

Thought Leadership Series

Choosing Your Church Governance Structure

Why the Structure You Choose Matters and How to Choose It for the Right Reasons

Every church has a governance structure. The question is whether it was chosen deliberately or accumulated by default. This piece is for church leaders who want to think carefully about that question: what the primary governance models look like, what each one requires, and how to evaluate which structure is right for the church they are building or leading today.

The Structure Question Most Churches Answer Too Casually

Governance structure is not a back-office decision. It determines who has authority, who has accountability, and what happens when those two things come into conflict.

Most churches arrive at their governance structure the way families arrive at household rules; gradually, informally, and largely in response to whatever situation presented itself most recently. A church plants with a founding pastor and a handful of trusted friends who function as an informal board. It grows, adds staff, and at some point, someone suggests they should probably have elders. A donor leaves a significant gift and someone realizes they need trustees. A conflict arises and it becomes clear that no one is quite sure who has authority to resolve it.

By the time most churches address governance structure seriously, they are typically doing so in response to a problem rather than in preparation for health. The structure they end up with reflects the history of what they have survived rather than a deliberate decision about how they want to be governed.

This is understandable. It is also costly. Governance structure determines who holds authority over whom, how accountability flows, what happens when the lead pastor and the board disagree, who owns the property, who approves the budget, and who has the standing to act when something goes seriously wrong. These are not administrative details. They are the foundational questions of institutional life and the answers embedded in a church's structure shape every significant decision it will ever make.

A church that has never deliberately chosen its governance structure has still chosen one. It has simply chosen it by accident and will live with the consequences of that accident until it chooses more carefully.

The Variables That Define Every Governance Structure

Most governance conversations in churches focus on titles. The more important questions are about authority, accountability, and the relationships between the people who hold them.

When a church sits down to think seriously about governance structure, the conversation typically gets lost in terminology; elders versus deacons, trustees versus directors, session versus vestry. These distinctions matter, but

they are downstream of three more fundamental variables that actually determine how a governance structure functions.

Variable 1: The Lead Pastor's Relationship to the Elder Board

Whether the lead pastor serves as a member of the elder board or is accountable to it as a non-member is one of the most consequential structural decisions a church makes. A pastor who sits on the board participates in its deliberations, votes on its decisions, and holds authority both as a board member and as the church's senior staff leader. A pastor who is accountable to the board but not a member of it has a cleaner separation between governance authority and operational leadership. The board retains unambiguous authority to evaluate, hold accountable, and if necessary, remove the pastor without the complications that arise when the subject of review is also a voting member of the reviewing body.

Neither model is inherently superior. Each has legitimate theological grounding and practical advantages. But the choice shapes every accountability conversation the board will ever have with the pastor, and most churches make it without fully understanding what they are choosing.

Variable 2: Whether Elders and Trustees Are the Same Body or Separate

In some governance structures, the elder board holds both spiritual oversight and fiduciary/legal responsibility. In others, these functions are separated. Elders provide spiritual and governance oversight while a distinct trustee board holds legal title to property, approves financial controls, and manages institutional compliance. Combining the functions in one body simplifies structure and reduces the coordination required between boards. Separating them creates clearer role definition and prevents the same group of people from being simultaneously responsible for both spiritual direction and financial governance, which in larger or more complex churches can create conflicts of focus.

Variable 3: Whether and How Deacons Fit

The presence or absence of a deacon ministry, and where it sits in the accountability structure, rounds out the primary governance variables. Some churches have no formal deacon body and assign servant ministry functions directly through staff or ministry volunteers. Others have a deacon board that reports to the elder board. Others have deacons aligned with specific staff ministry areas. Each configuration creates different dynamics around how practical ministry is authorized, supported, and held accountable. Each requires its own clarity about the boundary between servant ministry and governance authority.

The most important governance decisions a church makes are rarely about titles. They are about the lines of authority and accountability that titles sit within; and those lines need to be drawn deliberately, not inherited by default.

The One Principle Every Structure Must Preserve

Governance models vary. The principle of upward accountability does not.

