

A COMPANION TO THE CHURCH RESOURCE HUB

The Pastor's Handbook

A field guide for leading a local church

Print edition, July 2026

The living edition, with every tool linked, is at pastorhandbook.vercel.app

Part of Doing Church Together · doingchurchtogether.org

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Most pastoral books explain why ministry matters or tell you how it went for someone else. This one is operational: how a congregation actually runs, week to week and year to year, with the steps written out and the documents attached. Every chapter teaches one piece of the work, walks through how to do it, tells a real story of how it went at a real church, and then hands you the exact tool to use, linked straight to the Church Resource Hub at churchresourcehub.github.io. The book is the map; the hub is the toolbox.

It is written for the first-time or newly appointed pastor who was handed a church and not much else, and close behind, for Course of Study students, local pastors, second-career pastors, and lay leaders running ministries without training. It assumes you are intelligent and assumes nothing else. United Methodist polity is woven in where it matters, set off in boxed Polity Notes so a reader from any tradition can skip past them without losing the thread.

In this print edition, every tool link appears as a live address that works from a PDF reader and can be typed from paper. The digital edition at pastorhandbook.vercel.app always carries the current text.

Contents

PART I • THE PASTOR

- 1 The Call and the Cost
- 2 The Pastor's Triangle
- 3 Know Your Drift, Staff Your Gaps
- 4 A Sustainable Inner Life
- 5 Your First 90 Days

PART II • THE CHURCH

- 6 The Church House
- 7 How a Church Is Organized
- 8 Reading Your Context
- 9 Ministry Lanes

PART III • WORSHIP AND THE WORD

- 10 Word, Table, Order, and Service
- 11 Planning the Worship Year
- 12 Preaching and the Preaching Calendar
- 13 The Sacraments
- 14 Music and the Arts in Worship
- 15 The Unglamorous Rooms

PART IV • CARING FOR PEOPLE

- 16 A Congregational Care System
- 17 The Holy Moments
- 18 Welcoming and Keeping New People
- 19 Safe Sanctuaries

PART V • FORMING DISCIPLES

- 20 The Christian Life
- 21 Children and Youth

- 22 Adult Discipleship and Small Groups
- 23 Confirmation and the Milestones of Faith

PART VI • TURNING OUTWARD

- 24 Building a Missions Strategy
- 25 Fundraisers, Events, and Outreach
- 26 Starting Something New

PART VII • RUNNING THE CHURCH

- 27 Money
- 28 People
- 29 Property, Safety, and Risk
- 30 Communications

PART VIII • LEADING CHANGE AND THE LONG VIEW

- 31 Casting Vision and a Vision Process
- 32 Conflict, Decline, and Disaffiliation
- 33 A Two-Year Case Study
- 34 Playing the Long Game

PART I

The Pastor



The Call and the Cost

Somewhere in the first year, usually late at night after a meeting that went sideways or a Sunday that landed flat, a new pastor asks a question they are embarrassed to say out loud: am I allowed to admit that this is hard? The question hides because the call felt so clear at the beginning, and it seems ungrateful to complain about something you asked God to let you do. So let this book begin by answering it plainly. Yes, the work is hard, the difficulty is not a sign that you misheard the call, and the pastors who last are not the ones who never feel the weight. They are the ones who learn what the weight actually is and build a life that can carry it.

What the call is

The church has always understood a call to ministry as two callings that confirm each other. There is the inward call, the persistent pull you could not explain away, the sense in prayer or in service or in someone else's need that God was asking for your working life and not just your Sunday attendance. And there is the outward call, the church's side of the conversation, when a congregation, a mentor, a district committee, or a bishop looks at you and says out loud that they see the gifts too. Neither one alone is enough. An inward call with no outward confirmation drifts toward self-appointment, and an outward call with no inward fire produces clergy who are competent and hollow. If you are reading this as a licensed or appointed pastor, both callings have already spoken over you, and on the days when you doubt the first one, the second one is allowed to hold you up. The church examined you and said yes. That was not a clerical error.

It helps to be honest about what the call is a call to, because the office is bigger than its most visible hour. United Methodists name the pastoral office as a ministry of Word, Table, Order, and Service: proclaiming and teaching the Scriptures, leading worship and the sacraments, ordering the life of the congregation, and serving the world beyond it. Chapter 10 unpacks those four callings as a framework for worship, but notice now what the list means for your job description. Preaching is in there, and so is the budget meeting. The hospital room is in there, and so is the trustee walkthrough of a leaky roof. None of it is a distraction from your real ministry. It is all the one ministry, and the pastors who resent the Order and Service half of the call sentence themselves to resenting half of every week.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The United Methodist Church orders ministry through several doors, and it matters which one you are standing in. Candidacy for licensed or ordained ministry begins with the process in ¶310 of the Book of Discipline, under the care of a district committee. Local pastors are licensed for pastoral ministry (¶¶315-316) and complete the Course of Study as their theological education (¶318), while elders are ordained to a lifetime of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service after seminary and provisional membership (¶¶330-335). A licensed local pastor carries nearly the full work of a pastor within the charge to which they are appointed, including the sacraments there. If you are unsure where you sit in that system, your district superintendent is the right first phone call, and asking early saves years.

What the call costs

Nobody is served by a recruiting pitch that hides the price tag, so here is the honest one. The pastorate will cost you geographic stability, because United Methodist pastors go where they are sent, and every move that serves the connection uproots a family that did not choose it. It will cost you a certain kind of friendship inside the congregation, because even the warmest church relationship carries the office in it somewhere, and you will need people who love you with no stake in your performance. The weekly deadline never retires either; the sermon is due again every seven days forever, and a congregation's needs do not pause because you did well last month. There are tears you have not planned for, because you will bury people you love, and you will carry confidences that can never be set down in public. And your family now lives in a lighted window, because fair or not, people watch.

There is also a subtler cost that catches new pastors off guard: the work is never validated the way other work is. A good quarter does not close. A soul is not a deliverable. You can pour a faithful year into a congregation and watch the attendance number stay flat, and you can coast for a season and watch it rise for reasons that had nothing to do with you. If your sense of worth rides on visible results, this vocation will starve it. That is not a design flaw. It is the design, pushing you back toward the only foundation that holds, which is that you are a beloved child of God who has been given work to do, and the work belongs to God before it belongs to you.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's two-year history opens with the bill already on the table. In 2024 a disaffiliation season cost the congregation about 117 families, roughly forty percent of its membership, and more than \$650,000 in annual household giving, and the new pastor arrived that July to a budget rewritten around a projected deficit of nearly half a million dollars, a staff cut almost in half, and committees that had lost their chairs. The instructive part is the posture the church chose. The pastor's end-of-summer report named it "a season of discovery" rather than a season of rescue, and the first months went to preaching, learning names, and rebuilding the leadership teams, with 38 lay people stepping into the vacant seats by year's end. The cost was real and publicly counted, and the church outlived it. The whole account is linked in the tools below.

How to last

Longevity in ministry is not a personality trait. It is a set of habits and relationships, most of which are built early or not at all, and the research on clergy burnout keeps pointing at the same few load-bearing walls. Pastors last when their relationship with God has a life outside their job, when their calendar has a weekly rest that actually rests, when they have people who can hear the unfiltered truth, and when their family was consulted about the life rather than conscripted into it. Chapter 4 builds the whole sustainable inner life in detail. What belongs here, at the front door of the book, is the warning that none of those walls builds itself. The congregation will take what you offer and ask for more, not because it is cruel but because its needs are genuinely endless, and an endless need meeting an unguarded life is how a calling becomes a casualty.

The other half of lasting is theological, and it is the most freeing sentence in this chapter: the church was Christ's before you arrived, and it will be Christ's after you leave. You are not the messiah of your congregation, and on your best Sunday you are a servant pointing past yourself. Pastors who forget that spend themselves trying to hold up a sky that was never theirs to hold, and pastors who remember it can sleep on Saturday night, take their day off without guilt, and preach grace they actually believe applies to them too.

! WATCH OUT

Beware the savior reflex. It looks like devotion: answering every call personally and holding every ministry together yourself, always the last one out of the building. Within two years it produces an exhausted pastor and a congregation trained to be passive, and the whole arrangement collapses the day you are appointed elsewhere. The goal of your ministry is a congregation that thrives because of what God built through you, not one that needs you the way a patient needs a ventilator.

Settling into the office

Here is a short walkthrough for the season you are in right now, whether that is candidacy, a first appointment, or a return to this question twenty years in.

1

Write your call story in one page.

Put down where the inward call first spoke, who confirmed it out loud, and what you said yes to. Date it and keep it where you can find it, because there will be a Tuesday when you need to reread it, and the version you write now, before the office complicates it, is the honest one.

2

Place yourself on the credential map.

