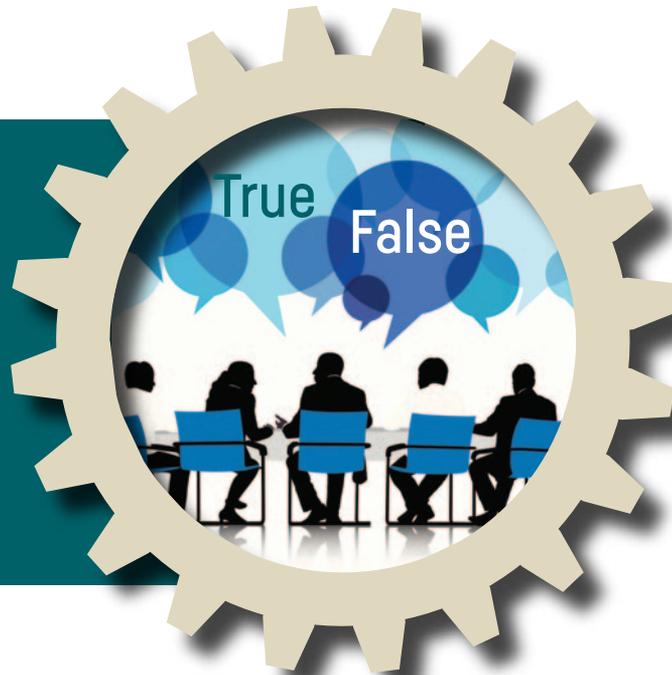




Duane Covrig

The Moral Work of School Boards



A board member hears rumors that a physical education teacher is using inappropriate language at school sporting events. An elementary teacher with two students from an undocumented family asks a board chair how the school can help shield these families from immigration “disruptions.” A janitor presents evidence to a board member that a teacher is drinking alcohol and wants to know what will be done about it.

These issues have obvious policy and legal implications for Seventh-day Adventist schools. They also impact relationships and employment decisions, all of which raise moral issues. School board members are called to enter the fray created by these issues to help create safe and caring schools. They can learn to execute their responsibilities—fiscal, legal, and relational—to make good decisions, create a positive school culture, and to grow their understanding about and wise

application of ethical principles. This will lead to moral growth: from simple moral compliance to major legal and regulatory cooperation with local authorities to more advanced roles of moral leadership. School boards can grow their moral influence on their schools and wider communities.

Ellen White associated moral issues with education in her classic statement:

“The plans devised and carried out for the education of our youth are none too broad. They should not have a one-sided education, but all their powers should receive equal attention. Moral philosophy, the study of the Scriptures, and physical training should be combined with the studies usually pursued in schools. Every power—physical, mental, and moral—needs to be trained, disciplined, and developed, that it may render its highest service.”¹

It makes sense that, since the schools should be teaching moral philosophy and helping students achieve moral development, the leaders of these schools should also grow their

own moral learning. This article reviews useful approaches to guide boards as they do the moral work of governance.

Ethics 101

Ethics and morality work to influence a person or group of people (e.g., organizations, communities, or institutions) to *do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right people to help the right groups—all while cultivating right motives*. The *right* repeatedly referred to here is not merely a technical or procedural term. It is also one of alignment to values—and for Adventists, to Christian ideals and teachings.

The words *ethics* and *morality* are often used interchangeably, but *ethics* typically refers to the thinking (justification) part of moral work while *morality* is the application (behavior) part. Boards should care about both. They must be ready to present their decisions and policy changes in ethics-based explanations that help others

understand the justifications for their choices. They also need to be ready to carry out visions and ideals in a pragmatic way. In other words, they must both “talk the talk” that grows moral thinking and “walk the walk” that helps implement these ideas so that behaviors are changed, and the school’s goals are achieved.

Ethics and moral growth, in individuals and communities, are facilitated

There are a lot of moral “voices” to which board members must learn to hear and respond, and with which they must keep in constant dialogue as they engage in decision-making. Dialogue is key to creating shared moral wisdom.

through complex interactions related to cognitive development, cultural development, emotional intelligence, spiritual maturity, and social influence. Recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of morality with these other areas helps us understand why Ellen White’s quotation cited earlier in this article referred to the need for “broad” understandings. Relationships build moral expectations. Moral expectations guard relationships and

create trust and boundaries. Adjudicating between moral expectations and the friction that comes from boundary crossing is a delicate work that requires both morality and leadership.

