



Dan Hotchkiss

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# External Review

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British Columbia Conference  
United Church of Canada

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## I. Summary

Based on interviews and documents provided by the British Columbia Conference, I reviewed the work of the Conference Executive and Executive Secretary over the last several years. I was assisted in this by a small Steering Team appointed by the Conference, and by the Conference staff, all of whom were most accommodating and helpful.

The Conference operates under John Carver's Policy Governance model. The Executive has adopted policies and monitors the work of the Executive Secretary. As a body, the Executive is rather passive in relation to the Executive Secretary and does not set the overall direction of the Conference as actively as it could. I recommend several steps intended to help the Executive to get traction on the strategic and generative aspects of its work:

- 1. That the Executive and Executive Secretary collaborate each year to identify a short list of open questions, and that the Executive host a year-long holy conversation about them.**
- 2. That the Executive and Executive Secretary collaborate to create each year a Conference Vision of Ministry (VOM) consisting of a short list of one- to three-year goals.**
- 3. That the Executive refocus its monitoring activity away from technical compliance toward missional (Ends) and strategic (VOM) success.**
- 4. That the Executive meet more often, expect more of its members, and use committees more often, to prepare for deeper conversation.**
- 5. That the Conference consider shifting to a smaller Executive, composed mostly of at-large members serving three-year terms. The President would also serve a three-year term, or perhaps spend a year as President-elect, and one as Past President.**

I am grateful for this opportunity to enter the life of the B.C. Conference, and appreciate the candor, frankness, and passion of all who participated and assisted.

## II. Background of this Review

On March 1, 2016, Keith Simmonds, president of the B.C. Conference, contacted me about conducting an external review of the Conference Executive and Executive Secretary. After some discussion with Keith, Cari Copeman-Haynes, Doug Goodwin, and Ian Fraser, we agreed to define our objectives this way:

As part of its ongoing monitoring responsibilities (and consistent with past practice) the Conference Executive wishes to have an independent review of the performance, over the last three years, of the Executive Secretary specifically in terms of compliance with the Executive's Ends and Executive Secretary Limitations policies.

The Conference Executive is also interested in hearing from an independent reviewer anything the reviewer thinks important for the Executive to know about matters of governance and ministry, especially in these times of rapid change to the organization and operation of the Church. This can include the performance and capacity of the Conference Executive itself.

The Conference Executive also wants an opportunity to learn about the approach to church leadership described in *Governance and Ministry*, by Dan Hotchkiss, and to equip leaders, if appropriate, to implement improved practices.

After approving the consulting contract, the Conference appointed a small Steering Team to work with me. They selected Conference and congregational leaders to be interviewed. I invited sixteen individuals and interviewed twelve (see list in the Appendix). The Steering Team discussed whether to gather information more widely through a written survey or further interviews, and decided not to do so.

The purpose of the interviews was not to poll the Conference for a scientific measure of the weight of different points of view. It was to alert me to the issues Conference leaders care about, and to help me learn how leaders talk about those issues. The evaluations in this report are mine alone, based on insights from the interviews, as well as minutes, policies, and other Conference documents.

### III. Policy Governance

The purpose of any sound governance structure is to help an organization to achieve its mission by selecting goals and strategies, empowering people to act, and holding them accountable. The B.C. Conference seeks to achieve these ends using the Policy Governance model, designed by John Carver.

#### Means and Ends

Carver's model begins with a sharp distinction between Ends and Means. Ends define the good an organization exists to accomplish. Means include the programs, resource allocations and other actions the organization takes to accomplish its Ends.<sup>1</sup> All the complexity of Carver's system has one result in view: to ensure that the internal workings of the organization are taken care of, so the board itself can focus on the outward-looking purposes for which it exists in the first place.

To free itself to focus on the Ends, a Policy Governance board delegates operational authority to the head of staff—in our case, the Executive Secretary. Carver's policy-writing procedure requires that the board first delegate *all* authority to the Executive Secretary, and then subtract bits of it, one at a time. Policies on Ends are *prescriptive*, that is, positive: they say what the Conference means to accomplish. Policies on Means are *proscriptive*, that

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, I capitalize all special Carver jargon words, including Means, Ends, Linkage, Ownership, and Monitoring, as a reminder that these words have special meanings.

is, negative: they say what methods, actions, and practices the board will not allow the Executive to use.

Having done this, the board can safely ignore all but a small part of the operational life of the organization. As Carver puts it, “so long as board members know they are not being cheated, it is usually best to let the taxi driver choose the route and the lanes in which to drive.” The most effective board is the one that can ensure that it is not being cheated—by monitoring the staff’s compliance with its policies—so efficiently that it can spend most of its time reflecting on the Ends.