Know which door you are standing in: certified candidate, licensed local pastor, Course of Study student, provisional member, ordained elder or deacon. Each has its own requirements and its own timeline, and drift here is expensive. If anything is unclear, call your district superintendent or your conference Board of Ordained Ministry registrar this week.

3

Recruit your three people.

A mentor who has done the job longer than you, a peer or cohort who is doing it now, and a friend or counselor with no connection to your church at all. The first two give you wisdom and company; the third gives you a place where you are not the pastor.

4

Set the two anchors before the calendar fills.

A daily time of prayer that is not sermon preparation, and a weekly day of rest that your congregation knows about. These go on the calendar first, in your first week, because no season of ministry will ever volunteer the space for them later.

5

Tell your family the truth about the season.

Name what this appointment will ask of them, what nights belong to the church, and what is protected. A family that helped draw the boundaries will help defend them, and a family that discovers them by disappointment will not.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

This week, write the one-page call story from step one and share it with one person who knew you before you were a pastor. Saying it to someone who remembers the before is the fastest way to notice what has stayed true.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What has the call cost you so far that nobody warned you about, and what has kept you in it anyway? Answer both halves. A cohort that only rehearses the costs talks itself out of the vocation, and one that only rehearses the joys is not telling the truth.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Write the one-page call story this week. Everything else in this book is built on the assumption that you know why you said yes, and that page is where you keep the answer.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[The Pastor's Roles \(PDF\)](#)

Original pages from the Pastoral Ministry guide mapping the pastor's work, a companion to this chapter's picture of the office.

[Word, Table, Order, and Service \(Word\)](#)

The four callings of an ordained Elder and a self-audit on where the week actually goes.

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The honest worked example this book returns to, beginning with the costs counted in this chapter.

[The Book of Discipline online \(umc.org\)](#)

The current Discipline, for every paragraph this book cites.

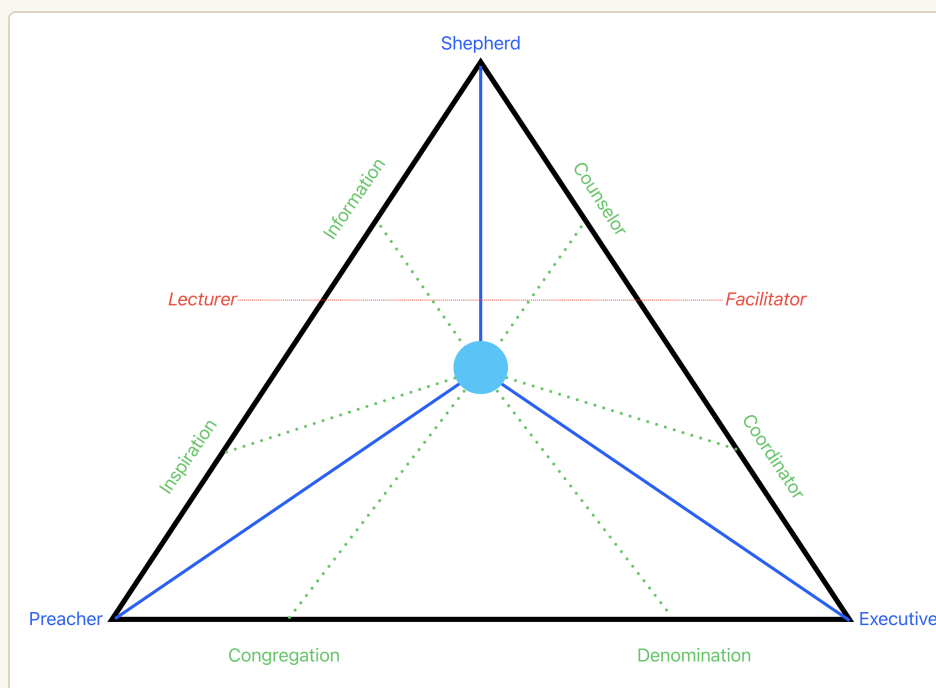
The Pastor's Triangle

A pastor in her second year told her staff-parish committee that she was tired, and the committee, who liked her, said what committees usually say: you seem busy, maybe you should take your day off. Both halves of that sentence were true and neither was the problem. The problem was that her weeks had quietly become one long chain of meetings and building decisions, her sermon was getting written on Saturday night, and she had not made a hospital visit in a month. Nobody chose that arrangement. It happened the way weather happens, and without a shared way to see it, the conversation could not get past *busy*. This chapter gives you the picture that makes that conversation possible.

Three pulls on one person

The work of a pastor is really three different jobs wearing one robe, and each of the three pulls on you every week. The Pastor's Triangle is a way to see those pulls clearly, to name what each one asks of you, and to keep any one of them from quietly swallowing the others. Most clergy burnout is not a failure of effort. It is what happens when one corner of the work expands until it crowds out the rest, usually without the pastor noticing until the neglected corners start to hurt.

◆ THE FRAMEWORK



The Pastor's Triangle, from Pastoral Ministry: Systems, Processes, and Resources (2024).

Three corners: the Shepherd who cares for people one at a time, the Preacher who proclaims to the gathered church, and the Executive who leads the institution. A teaching line crosses the middle, and a blue dot marks the hypothetical center where a perfectly balanced pastor would live. Nobody lives there, and the framework's whole usefulness begins the moment you admit where you actually live instead.

↓ GRAB THIS

[The Pastor's Triangle \(Word\)](#): the full framework document behind this chapter, ready to print for your own desk or hand to your staff-parish committee.

The Shepherd

The Shepherd cares for people one at a time. This is the ministry of presence: hospital rooms and living rooms, the homebound list, one-on-one meetings, phone calls and letters, pre-marital counseling, and the holy moments of weddings, funerals, and baptisms. The Shepherd's orientation is toward the congregation, and its currency is counsel, knowing the people and being known by them. When this corner is neglected, the church feels uncared for, and members can forgive a thin sermon far more easily than an absent pastor at a bedside. When it is overdone, the pastor is consumed by reactive crisis work

and never plans, never studies, and never leads, because someone always needs something and the Shepherd cannot say no.

The Preacher

The Preacher proclaims. This is the pulpit and everything behind it: choosing texts and themes, study, writing, and the weekly act of preaching itself. Preaching is more than conveying facts about the Bible and more than a motivational talk. It is meant to be a vehicle for divine inspiration that leads to transformed lives, and that transformation tends to come through the habit of sitting under preaching regularly over years, not through one great sermon. The Preacher's currency is inspiration. When this corner is neglected, worship goes thin and the congregation slowly stops inviting people. When it is overdone, the pastor becomes a performer, polished in the pulpit and disconnected from the people in the pews.

The Executive

The Executive leads the institution. This is administration and supervision: staff, committees, budgets, buildings, calendars, and the coordination that keeps every other ministry running. The Executive's orientation reaches toward the denomination as well as the congregation, because part of this work is keeping the church's ministry aligned with its larger connection. Its currency is coordination. When this corner is neglected, the organization frays, and good ministries stall for lack of support, money, or a decision. When it is overdone, the pastor becomes a manager who has stopped shepherding and stopped preaching, running a nonprofit that happens to meet on Sundays.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The Book of Discipline describes the pastor's office as a fourfold ministry of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service, and ¶340 spells out the duties that flow from each. The triangle is a working translation of that paragraph: the Preacher corner carries Word and Sacrament, the Executive corner carries Order, and the Shepherd corner carries much of Service and care. The Discipline also gives your staff-parish relations committee the duty to confer with you about the effectiveness of your ministry (¶258.2g), which is exactly the conversation the triangle is built to serve.

The teaching line

A red line crosses the diagram from Lecturer on one side to Facilitator on the other, and that line is your teaching role. Pastors teach constantly, in Bible studies and confirmation classes and, whether it feels like it or not, in committee meetings. The line names the two modes that teaching takes. The Lecturer delivers content: the prepared study, the doctrinal class, the financial report a committee needs explained. The Facilitator draws the room out: the discussion that finds its own way to the text, the meeting where the leader's job is to surface what the people in the room already know. Good teaching is oscillation, sliding

back and forth along that line as the setting demands. The line runs through the middle of the triangle because teaching happens in every corner, but notice that it is a line and not a corner. Teaching is a mode you move through while doing everything else, not a fourth job.

The blue dot, and why you are not on it

The blue dot in the middle of the diagram is the hypothetical center of pastoral identity. In a perfect world a pastor lives at the center, equally proficient in every corner, floating wherever the situation calls. Paul described that kind of range when he wrote to the Corinthians that he had become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might save some.

The truth is that almost nobody lives at the center. Nearly every pastor has a natural tendency to drift toward one corner and spend most of the week there, and that is not a flaw as long as you know it about yourself. A natural Shepherd will fill the calendar with visits while the budget report sits unread, a natural Preacher will guard fifteen hours of study in a week when the youth director needed one of them, and a natural Executive will run a beautiful meeting on a Tuesday and realize on Friday that no sermon exists. The drift itself is neutral. Unexamined drift is what does the damage, because the corners you neglect do not complain right away. They erode.

