



R-26 Brief Overview of Simplified, Accountable Structure

In the United Methodist Church (UMC), our polity has historically called for four administrative committees to care for the “business” of the church. Those four committees are the Trustees Committee, Finance Committee, Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, and the Church Council. These committees usually consist of 6-12 people serving three-year rotating terms. In addition to these generalities, each committee has its particular nuances and requirements as outlined in our *UMC Book of Discipline* (book that constitutes the law, polity, and doctrine of the United Methodist Church). While the structure and numbers vary from church to church, the average congregation has somewhere between 25 to 75 members tied up in serving on these four administrative committees.

While the predecessor bodies that constitute our denomination have approved a *Book of Discipline* for 200 years, the first edition of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* originated in 1968 when the UMC was formed through the union of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church. In 1968 the church’s primary responsibility was to receive the continuous flow of people coming in the door from a church-centric culture and make them official members. Designed for continuity and stability, the legacy committee structures we inherited were simply not designed for the complexity and rapid changes of our modern era. In the 21st Century, simply adding names to the membership roll is not the primary responsibility of the administrative committees since culture is no longer church-centric (in fact the church is counter cultural) thus resulting in the church needing to structure differently for a shifting time and focus.

In the latest edition (2016) of the *Book of Discipline* ¶247.2, the church, with approval of the district superintendent, is provided the opportunity to restructure in order to be more missionally focused. While the *Book of Discipline* describes in great detail how the four administrative committees are formed, this latest paragraph is quite general and flexible in nature. In working with hundreds of churches and thousands of leaders over the past decade (plus), we (Kay and Blake) have continuously massaged, tweaked, and improved a Simplified, accountable structure model for local congregations to adopt. This model has now found its way into churches across the country in multiple conferences. It is now referred to the simplified structure model generally accepted by district superintendents, cabinets, and bishops (with some districts and conferences requiring their own particular nuances).



This paragraph in the Discipline was introduced for the primary benefit of small churches who were struggling to have enough people to fill the four administrative committees as required by the traditional structure. However interestingly enough, it was the larger churches who were some of the early adopters. They quickly identified the efficiency and effectiveness in the model.

We are often asked about the effectiveness of simplified, accountable structure for the various size churches in the various church settings (rural, suburban, urban). In our experience, this model can (and does) work in any size church. Of course, there are nuances in the various settings, but the overall number of board leaders and accountability are static. The nuances occur in such things as the structure of staff and ministry teams according to church size, whether the church has a daycare or preschool, and how to operate in a multi-point charge. Further nuances occur in the guiding principles, leadership covenants, and the nominations process. The bottom line is that a simplified, accountable structure can work for any size church in any setting.

To simplify church structure, the four administrative committees (trustees, finance, staff-parish relations, and council) cease to exist as we know them, and they are replaced by one new Leadership Board of nine people with three year terms. This new board is nominated by the Committee on Nominations and Leadership Development and voted on by either the church or charge conference. Rather than holding four separate meetings of the four previous administrative committees, there is now one board meeting where the leaders are able to practice a healthier and more holistic approach with missional focus and direction. Technically, and in fulfillment with the requirements of the Discipline, all four committees still exist, but they exist as a single unified Leadership Board, with all of their responsibilities, qualifications, and authority of each administrative committee located in the simplified board. The new Leadership Board is the Church Council, and it is also the Trustees, which is the Finance Committee, and is the Staff Parish Relations Committee.

When simplifying the structure, accountability must be a deeply integrated and highly accepted component of simplification. Without accountability, simplification is not recommended! When transitioning to accountable leadership, the new Leadership Board shifts from managing the church to governing the church. This is a significant shift that should not be minimized or glossed over. While simplifying is a technical shift, accountability is an adaptive shift which takes longer and is a harder turn to make for most churches. Thus, this is not the “easy fix” some churches might think or even desire.



Accountable leadership changes not only the agenda, but also the conversations, focus, and priorities at the table. The nominations process is adapted, too, in this model. The role of the pastor will likely need to shift and sometimes staff roles, too. While the new Leadership Board governs in the model of accountable leadership, the pastor leads, the staff (paid and unpaid ministry leaders) equips and coordinates ministry, and the congregation is released to be in ministry.

The primary purposes and benefits of simplified, accountable leadership are ...

- Removes bottlenecks in the decision-making process (i.e. time, energy, resources, multiple committees/layers, silos, disjointed focus and priorities, etc.)
- Systems, procedures, and policies in place that are flexible and adaptable
- More people released and available for ministry
- Leadership Board responsible for church's faithfulness to The Great Commission (making disciples)
- Leadership Board aligns church resources to the mission and vision
- Guiding Principles in place for efficiency and permission-giving within healthy boundaries
- Leaders are held accountable at all levels
- Leadership Board is responsible for focusing on the areas of stewardship, strategic alignment, generative future-focus, and accountable leadership
- Missional focus, priority, and alignment are non-negotiables

Mission Possible by Kay Kotan and Blake Bradford lays out the three phases of leading with the simplified, accountable structure (discerning, equipping, implementing) in detail, along with tools and samples to ease the transition and encourage clarity as your congregation begins operating with this powerful and effective model of leadership.



R-2: Simplified, Accountable Structure (SAS)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Which positions can be combined for one person on the Board to hold?

Most all positions can be combined as long as the minimum number is elected. The Lay Leader, Lay Member to Annual Conference, S/PPR Chair and Trustee Chair must be designated but could all be the same person.

