

The Four-Committee Structure (the Discipline's default)

This is what your church has unless someone decided otherwise: a charge conference over a church council, with four administrative committees under it — pastor-parish relations, trustees, finance, and nominations and leadership development (§244). Nobody adopts it, which is exactly why nobody explains it; it is simply what you inherited. It gets described here for two reasons: because a page arguing for a simplified structure is worthless without an honest account of what it replaces, and because most churches on this structure are running a version of it that drifted, not the one the Discipline describes.

How the parts divide

The charge conference is the connecting link between your congregation and the denomination, and holds general oversight of the church council (§247.1). It meets at least annually. It elects the leaders, sets the pastor's compensation, and is the body the council answers to.

The church council plans and implements the church's program of nurture, outreach, witness, and resources, and administers the church's organizational and temporal life. It envisions, plans, implements, and *annually evaluates* the mission and ministry of the church, and it is amenable to and functions as the administrative agency of the charge conference (§252). It meets at least quarterly (§252.3a).

Then four committees, each holding something the others do not:

Nominations and leadership development (§258.1) identifies, develops, deploys, evaluates, and monitors spiritual leadership. Not more than nine people in addition to the pastor and lay leader; **the pastor is the chairperson**, with a lay vice chair elected by the committee; three classes, three-year terms (§258.1c–d). It serves year-round, not just in the autumn scramble.

Pastor-parish relations (§258.2) is the church's HR function — care, evaluation, job descriptions, staffing recommendations, and the congregation's voice in the appointment process. Five to nine people representative of the whole charge, plus the lay leader and a lay member of annual conference. Meets at least quarterly, in closed session, in confidence.

Trustees (§258.3, with membership and duties at §§2525–2551) holds the buildings, land, insurance, and legal instruments. Three to nine people, at least two-thirds professing members, and the pastor is not a voting trustee unless separately elected (§2525).

Finance (§258.4) raises, guards, and accounts for the money. Elected annually by the charge conference, and its membership is deliberately a web of cross-links: the chair, the pastor(s), a lay member of annual conference, the church council chair, a PPRC chair or representative, a trustee representative chosen by the trustees, the stewardship chair, the lay leader, the financial secretary, the treasurer, and the business administrator (§258.4).

What is never combined. These separations are the structure's actual argument for itself, and they survive into any alternative structure too:

- **Nominations is chaired by the pastor and is never the body it nominates** (§258.1c). No group nominates itself.
- **Treasurer and financial secretary are two people**, not related to each other, and no immediate family member of appointed clergy serves as treasurer, finance chair, or financial secretary (§258.4). Money is counted by one hand and recorded by another.
- **Paid staff and staff family stay off PPRC** (§258.2a), and only one person per household serves.
- **Personnel conversations happen in closed session** and stay confidential (§258.2e).
- **Property answers to the charge conference**, and trustees may not interfere with the pastor's use of the building — nor may the pastor grant outside use alone (§2533.1).

That last cluster is worth naming plainly: the four-committee structure is a **separation-of-powers** design. Its case is not efficiency. It is that no single group can hire, pay, house, and evaluate the same person without another group seeing it.

Officer slate

Elected by the charge conference, typically on the nominations committee's recommendation or from the floor:

- **Church council chair**, and the council itself — as few as eleven people or as many as the charge conference thinks right, including the council chair, lay leader, PPRC chair or representative, finance chair or representative, trustees chair or representative, treasurer, lay member to annual conference, UMM and UMW presidents or representatives, a young adult, a youth representative, and the pastor(s) (§252.5).
- **Lay leader and lay member(s) to annual conference**.
- **Trustees** in three classes of three-year terms (§2526); the board elects its own chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer if needed, within thirty days of the year beginning (§2530).
- **PPRC** — five to nine, three classes, three-year terms.
- **Finance chair, treasurer, and financial secretary** — three people, and the last two are never the same person (§258.4).
- **Nominations** — up to nine plus pastor and lay leader, three classes.