Self-awareness turns a natural tendency into a staffing plan. A pastor who lives near one corner needs people close by, on staff and among the laity, who cover the spaces the pastor inhabits less, and the next chapter is entirely about how to build that. For now the discipline is simpler: name your corner out loud. Being a good pastor does not mean living at the center. It means being able to reach every corner when the moment requires it, and knowing which direction you fall when you are tired.

! WATCH OUT

Do not let your drift harden into an identity that excuses the other corners. "I'm a shepherd, not an administrator" sounds like healthy self-knowledge, and it is, right up until it becomes permission to skip the finance report for a year. The congregation still needs all three corners covered. Naming your weak corner obligates you to plan for it; it never excuses you from it.

Congregation on one side, denomination on the other

Along the bottom of the diagram sit two poles, the Congregation and the Denomination, and the triangle is stretched between them. The Shepherd leans hard toward the congregation, since care is always local. The Executive answers partly to the denomination, through charge conference paperwork, apportionments, and the covenant of the connection. The Preacher stands between the two, proclaiming a Word that belongs to the whole church to the particular people in front of you. If you are United

Methodist, you are not a free agent, and the triangle quietly reminds you that some of your work belongs to a body larger than the one that sees you on Sunday.

Running a triangle self-audit

The framework becomes useful the day you check it against a calendar, so here is the walkthrough. It takes about a month at low effort, and pastors who do it are almost always surprised by the result.

1

Log two to four weeks of real time.

Keep a simple running list of what you actually did in each working block: morning, afternoon, evening. Do not clean it up and do not log what you meant to do. The hospital run that ate Tuesday counts, and so does the hour of email.

2

Sort each block into a corner.

Mark every entry Shepherd, Preacher, or Executive, and mark teaching along the line wherever it happened. Some blocks split; estimate. Sermon writing is Preacher, the finance meeting is Executive, the funeral is Shepherd, and the funeral lunch conversation with a grieving son is Shepherd too.

3

Add it up and name your drift.

Total the hours by corner. The big number is your drift corner, and the small one is your dark corner. Say both out loud, because the written totals end the argument you have been having with yourself about where the time goes.

4

Ask the season question.

Is the imbalance what this season of the church's life actually requires, or is it just the corner that shouts loudest? A building program will rightly swell the Executive corner for a year, and a wave of deaths will rightly swell the Shepherd corner for a season. Habit is not a season. Be honest about which one you are looking at.

5

Rebalance with standing appointments.

The neglected corner never wins a daily negotiation against the loud one, so stop negotiating. Put the weak corner on the calendar as a standing block: sermon study every Tuesday morning, visits every Thursday afternoon, administration in one contained window. Protect the block the way you would protect a wedding.

Bring the triangle to your SPRC.

Share the diagram and your totals with your staff-parish committee. The triangle gives the committee shared language for your workload without it becoming personal, and saying the Executive corner is eating everything is far more useful than saying you seem busy. It also lets the committee help you decide what the season actually calls for.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC, on the Alabama Gulf Coast, spent 2024 through 2026 rebuilding after the disaffiliation season took a real toll on its membership and budget, and the church's two-year history records what that did to the pastor's triangle. The rebuild pulled the pastoral work hard into the Executive corner for more than a year: a financial reset, staffing changes, a vision process, and new systems for nearly everything. Some of that swell was the season doing what seasons do, and naming it that way, out loud and with the committee, is what kept it from hardening into a permanent way of working. The counterweights were structural rather than heroic: a preaching calendar planned a year ahead so the pulpit did not live at the mercy of the week, and ministry restructured into clear lanes so that care and programs did not all route through one office. The whole account, wins and mistakes both, is in the case study document linked below.

THE FIRST MOVE

If you are brand new to your appointment, do not audit anything yet. Just start the time log in your first week and let it run quietly while you do the listening tour from chapter 8. By the end of your first month you will have the one document almost no pastor has: a truthful record of where a week in this particular church actually goes. Every conversation the triangle makes possible starts from that page.

What the triangle is for

Keep the diagram somewhere you will see it, because it earns its place in at least four settings. As a self-audit, it asks which corner got the most of you this month and whether that is what the ministry needed or just what the noise demanded. In staff-parish conversations, it turns a vague concern about workload into a picture two people can point at. In a pastoral transition, it lets a congregation name which corner needs strengthening and lets an incoming pastor be honest about which corner she brings. And as a guard against burnout, it gives you the early warning: when one corner has swelled for months and the season does not explain it, the fix is rarely working harder. The fix is rebalancing the triangle, and now you have the picture that shows you where.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which corner do you drift toward when nobody is directing your week, and which corner does your current congregation most need strengthened right now? If those are not the same corner, what is one structural change, a standing block, a delegation, or a lay team, that would cover the gap without pretending you are someone you are not?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Start the time log today. Two columns in a notebook or a note on your phone, the block of time and what you did with it, every working day for two weeks. Do not sort anything yet. The sorting comes later, and it only works if the log is true.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[The Pastor's Triangle \(Word\)](#)

The full framework document: the three corners, the teaching line, and how to use the triangle for self-audit, staff-parish conversations, and guarding against burnout.

[The Pastor's Roles \(PDF\)](#)

Original pages from the Pastoral Ministry guide mapping the pastor's work, with staff supervision rhythms and worship planning resources.

[Word, Table, Order, and Service \(Word\)](#)

The four callings of an ordained Elder, and a self-audit comparing your imagined even split with where the week actually goes.

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The full account of the rebuild described in From the Field, written as an honest worked example rather than a highlight reel.

Know Your Drift, Staff Your Gaps

A church with an open staff position usually hires a version of its pastor. The preacher who lives for the pulpit champions a creative arts hire while the homebound list quietly grows, and the shepherd who lives for the living room hires another warm body for care while the office drowns in unanswered decisions. Nobody does this on purpose. We are all drawn to gifts we recognize, and a candidate who shines in our own strong suit is easy to evaluate and easy to like. The last chapter gave you the triangle and asked you to name your drift. This chapter is about what that self-knowledge is for, which is building a team, staff and laity together, that covers what you do not.

Drift is permanent, so build for it

Chapter 2 ended with a self-audit, and if you ran it, you now know something most pastors never write down: which corner of the ministry gets your best hours and which corner gets your leftovers. The temptation is to treat that finding as a personal improvement project, as if enough discipline would someday deliver you to the blue dot at the center of the triangle, equally strong everywhere. Decades of pastors have tested that plan, and the honest report is that drift does not cure. You can stretch toward your weak corners, and you should, because the office requires you to reach all of them when the moment demands. But your natural lean will still be your natural lean in twenty years, and a wise pastor stops fighting that fact and starts building around it.

Building around it means the goal shifts from a balanced pastor to a balanced ministry. The congregation does not actually need you to be excellent at everything. It needs everything covered, and those are very different problems. The first is impossible, and the second is a staffing plan: an honest map of what the church needs, minus what you genuinely supply, equals what the team around you must carry. Your weak corner stops being a private embarrassment and becomes a job description.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Staff Structure and Org Chart \(PDF\)](#): a real church's staff map, useful as a worksheet for sketching who covers which corner of yours.

Your team is bigger than your payroll

In a large church this chapter reads as hiring advice, and in most churches it cannot, because most churches have a pastor, perhaps a part-time secretary and a musician, and no budget line for anyone else.

The principle holds either way, because the team that covers your gaps was never limited to employees. Every congregation holds retired executives, schoolteachers, nurses, contractors, and quiet organizers whose gifts sit exactly on your weak corner, and the church has a word for this that predates every org chart: the ministry of the laity. A pastor who drifts from the Executive corner does not necessarily need a business manager; she needs a gifted lay leader chairing finance and a trustee who owns the building walkthrough. A pastor weak in the Shepherd corner needs a trained care team making visits, not a guilty conscience. Staffing your gaps often means laying hands on the people God already put in the room.

Delegation of this kind is not the pastor shedding work; it is the pastor doing the deeper work of equipping, which Ephesians describes as the whole point of the pastoral gift. Two rules keep it honest. First, delegate real authority and not just errands, because a care team that must clear every visit through you is not covering your gap, it is decorating it. Second, know what cannot be handed off. The Word and the Table stay with you, and so does the final accountability for the whole. Everything else is a candidate.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The staff-parish relations committee is your structural partner in this chapter. The Discipline charges the SPRC with conferring about the pastor's and staff's effectiveness and with recommending staff positions to the church council (§258.2), which makes the committee the right room for your triangle profile and your coverage map. A pastor who brings the SPRC an honest "here is where I am strong, here is what this church needs covered around me" turns the committee from an annual evaluation panel into a team-building ally, and it gives the committee language for the next staff hire or the next lay leadership push that is about the church's needs rather than the pastor's popularity.