Under Policy Governance, the Executive’s main work is what, in a church context, we might call discernment: discovering and stating the purposes the Conference exists to achieve. Communicating with the wider constituency of the Conference (Carver calls this the board’s Linkage with its Ownership) is an essential part of this discernment work.<sup>2</sup>

#### Marks of success

The work of the Executive is measured by how well the Ends policies control and animate the work of the Executive Secretary and the paid staff and volunteers who work with him. The whole apparatus of Means policies and staff monitoring works best when it takes a minimum of meeting time, to free the Executive for its primary task. A key element of the Executive’s work on the Ends policies is the richness of its conversation with the wider Ownership of the conference.

The work of the Executive Secretary is measured by the performance of the organization itself. Specifically, the Executive Secretary must adhere to the Limitations policies. This means ensuring that Conference resources are cared for, people are kept safe, and so on. Most crucially, the Executive Secretary must show progress toward the Ends chosen by the Executive. In a complex organization like the B.C. Conference, the Executive Secretary’s success comes primarily through the work of others, including paid staff, volunteers, donors, the wider church, and outside partners.

## IV. Case study: Leadershift

I asked the Steering Team to suggest a recent initiative for me to use as a case study of the B.C. Conference governance process, and they suggested Leadershift, “an initiative ... to help leaders survive and thrive in a shifting church.”

Leadershift includes programs of the Conference that provide training, continuing education, coaching, and other resources to ordained ministers and other leaders at the local level. Leadershift is largely Doug Goodwin’s brainchild; it took on existing Conference leadership development programs and extended them. Strategically, it seems to have been a way of separating the supportive, educational work from the regulatory aspects of Conference oversight of local leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of Policy Governance is based on John Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations*. 3rd ed. Jossey-Bass, 2006, chapter 4. A full set of Carver policies can be found in John Carver, and Miriam Mayhew Carver. *Reinventing Your Board: A Step-by-Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance*. Revised. John Wiley & Sons, 2006.

The Executive received the Leadershift idea from Doug, discussed it, and approved funds in the normal budget cycle. The initiative implements the Ends policies that call for “Effective Leadership” and “Healthy Congregations and Ministries.” If the Executive’s choice of Ends policies shaped the Leadershift initiative in any specific way, no one seems to recall it. So far as I was able to determine, LeaderShift has been evaluated on its three years of existence, either by the Executive or within the staff.

Leadershift may be accomplishing its goal of helping leaders to “survive and thrive,” I don’t know. It clearly is a staff-driven program that has only a rather loose relation to the work of the Executive in articulating Ends to be achieved by the Conference.

## V. Review of the Conference Executive

The job of the Conference Executive, according to its policies, is “to represent the ownership in determining, monitoring, and ensuring organizational performance.” Ownership is a Carver term. It is not explicitly defined in the Executive Policies, but by implication the Conference Ownership includes God as revealed in Christ, the Conference General Meeting, and the United Church congregations and ministries within the boundaries of the Conference.

To do its job, the Executive should

- “Actively be the link” between the organization and its ownership
- Adopt written policies
- Assure the Ownership that the Executive Secretary is achieving the Ends and complying with the policies

In the interviews, I asked each person what he or she expected from the Conference Executive, and what the Executive had actually produced in the last couple of years. I then reviewed the minutes of the Executive with the same questions in mind. Based on this information, I feel reasonably certain that the Conference Executive is doing its best to fulfill its duties as it understands them. Some good things that the Executive is doing include:

- **The Executive conducts its work with courtesy and good humor.** In my interviews, I heard very little about sniping, personal attacks, or harsh language.
- **The Executive gives some time to shared learning.** Some of this is related to changes in the internal and external environment for ministry in the Conference. Quite a bit of this is devoted to necessary teaching and re-teaching of Policy Governance concepts, as new members do not arrive pre-taught in this rather specialized mode of governance.
- **The Executive regularly engages in shared spiritual practice and theological reflection.** I do not see, a simple line between this work and official actions of the Executive, nor would I expect to. On the other hand, I believe that a more disciplined approach to Ends (as described in the Recommendations

below) would help Executive members to see how spiritual practice supports their governance role.

- **The Executive generally succeeds at avoiding management decision making.** Most boards occasionally kick themselves sometimes for “micromanaging,” and I’m sure the Conference Executive is no exception. But so far as I can see, they generally avoid telling Doug how to use authority they have already delegated to him.

Based on my review, I also have some concerns about the Conference Executive:

- **Persistent doubts about Policy Governance may undermine trust in the Conference.** Several leaders expressed basic concerns to me about Policy Governance or reported that such concerns are often expressed by others. Complaints such as “We’ve given all the power to the Executive Secretary,” and “The Carver model is not appropriate for a church organization” seem to circulate quite freely. To prosper, the Conference needs to trust its model for decision-making.
- **The Executive depends too much on the Executive Secretary to initiate agenda items.** The Conference has responded to a changing landscape with programs such as Leadership and ProVision. The Executive has adjusted the Ends policies accordingly. But a disproportionate share of the initiative has come from the Executive Secretary. As one person put it, “A lot of the ideas come from Doug himself. He brings ideas forward; the Executive chews on them a bit.”