Count it up: a church running this fully staffs roughly thirty to forty distinct seats. That number is the whole reason the simplified structure exists, and it is the honest place to start any conversation about changing.

Meeting rhythm

- **Church council** — at least quarterly (§252.3a). It is recommended that the first agenda item at every meeting relate to the church's missional purpose (§252.3b), which is the Discipline quietly trying to prevent the council from becoming a reports queue. A quorum is whoever is present and voting at a duly announced meeting (§252.6) — no minimum, so a poorly attended meeting can still act.
- **PPRC** — at least quarterly, and additionally at the request of the bishop, the district superintendent, the pastor, the chair, or anyone accountable to the committee (§258.2e).

- **Trustees** — at least annually is the floor (§2532); quarterly is the realistic minimum for a church with a building.
- **Finance** — typically monthly around the budget cycle; the Discipline sets no frequency, but written financial policies are reviewed annually and an audit is provided for each year (§258.4c–d).
- **Nominations** — the Discipline says it serves *throughout the year* (§258.1a). Nearly every church treats it as a September-to-October committee, and that gap between text and practice is where the “we can’t fill the slots” crisis actually comes from.
- **Charge conference** — at least annually.

What the charge conference votes

Nothing adopts this structure; it is what §244 gives you by default. What the charge conference actually votes each year is:

- the slate of officers and committee members brought by nominations (§258.1b);
- the pastor’s compensation, in consultation with the district superintendent (§247.13);
- the trustees’ report, including the annual comparison of insurance coverage against the GCFA schedule and any recommendations to come into compliance (§2533.2);
- the finance committee’s report, including its written financial policies and provision for the annual audit (§258.4c–d);
- and the other reports the Discipline and your conference require.

If your church wants to leave this structure, that is a different vote and a different process — see the simplified structure page, and talk to your district superintendent before anything else.

Who this fits, and who it doesn’t

It tends to fit congregations with enough engaged laity to staff the seats without the same six people holding four jobs each; churches that have recently been through conflict, where visible separation of powers is doing real work and concentrating authority would be read — correctly — as a power move; churches in the middle of a capital project, a property sale, or a pastoral transition, where changing governance at the same time is one variable too many; and churches whose committees genuinely function, which is more of them than the simplification literature tends to admit.

It tends not to fit congregations where the same fifteen people already sit on all four committees and the meetings have become a ritual of reporting to each other; churches where a ministry idea takes four months and three committees to get a yes; and churches where the structure is producing the appearance of broad participation rather than the fact of it.

One pastor’s take: the honest failure mode of this structure is not that it’s bureaucratic — it’s that it’s usually not actually being run. A church with four committees on paper, two of which have not met in a year, does not have separation of powers; it has the paperwork of separation of powers and the reality of whoever shows up. Before deciding this structure has failed you, it is worth asking whether you have tried it as written: nominations working year-round, the council’s

first agenda item on mission, trustees meeting quarterly, finance producing written policies. Some churches find they never had the structure they're about to replace.

Elsewhere

- **Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation 2025–2028 — Cokesbury** — the official UMPH booklet series, one per committee and office, revised each quadrennium. The standard companion to this structure; a few dollars each.
- **Guidelines: Church Council 2025–2028 — Cokesbury** — the volume for the body that holds the rest together, if you buy only one.
- **Trustees Job Description — Discipleship Ministries** — free role descriptions; the site carries comparable pages for other offices.
- **UMC Minimum Insurance Requirements — GCFA** — the schedule the trustees' annual report is measured against (§2533.2).
- ***The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*** — this page paraphrases; the Discipline binds. Every church should own a current copy, and the officers should know where it is kept.
- **Your annual conference's charge conference materials** — these usually specify which reports are required and on which forms, and they change more often than the Discipline does.

This is a starting point, not legal advice. Employment law varies by state, and your annual conference may have policies that go beyond the Discipline. Before you rely on anything here for a hiring, firing, or compensation decision, run it past your conference office or chancellor.

Paragraph references are to the 2020/2024 Book of Discipline. This document paraphrases; for the binding text, see the Discipline itself.

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