Thankfully, Seventh-day Adventist school board members and trustees have many resources to draw from as they seek to enhance their personal moral development and shared moral leadership. They have biblical principles and commands, moral insight distilled from history and social experience, local and regional laws, and work or professional experiences. Many of them will have codes of ethics from their professional experience that can help them in shaping board discussion of moral issues. There are a lot of moral “voices” to which board members must learn to hear and respond, and with which they must keep in constant dialogue as they engage in decision-making. Dialogue is key to creating shared moral wisdom. Board chairs with a penchant for truncating discussion are at great risk of sacrificing shared moral growth in their board for the sake of quick decisions. Yes, boards need to maintain a steady pace of processing the agenda, but it is the shared dialogue—hearing the reasoning of other people—that most helps each member grow in moral wisdom and enables the group to solidify a shared moral vision.

Candid and respectful discussion of moral ideals can produce conflict. Dialogue is the bridge we take to understanding another’s thinking—but we may not like what we see when we get there. This leads some to pull out of discussion to avoid conflict or to angrily try to dominate the dialogue in an attempt to suppress other people’s thinking. However, wise individuals can use interpersonal dialogue to improve their cognitive and moral development. They can receive the ideas of other people as legitimate observations about what is happening in the world. Letting individuals explain their moral thinking is important for their development—and for ours. It strengthens their moral voice and en-

ables them to share their experiences and concerns. However, it is listening respectfully that is the most essential, and board chairs need to reiterate that. When we do this, recognizing that other people’s views and experiences, especially those that are different from our own (different cultures, races, generations, genders, etc.), we can broaden our understanding—and if we are willing to allow this, lead us to greater compassion and the opportunity to recognize the validity of different points of view. I remind my students about Proverbs 8, where the call to listening occurs repeatedly in the context of understanding wisdom and its ways. Keeping our moral conversation headed toward a consensus and a shared vision is not easy, but the ideas below can help us to achieve this goal.

Developing the Board’s Moral Competency

While this article cannot cover all the rich resources available to help boards learn how to engage in moral leadership, here are seven areas worth considering that address the development of moral competency:

1. Read and understand codes of ethics for school personnel and board members.

Many professional groups and state/provincial agencies have attempted to list, explain, and illustrate the moral values and ethical ideals they require of their professionals. Reading these codes of ethics is a useful starting point. Boards should start first with what is morally and legally expected of school administrators, teachers, psychologists, and counselors. Since boards are servants seeking to help these professionals, they should know how these professionals are called to work and figure out how the board can help create a moral environment to help them fulfill their callings.

They should also read the code of ethics available for boards, both

Sidebar 1. Example of a School Board Code of Ethics.

Excerpt adapted from the 2017 North American Division *Manual for School Board Members*:*

1. Board meetings should be conducted in a Christian manner and in harmony with the principles outlined in Matthew 5:23 and 24 and 18:15-19.

2. A code of ethics is a standard of personal conduct. In fulfilling their responsibilities, school board members will:

- Maintain Christian ethics of honesty, trust, fairness, and integrity.
- Base decisions on the philosophy and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist education system.
- Demonstrate attitudes and personal conduct that reflect the standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and refrain from actions or involvements that might prove embarrassing to the church or the school.
- Work unceasingly to improve the understanding and support of Adventist education.
- Learn and practice the art of compromise without sacrificing principle.
- Support and protect the civil rights of all members of the school community.
- Recognize that the authority of the board is only expressed by its actions as a board. Individual members may act or speak on behalf of the board only when authorized to do so.
- Take no private action that will compromise the school system, the board, or the administration.
- Avoid any conflict of interest.
- Base their decisions on facts and their independent judgment and not defer to the opinions of individuals or special interest groups.
- Work with other board members in a spirit of decency, harmony, and cooperation.
- Uphold all board decisions, regardless of any personal disagreement.
- Maintain confidentiality of all matters that, if disclosed, would needlessly injure individuals or the school.
- Recognize that their responsibility is not to run the school but, together with their fellow board members, to see that it is well run.
- Refer all complaints to the school administrator for appropriate processing.

