Simplified Accountable Structure (the single-board model)

A simplified accountable structure folds the four administrative committees — church council, trustees, finance, and staff-parish relations — into a single leadership board that does all four jobs. It is allowed by ¶247.2, which lets a charge conference modify the organizational plan in consultation with and upon the approval of the district superintendent, so long as the basic responsibilities of ¶243 are still met. It is not a small-church workaround; congregations of every size use it.

A note on the sources, because it affects how you should read everything you find on this: nearly all the available material on simplified structure was produced by people recommending it — conference vitality offices, consultants, and the trainings built on their books. That material is genuinely useful and this page draws on it heavily, but it is advocacy, and it is not balanced by an equivalent literature making the other case. This page tries to describe the model accurately rather than to recommend for or against it. Whether it is right for your church is a judgment your congregation and your district superintendent get to make.

What it merges, and what it never merges

What merges. The four administrative bodies stop meeting separately. One board holds the council's oversight, the trustees' property responsibilities, the finance committee's fiduciary work, and the SPRC's personnel work. Once the charge conference approves, those committees cease to exist as separate bodies on the date the charge conference sets — the responsibilities and authority move to the new board. Ministry teams are untouched; nurture, outreach, and witness work continues exactly as before.

What never merges. This is the part churches get wrong, and every one of these survives the simplification:

- **Nominations stays separate, and the pastor chairs it.** The committee on nominations and leadership development is composed of not more than nine people in addition to the pastor and lay leader, and **the pastor is its chairperson** (¶258.1c). This is structural, not stylistic: a board cannot nominate itself.
- **SPRC membership restrictions still bind.** No staff member, and no immediate family member of a pastor or staff member, may serve where SPRC functions are exercised; only one person per household (¶258.2a). In practice this means staff and staff family cannot serve on a board that carries the SPRC function at all.
- **Personnel conversations stay confidential and stay in closed session** (¶258.2), and the pastor's presence rules still apply. What changes is the meeting, not the rules.
- **Trustee qualifications still bind.** Between three and nine trustees, of legal age, at least two-thirds professing members of The United Methodist Church, with the one-third laywomen / one-third laymen recommendation intact (¶2525). **The pastor is not a voting trustee** unless separately elected. A board larger than nine cannot have every member serve as a trustee.

- **A trustee chair must be elected annually** — the board organizes within thirty days of the year beginning and elects officers (¶2530.1–.2). Corporate resolutions and property instruments need a properly authorized signer, and “the board” is not a name a bank will accept.
- **Financial separation of duties still binds.** The treasurer and financial secretary positions should not be combined or held by immediate family members, and no immediate family member of appointed clergy may serve as treasurer, finance chair, or financial secretary (¶258.4). Written financial policies are reviewed annually and an annual audit is provided for (¶258.4c–d).
- **The charge conference is still above the board** (¶247.1), and property decisions still answer to it (¶2533.1).
- **The annual property duties still happen** — insurance compared against the GCFA schedule and reported (¶2533.2), and the annual parsonage review (¶2533.4).

The Discipline itself anticipates this: ¶258.1 repeatedly says the nominations committee works with “the church council, **or alternative structure**.” You are not doing something exotic.

Four versions, side by side

There is no single right shape. These are the four the Arkansas workbook lays out, and they are genuinely different trades.

A. Whole board. One board of roughly nine to fifteen, seated in three classes of three-year terms, serving *in toto* as council, trustees, finance, and SPRC. No sub-designations. *Strength:* the cleanest accountability — everyone owns every decision. *Cost:* every member must be eligible for every function, which the trustee cap of nine and the SPRC restrictions can make hard.

C. Dual election — separate SPRC. The board carries council, trustees, and finance; a distinct SPRC continues and reports to the board, with three or four people (often including the board chair and lay leader) serving on both. *Strength:* stronger checks and balances, and personnel confidentiality has an obvious home. *Cost:* shared membership blurs who decides what, and the pastor can end up receiving mixed messages about priorities.