Delegation that develops people

Handing off a corner of the ministry is not a single transaction; it is a small apprenticeship, and the difference between delegation that develops people and delegation that burns them shows up in three habits. The first is training before transfer. A lay leader handed the care ministry with no orientation and no introduction to the homebound members has not been empowered, she has been abandoned, and when she quietly gives up in eight months the lesson the church learns is that laypeople cannot do this work, which was never true. Give every handoff a runway: a season of doing it together, a written picture of what faithfulness in this role looks like, and a standing way to ask questions without it feeling like failure.

The second habit is letting go of the how. If you delegate the men's ministry and then dictate the menu, the schedule, the speaker, and the study book, you have hired an unpaid secretary for your own ideas, and gifted people will not stay in that arrangement. Hold people to the what, the room gets covered and the people get cared for, and release the how to the person carrying it, even when their how is not yours.

Some of it will be better than yours, which is the whole point of staffing your gaps with people unlike you, and some of it will fail, which leads to the third habit: let people fail at a survivable scale without rescuing them or shaming them. A church where a flopped event costs someone their standing will never grow another leader, and a church where the pastor absorbs every failure never learns anything.

One more discipline belongs here because nobody enjoys it: build endings into every role. A term with a named end date is easier to say yes to than a life sentence, and easier to rotate or end gracefully when someone is in the wrong seat. The nominations committee you chair, as chapter 7 will show, is the natural home for this rhythm, and a congregation that rotates leadership on purpose stops depending on the same exhausted ten people chapter 9 is about.

Mapping the gap

The walkthrough below turns the chapter 2 audit into an actual coverage plan. It works in a church of eighty with no staff and a church of eight hundred with twelve, because the currency is coverage rather than headcount.

1

Write your triangle profile in three sentences.

One sentence per corner: what you genuinely supply in Shepherd, in Preacher, in Executive. Be as plain about strength as about weakness, because false modesty ruins the map just as thoroughly as pride.

2

Inventory the current coverage.

For each corner, list who besides you meaningfully carries it today: staff by name, lay leaders by name, teams that function. Some corners will show a crowd. At least one will show mostly you, or mostly nobody.

3

Name the exposed corner in one sentence.

Something like "when I drift, nobody is watching the money," or "if I am consumed, homebound members go unvisited for months." Naming the failure mode tells you exactly what role to build.

4

Write the role before you name a person.

Draft a short description of the coverage the church needs: what this role owns, what authority it carries, who it reports to. Roles written around a specific person collapse when that person moves away, and roles written around the need survive their occupants.

5

Recruit against your own reflection.

When you fill the role, staff or lay, deliberately weigh candidates who are unlike you. The interview that feels slightly uncomfortable, where the candidate's instincts run opposite to yours, is often the one to take seriously. Comfort in hiring is usually similarity wearing a nicer name.

6

Review the map with your SPRC once a year.

Bring the triangle, the coverage list, and the exposed corner to one committee conversation annually. Gaps move as staff and volunteers come and go, and a coverage map nobody revisits is a photograph, not a plan.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC rebuilt its whole team this way, out of necessity rather than theory. Between 2023 and the end of 2024 the staff went from eight full-time and seven part-time positions to four and seven, and a wave of lay leaders had stepped down in the same season, so the coverage map was mostly holes. The rebuild filled the lay side first: by the end of 2024, 38 people had stepped up to fill every vacancy across the five administrative teams. The staff side came back slowly and deliberately over the following two years, an associate pastor, a youth minister, an executive administrative assistant, each hire slotted against a named gap rather than a nostalgic org chart. The two-year history linked below tells it month by month, including the waiting.

! WATCH OUT

The most expensive hiring mistake in church life is hiring in your own image, and its lay-leadership twin is recruiting only the people who already agree with you. Both feel like team chemistry while they quietly double your strengths and double your blind spots. If your whole leadership circle finds the same things exciting and the same things boring, the boring things are not getting done, and you will not find out until one of them fails.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first weeks, do steps one and two only: your three-sentence profile and the names of who actually covers each corner today. Do not restructure anything and do not announce a plan. You are drawing the map you will need in month six, and drawing it early, before you have favorites and grudges, makes it truer.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Share your exposed-corner sentence from step three with the group. Then let the group ask the harder question: who in your congregation, staff or lay, might already carry that corner if you handed them real authority, and what is actually stopping you from handing it over?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Complete steps one through three this week: the profile, the coverage inventory, and the exposed-corner sentence. That is the whole assignment, and it is the foundation for every staffing decision you will make in this appointment.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Staff Structure and Org Chart \(PDF\)](#)

A real staff map to adapt for your coverage inventory.

[SPRC Guide \(PDF\)](#)

The committee overview to share with your staff-parish chair before the annual coverage conversation.

[Staff Self Appraisal Form \(PDF\)](#) and [Employee Development Plan \(PDF\)](#)

Evaluation forms ready to adapt once the roles are filled.

[Employee Handbook \(Word\)](#)

A full church staff handbook, including hiring and dismissal procedures.

[Youth Minister Job Description \(Word\)](#)

A worked example of writing the role before naming the person.

[Volunteer Role Inventory Method \(Word\)](#)

How to count every volunteer role and hour in your church, the lay side of the coverage map.

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The month-by-month account of the team rebuild described in From the Field.

A Sustainable Inner Life

There is a pastor, and you may be this pastor, who prays beautifully in public a dozen times a week, at the hospital bed, over the offering, before the potluck, at the graveside, and has not prayed alone in a month. Nobody will catch it. The public prayers still sound warm, the sermons still hold together on borrowed capital, and the calendar is so full of the Lord's work that the Lord himself gets crowded out of it. This is the occupational hazard of professional faith: the pastor's spiritual life becomes a performance for others so gradually that its private root system dies without anyone noticing, the pastor included. This chapter is about keeping the root system alive.

You cannot pour from a borrowed cup

Begin with the theology, because the habits only hold if you believe the premise. Your congregation does not ultimately need your competence; it needs your connection, a pastor who actually walks with God and speaks from inside that friendship rather than about it. Wesley's language for the ordinary channels of that friendship was the means of grace: prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conference, which is his warmly serious term for believers attending to each other's souls. Notice that these are means, not merits. You do not pray to stay employed or read to stay ahead of your Sunday school class. You do these things because grace flows through them, and a pastor cut off from the means of grace is trying to give people water from a cup that someone else filled a long time ago.

The working shape of the problem is that ministry constantly counterfeits the inner life. Sermon preparation feels like Scripture reading, and it is not, because you are reading for them and not as you. Pastoral prayer feels like prayer, and it is not quite, because you are performing an office. Meetings about the church feel like Christian conference, and they are usually administration wearing its collar. None of those counterfeits is bad; they are the job. The discipline is refusing to let the job's spiritual activities substitute for your own, which means the pastor needs what any Christian needs: unhurried time with God with no deliverable attached.

! WATCH OUT

Watch for the phantom day off. It appears on your calendar as rest and dissolves on contact: a funeral you could not refuse, a "quick" hospital visit on the way to lunch, errands for the church because you were out anyway, and evening email to stay ahead of tomorrow. A day off that flexes for everything is not a day off, it is an unpaid workday with guilt attached. The congregation will respect the wall exactly as much as you do, and it learns from what you defend, not from what you announce.

Rhythm, not balance

The usual advice is work-life balance, and pastors keep failing at it because balance is the wrong picture. A scale at balance is standing still, and no week of ministry stands still: Holy Week will eat you alive, a death in the congregation rearranges everything, and a snowed-out Sunday hands you an unexpected sabbath. A truer picture is rhythm, a repeating pattern of priorities that bends without breaking, faith and family and work and rest each getting their beat, with the order of priority decided ahead of time rather than renegotiated in every crisis. A rhythm expects the interruption and knows where the lost beat gets made up. The pastor with a rhythm misses Tuesday prayer for an emergency and takes it Wednesday without drama. The pastor chasing balance misses Tuesday, declares the week ruined, and quietly stops trying until things settle down, which is never.

Sabbath deserves its own word, because it is the beat pastors drop first and the one the whole rhythm hangs on. Your sabbath will almost never be Sunday, which is a workday wearing vestments, so it must be chosen, published, and defended: a full day each week when you do not produce, do not answer church email, and do the things that make you a person, because you rest as a creature of God and not as a reward for finishing, and ministry is never finished. Tell the congregation which day it is. A church that knows its pastor rests on Friday learns two things at once: when not to call, and that the gospel of grace its pastor preaches is apparently true enough to live by.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Series: Rhythm \(PDF\)](#): a four-week sermon series built on this exact idea, balance is an illusion and a rhythm of priorities is the livable alternative, ready to teach your congregation what you are practicing.