*2018 NAD Manual for School Board Members, pp. 23, 24: https://nad-bigtincan.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/leadership%20resources/administration/handbooks%20%26%20manuals/SchoolBoard_Manual.pdf.

within and outside the field of education (see North American Division excerpt above). Reviewing these periodically at board meetings can create a helpful reminder of the moral responsibility of board members.

2. View moral work as functioning in stages.

James Rest's four-stage model² has been used and modified over the past 30 years to give a simple look at the

“life cycle” of moral work. The first is sensitivity to moral issues. Becoming *sensitive to* or *aware of* a moral issue usually means a willingness to see the impact of events, statements, or actions on the well-being of individuals and groups. Boards can train themselves to recognize moral issues by mingling regularly with their communities to hear and observe their concerns and challenges. Moral sensitivities often reveal themselves through the use of phrases like “this concerns me,” “that isn’t right,” “that hurts children,” “this seems unfair,” “I hope . . . ,” “my dream of is that” Seeking to understand other people’s pains and joys often produces in us a more sensitive heart.

Boards are not only stewards of their own moral views but also those of their constituents. This requires a deep desire to understand others. Systematic visitation, anonymous surveys, and other communication tools can help transform “weak” signals into strong awareness. Boards must be careful about hypersensitivity and the possibility that excessive idealism may sabotage even incremental change. However, they must not ignore even the slightest whimper of moral sensitivity lest they become desensitized to the moral change and growth God may be trying to bring to their school and community.

The second stage is *judgment*. This is the ability to gather the moral whispers, anger, viewpoints, and dreams swirling around the school and realistically discuss them as a board in order to systematically evaluate a moral issue. Judgment is about going through a loving due process that welcomes multiple witnesses but also challenges (even interrogates) those views with alternative perspectives. Boards must be careful to avoid *judgmentalism*, which is not the same as *righteous judgment*. Judgmentalism traffics in generalities and preconceptions and rushes to a decision without due process or hearings. Cooper’s excellent book *Making Judgments Without Being Judgmental: Nurturing a Clear Mind and a Generous*

*Heart*³ explains the difference and provides excellent strategies for improving this practice.

Judgmentalism shows itself when board members make rash decisions, let gossip guide their tongue or warp their data, or when they foster an unloving spirit toward those they believe to be in the wrong. Condemnatory attitudes are easily nursed, especially among Christian communities with high ideals.

Christian judgment avoids overgeneralization. It stays focused on the specifics of the situation being discussed and does not stoop to impugning the characters of those involved. In 2018, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts explained well how the members of the Court avoid divisiveness among themselves by limiting discussion to the task at hand. By focusing on a decision point, instead of trying to push for a broader moral consensus, they can keep schism from creating judgmental attitudes. He reviewed his administrative approach to doing judgment, which may be useful for chairs to watch.⁴ Because the Adventist community believes that God entered His final redemptive work of judgment in 1844, those who serve on institutional boards in this community would do well to learn how He does His work and how it should guide our commitment to due process in judgment.

The third stage is *a commitment to action*. This involves cultivating *motivation* and *focus* to act on a decision. While boards must avoid judgmentalism, they must make decisions. Although they are not called to play God, boards are called to evaluate and judge. Paul scolded the Corinthians for not exercising their work of judgment by taking action when dealing with a sexual practice in their congregation (1 Corinthians 5 and 6). “Do you not know that you will judge angels? How much more the things of this life” (1 Corinthians 6:3, NIV).⁵ Boards must not avoid tough moral decisions. Avoiding judgment is *not a*

Even in Adventist communities where wars between “liberal” and “conservative” moral values can bring deep division, calmly naming principles undergirding these values can be helpful to maintain dialogue. Liberal values of love and compassion, as well as the equality aspect of justice and the freedom part of liberty need a voice.

loving act but a cowardly act. Boards will have to humbly engage in censoring, firing, expulsions, and other acts of discipline even as they commit themselves to embracing the deep motivation of love and truth.

