



Deferred presidential maintenance

By G. Douglass Lewis

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE ON AGING BUILDINGS presents enormous challenges for many theological schools. Often unable to bring their buildings to optimum condition, boards and presidents sometimes struggle just to make minimum repairs. Some schools do not have a line in their annual budget for ongoing capital repairs; fewer still have the fiscal discipline to fund depreciation. In most places, deferred maintenance is accumulating.

I want to suggest that there is another type of deferred maintenance present in most theological schools — the well-being and state of functional readiness of the president. The president's job, like the buildings, is a 24/7 reality. The president must always be ready, when needed, to spring into action, respond to a crisis, make phone calls, send e-mails, prepare for the next meeting, identify problems, envision the future, and nurture the constituency. A president ever-prepared to function at a high level is what every member of the board, faculty, and staff expects. These expectations are rarely spelled out in a contract, but they are simply assumed by everyone, both on- and off-campus, including the president.

Boards know that their governing responsibility includes main-

taining the school's physical facilities in good order. In some schools, the maintenance of the physical plant is supported in part by an endowment — an investment portfolio that provides returns each year that can be used at the discretion of the school's governance leaders. A board should be just as diligent in providing an "endowment" to support the president — a set of resources to support, sustain, and enhance the president's readiness to lead effectively.

Bad advice

Having served as a seminary president for 20 years, and having worked with many presidents and boards, I confess that I have often given presidents some bad advice: "You must take responsibility for your own well-being and state of readiness," I have said. "If you don't, no one will. As president,

you must build your own endowment, provide your own program to address 'deferred presidential maintenance.'"

Though functionally effective, the negative aspect of this advice is that it has laid on a president's shoulders one more thing for which to be responsible. It has easily been ignored or rationalized by workaholic presidents and others who have not wanted to face these issues.

I've grown to believe that "deferred presidential maintenance" is the board's responsibility. Everyone agrees that a board must ensure that the school has assets that are sustainable and adequate to accomplish its mission. And the school's most important asset, I believe, is its president. Therefore, the board's chief priority is not just hiring a good president, but also supporting and enhancing that person's capacity to function effectively. The board must ensure that whenever the switch is thrown, the lights will go on — and appropriate, effective presidential action will take place.

Key elements of a presidential readiness endowment

What does it take to care for the well-being of the president and to maintain the president's capacity for effective leadership? The following list of essentials can serve as an evaluation checklist for a board wondering if it is adequately maintaining the readiness of the institution's most valuable asset — its president.

■ A self-reflective board and a committed board chair

A president can rarely succeed without an effective board and board chair. The president can help recruit and develop the board, but the board must develop its own identity and nurture its own commitment to invest in and lead the institution. The board must assess itself regularly, preferably with outside help, to learn if it is functioning at its full capacity. (With its Board Performance Audit, In Trust can help with this assessment.)

■ Quality staff

An occupational hazard for most presidents is the temptation to do too much and to micro-manage. A board can encourage — even require — the president to hire excellent personnel, including administrative support and senior cabinet-level staff. And the board should ensure that adequate resources fund these essential staff positions.

■ Adequate compensation

I know no one who accepted the job of seminary president because of its high salary. Rather, presidents work with a sense of service and calling. But presidents under financial stress are not able to give themselves completely to their jobs. The board holds the responsibility to pay the president fairly — to meet the needs of the president's family and to provide for retirement.

■ Outside consultant help

The board must encourage the president to seek outside expertise in critical areas like fundrais-

ing, planning, and even personal mentoring. A board should urge the president to ask for help — not assume that the president knows all.

■ Continuing education and renewal

Every president needs to develop a rhythm of "away" time, including vacations and times of renewal and reflection. Good boards urge, require, and fund appropriate rhythms of renewal.

■ Engagement with other professionals

Presidents thrive when they engage with fellow leaders at professional gatherings. Fortunately, many opportunities for professional development and cooperation are available to presidents — through In Trust, the Association of Theological Schools, denominational groups, and other organizations like the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents. A good board expects the president to use the opportunities presented by these groups — to attend conferences and educational sessions, to engage with fellow presidents from across North America, and to learn from them.

■ Healthy lifestyle

I recognize that even presidents have a private life, and health is one of those things that people resist talking about with others. Nevertheless, when a president is ill, the effect can be catastrophic for the whole school. Boards should encourage presidents to undergo an annual physical, to develop a program of physical

fitness, and to live healthily. They should support healthy living by funding a gym membership or whatever resources are needed for physical well-being.

■ Annual performance evaluation of the president

An annual performance evaluation designed jointly with the president and conducted by a board committee is essential. Many presidents and boards forget how supportive a well-designed evaluation can be. Effective evaluation promotes growth in both the president and the institution. Here again, In Trust can help.

■ Support of the president's spiritual life

Wesleyans used to ask one another, "How is it with your soul?" While that question seems outdated and prying to the modern mind, it's never outdated for presidents of theological schools — who are, by definition, leaders of religious communities — to have spiritual support and the encouragement to grow in their faith.

How this is done varies widely based on the particular institution's traditions and practices. But in a theological school, spiritual reflection is not simply a private affair, and boards should both encourage and hold their presidents accountable in this area as in other areas. **IT**

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