

## Welcome to the board room

*Starting new members off right means putting some thought into the orientation process*

By Elesha Coffman

**I**n *First Things First*, Stephen R. Covey relates a story about a seminar presenter who stands at the front of the room with a big, empty jar. The presenter places several fist-sized rocks in the jar and asks the audience, “Is the jar full?”

“Yes,” they reply.

The presenter then shakes a handful of gravel into the jar, sliding the smaller stones between the larger ones. He asks again, “Is the jar full?”

“Probably not,” the audience cautiously answers.

Next, the presenter adds sand to the jar. “Is the jar full?” he queries.

“No!” the audience shouts.

Finally, the presenter pours water into the jar, filling it to the brim. He tells the audience, “OK, now the jar really is full. What’s the lesson here?”

One listener ventures, “You can always fit more into your life if you work hard at it.”

“Wrong,” the presenter counters. “The lesson is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never fit them in at all.”

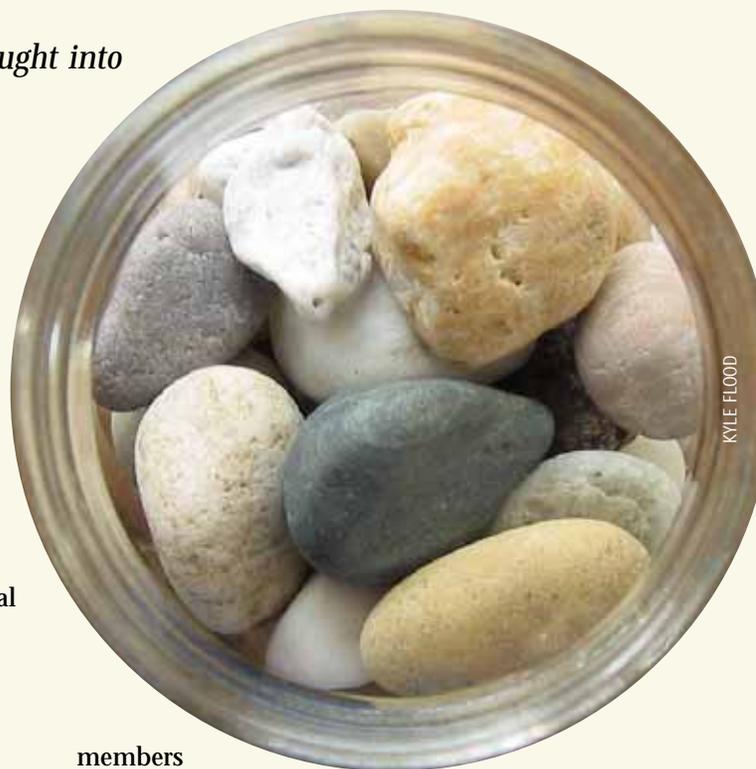
The orientation process for new members of theological school boards can be a little like filling that empty jar. New board members need a lot of information before they can begin to exercise effective leadership. Handing rookies an empty jar and expecting them to grab everything they need on the fly delays the beginning of effective service and could sour their entire board experience. Dumping massive amounts of

information onto new board members all at once can have the same effect. What is needed is an approach that gets the “big rocks” in first while easing new members up to full capacity.

*In Trust* asked three first-year board members to reflect on their orientation experiences and identify the elements that were most crucial in preparing them for service. These “big rocks” represent newcomers’ greatest needs:

**Context.** Joining a board means catching an institution mid-stride and, for some new members, entering the theological school world for the first time. To get their bearings, newcomers need a sense of history and a view of the landscape.

One of the best ways to offer a quick but vital history lesson is to share old minutes. The Rev. Ralph Blumenberg, who recently filled a vacancy on the board at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, started during the second year of his predecessor’s six-year term. He requested a complete set of board agendas and minutes going back to the beginning of the term, “simply for perspective.” George Nakonetschny, a new member of the board of St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in South Canaan, Pennsylvania, is interested in documents from the past five years. “I think that looking at what a board has done for five years would give a new member insight into where they’re going and what to expect,” Nakonetschny says. This “homework” also lets new



KYLE FLOOD

members begin to see if changes need to occur.

To orient newcomers to the theological school landscape, it can be helpful to put them in contact with board members from other institutions. Mingling with peers was Nakonetschny’s favorite part of the *In Trust* “Board Basics” seminar that he attended, and it was a key component of his orientation. “So much is learned from interaction,” he says. Jan Weller, a first-year board member at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, also appreciated the opportunity at the seminar to learn about issues confronting similar boards.

**Clear expectations.** Surveys conducted by *In Trust* and the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education indicate that while most administrators expect board members to spearhead fundraising efforts, few board members think fundraising is one of their primary tasks. This is just one example of a mismatch between