D. Specialists. One board, but two or three members are designated as finance, trustee, or personnel specialists who handle day-to-day matters between meetings inside limits the board sets. *Strength:* members know who to call when the furnace dies, and it is the smallest change from what your church already does. *Cost:* specialists drift back into being three-person committees with less oversight than the committees they replaced.

One pastor’s take: if your reason for simplifying is that you cannot fill the committee slots, version D will quietly rebuild the thing you were trying to leave — three small committees with less oversight than the four you started with. Beyond that, this is a judgment call about your church’s culture, and your DS will have watched more of these than you have. Ask which ones held up in your district after five years, and which ones quietly reverted.

Officer slate

A workable board of nine to fifteen, with everyone in one of three classes:

- **Board chair** — may also be the lay leader.
- **Trustee chair** — elected annually from the board's membership (¶2530.2); the workbook recommends the board chair also serve as trustee chair. Must be over 18 and, per ¶2530.2, a professing member of the local church.
- **Secretary** — keeps minutes that will be read in ten years by someone trying to reconstruct a decision.
- **Treasurer** and **financial secretary** — two people, not one, and not related (¶258.4).
- **Lay leader** and **lay member(s) to annual conference** — serve by virtue of office; the three-year class rotation does not bind them.
- Remaining members at large.

Who cannot be on it: paid staff, and immediate family of the pastor or staff, where the board carries the SPRC function (¶258.2a). Two members of the same household cannot both serve. Youth may serve on the board but cannot serve as trustees.

Meeting rhythm

One monthly meeting replaces four. The training materials generally build that meeting on a **LOVE + LEARN + LEAD** shape — open in worship and community, spend time learning, then govern — with a consent calendar handling routine reports. Whether that produces better governance or mainly moves the reporting off the agenda is contested, and you will not find much written by anyone who thinks the latter.

A workable year:

- **January** — Organize within thirty days (¶2530.1): elect trustee chair and officers, confirm classes, adopt or renew the board covenant, review guiding principles.
- **Monthly** — a consent calendar for reports (circulated in advance, approved in one motion) so the meeting itself is spent on the one or two decisions that matter.
- **Quarterly** — the personnel conversation, in closed session, with the same confidentiality SPRC has always had (¶258.2e).
- **Spring** — parsonage review with the pastor (¶2533.4); budget work begins.
- **Fall** — insurance comparison against the GCFA schedule and the report to charge conference (¶2533.2); written financial policies reviewed (¶258.4c); audit arranged (¶258.4d); nominations committee — which the pastor chairs, and which is not this board — brings the slate.
- **Charge conference** — the board reports as council, trustees, finance, and SPRC, because it is all four.

Adopting it: the process

1. **Talk to your district superintendent first.** ¶247.2 requires the DS's approval, so a congregation that discerns for six months and then asks is doing it backwards. Great Plains, for instance, has the DS decide up front whether the church is even in a position to explore it — a church mid-conflict, mid-capital campaign, or mid-appointment-change is usually told to wait.
2. **Lead with why, and listen.** Long-time United Methodists may experience the loss of separately elected committees as a power grab or a loss of Methodist identity. That reaction is not

irrational — checks and balances really are being restructured — and it has to be answered in public, more than once.
3. **Discern the version** (A, C, or D above) and map it. If it can't be sketched on a napkin, it's too complex.
4. **Write to the DS** requesting a ¶247.2 change: your purpose, which committees are affected, how those functions will be carried out and by whom, your model, your nominations plan, and your timeline.
5. **Nominations** — the pastor-chaired committee (¶258.1c) builds a slate for the new structure.
6. **Charge conference**, called with proper notice, votes on the structure, the slate, and a founding set of guiding principles the board may adapt.
7. **First board meeting** — adopt a covenant, elect the trustee chair, orient everyone on the guiding principles.