The final stage is one of *maintaining a moral character and culture*. Individuals who cultivate the first three steps eventually acquire a character, bent, or predisposition toward certain moral actions. A group that does the same creates a culture, a sustainable ethos, or group tradition that fosters better moral practices. This stage is fostered by sober awareness of what happens when leadership abandons its fiduciary and oversight responsibilities (the Internet is full of illustrations of that) and conversely, inspired by times when leadership stepped into moral gaps (e.g., Martin Luther’s stand before the Diet of Worms or Martin Luther King, Jr.’s many speeches challenging the United States to moral righteousness).

There are several ways boards can improve on how they implement this stage. Chairs can place a “follow-up” or “close the loop” section in the agenda. This can be a time to discuss a specific past decision and its impact on the moral culture of the school, constituency, and wider community. Administrators or faculty may be invited to share their data that show how the policy and practice decisions were applied. This is not mainly

about administrative accountability but about helping boards see how their decisions and those of their predecessors have impacted the school and community. This feedback should invite both positive and negative feedback. Any news is better than no news for improving practice. This willingness to learn from past choices shows a steadiness in taking previous decisions seriously, an openness to learn, and a willingness to be held accountable. This practice could be encouraged in other decision-making areas of the school, as well. It can create a “what-can-we-learn culture” that is crucial to fostering moral maturity.

3. Learn to use the language of values in Haidt’s Six Moral Frames.

Moral conflict will emerge during the above processes. Jonathan Haidt’s Moral Foundation⁶ Website can help boards understand the bases of these moral conflicts. He sees six values as universally “felt” in reference to morality. Boards can use these moral values in their discussions and in support of their decisions to help create a common school language. Those six are love (care), justice (fairness), liberty, authority, loyalty, and sanctity (purity). While I do not accept Haidt’s evolutionary arguments for the origin of these values, I do believe he correctly identifies fundamental values at

work in our communities.

Haidt's work has also been helpful for explaining moral irritation and division in communities, including Adventism. He notes that parts of a community may emphasize some values over others. This leads to a perception of right and wrong, but it can also be used to polarize the larger moral community. This is especially evident in the moral division that now characterizes the politics of many nations and religious organizations. Even in Adventist communities where wars between "liberal" and "conservative" moral values can bring deep division, calmly naming principles undergirding these values can be helpful to maintain dialogue. Liberal values of love and compassion, as well as the equality aspect of justice and the freedom part of liberty need a voice. Conservatives' emphasis on the "deserving" (merit) side of justice, and the need to respect authority, foster group loyalty, and embrace a deep respect for the sanctity for life (especially related to sexual issues and abortion) also need a voice. Naming values can help different factions to understand where they "come together" on some issues.⁷

Space does not allow us to review Haidt's useful work on public morality, but I encourage boards to consider using his material in their training sessions to develop common language they can use to discuss and even debate moral values they identify in school situations. I think this is part of the broad moral training Ellen White recommended.⁸ Haidt's interview with Bill Moyer⁹ is especially useful in promoting understanding of how a rigid moral "rightness" can bring disunity, separation, judgmentalism, anger, and eventually can lead some to justify physical attacks, murder, and war on others.

4. Keep track of the board's relational moral matrix.

Another way to improve a board's moral practice is by discussing the core moral expectations various indi-

viduals or groups have on the board. I call this "creating a moral matrix." This chart can be as simple as a four-by-four table with the name relationship and what they need, what we need from them, what can violate or destroy the relationship, and ways we can improve it. Glaser recommends three simple realms of each ethical situation: individual, institutional, and societal.¹⁰ I recommend a more complex matrix for professionals¹¹ (see Matrix examples on page 45).

The key benefit of this exercise is creating and discussing one's own chart. Making a list of the people the board needs to serve, finding out what these individuals need, and talking with board members about how to meet these needs is a way to see relationships as having moral claims. It can guide boards to see the moral footprint they leave on specific relationships and avoid generalizing about all groups so that they see them within one homogeneous moral framework. Disaggregating general relationships into specific ones gives a "face" to the more general moral demands each have on the board. Linking particular relationships to specific moral expectations and responsibilities keeps board members from limiting themselves to merely abstract moral calculus in their moral work. For example, boards may tend to focus on staff needs to the exclusion of parents' moral claims, or vice versa. Part of moral leadership is balancing multiple moral claims, living with that tension, and addressing it appropriately in major moral choices.

