

Thought Leadership Series

Right-Sizing Your Leadership

The Question Is Not How Many Positions Your Governance Model Requires. It Is Whether You Have the People to Fill Them Well.

Every governance model has positions, but having the right model is only part of the equation. What most governance frameworks do not address is how many people a church actually needs in each role at any given stage of its development, and what happens when the number of qualified, available people does not match what the structure requires. Getting that number right is not a bureaucratic exercise. It is a precondition for governance that actually functions.

Two Failure Modes

Churches tend to err in one of two directions. Both produce governance problems, and both are avoidable.

Too Few: Governance Stretched Thin

Under-governed churches are more common than over-governed ones. The symptoms are recognizable: elders who are managing ministry operations because there is no one else, trustees who are approving transactions without adequate review because the board cannot achieve quorum, deacons who are carrying more servant ministry responsibility than any sustainable volunteer commitment allows. Each person in the structure is doing their job and more, which means none of them is doing their job well.

The deeper problem with under-governance is that it concentrates institutional risk. When one elder holds the institutional knowledge for a critical governance function, or one trustee manages the relationship with the church's legal and financial advisors, the church is one departure away from a significant gap. That is not stewardship. It is fragility dressed as efficiency.

Too Many: Governance Without Traction

Over-governed churches present a different problem. A governing board large enough that individual members feel diffused of responsibility, where achieving consensus requires managing a dozen competing perspectives, where the board's size signals importance rather than serving a governance function, is not more accountable than a smaller one. It is less. Governance requires deliberation, not crowd size. A board that cannot make a decision clearly and execute it cleanly has a capacity problem regardless of how many people are sitting at the table.

The right number of elders is not the largest number the bylaws permit or the smallest number that keeps the board from being a genuine check on pastoral leadership. It is the number required to exercise genuine collective governance over the congregation as it actually exists today.

Sizing Guidelines by Congregation Size

These are ranges, not prescriptions. The right number for your church depends on the complexity of your ministry, the depth of your qualified candidate pool, and the governance model you have adopted.

Congregation Size	Elders	Trustees*	Deacons	Ministry Directors	Key Staff
Under 100	2–3	2–3 (or combined with elders)	0–2	0–1	0–1
100–200	3–4	3 (or combined)	2–4	1–2	1–2
200–400	4–6	3–5	4–6	2–4	2–3
400–700	5–7	4–5	6–8	4–6	3–5
700+	6–9	5–7	8+	6+	5+

** In governance models where elders and trustees are the same body, use the elder range. The trustee range applies only where the boards are separate.*

These Are Governance Positions, Not Headcount Targets

The ranges above describe adequate governance capacity at each size range. They are not targets to fill for their own sake. A church of 250 with four deeply qualified, actively engaged elders is better governed than a church of 250 with six elders, two of whom attend infrequently and one of whom has not reviewed a financial statement in eighteen months. Quality and engagement matter more than number.

What Drives the Number

Attendance is the starting point, not the full picture. Three additional factors shape how many governance leaders a church actually needs.

Ministry Complexity

A congregation of 300 running weekend services, a children’s ministry, a student ministry, a benevolence program, a small groups structure, and a facility of its own requires more governance and operational leadership than a congregation of 300 that meets in a school, runs one primary service, and has two structured ministry areas. Ministry complexity drives the demand for both governance oversight and operational direction. Churches that are adding ministry programs without adding corresponding leadership capacity are building a gap they will eventually feel.

Budget Size and Financial Complexity

A church whose annual budget exceeds \$500,000 has financial governance demands that a church with a \$150,000 budget does not. The trustee function scales with financial complexity: more transactions, more vendors, more staff payroll, more compliance requirements, and more fiduciary exposure all require more trustee capacity to manage adequately. A single trustee reviewing financial statements for a church with a \$1.2 million budget and a construction project in progress is not adequate oversight regardless of how competent that trustee is.

Qualified Candidate Availability

Governance positions filled by people who are not qualified for them are worse than unfilled positions. An elder who has not met the biblical qualification standard undermines the integrity of the board. A trustee who does not understand fiduciary responsibility creates institutional exposure. A deacon who was recognized without a qualification process may function well or may not, but the church has no structural basis for knowing the difference. The availability of qualified candidates is a real constraint that should shape the size of the governance structure, not be overridden by it.

A church that expands its elder board to eight because the bylaws allow it, and then cannot find eight qualified candidates, has not expanded its governance capacity. It has diluted it.

When the Structure Outgrows the People

The right response to a governance capacity gap is not to lower the standard. It is to build toward it.

Most churches experience periods where the governance structure they need exceeds the qualified candidates they currently have. That is a normal feature of growth. The question is how the church responds to the gap. There are two common responses, one of which serves the church and one of which does not.

The Wrong Response: Filling Positions to Complete the Chart

Churches that feel the pressure to fill governance positions often lower the qualification threshold without acknowledging that is what they are doing. An elder is recognized because they are trusted and available rather than because they have been assessed against the biblical standard. A trustee is appointed because they have business experience rather than because they understand fiduciary responsibility in a nonprofit context. The positions are filled. The governance capacity is not.

The Right Response: Building the Pipeline

The sustainable response to a governance capacity gap is intentional leadership development. The elder board identifies people in the congregation who show potential for governance leadership and invests in developing them over time. The lead pastor builds relationships with potential trustee candidates and helps them understand what the role requires before the need is acute. The deacon ministry creates pathways for servant leaders to grow into recognized roles. None of this is fast. All of it is the work that produces a governance structure that can actually sustain the church across leadership transitions and seasons of growth.

The Succession Question

Right-sizing governance is not only about the present. It is about whether the church has enough depth in its leadership pipeline to sustain governance quality through natural transitions. An elder board where three of five members are within five years of the same likely transition point has a succession gap that the current board should be actively addressing. Governance capacity planning is a long-term responsibility, not a reactive one.

A Diagnostic for Lead Pastors and Elder Boards

These questions are designed to surface whether your church's governance structure is adequately sized for the congregation it is governing today.

- ▶ Does your current elder board have adequate capacity to exercise genuine governance oversight of the congregation as it exists today, or are individual elders stretched across more responsibility than the role was designed to carry?
- ▶ Is your trustee board sized appropriately for your current budget, financial complexity, and property obligations? Could it achieve quorum for an urgent vote if needed?
- ▶ Are there governance positions currently filled by people who would not have been recognized under a rigorous qualification process?
- ▶ Is there a ministry area, governance function, or operational responsibility that currently depends on a single person whose departure would leave a significant gap?
- ▶ Does your church have an identifiable pipeline of people being developed toward governance leadership roles, or does the candidate pool only surface when a position needs to be filled?
- ▶ When did your leadership team last formally assess whether the size and composition of each governance board is appropriate to the church's current size and complexity?

If these questions surface meaningful gaps, the work is not organizational housekeeping. It is the governance investment that protects the ministry, sustains the leadership, and builds the institutional capacity the congregation deserves.

Stewardship Advisors Can Help

Stewardship Advisors works with church leadership teams to assess governance capacity, right-size board composition, and build the leadership pipelines that sustain governance quality across seasons of growth. Contact us to schedule a complimentary discovery conversation.

Available at stewardshipadvisors.co/resources

This piece is part of the Stewardship Advisors Thought Leadership Series. Visit our resources page for the full library.