The people who keep you human

The office is lonelier than anyone warns you, and the loneliness has a particular shape. You are surrounded by people all week, many of whom love you, and nearly every one of those relationships carries the office in it somewhere: they are grieving and you are officiating, they are serving and you are supervising, they are confiding and you are keeping it. Warmth is everywhere and mutuality is scarce, and pastors who do not name that gap tend to fill it badly, with overwork, or with the handful of confidant relationships inside the congregation that feel sustaining right up until a leadership decision strains them. The corrective is deliberate: keep friendships that predate the collar and owe it nothing, and build peer friendships with other pastors who understand the week without explanation. When your conference or district offers a covenant group, treat it as load-bearing rather than optional.

The same honesty is owed at home. A spouse is not an unpaid associate pastor, and children did not apply for the lighted window they live in, so the family's boundaries deserve the same defense as your sabbath:

church business that ends at the door some evenings, and a family calendar that wins its share of arguments against the church calendar. Above all, the family needs the standing assurance that they can just be members here, or not, without their participation being audited by the congregation. Ministry families do not resent the church for what it asks of the pastor nearly as much as they resent discovering that they were never asked.

The load-bearing habits

Four practices carry most of the weight of a sustainable pastorate, and none of them is complicated. What they require is placement, meaning they go on the calendar before the church's needs arrive, because they will never win a fair fight against a ringing phone.

1

Anchor a daily hour that belongs to God and not the job.

Prayer and Scripture with no sermon in view, at whatever hour you are actually awake and honest. Guard the distinction fiercely: if you catch yourself outlining Sunday in the margin, smile, put it down, and come back to reading as a child of God rather than a content producer.

2

Publish your sabbath.

Pick the day, tell the staff and the congregation, and put what fills you on it: the boat, the trail, the grandkids, the nap. Define ahead of time what genuinely interrupts it, which is roughly a death or a disaster, and let everything else wait a day. It nearly always can.

3

Feed your mind beyond the pulpit.

Keep one book going that has nothing to do with this week's sermon, take your continuing education leave every year, and study something annually that stretches you. Pastors who stop learning start repeating, and congregations can tell by about year three.

4

Get a person and go see them.

A spiritual director, a counselor, or a covenant group of peers, someone whose job is your soul and who cannot be impressed by your statistics. Normalize this for yourself the way you would prescribe it to a parishioner, because the pastor who is above being helped is below being honest.

5

Take the vacation. All of it.

Every year, entirely, without checking email, with the guest preachers arranged far in advance. An untaken vacation does not accumulate as devotion; it accumulates as resentment, and the congregation inherits the interest.

POLITY NOTE

The Discipline treats a pastor's growth and renewal as part of the office, not a perk. ¶350 provides for continuing education and spiritual growth, including study leaves during an appointment, and directs the church to support them; your SPRC and charge conference set vacation expectations in writing. If your congregation has never budgeted or calendared for these, that is not a tradition to honor, it is a gap to fix at the next SPRC meeting, and the paragraph number is your friendliest argument.

FROM THE FIELD

The most effective sustainability tool in the Spanish Fort UMC files is not labeled self-care at all. It is the annual preaching calendar, every Sunday of the coming year mapped with series, titles, and texts months in advance. Planned that far ahead, sermon preparation stopped being a weekly emergency and became a settled rhythm of study, and vacation and study leave could be scheduled around the calendar instead of squeezed guiltily into it. The church also preached the rhythm idea to the whole congregation as a summer series, on the theory that a sustainable life is not a clergy perk but a discipleship issue for everyone with a calendar. Both documents are linked below.

THE FIRST MOVE

In week one of a new appointment, before the calendar hardens, claim the daily hour and the sabbath day and tell the office administrator both. You are setting precedent whether you mean to or not, and it is far easier to establish a boundary in week one than to install one in year two after the congregation has learned you will always answer.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Which of the counterfeits in this chapter has most quietly replaced the real thing in your life: sermon prep standing in for Scripture, public prayer standing in for prayer, or meetings standing in for friendship? What would the genuine article look like this month, concretely, on your actual calendar?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Choose your sabbath day and announce it this week, to the staff, to the lay leadership, and in whatever channel reaches the congregation. Announcing it is the point; a private boundary is a wish.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Series: Rhythm \(PDF\)](#)

The four-week series brief on rhythm over balance, ready to adapt for your congregation.

[Annual Preaching Schedule Example \(PDF\)](#)

A full year of Sundays planned in advance, the quiet backbone of a sustainable preaching life.

[Word, Table, Order, and Service \(Word\)](#)

The self-audit for seeing where your week actually goes, and what is squeezing out the parts that first called you.

Your First 90 Days

The moving truck pulls away, the parsonage smells like someone else's cooking, and somewhere across town a congregation is already forming its first impression of you from a photo in the newsletter and a rumor from a cousin in your last church. The first ninety days of an appointment are strange precisely because everyone is watching and almost nothing is required of you yet, and new pastors fill that vacuum in one of two bad ways: freezing into pure caution, or proving themselves with changes nobody asked for. There is a third way, and it has a clear shape. The first ninety days have exactly four jobs: be known, know them, learn the systems, and change almost nothing.

Before the first Sunday

The transition begins weeks before the truck. Call your predecessor, because an hour of candor from the person who just did this job is worth a filing cabinet of documents, and ask the generous questions: what did you love here, what do I need to know about the staff, who is in the hospital right now, what is unfinished that cannot wait. Ask your district superintendent for their honest read of the appointment and what the previous transition was like. Then read everything you can get shipped ahead: the last charge conference packet, a year of council minutes, the budget, the newsletter, the website, and the church's published history if one exists. You are not looking for problems to solve. You are learning the vocabulary of a family you are about to join, so that on day one you can ask second questions instead of first ones.

One caution about all that reading: hold the file gently. Minutes and budgets tell you what happened, and they are usually silent about why, and the predecessor's account is one honest witness and not a verdict. Every piece of advance intelligence you carry in is a draft to be revised by the people themselves.

① THE FIRST MOVE

Before you preach a single Sunday, make two phone calls: your predecessor and your new lay leader or council chair. Tell the lay leader one true and warm thing, that you are glad to be coming, and ask one question: who in the congregation is in crisis right now? Arriving already knowing about the surgery scheduled for your first week is worth more trust than your first month of sermons.

The first month: presence

Month one is the Shepherd's month, whatever your natural corner is. Preach solid, warm, and well-prepared sermons that introduce you honestly, and resist the urge to preach your whole theology in four weeks; a short series on something creedal and central works better than a highlight reel. Learn names like it is your job, because for this month it is: photo directories, name tags, whatever it takes, and when you forget, ask again without shame. Above all, get to the bedsides fast. Visit the hospitalized and the homebound within your first two or three weeks, because word that the new pastor showed up at Mrs. Eleanor's bedside in week two travels farther than anything you will say from the pulpit, and it tells the congregation the one thing they most want to know about you, which is whether you will be there when it is their turn.

Meet the staff one at a time in the same month, and make the meetings about them: their story, their ministry, what they need from a pastor, what they hope does not change. Make no personnel judgments yet, out loud or in your head if you can manage it, because first-month impressions of staff are notoriously wrong in both directions. The anxious ones sometimes shine once trust arrives, and the polished ones sometimes coast.

The second month: systems

Month two turns toward the Executive corner. Sit with each committee chair one on one, and attend each committee's meeting once as a listener before you attempt to lead anything in that room. Learn the money honestly: sit with the treasurer or finance chair and have the actual numbers explained until you understand giving patterns, the budget's real condition, and how money physically moves from the offering plate to the bank. Learn the office systems, the membership database, the calendar, the building keys, who unlocks the doors, because a pastor helpless in their own systems stays dependent on whoever holds the knowledge. And begin mapping the informal church that no org chart shows: whose kitchen decisions get made in, which family's blessing every project seems to need, who quietly funds things. You are not learning this to play politics. You are learning it because you cannot love a system you cannot see.

This is also the month to start the listening tour in earnest, twenty or thirty one-on-one conversations with a standard handful of questions, which chapter 8 lays out in full as the foundation for reading your context. Let those conversations run through month three and beyond; the point in month two is simply to begin.

The third month: small trust, publicly kept

Month three is where the discipline pays. By now you have seen things you want to change, and the rule stands: no big changes in the first ninety days, and very few in the first year. Worship stays recognizable

and staff stays in place, and the building stays the color it was. What you can do in month three is spend a little of your new trust on small, visible, low-controversy improvements, the broken sign finally fixed and the meeting that famously ran two hours landing at seventy-five minutes. Small kept promises teach the congregation that change under you will be considered and real, which is exactly the reputation you will need in year two when the changes are no longer small. Close the ninety days by naming the season out loud, in the newsletter or from the pulpit: what you have heard so far and what season you believe the church is in. Naming it does not commit you to a plan. It shows them you were listening, which was the whole assignment.