I find this especially important for religious groups, which can neglect other human beings in their moral focus on God. Yes, one's relationship with God is primary, but not the only requirement for godly living. Jesus recognized the temptation for religious people to fail to put God first but also acknowledged their temptation to claim to be putting

God first to justify their immoral treatment of other people. He condemned the Pharisees for using faithfulness to God and church as an excuse to violate family moral claims:

"For God said, "Honor your father and mother" and "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is "devoted to God," they are not to

One's relationship with God is primary, but not the only requirement for godly living. Jesus recognized the temptation for religious people to fail to put God first but also acknowledged their temptation to claim to be putting God first to justify their immoral treatment of other people.

"honor their father or mother" with it. Thus, you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition'" (Matthew 15:4-6).

Another moral claim that churches sometimes marginalize is their relationship with local and national governments. While loyalty to Jesus and God and the church family should be central, we have the Bible's moral reminder that we owe something to those that govern society: "'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'" (Matthew 22:21). Boards should foster a desire to live

at peace with local communities and respond appropriately to government authorities (Romans 13). That will often require prayerful discussion and perhaps even sacrifice, and boards must adjudicate when a capitulation to local practice or demand violates other obligations. Space is inadequate to offer detailed illustrations in this area, but sharing land use and complying with local ordinances are often key demonstrations of a board's willingness to take seriously the moral

Creating a moral matrix will serve as a reminder of one of the unique characteristics of God's moral leadership. While God seeks exclusive worship, He encourages us to love widely, not just Him.

claims of the community. It is clear that there may come a time when school boards have to wrestle with a request by authorities that may violate God's law, but for the most part, the moral call to "live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18) should be central to decision making.

Creating a moral matrix will serve as a reminder of one of the unique characteristics of God's moral leadership. While God seeks exclusive worship, He encourages us to love

widely, not just Him. This ability to share love widely is one of the ultimate attributes of the Trinity. Jesus' command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), implies two simultaneous obligations: love for self and love for one's neighbor. In short, boards that keep track of the moral matrix of their responsibilities will likely be better at making decisions that help their communities. (See Sidebar 1 for suggestions.)

5. Maintain individuality, mutuality, and submission.

Growing ethics and doing morality as a board require social skills. When we seek to share our moral thinking with one another, and listen to the ideas of others, we will accomplish this more effectively if we embrace the belief that two (or more) minds can be better than one. Both humility and mutual submission can be fostered by a board chair. It takes a praying board to get to a point where they consider others better than themselves (see Philippians 2:1-4). Submission is a difficult topic to broach in modern parlance, but it is an attitude and a culture for chairs to promote as they interact with their boards (see article by Bordes Henry Saturné on page 33).

6. Understand that good moral processes create better moral thinking and outcomes.

Practicing individuality, mutuality, and submission requires that school boards have in place a process to hear and adjudicate differing and sometimes competing moral claims. While techniques are available to facilitate this task (see Cooper's *Making Judgments Without Being Judgmental*),¹² implementing them requires a fundamental belief that judgment can be good. As people of "the judgment" (Revelation 3:14-22), Adventists should have a special appreciation, at least theologically, for how grace-oriented a good judgment can be in resolving conflict, promoting reconciliation, and vindicating good. God in-

vites us to be like Him, in both love and judgment. If God can engage in love and righteousness while practicing justice and judgment, we can, too, with humility and prayer.

Unfortunately, many have created an incorrect separation between grace and judgment. This is not appropriate, either biblically or in practice. Judgment can be redemptive—for example, good judges not only seek to uphold the law but also consider creative ways to bring the violator back into compliance with the law and to make restitution to his or her victims. Experiencing consequences can help a person see the negative impact of his or her actions. Strong, vindictive language can take the eyes of the offender off that reality and cause him or her to focus on individual personalities. Keeping calm allows people to stay focused on the potential for learning from judgment. I found it useful to reread Zechariah 3, John 8, and parts of Luke 15 to remind myself of how God deals with offenders in judgment. Board chairs can do much to create this atmosphere of redemptive judgment in moral deliberations.

