

Book Review: Ferenczi, Jason. *Serving Communities: Governance and the Potential of Theological Schools.*

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I have been serving for more than a decade as the President of a theological school in the Majority World: Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. Questions of contextual relevance have been at the forefront of our thinking for many years. As our context changes rapidly, we have been able to respond through innovative ways of delivering integrated and holistic theological education. However, many related questions linger in my mind: How much of this innovation is influenced by the structure and maturity of our leadership? Is it realistic to expect that governance can move beyond mere fiduciary administration? Is there a modified governance model that would be more effective in our culture?

Jason Ferenczi does a brilliant job answering these and many more questions. With his vast experience serving theological schools around the globe through the Cornerstone Foundation and Overseas Council, Ferenczi is well-suited for exploring the influence of governance structures on the renewal of theological education in the Majority World. Ferenczi begins by providing a comprehensive survey of the literature on leadership in theological schools, as well as on nonprofit and educational governance. He then discusses his detailed qualitative research among four diverse theological schools in the Majority World and proposes insightful recommendations for effective governance.

Busy seminary leaders find it hard to spend time reviewing extensive bodies of literature on topics such as governance. I highly appreciate the way Ferenczi

distills the main concepts of key books for our benefit and how he builds a bridge from leadership to governance. As Ferenczi reflects on the literature, he concludes that “[i]ncreasingly, literature on nonprofit and educational governance has suggested the importance of governing boards moving beyond the fiduciary role to engage in strategic and generative thought” (89). However, Ferenczi notices that the literature has not paid much attention to the governance of theological schools. This makes his research all the more crucial.

After reviewing the literature, Ferenczi discusses his research on governance and leadership at four institutions in Asia, the Caribbean, Eurasia, and South America. He dedicates more than one third of his book to addressing his first research question: *What characteristics contribute to the effectiveness of theological school governance?* Ferenczi organizes his findings into six categories that also highlight key recommendations for schools in various contexts. They deserve a brief mention:

- 1) **A Community of Trust:** “Trust was the first and perhaps the primary building block of governance effectiveness in the schools studied” (109). Communities of trust share two key characteristics. First, they demonstrate respect for those in various positions of authority: the board, president, management team, faculty, and staff. Second, they share a “fabric of trust that transcended the power or authority of any one position” (102).
- 2) **Alignment:** Alongside trust, there has to be alignment of the parts in any system. Alignment relies on trust. It refers to “the congruity of the administrative actions of the various units of the educational institution” (111). This alignment includes shared values, and a shared commitment to the vision and mission of the school.
- 3) **Strong, Empowering Leadership:** Ferenczi’s research reveals that effective governance requires a certain kind of leadership. Leaders need to be strong and know “where the community need[s] to go,” as well as empowering and able to recognize that they cannot “drive the community there by fiat alone” (137).
- 4) **Shared Commitment to Transformative Education:** Although Ferenczi’s research does not focus on curriculum or educational approaches, “questions about governance effectiveness in each case led to discussions of curriculum and educational programs” (159). Effective schools increasingly understand their role as missional, prophetic, and transformative.

- 5) **Reflective Responsiveness:** Ferenczi defines reflective responsiveness as “an awareness of and curiosity about both the immediate and broader context in which the school operates, as well as the broader context of the Christian church as it relates to non-Christian society” (140). Institutional and governance effectiveness are key to schools’ ability to see, interpret, and relate to the surrounding society.
- 6) **Planning for the Future, Including Succession:** This may not be the most important characteristic, but Ferenczi notes that “awkward and unplanned transitions were the single greatest threat to the presence of the other characteristics mentioned above” (161). Although a strong and empowering president is key to governance effectiveness, it is the responsibility of the board to consider what happens in the absence of such a leader. Complacency in this area is very risky.

Next, Ferenczi asks: *How does the cultural setting of theological schools relate to characteristics that contribute to governance effectiveness?* Ferenczi found little evidence of the need for specific cultural forms of governance. Nevertheless, there is a “need for all governance structures to be responsive to their context” (184). Effective schools must adopt “a more fluid approach to governance” that takes cultural patterns into account.

Finally, Ferenczi asks: *How do governing boards employ insights from internal and external relationships to enhance governance effectiveness?* This question was designed to investigate whether boards were involved in two activities that contribute to governance effectiveness: boundary spanning and generative thought. Ferenczi’s data reveals that these activities were practiced meaningfully by management teams, staff, and faculty, but rarely by school boards. This finding led Ferenczi to construct a governance theory that he calls a concert of governance in order to encourage “the expansion of the understanding of governance” beyond the traditional understanding (188). The board remains as “the critical final authority in the governance process, yet the overall work of governance stretches beyond the boardroom and into the fabric of the institution as a whole, drawing on the insights, talents, and abilities of the [President], the Management, staff, and faculty, as well as the board” (189). Ferenczi discusses some implications of this theory, but defers to those in the position to test the validity and utility of this theory.

A number of years ago, our school partially implemented John Carver’s Policy Governance model, which considerably improved our governance function. However, as the book points out, this model has its obvious limitations. Ferenczi offers us a new framework that can help us move beyond the traditional

understanding of governance. My hope is that we will be able to experiment with this framework at ABTS in the near future, and that we will be able to validate the findings and governance theory presented by Ferenczi for cultural applicability in our context.



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Born and raised in Lebanon, Elie Haddad immigrated to Canada towards the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1990 where he pursued his career in Information Systems & Management Consulting. Responding to a call to ministry, he enrolled in a Masters of Theological Studies (MTS) program at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto while working and serving as a lay pastor. In 2005, Elie and his wife Mireille returned to Lebanon as missionaries with Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM). He served at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, initially as provost, becoming president in 2008. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Missional Ecclesiology at the International Baptist Theological Study Center of the Free University in Amsterdam.