A sample charge conference motion

> **Motion:** That [Church Name], pursuant to ¶247.2 of *The Book of Discipline* and with the consultation and approval of the District Superintendent, adopt a simplified accountable leadership structure effective [date], as follows:
>
> 1. A single Leadership Board of [nine] members, elected in three classes to three-year terms, shall serve as the church council (¶252), the board of trustees (¶¶2525–2533), the committee on finance (¶258.4), and the committee on staff-parish relations (¶258.2), exercising the full responsibilities of each.
> 2. The lay leader and the lay member(s) to annual conference shall serve as members of the Board by virtue of their office.
> 3. The committee on nominations and leadership development shall continue as a separate committee chaired by the pastor (¶258.1c).
> 4. The Board shall annually elect from its membership a chairperson of trustees, a secretary, and such other officers as required (¶2530), and the church shall continue to elect a treasurer and a financial secretary, which offices shall not be combined (¶258.4).
> 5. No paid staff member, and no immediate family member of the pastor or of any staff member, shall serve on the Board (¶258.2a).
> 6. Effective [date], the existing church council, board of trustees, committee on finance, and committee on staff-parish relations shall cease to exist as separate bodies, and their responsibilities and authority shall rest in the Leadership Board. Ministry teams shall continue.
> 7. The Board shall operate under the guiding principles adopted by this charge conference, which the Board is authorized to adapt as ministry needs require.

Take this to your DS and your conference chancellor before you take it to a vote — conferences differ on what they want the resolution to say, and it is far easier to adjust wording beforehand than to re-vote.

Who this fits, and who it doesn't

Churches that report it working are generally ones where the same fifteen people already sat on all four committees and the meetings had become a ritual of reporting to each other; where the sense of mission was clear enough that a permission-giving board didn't simply drift; and where the pastor was willing to be genuinely accountable to a board rather than managed by four of them. Note the selection problem in that sentence: churches that tried it and reverted don't usually write the article.

The standing objection, which deserves stating in its own words rather than as a hurdle to be cleared: the four committees are a separation of powers, and folding them into one board concentrates authority over hiring, paying, housing, and evaluating the same people into a single group. Proponents answer that clear accountability and guiding principles substitute for structural separation. That is an argument, not a settled question, and a congregation is entitled to find it unpersuasive.

It tends not to fit — at least not yet — churches in active conflict, churches mid-capital-campaign, churches in the middle of an appointment change, and churches whose honest reason is "we can't fill the slots." That last one is worth sitting with: a structure change will not create leaders, and a board of nine disengaged people governs worse than four committees of disengaged people, because there is nowhere left for a dissenting voice to sit.

It also asks more of multi-point charges, where one church's simplification has to respect the other's structure and ministry.

See also the four-committee structure for how the default works when it is actually being run — worth reading before you leave it, since some churches discover they never had the structure they meant to replace. And the SPRC and trustees guides — under a simplified structure you still have to do everything those pages describe.

Elsewhere

Every item below was produced by people who recommend this model. That doesn't make them wrong — they are the most detailed and practical resources available, and this page relies on them — but read them as advocacy, and notice that no comparably resourced case for the other side exists.

- ***Simplified Accountable Structure: Unleash Your Congregation's Leadership Potential* (PDF)** — the Arkansas Conference Center for Vitality's 29-page planning workbook: ten steps, four structure models, a sample agenda, and guiding principles. The most useful single document on the topic, and unusually honest about the cons of each version. Free.
- **Single Board Model — Great Plains Conference** — a conference's actual approved process, with a month-by-month timeline and the criteria a DS uses to decide whether a church should explore it now. Note their page quotes ¶247.2 as "church conference"; the 2020/2024 text reads "charge conference," which changes who votes — go by your current Discipline.
- **Simple Governance Resource Guide — Mississippi Conference** — a curated list of articles and case studies from churches that have made the change, including congregations well past small-church size.

- **Simplified Structure — Blake Bradford** — resources from one of the authors behind much of this material; useful for the leadership-behavior side, which is the part structure changes don't fix.
- **Kay Kotan, *Mission Possible: Structuring Your Church for Missional Effectiveness*** — the short book most conference trainings are built on. If you want to understand why your DS talks about this the way they do, it's this.
- **Your annual conference's own guidance.** Several conferences have a defined process and required resolution wording. Yours may be one of them; ask your district office before drafting anything.
- **The four-committee structure** — the default this replaces, described on its own terms rather than as a foil.

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.