The not-so-secret components for crowd-pleasing shared governance

Shared governance, then, requires time, respect, and care. It also requires a handful of other components to succeed: educational opportunities, strong relationships, clear communication, and regular practice. When those pieces are in place, the benefits of shared governance start to kick in. "This really matters because we do better when we can listen attentively to the shared wisdom of our community," Steinke said.

Educational Opportunities.

Like new music students, those new to shared governance—or those who could use a refresher—should familiarize themselves with the standards. In jazz, the standards are songs with staying power—maybe "Equinox" or "Blue Monk." In theological education, the standards are ATS accreditation standards. Hartung, who served as vice president and dean of Moravian and Lancaster Theological Seminaries before landing at ATS, recommends a board or board-and-faculty exercise: Read the ATS standards 9.6-9.8, which have to do with shared governance, and reflect on them together. It's an opportunity to better understand institutional mission, documents, and committee structures. "It's hard as an institution to remember all those things," Hartung said. Reviewing the documents can prompt curiosity. It can also potentially raise

tensions—and that's not necessarily bad. "If it raises tensions someplace, that's probably [because] something might not be working."

Jane Fahey is chair of the board of trustees at Columbia Theological Seminary, where she is also an alumna. "I think the biggest obstacle is when people aren't clear about the processes that are in place," Fahey said. "So we're trying to make sure that all the constituencies in the community understand our role and we understand theirs."

This year, for the first time, the board is hosting a faculty orientation to shared governance. While it's primarily for new faculty members, it's open to all. "Some of these faculty may have been in institutions that have a different model than Columbia's, or they may be new to the academy altogether, and this is the first time they've operated in an intuition that has a system of shared governance."

The board is also seeking out educational opportunities of its own. In an assessment that they conducted with the In Trust Center's Wise Stewards initiative, the trustees realized they didn't always fully understand the processes of the academic affairs committee. They invited the dean and the faculty representative to explain to the board in greater detail about these processes.

Finally, Fahey is an advocate of independent study as a way to improve shared governance. "I've been board chair for five years, and I go back and read the bylaws all the time," she said. A lawyer by training, Fahey has one principal piece of advice for all who participate in shared governance: "*Read the documents.*"

Strong Relationships.

Fahey has served two presidents at Columbia, and she said their weekly board chair-president conferences are essential to shared governance. "There's got to be trust, transparency, ease of relationship. There should be no surprises." She tells her president, "'You need to feel free to say to me, "stay in your lane."' I need to be able to say that to the president as well, because we need to remind each other when something is not our primary responsibility."

Visel said that no matter how strong or deep a relationship is—or isn't—it's vital to remember the big picture of shared governance: You're in this together. "You can't just want the other person to leave," she said. "You have to work it out. You may not always like each other, but you need to love each other. That means figuring out how to respect each other. And that means you have to get to know each other, get to know each other's gifts and talents and skills and what to expect this person will bring to the conversation." If shared governance happens remotely? Visel lobbies hard for in-person time for real relationship building. When that's limited, she said, "Make sure that when you are together, you're using that time really meaningfully."

Clear Communication.

Shared governance works best when there's clear communication from the start about who's doing what, when, and what's the nature of the consultation. "I don't care if it's the strategic planning process or the budget process or a curricular refresh process," Steinke said. "Being clear from the outset about who's got what role when—that takes careful planning, thought, and communication."

That clarity can require extra effort. For example, Luther held a monthly lunch meeting for faculty and staff to get updates about or provide input on seminary business. Sometimes the meetings included an educational session on a relevant topic. It seemed like a great venue to engage with the faculty and staff, but people were becoming increasingly frustrated with these meetings. "We couldn't figure it out," Steinke said. Eventually she and her leadership team understood that they were not being clear about which thing was happening at a given meeting. Now they are. Before each meeting, they announce if they will be reporting, educating, inviting feedback, or a combination of those things.

When shared-governance-related communication has been challenging at Saint Meinrad, Visel said, "Generally it comes back to, did the people who needed to be consulted get consulted? Did everyone get heard in the appropriate order? Did we get the right information at the right time?" The school created a new position, faculty moderator, to participate in both the faculty meeting and the cabinet meetings, and to report back to each group from the other. It's separate from the dean, and, Visel said, "It helps keep people on the same page."

One way to communicate with constituencies is in print. The Pacific School of Religion, for example, has a document on its website explaining how shared governance is lived out at the school and how members of the community can get involved. It strikes a collaborative and invitational tone. "We encourage everyone to get engaged in shaping PSR's present and future," it reads. "Implementing shared governance requires a commitment to building trust and a willingness to engage in constructive conflict resolution as needed."

The development of such a document is also an opportunity for communication. In working with the In Trust Center's Wise Stewards Initiative, Luther Seminary developed a four-and-a-half-page document about shared governance at their institution. The committee included two faculty members and the academic dean—but neither the president or board chair. Steinke knew that in order for the document to have credibility with the faculty, she and the board chair needed to let others handle the document's development. "When the first draft was distributed for review, the faculty responded with a flurry of comments and changes. In the second draft, the board did the same. It went through nine drafts. "Let me tell you, the ninth version is far superior to the one-through-eight versions," Steinke said. The final document was unanimously received by the faculty and then unanimously adopted by the board.

Regular Practice.

Just as with music, the only way to get good at shared governance is to practice it. Visel said the team at Saint Meinrad is deliberate about regular check-ins about the mission. "We have to operate out of a concern for the common good, and that comes back to having that shared sense of mission and vision. The first thing we do every year is review the mission and say, 'Is this still true? Is there anything we need to adjust? If you have that common ground really well established, you can do lots of things."

At a recent retreat, the Columbia board of trustees developed a checklist of questions to ask themselves about each matter that comes to the board for a decision. The list, to be included with every board packet, starts by asking who is responsible for what action. "We want to understand the lines of jurisdiction and who has primary authority," Fahey said. Other questions

ask who will be impacted by the decision, if they've been consulted, and if so, in what way? The checklist helps the board understand the decision-making process that has already happened before an issue makes it to them.

Another important part of practicing shared governance is for all participants to consistently check their attitude. How are you thinking about or engaging with shared governance? "[It] can sound really daunting," said Hartung. "People assume it will never work, but I think entering that room with a posture of curiosity about what's going on, holding the institution's mission central, can diffuse some of that anxiety and lead people to be curious about why others are in the room."

A bigger horizon

Just as when a jazz combo is at the top of its game, a seminary that engages in deliberate and proactive shared governance is a marvel to behold. But there's something more to shared governance (and jazz, but that's another story for another time) than musicality, timing and trust. There's a deep spirituality. Steinke considers shared governance as an opportunity to invite others into our respective dilemmas. Boards and administrators need to hear the dilemmas the faculty are facing, such as students who are struggling with mental health issues and other stressors. Faculty need to hear the dilemmas facing board members, including that they are volunteers who care deeply about the mission and are trying to do their best. These dilemmas have the power to humanize all parties, and that can be an antidote to some of the challenges that come with shared governance.

"In the absence of shared governance is the assumption that only one entity will know what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and in what way it should be done. And that's anathema to the gospel, right?" Steinke said. "There's a bigger horizon that God has placed before us. There's a reason Jesus calls the disciples into a community."