A focus on routine tasks or unwinding crises tends to take over the agenda of congregational boards or governing bodies. Over time, board members may become disenchanted with their roles or buried out by long meetings that lack direction and vigor. Over time, a notable opportunity has been missed for developing strong leadership to guide the congregation in laying out a renewed sense of mission and purpose. Moreover, these leaders can feel “spent” — rather than renewed for future leadership positions.

Charles Olsen, in his book Transforming Church Boards (Alban Institute, 1995), considers the possibilities of developing the board as a “community of spiritual leaders.” He writes:

Strategically speaking, the board, or council, is a crucial arena for congregational renewal and revitalization efforts. If the board can move beyond “business as usual” into the experience of active and energized faith, it will model and lead in ways that impact the whole church. If the board becomes a community of spiritual leaders, the church is bound to feel its effect (p. 76).

A shift to seeing the governing board as a crucial arena for congregational renewal and revitalization requires not only a new perspective but also a commitment to practices that embody this approach in the agenda and in the board’s deliberative processes. Can we imagine ways that boards can do their work while strengthening their own religious lives and capacities for reflection, analysis, and vision?

Yes, I know it is possible. In leading retreats with dozens of congregational boards, I find it helpful to understand the event as an opportunity to launch new practices that the board will continue afterward. During the sessions I stop periodically and ask the board to list implications for our ongoing practice. At the end of the retreat, we review the list, and members commit to the practices that they believe will make the greatest difference for their work. A review three to six months later allows the board to assess what has been learned by engaging in new practices — and how it can sustain the commitment to transforming its work.

### Suggested Practices

Any new practice in our lives (for example, our exercise program, regular meditation, or daily prayer) is hard to sustain. As soon as a board feels overwhelmed by too many items on the agenda or by a crisis, it usually reverts to “business as usual,” with predictable results. To sustain a new practice, one must continue, no matter what, until it is mastered. A board might consider adopting some of these:

1. Begin the meeting with a time of prayer, meditation, or reflection on scripture to remind the board that its work is sacred. Sometimes I have observed a board beginning with prayer or reflection but then getting into its agenda to get to the “real work.” When done well, this worshipful beginning is not merely another agenda item to check off but a way to set the tone and context for the board’s work.

2. Provide time for a board member to share briefly some highlights of her own faith journey and what this congregation means to her. Even if this sharing takes five minutes of meeting time, it is time well spent. It helps members to appreciate and understand one another beyond their roles on the board. It reinforces the connection between a member’s personal life mission and the mission of the congregation.

3. Recognize that some significant decisions require time for theological reflection and interpretation in the context of the congregation’s mission. Often we move from identifying a problem to determining a solution with no steps between. Occasionally, we need to ask: How does our faith tradition inform this decision? How do we interpret this decision light of our mission statement? A congregational board’s decision making should strengthen the leadership’s ability not only to analyze the data, but also to reflect on that information through the resources of faith and the stated mission of the congregation.

4. Take a meta-view of some decisions. Alice Mann, in her book Can Our Church Live? (Alban, 1999), poses three formative questions whose answers shape a congregation’s development and revitalization. “Who are we?” “What are we here for?” “Who is our neighbor?” It is helpful to pause before taking action and ask, “How does this specific decision articulate our response to these three questions?”

5. Advocate for your ideas — but also be willing to be influenced. Often board members feel that they must represent a particular constituency, or advocate for a point of view — no matter what! It takes spiritual discipline to be open to the influence of another’s ideas, experiences, or data. The balance between advocacy and a willingness to be influenced provides a atmosphere of dialogue that can enrich decision making as well as transforms decision makers.

6. Pause for reflection or prayer before or after a decision. Sometimes we rush from one task or agenda item to another. Pausing occasionally before or after a decision allows participants to put the action into a meaningful spiritual context and to share further reflections. Asking for spiritual guidance can become part of the spiritual discipline of a board as well as of its individual members.