! WATCH OUT

Beware the early ally. In every transition, a few people arrive first and warmest, with dinner invitations and briefings on everything wrong with the place, and some of them are simply kind, while others are recruiting the new pastor for an old war. If someone's welcome comes bundled with a list of villains, receive the welcome and decline the list, and check the story against three other sources before it settles into your picture of the church. The people who own the new pastor's ear in month one are rarely a random sample.

The ninety-day walkthrough

1

Before day one: two calls and a reading stack.

Predecessor, lay leader, district superintendent if you can get them, plus the charge conference packet, a year of minutes, the budget, and the newsletter. Arrive with vocabulary, not verdicts.

2

Weeks 1-3: presence.

Preach well and learn names relentlessly, and reach every hospitalized and homebound member fast. Start the time log from chapter 2 while your weeks are still honest.

3

Weeks 2-5: the staff, one at a time.

One-on-ones about their story and their hopes. No judgments, no reorganizations, no promises you cannot keep yet.

4

Weeks 4-8: the systems.

Committee chairs one on one, each committee visited once, the money explained to you until you actually understand it, keys and passwords and the database in your own hands.

5

Weeks 6-12: the listening tour.

Twenty to thirty one-on-ones with standard questions, per chapter 8. Write down what you hear the same day; memory flatters us all.

Weeks 10-13: small trust, publicly kept.

Two or three visible low-stakes improvements, then name the season to the whole congregation: what you heard, what you are grateful for, where you sense God is leading next.

FROM THE FIELD

The Spanish Fort UMC history shows the arc under the least forgiving conditions, a new pastor arriving weeks after a disaffiliation had taken forty percent of the membership and most of the staff. The first sermon came on July 14, 2024, opening a six-week series on the Apostles' Creed, central and creedal rather than autobiographical. The first church council did not meet until August, and the fall's commitment campaign did not launch until September 8, nearly sixty days in. The pastor's end-of-summer report named the whole stretch "a season of discovery," and the urgent structural work that could not wait, refilling five hollowed-out committees, was done by recruiting 38 lay people into the existing structure rather than redesigning it. Even in a crisis appointment, the ninety-day shape held: presence first and systems second, with the big changes saved for a vision process that did not begin until month six.

POLITY NOTE

United Methodist appointments are made annually by the bishop after consultation (§425-430), with most transitions effective at the start of the conference year in July, so your ninety days run against a known clock: fall charge conference paperwork will arrive before your listening tour ends. Ask the district office early for the charge conference date and checklist (§246 governs that gathering), because walking into your first charge conference prepared is one of the small kept promises that builds trust with both the congregation and your district superintendent.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Where are you in the ninety-day arc right now, and which of the four jobs, being known, knowing them, learning the systems, changing almost nothing, is hardest for your temperament? What has surprised you most about the difference between the church as described before you arrived and the church as you found it?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Wherever you are in the arc, take the step the calendar says is next: the two phone calls if you have not arrived, the hospital list if you are new, the money conversation if you are past month one. If your ninety days are long past and some of this never happened, it is not too late; the listening tour in chapter 8 works in year three as well as it works in month three.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Leadership Orientation Packet (PDF)

The packet handed to every committee and council member at the start of the year, a model for orienting yourself and your leaders at once.

Annual Meeting Schedule Template (Excel)

A full-year committee calendar on a predictable rhythm, worth setting up in your first quarter.

Annual Preaching Schedule Example (PDF)

The year of Sundays planned ahead, which month three is the right time to start building.

Series: Non-Negotiables (PDF)

A worked example of a first series in a new appointment: six weeks on the Apostles' Creed.

SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History (Word)

The full account of the transition described in From the Field, starting before day one.

PART II

The Church

The Church House

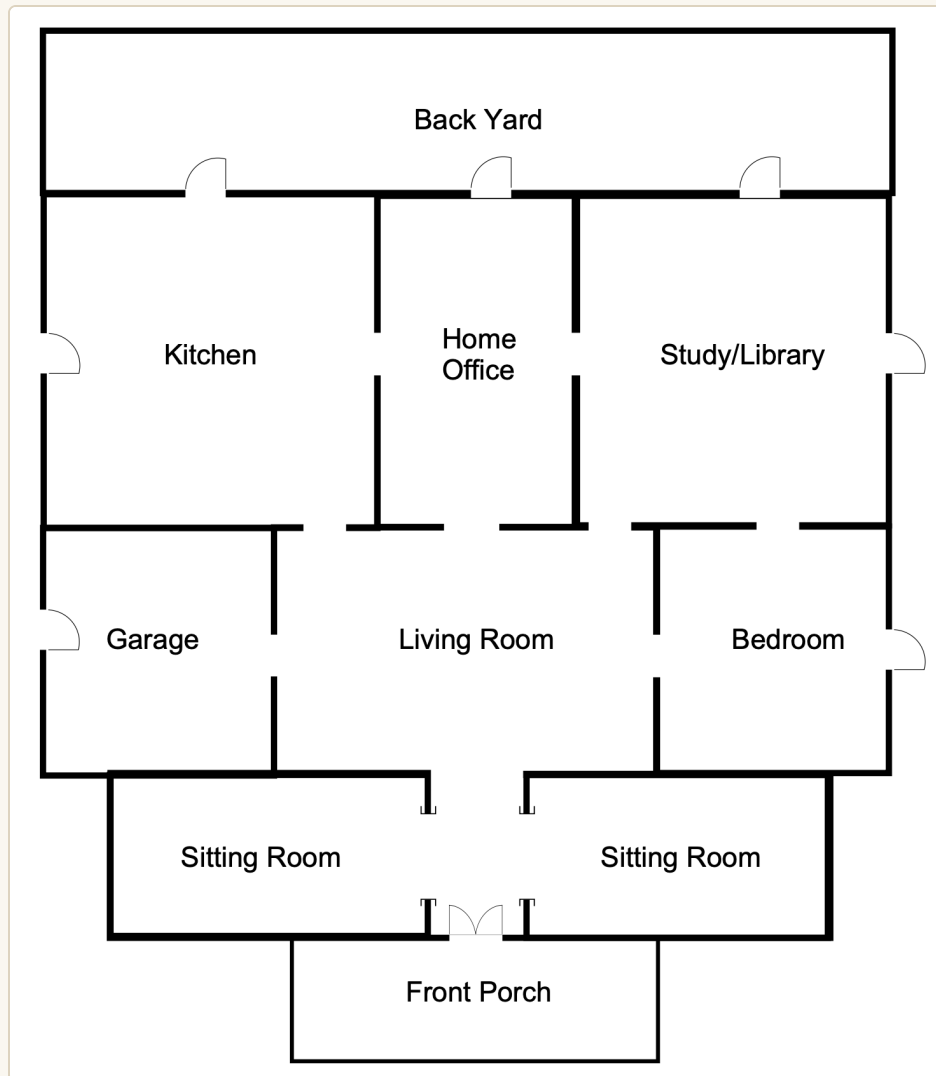
Ask a pastor how the church is doing and you will usually get a worship report: attendance is up a little and Easter was full. It is an honest answer to a different question, the way "how is your family?" is not answered by describing the kitchen. A congregation is a dozen ministries breathing at once, and most of us carry no picture of the whole, so we report on the room we can see from the pulpit. Part I of this book gave you a map of yourself. Part II gives you a map of the church, and it starts with a house.

Wesley's doorway, extended

John Wesley described salvation with the image of a house: repentance as the porch, faith as the door, and holiness as the life lived inside, religion itself. The image is worth extending one step further, because the experience of belonging to a congregation is like moving through a whole house and discovering the purpose of each room. Some rooms are public and some are intimate, some get all the traffic and some hold the tools, and a family lives well when the whole house works, not when one showpiece room stays lit while the rest go dark.

One distinctive feature of this house is that although there is a front door designed for entrance, there are many ways a person can actually find their way inside. Some people first meet a church at worship, and just as many first meet it at a pumpkin patch, a preschool pickup line, a thrift store counter, or a funeral lunch. A pastor who knows the whole floor plan stops treating those as side doors and starts treating them as doors.

◆ THE FRAMEWORK



The Church House floor plan, from Pastoral Ministry: Systems, Processes, and Resources (2024).

Nine rooms, one house. The living room of worship sits at the center with a doorway into nearly every other room, and the health of the whole is the point: every room matters, and somebody has to tend the ones nobody applauds.

A walk through the rooms

The front porch: evangelism

The porch is where the church meets people who have not come inside yet: first-time guests, the welcome desk, the sign on the highway, the advertising and the social media presence, the way members invite

their neighbors or do not. It is usually the first thing people see when they encounter the church, and porches speak whether or not anyone is standing on them. An unkempt porch tells the neighborhood the house is not really expecting company, and so does an outdated website or a greeting team that only greets each other.