It is appropriate and consistent with Policy Governance for the Executive Secretary to participate fully in the work of the Executive. However, Policy Governance calls for a board that manages its own work and sets its own agenda. Achieving that would be a good next goal for the Executive.

- **The work of “Linkage” with the Ownership is not clearly connected with actions to be taken by the Executive.** This observation is based mostly an omission: When I asked why the Executive took particular actions, I rarely heard anything related to the Linkage function.
- **The Executive spends too much time passively monitoring and too little time actively discerning.** When something is seriously wrong, any board will grab the reins and make things right. Normally, however, the Executive’s primary focus should be on the future, not the past, and on governance, not management. Monitoring is important, but it is focused on the past; the Executive should focus mainly on the future.

The Executive, as a body, seems collegial and sincere, but somewhat passive and reactive. Consequently, it does not provide Executive Secretary with as strong a partner as might be helpful to the Conference.

## VI. Review of the Executive Secretary

As you might expect with any long-tenured employee, Doug Goodwin and his fellow leaders seem to agree about his profile of strengths and weaknesses. By acclamation, Doug gets well-deserved credit for several major changes in the work of the Conference under his leadership, including:

- Organizing the **ProVision funds**, which give grants to ministries in Presbyteries where church buildings have been sold.
- Launching the **LeaderShift** initiative, which incorporates and extends the leadership development activities of the Conference.
- Professionalizing the **Property Resource** work, which helps congregations and Presbyteries with complex projects aimed at getting a return on invested funds and providing space for worshipping communities.
- Consolidating and reducing the Conference's **camping facilities**, and establishing them on a new organizational footing.

Not surprisingly, I heard different opinions about whether these steps were the right ones, and whether they were done in the right way. But they all were taken with approval from the Executive, and Doug was a major force in instituting each of them and in putting leaders in place to carry them forward.

The two concerns I heard expressed most often about Doug were that his supervision of the staff is too distant and hands-off, and that his role with the Conference Executive is too dominant. I cannot verify or refute these criticisms directly. What is of more interest anyway is the way Doug and the Executive address such issues as they arise.

### Addressing performance concerns

Like any nonprofit head of staff, Doug plays a dual role—he participates in the Executive and is also its employee. The situation is further complicated, at least on paper, by the fact that Doug's official supervisor is the General Secretary in Toronto. I do not believe that these peculiarities materially impede the proper functioning of Policy Governance in the Conference, so long as everyone agrees that the Conference Executive has the right to set direction for his work and to expect accountability. Supervision from Toronto seems to be quite light-handed and collegial. Nora Sanders, the general secretary of the General Conference, is Doug's supervisor nominally, but for most practical purposes Doug is responsible to the Conference Executive.

The Executive has supervised Doug mainly through conversations about policy compliance. This has the virtue that the conversation starts with known criteria for judgment, rather than random opinions or reactions. But the Executive Secretary's job performance is about more than policy compliance. It includes building a cohesive staff, building consensus among various constituencies, representing the Conference to others, and building a strong partnership with the Executive.

When a head of staff has both strengths and weakness (i.e., always!), it is important to choose a staff team with a balance of strengths. Staff hiring decisions belong to the Executive Secretary, but it is important for him to be in conversation with the Executive about staffing strategy, for two main reasons: to advise the Executive Secretary about staff strengths and weaknesses, and to prepare the Executive for its eventual role in succession planning for the Executive Secretary position. When that time comes, it will be important that the job not be tailored too closely to the incumbent's measure.

#### Partnership with the Executive

Before becoming Executive Secretary, Doug Goodwin advocated for the adoption of Policy Governance by the B.C. Conference, and he is still a major source of wisdom and information about the model. This combination of roles has made Doug a valuable resource, but also makes it especially difficult for him to turn over the responsibility for governance to the Executive and President.

## VII. Recommendations

Many of the strengths and weaknesses listed above for the Executive and the Executive Secretary are intertwined. Power is not a zero-sum game; it is not helpful to frame governance as a competition for scarce resources. A strong partnership enhances everyone's capacity to serve the mission of the Conference. In thinking about how to create a more balanced partnership among the leaders of the B.C. Conference, I think the Executive has the next move.

In an enormously helpful book, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (BoardSource, 2005), Richard Chait and his colleagues suggest that boards spend their time in three ways: fiduciary, strategic, and generative:

**Fiduciary** governance is making sure that all is in order. In Carver's terms, monitoring to ensure compliance with Limitations policies would be one way to act as a fiduciary.

