
Simple Governance

Moving from Meetings to Ministry

Exploring the Unified Board Model

Rev. Bill Brown, Director of Congregational Vitality

Rev. Johnsie Cogman, Two Rivers District, BWC

Based on *Simple Governance* by Stephan W. Ross



LIVE CHAT

**Was your last board meeting
mostly mission—or mostly
maintenance?**

Drop a word or two in the chat.

WHAT YOU'LL WALK AWAY WITH

Tonight's Journey

- ✓ Why flat and simple structures produce more vital, fruitful congregations
- ✓ How a single board can combine Trustees, Finance, SPRC, and Church Council
- ✓ What has to change in how leaders lead — not just how the org chart is drawn

OUR GROUNDING PRINCIPLE

This is an experiment in leadership.

“Leadership is the quality exercised by a person when they empower a group of people to accomplish their mission through a coordinated effort.”

— Stephan W. Ross, *Simple Governance*

THE PROBLEM

All organizational structures are compromises.

There's no perfect structure — but the one most churches run on was designed to solve problems we no longer have, and it's poorly suited to the ones we do.

ASK YOURSELF

**Is your structure organized
around your mission — or has it
quietly reorganized around
institutional maintenance?**

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

Symptoms of Maintenance-Mode Governance

Your best, boldest leaders are frustrated by decisions made in meetings they weren't invited to

Willing servants serve on multiple committees just to keep the chairs filled

Decisions take weeks because responsibility and authority live in two different rooms

The most passionate people burn out fastest — in management, not ministry



LIVE CHAT

What's one Board meeting from the past year that had almost nothing to do with our mission of making disciples?

THIS IS A LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Three Common Mistakes

- 1 Selecting leaders for the wrong reasons — honor, loyalty, “no one else was willing”
- 2 Placing good leaders in the wrong positions
- 3 Expecting today's leaders to operate the way leaders did decades ago

THE CORE PREMISE

Mission is the fuel.

“A church without a real mission is like a car without fuel. It's a doorstop, a lump, a useless hunk of stuff that just requires upkeep but produces no output.”

— Simple Governance, p. 12

AS UNITED METHODISTS

Our mission is already given:

**Making disciples of Jesus Christ for
the transformation of the world.**

*“That is not the mission of public schools, Microsoft, the Elks Lodge, or the
synagogue down the street.”*

— Simple Governance, p. 15

THREE ORDERS OF SERVICE

Governance · Management · Ministry



Governance

Discerns mission,
vision, and strategy



Management

Coordinates the
people and the
work



Ministry

Directly touches the
world — closest to
the mission

MINISTRY, DEFINED

Everything your church does is (or should be) ministry.

Whether it's the work of a group or a single person — if it expresses the mission of the congregation, it's ministry. And most of it happens when people are dispersed, not when they're gathered as the church.

GOVERNANCE ASKS

Three Questions Almost Nobody Is Asking

🔑 Who are we?

🌐 Who is our neighbor?

🎓 What is our definition of a disciple?

Committees do management. Ministry teams do ministry. But nobody is asking these governance-level questions.



LIVE CHAT

**What's the honest split at your last
board meeting — governance /
management / ministry?**

Type your best guess, like “10 / 70 / 20.”

KEY PRINCIPLES

Keep It Flat. Keep It Simple.

Vital congregations across traditions share one pattern: they've moved from hierarchy to a flat model.

Hierarchical



Many steps from decision to action

Flat



Direct line from center to edge

KEEP IT FLAT

Three Reasons It Matters

You don't have the people you used to. Willing servants are stretched thin across too many committees.

Your best leaders will leave if you don't fix this. Layers of approval frustrate the people you most need to keep.

Your mission field is closer to the edge than the center. A flat structure empowers those closest to the need.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Four Questions Everyone Should Be Able to Answer

- 1 Who do I ask for permission to act on behalf of the church?
- 2 What's approved — and what's prohibited?
- 3 What do we expect of those who lead a ministry?
- 4 How do I grow as a faithful member of this community?

THE DEEPER PRINCIPLE

Responsibility · Authority · Accountability — Together

Responsibility

What outcome are we asking this ministry to produce, for whom?

Authority

The authorization to do what's necessary — within our values and resources — to fulfill that responsibility

Accountability

How we'll know whether it worked

THE UNIFIED BOARD MODEL

One Board. One Job: Governance.

