

Anatomy of an Administrative Disaster

By Mr. Smith (a pseudonym)

“Anatomy of a Disaster” is an ex post facto study of the deterioration of a relationship between the head of Midwest Faith-Based School and its governing board, and the eventual resignation of the school head. Various factors contributed to this unfortunate series of events, including a lack of strategic plan in place, rapid turnover among the membership of the governing board, financial constraints, and an untenable governance model that contributed more to disunity than unity among the operating owner congregations.

While the previously mentioned factors provided some degree of impetus for the disintegration of the relationship, the primary focus of “Anatomy” is the school head. There ended up being an obvious mismatch between the administrator and the expectations of the governing board and certain influential constituents. What information could the administrator have gathered prior to coming to Midwest that could have helped avoid the mismatch? What mistakes were made by the administrator during his tenure that contributed to the problem? An appendix of potentially useful questions for prospective school heads is included at the end of the paper.

“Disaster” is a strong word, perhaps too strong to describe the disintegration of a relationship between the school board and administrator of a medium-sized faith-based school. Like other misfortunes that befall the human race, failed relationships are the result of two sets of decisions; decisions made before the fact, and decisions made during the process of the ongoing relationship. Hurricane Katrina, and its horrific impact, serves as a larger example: for decisions made before the fact, it is logical to ask “why would people choose to establish a large city below sea level in an area known to be susceptible to tropical storms, some of great destructive power?” So one could ask, were the decisions made before the relationship between the board and administrator began logical and well-thought-out? Did it make sense for the particular administrator to accept the position in this particular location?

Once the bed has been made, so to speak – the city established, the position accepted – a series of decisions, actions, and communications take place, for the good or for the bad. The damage and human misery resulting from a series of decisions and responses too little and too late in coming, left New Orleans residents in a no-win situation. In the same manner, given an established relationship between board and administrator, there were decisions and responses that were made either too late or to insufficient levels by the administrator. The following treatise attempts to offer guidance at both levels of decision for potential administrators, to help them avoid similar experiences and outcomes, if possible.

Midwest Faith-Based School is a K-12 school on one campus with just over 500 students. Midwest is owned and operated by a small number of Christian congregations. Board representation is determined by the number of students each church sends to the school; the largest church has three representatives, the next has two, and each of the four smaller churches has one. The initial interview was conducted by a “call committee” comprised

of board members, pastors, and other constituents of the six congregations. The chairperson of the call committee was the school's largest historical donor, who did not serve in an official capacity either on the school board or at the church to which he belonged.

Mr. Smith began his relationship with the board of Midwest Faith-Based School in 2003, when he was interviewed for the position of superintendent. During the interview, Smith attempted to clarify for those gathered what he considered to be his strengths and weaknesses, strengths being spiritual and academic leadership, weaknesses being the money side of things, particularly in the area of development. The committee made a recommendation to the School Board, which voted to extend a call to Mr. Smith to serve as superintendent of Midwest Faith-Based School. In this system, the "call" is considered to be divine, that is, God's Holy Spirit works through the calling body (in this case, the board) to determine the person whom God intends to occupy the position. The call to Midwest was tenured, which indicates that unless the called worker is found guilty of teaching false doctrine or of moral turpitude, that he or she cannot be officially removed from office. There are, of course, many ways to communicate to a person that he or she is no longer wanted, and Midwest's school board eventually communicated that reality to Mr. Smith in a very clear manner, a message that he received and upon which he acted. That there were many people in the Midwest community, as well as the vast majority of the Midwest staff, who felt otherwise, ends up being of little import.

The question at hand is, "How could this outcome have been avoided both for Mr. Smith's sake and, more importantly, for the sake of the children, families, and staff members of Midwest Faith-Based School?" What questions could Mr. Smith have asked prior to his commitment to serve Midwest, what information could he have discovered beforehand, to avoid an inherently untenable situation? Second, what things could Mr. Smith have done differently to effect a more positive outcome? Also, some external events and atmospheric factors that impacted the outcome of Mr. Smith's tenure at Midwest will be identified.

The role that the board played, or chose to play, is largely ignored in terms of prescriptive recommendations, since the goal of this treatise is to aid potential heads of school in their ministries. Thus, the focus of the paper will be on attempting to avoid a mismatch between organizational/board expectations and administrator expectations, strengths and abilities, as well as attempting to alert administrators to potential hazards and methods to pre-identify those hazards. Included will be a theological framework for an administrator to consider as he or she copes with the aftermath of an unpleasant series of ministry-related events. Finally, a list of specific questions/points of inquiry will be appended, to provide a more concrete help for the administrator seeking to avoid similar circumstances.