The sitting room: fellowship

Unlike your grandmother's sitting room, this one wants you to put your feet up. Fellowship gives people a place to build friendships without programmatic expectations or discipleship pre-work: supper clubs, affinity groups, potlucks, the coffee hour that runs long. It is easy for serious church leaders to treat fellowship as calorie-laden filler, and it is not. For many people the sitting room is where a church becomes their church, because nobody stays long anywhere they have no friends.

The living room: worship

Almost every other room in the house has a doorway into and out of this one. Worship is the center of the house the way the living room is the center of a home, the place the whole family gathers, and everything else the church does flows out of it and back into it. The children's ministry feeds it, the care ministry follows up on what surfaces in it, and the offering collected in it funds the kitchen. Part III of this book lives in this room, and the point here is simply its placement: central and connected, and never the whole house.

The bedroom: prayer

Jesus said that when you pray you should go into your room and shut the door, and the bedroom is the most personal and intimate space in the house, just as prayer is the most intimate place we meet with God. In congregational terms this room holds the prayer chain, the intercessors, the quiet discipline of members who pray for the church by name. It is the room guests never see and the room the whole house secretly depends on, and it is the easiest room in the house to assume is fine.

The kitchen: service and outreach

The kitchen is where food gets made for other people, and service and outreach are the mission and calling of the church, which does not exist for itself. Food pantries, community dinners, mission trips, the thrift store, disaster response: this is the room where the church prepares what feeds the world. As the old line has it, the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners, and hospitals have kitchens.

The garage: operations

There is a lot of unglamorous work behind a functioning church, and the garage holds it: the sound board and the folding tables, the van keys, the setup crew, the volunteers who arrive early and leave late. Like the garage at home, it stores the tools and rarely gets shown to guests, and the people who work in it can

serve for a decade without public thanks. Naming the garage as a room, out loud, is a small act of justice, because the house does not run without it.

The library and study: discipleship

To know is to grow. The library holds Bible studies, Sunday school, youth group, small groups, confirmation, the short-term class that gets someone reading Scripture for the first time at fifty-four. We grow closer to Christ when we know more of Christ, and a church with a bustling living room and an empty library is producing attenders rather than disciples. Part V of this book lives here.

The back yard: high energy events

The church should have fun, and the back yard is where it happens: Vacation Bible School, the fall festival, dinner on the grounds, the pumpkin patch, the retreat. Back yard events engage people who might never walk up the front porch steps, which makes the back yard one of the busiest entrances to the whole house, and they give the congregation itself a place to gather across the lines of age and committee that sort people everywhere else.

The home office: administration

Somebody pays the bills, keeps the rosters, files the insurance, and schedules the rooms, and the ministries of the house survive because that somebody does it well. The home office is where stewardship of everything else is exercised, and Part VII of this book lives in it. Pastors who despise administration should reread the description of the Executive corner in chapter 2 and then thank whoever runs this room.

Reading your own house

The floor plan becomes a diagnostic the moment you lay your actual congregation over it, and the exercise below takes an evening with your leaders. Churches that do it are usually surprised twice: once by a room more crowded than anyone realized, and once by a room that has been dark so long nobody remembers it is there.

1

List every ministry, then give each one a room.

Everything the church does goes on the list, from worship to the men's breakfast to the crew that mows the cemetery, and each item gets assigned to exactly one room. Arguments about placement are useful; have them.

2

Look for the crowded rooms.

Most churches discover one room holding a third of the list. That is not automatically wrong, a mission-heavy church may be exactly what God called that congregation to be, but it should be a choice rather than an accident.

3

Name the dark rooms.

A room with nothing in it, or one entry limping along on two tired volunteers, is a dark room. Say it plainly and without blame; rooms go dark in every house.

4

Check the doors into the living room.

For each room, ask how a person who entered the house there would ever find worship. If the preschool families and thrift store customers have no doorway to Sunday, the house has rooms with no hallways, and growth that has nowhere to land does not last.

5

Honor the garage and the home office out loud.

Whatever else the audit finds, publicly thank the rooms that never get applause. It costs a paragraph in the newsletter and pays for years.

6

Choose one dark room and discern.

Is this a season to light it, or does another church nearby carry this ministry better, so that yours can bless it and focus elsewhere? Either answer can be faithful. Ignoring the question is the only unfaithful move.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

When Spanish Fort UMC finished its vision process in the summer of 2025, the report the Church Council adopted did not organize the church's future around programs or growth targets. It named the Church House as the organizing image: every room mattered, every room had to function, and the body was responsible for tending the whole house. That single picture did quiet work in the years that followed, because it gave the congregation a shared way to talk about why the operations volunteers deserved the same honor as the choir, and why a new ministry idea had to answer which room it lived in and which door it opened before it got a budget line.

↓ GRAB THIS

[The Church House \(Word\)](#): the full framework document with the floor plan and the room-audit method, ready to hand to your council for the exercise above.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The Discipline gives the house its purpose in one sentence: the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world (¶120), and it names the local congregation as the most significant arena through which that disciple-making occurs (¶201). The Church House is one way of seeing ¶202's description of the local church's function laid out in floor plan: reaching, receiving, nurturing, and sending people, room by room.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first weeks, walk the actual building with the floor plan in mind, on a weekday when it is empty. Notice which metaphorical rooms have physical addresses and which exist nowhere: many churches have five classrooms for a dark library and no space at all for the sitting room. The building will tell you what the congregation has historically valued, which is the beginning of reading your context in chapter 8.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Sketch your church's house from memory: which rooms are crowded and which are dark, and which door do most new people actually enter through? Compare sketches around the group. What does it tell you that so many congregations share the same dark rooms?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Schedule the room-by-room audit with your council or leadership team in the next month: one evening with a whiteboard and the ministry list. Do not fix anything that night. The assignment is an honest map, and the map will set the agenda for months.

GRAB THE TOOLS

The Church House (Word)

The framework document behind this chapter, floor plan and audit method included.

SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History (Word)

The account of a congregation that adopted the Church House as its organizing image, and what happened next.

How a Church Is Organized

At your first council meeting somebody will say "the SPRC needs to bring that to charge conference after Trustees signs off," and every head in the room will nod, and you will nod too, because admitting you cannot diagram that sentence feels impossible in your second week. Take heart. The structure of a United Methodist congregation is genuinely learnable in an evening, it is more sensible than its acronyms suggest, and a pastor who understands who decides what stops being surprised in meetings. This chapter is the diagram you were afraid to ask for.

The shape of the thing

Every United Methodist congregation, whatever its size, runs on the same basic architecture: one annual gathering with final authority, one council that governs between gatherings, and four committees with defined portfolios. Everything else in the church, every ministry team and task force and men's breakfast, organizes underneath or alongside those six bodies. Learn the six and you can find your footing anywhere in the connection.

The charge conference

The charge conference is the congregation's annual meeting and its highest local authority, and it belongs to the district superintendent, who presides or appoints someone to. It meets at least once a year, usually in the fall, to do the structural business: electing the officers and committee members the nominations committee presents, setting the pastor's compensation, receiving membership reports, and approving candidates for ministry. Most charge conferences are warm and short, and the paperwork behind them matters more than the meeting itself, because it is the church's annual account of itself to the connection.

The church council

The council governs between charge conferences, and it is where ministry and administration meet: it plans and coordinates the church's mission and receives reports from every committee and ministry area, and it makes the operating decisions the charge conference does not. Chairs of the major committees sit on it along with lay leadership and at-large members. If the charge conference is the church's annual meeting, the council is its working board, and a well-run council on a predictable monthly or bimonthly rhythm is the single biggest determinant of whether the church's administration feels calm or chaotic.

Staff-parish relations (SPRC)

The SPRC is the human resources committee and something more pastoral than that phrase suggests: it attends to the relationship between the congregation, the staff, and the pastor. It recommends staff positions and compensation, evaluates and encourages the staff and pastor, handles personnel concerns with strict confidentiality, and serves as the consultation body when appointment season comes. A healthy SPRC is a pastor's best structural friend, and chapter 3 showed how to make it a team-building partner rather than an annual report card.

Trustees

The trustees hold and care for the church's property: buildings, grounds, insurance, legal matters, and the physical risks of chapter 29. United Methodist trustees carry one distinctive weight worth learning early, the trust clause, which provides that local church property is held in trust for the denomination. Trustees also field the requests that come with a building: who can use the fellowship hall, and whether the scouts can store their trailer behind it.

Finance

The finance committee builds the budget, monitors giving and spending through the year, establishes the internal controls that protect both the money and the people who handle it, and arranges the annual audit. The treasurer and the financial secretary work under its umbrella, and the separation of those duties, one person counting, another recording, another reconciling, is the committee's quiet integrity system. Chapter 27 covers the money in full.