The Unified Board absorbs the governance work once scattered across Trustees, Finance, SPRC, and Church Council. Budgets still get built. Buildings still get maintained. But that's management — delegated to staff, inside policy boundaries the Board has set.

WHO SERVES

Size, Composition & Confidentiality

6–15

Size

Fewer can't sustain
real conversation;
more loses focus



Composition

Gifted in listening &
discernment, committed to
the mission, representative
of the congregation —
especially newer members
showing real commitment



Confidentiality

Meetings are open,
except personnel
matters — Board
members only

A SAMPLE ELEVEN-MEMBER BOARD

Who Sits at the Table

1 Board Chair

1 Lead Pastor

3 Gifted in Finance / Facilities

3 Gifted in Staffing / Interpersonal Relationships

3 For Demographic Balance

 **Terms:** 3–4 years, staggered rotation, maximum two consecutive terms

THE PART THAT SURPRISES PEOPLE

3–6

times a year, not monthly

Four to five hours per meeting, ideally off-site

Meeting less — and staying focused — keeps the Board from drifting into management. If meeting less feels risky, that's a sign your Board is doing management, not governance.

THE ANNUAL RHYTHM

Five Meetings, One Governance Calendar

1	Looking Up	Orient to mission, vision & values
2	Looking Back	Evaluate last year's goals
3	Looking Around	An honest snapshot, right now
4	Looking Forward	Set goals & the budget to match
5	Church Conference	Report to & hear from the whole congregation; elect new members

Between meetings: Town Halls, Focus Groups, and Informal Conversations keep the Board connected to the congregation.

MEETING ONE — JANUARY

“Looking Up”: First Meeting of the Unified Board



Introduction of the new officers



Review of the mission, vision, and values of the congregation



Role of each person on the board and how they work together for the benefit of the mission



Review of the boundaries/policies to ensure they are all up to date

SAMPLE AGENDA

“Looking Up” Meeting

Agenda Item	Facilitator	Time
Relationship Grounding	—	20 min
Bible Study on Discipleship	Pastor	40 min
Review of Mission / Vision / Core Values	Chair	90 min
Lunch or Dinner	—	45 min
Our Role as a Unified Board	Chair	60 min
Reflections from Board Members	—	40 min
Devotional Sending	Pastor	5 min

Simple Governance, p. 218

MEETING TWO — APRIL

“Looking Back”



Evaluation of the past year (statistical reports, financial reports, etc.)



Honest assessment of goals



What celebrations and/or revisions should be made to ensure we are fulfilling our mission

MEETING THREE — JULY (NEW APPOINTMENT YEAR)

“Looking Around”



What are the current strengths and challenges in the congregation?



What new forces are emerging in our congregation that we should be attending to?



What is happening in our community that may have an impact on the congregation?

MEETING FOUR — OCTOBER (CHURCH CONFERENCE SEASON)

“Looking Forward”



Setting goals for the coming year

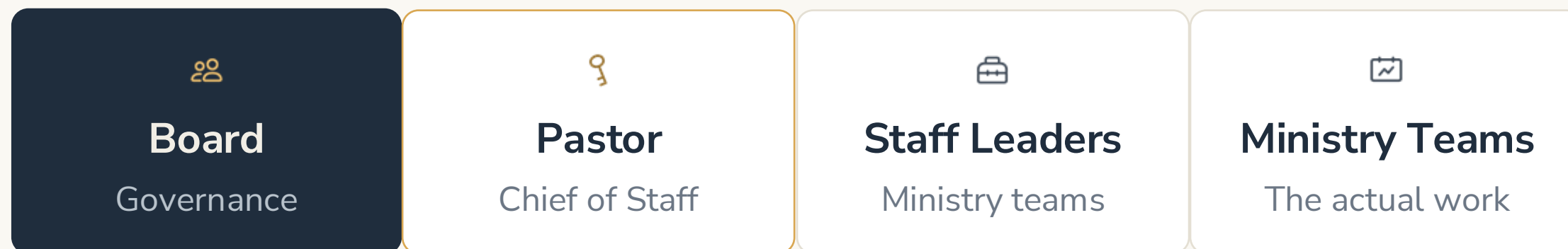


What new mission, if any, is God calling us to achieve now?

What do we need to stop doing in order to do what is needed now?