At first glance, it would seem simple to ascertain the priorities and expectations of a governance board. Priorities and expectations are typically set forward clearly in mission statement and articulated strategic plans and expectations are set forward in previously-developed job descriptions and evaluation forms. Absent such strategic plans and other documentation, an unpleasant sense of uncertainty can pervade the relationship between board and administrator. This was the case at Midwest – the Board had done no strategic planning, nor was there an evaluation instrument in place at the time of Mr. Smith's

hiring. In the absence of clearly articulated expectations and priorities, it was difficult for Mr. Smith to accurately ascertain the Board's priorities, and tailor his performance to achieve the board's goals. In fairness to the Board, it would have been wise for Mr. Smith to have not only encouraged them along the way, but to have insisted that they provide him with both strategic plan and established evaluation instrument. Finally, it is the responsibility of the professional to provide appropriate leadership to a volunteer board, and Mr. Smith did not provide this leadership in a timely-enough fashion.

The governance structure at Midwest Faith-Based School contains self-limiting factors. Board members are chosen by their individual congregations according to a variety of criteria (or none at all beyond someone who is willing to serve), and come to board meetings primarily to represent the interests of their individual congregations and constituents, rather than the general interests of the school ministry and the children and families it serves. Thus, there is a consistent competitive atmosphere, including a lingering sense of resentment from the smaller congregations who feel that the larger congregations hold sway in a manner which marginalizes the concerns of the smaller. The turnover rate of Midwest Faith-Based School's board is also a limiting factor. By the beginning of Mr. Smith's fourth year at Midwest, there were no members of the school board who were present for Mr. Smith's selection as superintendent. The high rate of board turnover, coupled with a lack of written expectations and strategic plan, made it difficult for new board members to understand the rationale for Mr. Smith's being hired in the first place. Mr. Smith failed to make his own case in this area, by not leading the first board to make some written explanation of the strengths for which he was hired, and by not providing the necessary leadership for the board in the area of strategic planning and evaluation.

To illustrate the capacity that board turnover has to make the success of an administrator difficult, the board chair who hired Mr. Smith chaired only one more meeting before having served his term limit. The hiring board chair was an educator by background, a college professor who approached the governance of the school from an educational perspective. The incoming board chair at Midwest was a corporate executive for a multinational firm, with a focus much more from that world. The focus at Midwest shifted from a primary focus on religion/education to a focus on finance/public relations. While this is not evil or wrong in its own right, it did put Mr. Smith in an awkward position, and he was too slow, both in recognizing the implications of the change in leadership and in adapting to the new focus.

It is entirely possible that Mr. Smith should have declined the call to serve Midwest Faith-Based in the first place. Not only was there an impending shift in key board positions, but the skill set required of the superintendent of an association school differs from that required of the principal of a single-parish school, which is the position Mr. Smith occupied prior to coming to Midwest. In this area, Mr. Smith failed to identify his primary strengths and compare them with the requirements of the new position. What makes for a high degree of success as the principal of a school may not be adequate for the shifting expectations of a superintendent, whose function was, according to Mr. Smith's last board chair "to keep things running smoothly", a vague expectation at best.

Despite Mr. Smith's stating to the interview committee, "If you want someone to be the spiritual leader of your school, and if you want someone to increase the academic quality

of your school, then I might be the person. If you're looking for a money guy, that's not me", he was issued the call. While the call committee and the board could certainly have taken this as evidence that they needed to call a different candidate, the responsibility also lies with Mr. Smith, who failed to ascertain the mismatch between his gifts and the expectations of the governance and influential constituents at Midwest. There can be a large difference between the stated expectations and priorities of a group of people and their real expectations and priorities. Mr. Smith could have spent a greater amount of time with the person who occupied the position prior to his tenure, seeking a greater understanding of both the tangible and intangible aspects of the superintendent's position. Some pointed questions about the challenges faced by the former administrator, as well as an honest comparison of skill-sets and strengths, could have helped Mr. Smith avoid coming into a situation where, due to the lack of unity and trust on the governing board and among the owner congregations, the focus on people-pleasing and financial matters were paramount to the board.