7. Practice moral courage and lead change.

As suggested here, there is a lot involved in moral leadership for boards. However, board members should never feel as if they have arrived in this moral work. Proverbs 4:18 suggests that human beings will continue to need to change to mature morally: "But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, That shines brighter and brighter until the full day" (NASB).¹³ Boards can expect that progressive revelation will come to them as they wrestle through issues and stay grounded in biblical and historic learning. Such a progressive view is fundamental to Adventism (see the preamble to the *28 Fundamental Beliefs*¹⁴ and for further discussion, Jon Paulien's analysis of the pre-

Continued on page 46

Sidebar 2. Examples of a Moral Matrix of Social Responsibilities.

The board chair can create many types of charts to help members discuss the board's many moral responsibilities to others. Creating it and filling it in is the point of learning moral ideas. Listed below are some template charts and sample items for discussion. The key is to list different relationships in thinking about moral claims.

For shorter discussions, a simple chart like this can work:

The relationship with . . .	What they need . . .	What we need from them . . .	Some signs of a moral breakdown	Ways we can improve this relationship
Individuals				
Example: (Teacher's Name)	Respect Freedom to teach as he or she sees best	Uphold professional standards of practice	We micromanage his or her lesson plans. After receiving training about best practices, he or she fails to implement these techniques.	Give him or her a trial period and mentoring as he or she attempts to implement innovative teaching strategies. Provide oversight but do not attempt to micromanage the process.
Institutions (Groups)				
Society				

A more complex matrix each member can fill out for general application or related to a specific issue being debated:

The relationship with . . .	What I/those in relationship with me want from this experience . . .	What I need from them during this experience . . .	What aspect of this issue is most harmful or can seriously damage this relationship?	I would better align with this relationship if I . . .
God				
Self				
My Family				
Clients				
Coworkers				
Employer				
Constituents of the school				

amble¹⁵). Boards can even play a role in applying a progressive form of moral wisdom to create energized and growing schools. This form of wisdom is evident throughout Scripture and in our heritage as a church (see Roy Gane's *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* on ways biblical and historical laws interact with moral growth and moral wisdom).¹⁶

Conclusion

Boards can be competent and effective moral agents of change and play an important part in creating just and caring schools. This article discussed a few of the ways they can grow their competency and moral leadership. When this is done well, boards can help promote a strong Christian culture where people understand, appreciate, and apply moral ideals and biblical principles. They can fulfill Christ's dream to create a place where His light is reflected by His followers like a city set on a hill that is seen from afar (Matthew 5:14), and people praise God as a result. Schools can revitalize communities as they breed authenticity, transparency, and integrity.

Poorly managed boards can create one of two extremes—a dry desert where moral rigidity stifles love, creativity, human sensitivities, and growth, or a place where moral relativism grows the cancer of moral chaos, unclear expectations, and harmful practices. But as Hebrews 6:9 reminds us, “we are convinced of better things in your case”: and well-run boards can become the moral agents they need to be to help nurture and grow their schools. ✍

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3. Terry D. Cooper, *Making Judgments Without Being Judgmental: Nurturing a Clear Mind and a Generous Heart* (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 1. This book is very helpful in encouraging leaders and groups in making tough decisions without becoming judgmental.
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School (October 2018): <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4755741/chief-justice-roberts-remarks-university-minnesota-law-school>.

5. 1 Corinthians 6:3. Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* of the Bible. Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

6. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), or visit the Website: <https://www.moralfoundations.org/>. Haidt's *Righteous Mind* is a challenging read but useful in helping boards understand moral diversity and debate in society and in our own churches. I think he accurately diagnoses the moral tensions creating conflict in our communities. His discussion with Bill Moyers on American tensions may help boards that are morally divided and need reconciliation (see Endnote 9).

7. These values are given as examples and attribution to one specific group does not indicate that they are not valued by the other group.

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