2. Is there an absolute minimum number for the Board?

Nine is the standard and recommended minimum. Very small congregations may be able to have a Leadership Board of six, composed of two individuals in each three-year class at the discretion of their district superintendent.

3. Does the pastor have a vote?

No. Because the Leadership Board's work switches roles quickly from Disciplinary committee to committee, we recommend that the pastor not vote, in order to preserve clarity and unity in the Board. If a matter comes up that depends on one vote of the pastor, that is probably a sign that more conversation and discernment is needed.

4. Can family members serve together on the Board?

Per the Book of Discipline, family members cannot serve on the Board together. If it cannot be avoided, the family members may need to excuse themselves from the room or not vote on issues with potential conflict of interest. Staff and family of staff cannot serve on the Board.

5. Should staff (paid and unpaid) serve on the Board

No

6. Who should take notes at the meeting?

Someone can be assigned or elected to take notes who is not on the Board. That person could also be selected from the existing members of the Board, a person recruited outside the Board to take notes (needs to be excluded from S/PPR conversations) or a person who is an addition to the Board with the sole responsibility of taking notes.

7. Are the Financial Secretary and Treasurer required to be on the Board?

No, but they can be. The recommendation and best practice is for them not to be on the Board.



8. Which position on the Board serves as the liaison to the district superintendent for Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee purposes?

It is recommended that the Board Chair serves as the S/PPRC liaison to the DS.

9. Are there still three-year terms and classes?

Yes. One third of the Board will roll off each year.

10. Is the Board self-nominating?

No. There is still a requirement that there be a separate Committee on Nominations and Leadership Development to nominate the Board Members to the Charge Conference each year.

11. How long can a person serve on the Board?

Board members serve a three-year term. Since all members are serving as S/PPR, Trustees and Finance, it is recommended they roll off after each three-year term. After being off the Board for a year, the person can roll back onto the Board if elected.

12. Are UMM, UMW, and UMYF representatives required to be on the Board

If the church has these chartered groups, a member of that group may serve if requested on the Board as a leader of the local congregation (not to report about their group).

13. How many must be present to take an official vote? What requires an official vote?

A quorum is described as whoever is present (Note of exception: In rare matters that require the Trustees to function as a legal body, a majority of Leadership Board members who are Trustees must be present). Simple majority of Leadership Board members attending approves a motion.

14. How is the Trustee Chair elected or appointed as required by the corporate resolution

At the first meeting at the beginning of each new year, the Board will elect a Trustee Chair to satisfy the corporate resolution requirement. It is recommended the Board Chair serve as the Trustee Chair. Please note that all members of the board who will serve in the role as a trustee must be of legal age (18+ in most states).



15. If a church moves to the simplified, accountable structure, how does ministry happen?

Even though the restructuring occurs, ministry teams are still needed and in place. Fewer people on the Board means more people are available to do ministry. Simplifying structure is the combining of the four administrative teams of the Council, Trustees, Finance and S/PPR Committees. The only change for ministry teams is that the Nominations Committee is no longer responsible for identifying and nomination leaders and members for ministry teams.

16. Do I need approval from my DS to move to the simplified structure?

Yes. A letter from the pastor and Council Chair requesting to move to simplified structure to the DS is the first step. In the letter, state the missional purpose for moving to this structure. Refer to the Discernment Phase for the steps towards moving to a simplified, accountable structure.

17. Where can I find information on simplified structure in the *Book of Discipline*?

¶247.2 in the 2016 edition

18. How should we pick Leadership Board members? Do we need to seek out people with different skills, such as financial, human resources, legal, and marketing? Should we try to create a team composed of people with personality test results?

By Discipline, all Leadership Board Members will need to be professing members of the church because some of the constituent committees require professing membership. The right team is composed of devoted disciples of Jesus who can think strategically about the church’s mission, hold clergy, staff, and fellow members accountable to the mission, and partner with other Leadership Board members to guide the congregation into making a God-sized impact. The Leadership Board should be as diverse as possible so that the leadership table will have the different voices that God needs for the congregation to discern its future direction. Other skills can be added through work groups. While teams can be designed using a variety of tools, don’t let these tools get in the way of the fact that Jesus’ mission needs Jesus’ disciples and that accountability must come before any other considerations.



19. What size church is too small or too large for SAS?

While 247.2 was written for small churches who had difficulty finding enough people to fill all the “slots” in a committee structure, it was some of our largest churches that first discovered the power of SAS. Churches with an average worship attendance under 50 may already be doing a de facto simplified structure, and it may or may not be using accountability. Large Churches that worship in the thousands have discovered the need for SAS as they seek to counteract ministry silos and mission drift. Mid-size congregations from 50-500 in worship will quickly discover the power of SAS in unleashing more laity for ministry and focusing the church on Christ’s mission.

20. What are the Discipline requirements for Leadership Board composition?

The Leadership Board should be made up of professing members, with a Discipline-recommended minimum of 1/3 being laywomen and 1/3 being lay men.

21. Who can attend the meetings?

Congregation members are always invited to attend the meetings, but do not have voice or vote. When the Board needs to move to executive session to address S/PPRC matters or to consider legal negotiations (such as buying or selling property), these church members will need to be excused.

22. Should we assign Board Members to specialist roles for finance or personnel?

No! This defeats the purpose of the simplified structure and interrupts Leadership Board accountability. While the Board may assign a work group to work on a special project and report back, only the entire Leadership Board can act and make decisions.