ONE CLEAR LINE

The Pastor as Chief of Staff



One line of accountability, not a maze of overlapping committees. The Board holds the Pastor accountable for the whole organization — and the Pastor, functioning like a chief of staff, holds every staff leader (paid or unpaid) accountable underneath.

MAKING IT CONCRETE

A New Wednesday-Night Program

OLD STRUCTURE

- Sign-off from Christian Ed
- Facilities request to Trustees
- Line item from Finance
- Report to Church Council

Four rooms. Four calendars.

Weeks of waiting.

UNIFIED BOARD MODEL

Leader already knows the policy boundaries: budget range, facility-use, safe-sanctuary. Fits inside them?

Check with the pastor and start.
Bigger than the boundaries? Pastor brings it to the Board.

One conversation, not four.



DROP IT IN THE CHAT

Think of one ministry leader in your church right now. Walk the “old path” their last new idea had to travel through your current structure.

How many rooms did it pass through before it got a yes or a no? Type the number.

SECTION 6 — DISCERNING & SETTING STRATEGIC BOUNDARIES

**Simplifying the board is only
half the equation.**

You can redraw the org chart perfectly and still fail if
your leaders don't also change how they lead.

SHIFT ONE

From Approval-Seeking to Policy Governance



Approval-Seeking

Board controls every decision,
case by case



Policy Governance

Board sets boundaries once; staff
leads within them

By setting policy, the Board delegates management authority to staff. Inside Board-approved boundaries, they ~~operate~~ without additional approvals — a permission-giving culture, not a control culture.

SHIFT TWO

From Recruiting to Calling

RECRUITING

A box on the chart to fill — keep asking until someone gives in

CALLING

A clear Responsibility, Authority & Accountability description — before you ever approach a person

A calling / position description names:

- Intended benefit
- Time estimate
- Budget / facilities granted
- Required qualities
- Who they're accountable to
- Room for “no” as a real answer

SHIFT THREE

From Paid/Unpaid to Staff/Disciple

We stop organizing by paid-versus-volunteer and start organizing by function. As our Bishop reminds us, “volunteer” is unbiblical — we are all disciples.

Lead a team in ministry? You're “staff”
— whether or not you draw a paycheck.

Doing direct, hands-on ministry? You're
a disciple in ministry — paid or not.

TWO QUESTIONS PEOPLE ALWAYS ASK

How Are Board Members & Ministry Teams Formed?



Board Members

Follow the call system. A Committee on Leadership Development and Nominations still exists. Board members are elected by the Church Conference.



Ministry Teams

Created based on need and gifts — e.g. a Building Ministry Team, within Board-set guidelines. No nomination or election required.

TAKE THIS BACK TO YOUR BOARD

A Quick Self-Check

For each shift: are we doing this, or still doing the old thing with new language?

- ☉ Do we have written policies that empower staff, or still require case-by-case approval dressed up as “policy”?

Did our last three leaders get called — with a clear RAA description

- ☉ — or recruited to fill a box on a chart?
- ☉ Do we talk about “paid staff and volunteers,” or about staff and disciples, regardless of paycheck?

SECTION 7 — A REALISTIC ON-RAMP

Where Do We Start?

- 1 Name the problem out loud.** Ask: how much of tonight was
- 2 Audit your meetings against the four questions** from Section 4.
- 3 Start writing policy instead of approving requests.** Pick one
- 4 Pilot the calling process** next time you need a leader. Write the
- 5 Talk with your DS**

SECTION 8 — WHY IS THIS WORTH THE DISRUPTION?

Three Tangible Benefits



Prevents Burnout

Flatten the structure and remove the single biggest reason gifted leaders walk away.



Faster Response

One conversation instead of four — a church that can pivot the same month, not the same year.



Refocuses Pastoral Time

Chief-of-staff instead of the last stop in a four-committee chain — time given back to shepherding.

SECTION 9 — CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

**Keep It Flat. Keep It Simple. Keep It Focused
on Mission.**

“The real measure of a disciple, of a ministry, or of a congregation, is impact... Our work as leaders is not to preserve these things, but to spend them on the impact they have in their place and time.”

— Simple Governance, p. 206



THE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

**Is your current structure a barrier
to your mission field, or a bridge
to it?**



Questions & Discussion

Use the Q&A panel to submit a question.