**Strategic** governance looks to the future and asks "What do we mean to accomplish in the next few years, and what are the major choices we must make to get there?" Strategy is *macromanagement*: making the biggest choices about how you will live out your purpose.

**Generative** governance ponders questions about how the world has changed, and how the organization needs to change in response. Ends policies are one way of capturing the products of a generative conversation

I'm sure members of the Conference Executive will recall times spent in each of these three modes, but my review leads me to believe that the Executive spends time at both ends of the spectrum. It has generative conversation, but does not know how to capture what it generates. And it engages in fiduciary Monitoring that feels rather dry and technical.



I think it would be helpful for the Conference Executive to try, with Doug's support, to spend less time in fiduciary mode and more time in strategic. There are many ways to do this. Here are my recommendations:

**1. That the Executive and Executive Secretary collaborate each year to identify a short list of open questions, and that the Executive spend much of its time hosting a year-long holy conversation about them.**

Open questions name issues the Conference needs to address. Some examples of possible open questions occur to me:

- How will the Conference manage the tension between supporting traditional churches and promoting experiment and innovation?
- How will the United Church sustain a community of engaged leaders as more functions and resources are centralized at the Conference level?
- What difference does the Conference mean to make through its social justice ministries?

Open questions help to focus the Executive's attention on matters of future importance, and draw others into conversation as well. The holy conversation itself is an inclusive one, engaging staff, leaders, and members in shaping the future. Data gathering, historical and text study, meditative reflection, and field trips can all be part of the process.

The Executive will need to take care to respect the boundaries it has learned, so that it does not slip into giving staff direction or making management decisions.

**2. That the Executive and Executive Secretary collaborate to create each year a Conference Vision of Ministry (VOM) consisting of a short list of one- to three-year goals.**

In Carver's language, the Vision of Ministry is an Ends policy that dips a little deeper into the inner mixing bowls. It specifies results the Conference intends to achieve, not methods for achieving them. In other words, the VOM sets priorities for the coming period. Each year's VOM grows out of open question conversations in prior years. The Executive can point to the open-questions process as a truer form of democracy than is likely to occur at a traditional parliamentary Conference meeting.

**3. That the Executive work to refocus its monitoring activity away from technical compliance toward missional (Ends) and strategic (VOM) success.**

The Executive's attention is a scarce resource. Time spent micro-monitoring administrative matters cannot be spent ensuring that the Conference achieves its larger purposes. The Annual Vision of Ministry process will provide criteria for evaluation that are more concrete than the current Ends policies but more mission-focused than policy compliance Monitoring alone.

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<sup>3</sup> This term is borrowed from this excellent planning resource: Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

**4. That the Executive meet more often, expect more of its members, and use committees more often, to prepare for deeper conversation.**

To become more effective, it will not be enough for the Executive to work harder. If the Conference wants the Executive be a strong partner to its full-time Executive Secretary, it must equip it and invest in it.

**5. That the Conference consider shifting to a smaller Executive composed mostly of at-large members serving three-year terms. The President would also serve a three-year term, or perhaps spend a year as President-elect, and one as Past President.**

The ideal size for a vision-focused board is seven members, all of whom are chosen for their gifts and calling to the task of governance, rather than for purely geographic reasons or because they have earned the right to govern by serving as volunteers in other ways.

Recommendations 4 and 5 are related, because a larger board needs *more* time together to accomplish tasks of any depth. Expecting 16 people who spend only a few hours per year together to engage in strategic or generative work is simply unrealistic, especially if they rotate on and off and carry other major responsibilities elsewhere in the organization.

Building on success is always easier than focusing on problems and shortcomings. I'm sure that at times, the Conference Executive has had robust discussion and produced appropriate, strategic-level. Recent conversations about climate change and the idea of divestment may be an example, and a good test of how responsive the staff can be to values-driven leadership from its Executive.

## Appendix: Information sources

Interview subjects (\* indicates Steering Team member)

Cheryl Black,* Victoria Presbytery	Doug Goodwin, Conference executive secretary
Jacob Black-Lock*	
David Boyd,* Kootenay Presbytery	Keith Howard, Leadership
Sally Bullas, chair, Comox-Nanaimo Presbytery	Carol Martin,* Victoria Presbytery
Cari Copeman-Haynes,* Conference president-elect, Fraser Presbytery	Nora Sanders, general secretary, United Church of Canada
Treena Duncan,* Conference personnel minister	Keith Simmonds,* Conference president
Ian Fraser,* Kamloops Okanagan Presbytery	Shannon Tennant, secretary, Westminster Presbytery

Documents

- Minutes of the Conference Executive, 2014-2015
- Minutes of the Conference General Meeting, 2014-2015
- BC Conference Executive Governance Policies, as of March 2016
- Executive Secretary's Monitoring reports, 2014-2015

Organizational Audit – Ends and Limitations Policies, November 2010  
Carver Governance Model Review, August 2013