Every administrator has both areas of strength and areas of weakness. This is inevitable, though there are people who don't seem to understand it. One thing Mr. Smith did not do that he should have done is to continue to remind the shifting board of his strengths, by functioning primarily in those areas (see Marcus Buckingham & Donald Clifton's *Now, Discover Your Strengths* – copyright 2001 by the Gallup Organization) and being clear about his focus, and by insisting that the Board would need to staff his areas of weakness with other people. Had this identification of a need for additional staff to fulfill Mr. Smith's areas of non-strength (finance, development) been held out to the committee at the beginning, they might have chosen a more suitable candidate. On the other hand, if Mr. Smith's gifts of spiritual academic leadership would have been held in higher regard, the governance could have acted to fill the void in a timely fashion. While it is true that the board could have seen this reality, Mr. Smith could and should have seen it sooner.

Mr. Smith's lack of financial expertise was particularly telling as the situation unfolded at Midwest Faith-Based School. It seemed there was never enough money, not an uncommon difficulty at a Christian school, and for that reason Mr. Smith was guilty of assuming that there was not enough money to do certain things, such as staffing a full-time development director position. This position, though Mr. Smith reported its necessity to the board on more than one occasion, was not staffed, and Mr. Smith did not force the issue.

The financial operation of Midwest had historically been heavily dependent on funding from its owner congregations, 65-70% of K-8 operations, though the congregations did not fund the education of the high school students at all. During Mr. Smith's tenure as superintendent, the congregations' individual financial positions continued an earlier decline, and a greater focus was brought to bear on finance, keeping congregations' costs down, and finding money outside the congregations via third-source funding. It would be safe to say that Mr. Smith failed to see the writing on the wall in this area. An earlier examination of board concerns, to what degree they were financial in nature, and an informed examination of whether the funding model of Midwest Faith-Based was sustainable in the long term could have helped Mr. Smith to avoid being placed in a situation this far outside his expertise. A positive intervention - Mr. Smith did convince the Board to provide him some professional growth in the area of finance, but this happened too far along in the process to affect the outcome. The Van Lunen Fellows

program, funded by the Van Lunen Foundation and administered through Calvin College, is exactly the type of educational experience that potentially could have helped Mr. Smith, but it came along late in his tenure at Midwest.

The short-term focus on finances was not instituted by Mr. Smith; it was already in place. His failure was in not leading the change to a more long-term focus. As an example, Midwest Faith-Based a school with an annual budget of roughly \$2.7 million, did not have a practice of having annual official financial audits. A member of one of the churches, an accountant, did what amounted to a largely volunteer audit, billing the school roughly 8-10% of what a full-blown audit would have cost. While this practice saved Midwest money in the short term, the long-range ramifications were very costly.

Perhaps the single precipitating event in Mr. Smith's departure was the discovery of financial irregularities. Due to Mr. Smith's lack of expertise, or competence, in the area of finance, and due to his lack of insistence that his weakness in this area be made up in a different way, the financial reporting at Midwest, never the clearest, deteriorated to the point of being inexplicable. In short, the business manager, hired by Mr. Smith, was embezzling funds and was unable to cook the books severely enough to hide the theft. Mr. Smith had performed due diligence in the hiring process, but was guilty of trusting someone who ought not to have been trusted, and was guilty of not asking (and answering accurately) the tough questions that should have been forthcoming. The lack of formal audit procedures allowed the theft to continue over a span of over two years, as Midwest waited for its "volunteer" auditor to produce reports. Mr. Smith should have insisted from the beginning that formal audit procedures be established and followed, but he fell victim to the lure of saving money in the short term.

The embezzlement issue was a precipitating issue, but it was not the cause of Mr. Smith's needing to leave Midwest Faith-Based School. The relationship with and among the board, always characterized by mistrust and a lack of unity and collegiality, had steadily deteriorated over the span of four years. Mr. Smith's weaknesses, which he left un-staffed and un-ameliorated by functioning board committees, coupled with the understandable focus on matters financial, took the focus off the spiritual and academic mission of the school. With strong focus on areas of weakness and little to no focus on his areas of strength, Mr. Smith's obvious choice was to seek and accept another position.

The implications of Mr. Smith's experiences at Midwest are, perhaps, important. While the overall relationship of Mr. Smith with the board was a disaster, even antagonistic board members acknowledge that positive things happened at Midwest because of Mr. Smith's service. To view the situation from a theological perspective, God has promised to work for good all things for those who love Him (Rom. 8), including the children and families of Midwest Faith-Based, as well as Mr. Smith and the school board. While the circumstances were difficult, and the relationship usually painful, it is true that Mr. Smith learned a great deal, both about school administration and about himself, during his tenure at Midwest, and it is possible that, through the circumstances of difficulty and the ensuing search for a new superintendent, the board will grow, as well.

