

Moral Ownership

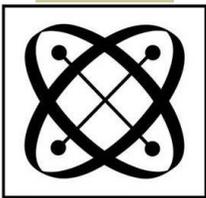
As a spiritual community we exist to make positive impacts on people's lives - some say to have a transforming impact. This raises questions of accountability, authority and responsibility of the organization. To whom is Eliot Chapel as an institution accountable? From whom does Eliot Chapel gain authority? For whom is Eliot Chapel responsible? In church governance the starting point to address these questions is with the ownership. Who "owns" Eliot Chapel?

Dan Hotchkiss in his book Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership argues that the mission is the owner of the church. Policy governance purists argue that the ownership should never include concepts, only people. As Eliot Chapel moves into full implementation of policy governance, we need to think about this core issue of "Moral Ownership." It matters to our future.

Of course we can easily include ourselves, the congregation, among the owners. In fact it is common to take as a first draft of the moral ownership the members, friends and visitors of the Chapel. Eliot's Board of Trustees did just that in crafting the initial board policy manual. Churches with more experience in this often use the term "Beloved Community" and have sophisticated and inspiring notions of moral ownership (see Unity Unitarian in St. Paul Minnesota as an example). An expansive definition gives the church purpose and duty to make positive differences in lives. It takes time for the community to embrace the wider purpose implied by an expansive definition of ownership. So let's take what time we need to build our own expansive definition of ownership.

For Eliot to move beyond this initial concept, we all need to don the hat of Moral Owner and work on the church as much as we use the church as consumers or work for it as volunteers. So let's put on our Moral Owner hat and explore a bit what that means.

As moral owners, we have a duty to care for the Chapel on behalf of all owners and all future owners; we have a duty to care for the entirety of the Chapel, not just the aspects of it that interest us; we have a duty to make the Chapel a constructive instrument in society; and we have a duty to make the Chapel a safe environment for spiritual exploration and growth.



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Wearing the owner hat will be new to many. We are all most accustomed to wearing the consumer hat and the using the privileges that go along with it. And that's fine - we do not have to stop being consumers in order to operate under policy governance. On the other hand, any church under any governance can improve if its members think and act as owners at least some of the time.

Moral Ownership

We have all worn the owner hat a couple of times recently and to get more comfortable, reflect on your role in these. First, we wore the hat when we elected the Ministerial Search Committee and positively endorsed their decision last year to not present a candidate for call. Our act of embracing the best interest of Eliot Chapel for all and for the long run was an act of ownership. Another example was the formulation and endorsement of the Congregational Covenant. This document makes a tremendously positive contribution to all the duties mentioned above. Honoring and upholding that covenant is a continuing act of ownership.

Get comfortable with the ownership hat. Think about it in the context of individual programs and activities. Eliot will need us all to wear it with increasing frequency as we move into new leadership, and we craft the future of Eliot as a positive force for good in the community.

Best wishes.