Across every legitimate governance model, one structural principle is non-negotiable: no one should be accountable to someone who is simultaneously accountable to them. This sounds obvious. It is violated constantly. The most common version is a lead pastor who serves on the elder board responsible for evaluating and, if necessary, removing them. The pastor participates in deliberations about their own performance. Their vote is cast on decisions about their own accountability. The board's ability to exercise independent governance judgment is compromised before any specific situation arises.

A second common version involves staff members who hold elder or trustee positions while remaining employees of the church. They are simultaneously accountable to the governing body as staff and members of the governing body itself. This is a circular accountability structure regardless of how healthy the relationships appear. It does not become a governance problem when things go wrong. It is a governance problem from the moment it is created.

The Trustee Distinction

Trustees occupy a specific legal role that is worth understanding clearly regardless of governance model. In most states, the trustee board or its equivalent holds legal title to the church's property and bears personal fiduciary responsibility for the organization's financial integrity. This is not a ceremonial function. Trustees who approve a budget without adequate review, who allow financial controls to lapse, or who fail to act on known financial misconduct may bear personal legal liability for the consequences. The trustee role deserves to be filled with people who understand what they are accepting; not simply with reliable volunteers who are willing to sign documents.

Matching Structure to Size

The governance structure that serves a church of 80 is not the structure that serves a church of 800. Building for where you are is wise. Building for where you are going is wiser.

Structure should be appropriate to organizational complexity, and that complexity changes as a church grows. A lean structure combining elder and trustee functions works well for a church plant where decisions are made in real time by a small trusted group. That same structure, unchanged, becomes a governance liability for a church with multiple staff, significant property, and a substantial budget. The churches that navigate governance transitions well treat their structure as a living framework: reviewed periodically against actual complexity and updated deliberately. The churches that do not navigate them well outgrow their structure without noticing, until a crisis makes the inadequacy impossible to ignore.

The relevant question at any stage is not whether the current structure has worked in the past. It is whether the current structure is adequate for the decisions the church is making now and the complexity it is likely to face in the next three to five years. A structure that is perpetually catching up to the church's reality is a structure that will consistently fail at the worst possible moments.

Build for where you are going, not only for where you are. A governance structure that was adequate yesterday and adequate today may be the church's greatest institutional vulnerability tomorrow.

A Diagnostic for Church Leadership

These questions are designed to surface whether your current governance structure reflects a deliberate decision or an accumulated default.

Work through these as a leadership team; elder board, pastoral staff, and trustees together if possible. The goal is not to find fault with the current structure but to assess honestly whether it is serving the church well and whether it is prepared for what the church will face next.

- ▶ Can your leadership articulate, clearly and consistently, why your church's governance structure is configured the way it is? Or did it evolve without a deliberate decision?
- ▶ Is the accountability relationship between your lead pastor and your elder board unambiguous? Does every board member understand it the same way; and does the pastor?
- ▶ Are there any circular accountability relationships in your current structure, staff members serving on the boards that govern them, or board members who report to someone they also oversee?
- ▶ Do your trustees understand the legal and fiduciary weight of their role, or does the trustee board function primarily as a signing authority for decisions made elsewhere?
- ▶ Is your current governance structure adequate for the complexity your church operates with today and for the complexity you anticipate in the next three to five years?
- ▶ If a serious governance crisis arose tomorrow; a pastoral concern, a financial irregularity, a significant conflict between boards does your structure give someone the clear authority to act? Does everyone know who that is?

If these questions surface significant uncertainty, the issue is almost never the people currently serving in governance roles. It is the absence of a deliberate structural framework within which those people can exercise their authority clearly and exercise their accountability reliably. That framework is buildable and building it before a crisis is significantly less costly than rebuilding it during one.

Ready to Choose Your Structure Deliberately?

The Choosing Your Church Governance Structure Reference Guide moves from these questions to practical tools. It includes:

- Definitions for all key governance roles; elders, trustees, lead pastor, pastoral staff, non-pastoral staff, and deacons
- Six detailed governance model profiles with reporting lines, best-fit scenarios, and watch-outs for each
- A staged pathway recommendation; launch, growth, and established congregation
- What your governing documents must address to make any model function well

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