Finally, there is a greater reality that Mr. Smith and all Christian school administrators must embrace. In God's economy, we are both expendable and eternal. In other words, we are not necessary to the success of His schools, but each of us is His uniquely created

child, and he cares about us and cares for us. This paradox has interesting implications for administrators of Christian schools. One obvious application is that what happens as we attempt to serve needs to be about the service and about those whom we serve, and not about us. Things will go wrong, and we will make mistakes. Some of them may be large enough and damaging enough that maintaining the relationship is no longer possible. Sometimes, we may outlive our usefulness within a particular ministry context (or influential people will feel that we have outlived our usefulness, though the truth of the situation may not matter), at which point, we have two choices: one, find a ministry setting in which we can be useful and used, or two, stay in a ministry setting in which we begin to hinder the ministry instead of helping it. The choice seems clear.

Appendix

Questions to Ask/Information to Seek Prior to Accepting a Position: (*in no particular order*)

Before deciding whether to interview:

1. Get a detailed position description. (if there isn't one, the expectations will be inevitably vague, and evaluations potentially inconsistent)
2. Know your own gifts. Do they match the description?
3. What is the mission of the school? Does it seem to be "up front"?

During the interview:

1. Map the questions. What is said? What concerns/points of view underlie the questions?
2. Who is present at the interview? Who leads the interview? What is the background of the lead person? (this can give you insight into the priorities of the group, i.e. the type of background can indicate the values of the group – i.e. is it a pastor, a businessperson, a college professor, etc.)
3. Be very honest about your own areas of strength and weakness (this won't always work.)

Once the position has been offered:

1. What are the stated expectations/priorities of the board?
 - a. Are they realistic?
 - b. How are the priorities supported in the budget?
 - c. How are the priorities supported in the overall staffing picture?
 - d. Do these stated expectations accurately reflect the desires and expectations of the owners/constituents? (ask a wide variety of people: "in one sentence, what is the job of the school head?")
2. What are the REAL expectations/priorities? (realize that people may have real expectations and priorities of which they are not even aware; it may not be evidence of dishonesty or subterfuge)
 - a. Are they realistic?
 - b. Get copies of board meeting minutes. Look for priority of attention.
 - c. Ask board members to describe the past two or three meetings (how much time is spent on which things, what are the primary issues facing the board, etc.)
 - d. Ask board members to describe occasions of constituents who have had an issue with school personnel, including the actions the board has taken.
 - e. Ask "who has to be pleased with my performance?"
 - f. How, and how often, is the school head evaluated? By whom? Get the instrument(s) ahead of time. How subjective? How does it correlate with the strategic plan (if there is one)?
 - g. Get a copy of the board's strategic/ministry plan. How was it developed? How up-to-date is it?

3. Does the governance model support a positive outcome?
 - a. Is the governance model consistent with the mission of the school?
 - b. Who owns the school?
 - c. Whom do Board members represent? Is their primary allegiance to the school ministry, or elsewhere?
 - d. Is the Board united, with a coherent, commonly held vision? (a formally adopted strategic plan is a good sign here).
 - e. How is the Board selected? According to what criteria?
 - f. How often does Board membership turn over?
 - g. Do Board members support the school financially on a personal basis? (Are they donors?) To what extent are they loyal to the school? Do they volunteer beyond board meeting times?
 - h. Are there functioning board committees to assist the administration in ensuring the success of the school mission?
 - i. Does the Board operate as policy-based governance, or are they more involved?
 - j. Is the funding model realistic and sufficient to sustain and grow the ministry?
 - k. Who serves on the Board? (particularly important is the chair), and what are their backgrounds? Will the chair (or other key members) be staying or leaving?

4. With regard to third-source funding: Is there any person or small group who accounts for the majority of donations? (If so, be prepared for this person or group to wield a substantial amount of informal influence.)

5. Get in writing the priorities of the Board that offers you the position. Ask them to write down, for future boards (particularly important in places with high turnover) the reasons you were selected over the other candidates.

Once You Have Accepted the Position: (This list is not nearly exhaustive, but reflects specific mistakes made by the author.)

1. FUNCTION PRIMARILY IN YOUR AREAS OF STRENGTH. GET OTHER PEOPLE TO FUNCTION IN AREAS WHERE YOU ARE NOT AS STRONG.
2. CONTINUALLY MONITOR THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE BOARD, BOTH STATED AND UNSTATED.
3. CONTINUALLY MONITOR THE DESIRES OF THE BOARD RE: THE DEGREE OF DETAILED INFORMATION YOU GIVE THEM.
4. KNOW WHICH PEOPLE OR GROUPS OF PEOPLE EXERCISE INFLUENCE OUTSIDE FORMAL CHANNELS. WATCH THEM CAREFULLY.