Nominations and leadership development

The nominations committee finds and develops the church's lay leadership, and it presents the annual slate the charge conference elects. Here is the detail new pastors miss: the pastor chairs this committee. It is the only one you chair, and the Discipline puts you there because leadership development is pastoral work at its longest range. The nominations committee run well is a year-round discipling ministry; run poorly, it is a panicked October phone tree begging people to keep serving.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The paragraph map for this chapter, all in the Book of Discipline: the charge conference (¶¶246-247), the church council (¶252), nominations and leadership development (¶258.1), staff-parish relations (¶258.2), trustees (¶258.3, with their duties detailed in ¶¶2525-2551), finance (¶258.4), and the trust clause (¶2501). The Discipline also permits a simplified alternative to this architecture, and it has become common enough that it gets its own section below.

The one-board alternative

The architecture above assumes a congregation that can seat it. Count the chairs honestly, four committees in rotating classes and a council above them, and the traditional structure asks a church for thirty or more elected positions once the officers are added. A congregation of sixty in worship cannot fill that chart truthfully, and the attempt produces a familiar picture: the same faithful eight people wearing every hat, and a nominations report padded with names that never attend. More and more smaller churches, and a growing number of mid-sized ones, have answered this with single board governance, often called the simplified accountable structure.

The idea is compact: one leadership board, commonly nine people in three rotating classes, carries the responsibilities and the authority of all four administrative bodies at once. Every member wears the council hat, the trustee hat, the finance hat, and the SPRC hat, and the four portfolios become standing concerns of one table rather than four separate rooms. Nominations and leadership development remains a separate committee, still chaired by the pastor, and the charge conference still stands above the whole structure as the annual authority.

Done well, the change is less about fewer meetings than about a different kind of meeting. The board governs rather than manages: it adopts written guiding principles that delegate day-to-day operations to staff and ministry teams, and its members sign a leadership covenant that names how they will hold one another accountable. The agenda changes shape to match. Routine reports and minutes go out ahead of time and are received together in a single consent item, which clears the table for the work only a board can do: spiritual formation and leadership development at the top of the meeting, then honest review of the church's goals and its progress in reaching new people, then the forward-looking questions of strategy. A board that spends its hour approving the landscaping bill has missed the point of the model.

The safeguards matter as much as the streamlining, because the functions of the four committees do not disappear; they become calendar items of one body. Personnel work happens in executive session, with the Discipline's staff-parish eligibility rules intact, so no staff member or immediate family member of staff can sit on the board. For property and legal purposes the board acts as the trustees, so its members must satisfy the civil-law requirements for trustees in your state. The annual audit, the insurance review, the pastor's evaluation, and the budget still happen on schedule; the board simply owns them all.

Adopting the model is a process with a required doorway: the district superintendent. Paragraph 247.2 makes the change subject to the superintendent's approval, so the first call belongs there, and most conferences ask for a discernment season before any vote, teaching the congregation what would change and why. The charge conference then approves the new structure, often convened as a church conference so every member may vote, and the new board is typically seated with the annual slate. The standard field guide is *Mission Possible* by Kay Kotan and Blake Bradford, and the Alabama-West Florida Conference

keeps a Simplified Board Structure resource page, with training video, under Lay Leadership at awfumc.org.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The enabling text is ¶247.2: "When the membership size, program scope, mission resources, or other circumstances so require, the charge conference may, in consultation with and upon the approval of the district superintendent, modify the organizational plans, provided that the provisions of ¶ 243 are observed." The proviso is the important clause. ¶243 keeps the required functions and officers in place, so a church may reorganize where the work lives, but not whether the work happens: nominations (¶258.1), the staff-parish eligibility rules (¶258.2), and the trustees' legal duties (¶¶2525-2551) all still bind the one board.

! WATCH OUT

Nine people holding property, money, personnel, and direction in one room is efficient and concentrated for the same reason, so the model runs on deliberate transparency. Publish minutes promptly and report decisions to the congregation on a regular rhythm, and reserve executive session for personnel matters alone. And watch for the paper-only conversion, where a church renames its old committees a "board" and keeps the same meetings under new letterhead. The structure without the accountability culture (the covenant, the guiding principles, the consent agenda, and the reshaped meeting) saves nothing except the printing of three agendas.

The connection above the congregation

A United Methodist congregation is not a franchise and not an island; it is a local expression of a connectional church. Above the charge conference sits the district, led by a district superintendent who is your supervisor and, used well, your consultant. Districts gather into an annual conference, the basic body of the denomination, which meets each year, sets conference budgets, and through its bishop appoints the pastors. Annual conferences gather into jurisdictions, and the whole church meets as General Conference every four years to speak through the Discipline. What flows down is appointments and resources, and what flows up is apportionments, the congregation's share of the connectional budget, along with leaders and candidates for ministry. Treat apportionments as a bill and they will feel like a tax; teach them as the congregation's mission giving to a church larger than itself, which is what they are, and most congregations pay them with something close to pride.

! WATCH OUT

Watch for the committee that has quietly become the church. In many congregations one body, often trustees or finance, has accumulated veto power over everything because it controls the building or the budget, and every idea in the church dies in that room by default. The Discipline's architecture puts ministry direction in the council and the charge conference precisely so that money and property serve mission rather than governing it. If every new ministry conversation in your church begins with what the building can bear or what the budget line says, the org chart has inverted, and gently restoring the council's primacy will be some of your most important early work.

Learning your church's version

The Discipline provides the skeleton, and every congregation has grown its own flesh over it: nicknames, workarounds, a committee that has not met since 2019, a saint who has been treasurer for thirty years. The walkthrough below gets you from the org chart on paper to the organization as it actually runs.

1

Get the rosters and meet every chair.

Ask the office for the current leadership list, then sit down with each committee chair one on one. Ask what the committee actually does and what it is proud of, and what it wishes the pastor understood. You will learn more in six coffees than in six months of meetings.

2

Calendar the whole year of meetings.

Committees that meet on a predictable rhythm, the same week each month or quarter, develop momentum and attendance that ad hoc scheduling never does. Publish the year's schedule in one document every leader holds.

3

Read last year's charge conference packet and a year of council minutes.

Together they are the church's official memory: what was decided and reported, and what was carefully not mentioned. Note what surprises you and ask about it gently.

4

Orient every committee, every year.

Most church committee members have never been told what their committee is for, and they serve nervously because of it. An annual orientation, a packet and one training evening, transforms the culture: people serve with confidence when they know the job.

5

Learn the trust clause and the money rules before you need them.

Read the trustees' packet and the finance controls now, in an ordinary season, because the day a building crisis or a designated-gift dispute arrives is a bad day to be learning the rules.

6

Fix the reporting rhythm.

Decide with the council what each committee reports, to whom, and how often, so information moves by design rather than rumor. A one-page written report per committee per council meeting is enough for most churches, and it keeps the council meeting about decisions rather than recaps.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC had to rebuild this entire structure at once in the fall of 2024, after a disaffiliation season had taken the council chair, at least three at-large members, and leaders across the committees. The rebuild leaned on exactly the unglamorous tools this chapter recommends: a full-year meeting calendar on a predictable monthly rhythm, and an annual all-committee training evening with orientation packets for every member, walking through the structure, each committee's mandate with its Discipline references, the key policies, and the meeting calendar itself. By the end of that year all five administrative teams were fully seated with 38 lay people, many serving for the first time, and the training deck and packets they used are all linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Annual Leadership Training Deck \(PDF\)](#): the all-committee training presentation, church structure, each committee's mandate with Discipline references, key policies, and the meeting calendar, ready to adapt for your own leadership night.

① THE FIRST MOVE

This week, ask the office for two documents: the current leadership roster and last year's charge conference packet. Read them side by side and mark every name that appears more than twice. That short list is your church's actual load-bearing structure, and those are the coffees to schedule first.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which committee in your church is strongest, which exists mostly on paper, and where has informal power collected outside the structure? What would it take, concretely and kindly, to bring the paper chart and the real chart closer together?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Schedule the one-on-ones with your committee chairs, all of them, over the next six weeks. Bring no agenda beyond the three questions in step one, and write down what you hear.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Church Council Orientation Packet \(PDF\)](#)

Big picture, membership, responsibilities, and a sample agenda for the council.

[Church Council Operating Rhythm \(Word\)](#)

How a council runs on a predictable rhythm through the year.

[SPRC Guide \(PDF\)](#)

Committee overview plus four points of emphasis, including confidentiality.

[Trustees Packet \(PDF\)](#)

Property oversight, the trust clause, insurance, and boundaries.

[Finance Committee Orientation Packet \(PDF\)](#)

Responsibilities and the separation-of-duties rules every church should follow.

[Nominations Process and Slate \(Word\)](#)

The year-round process behind the annual leadership slate.

[Annual Meeting Schedule Template \(Excel\)](#)

The full-year committee calendar on a predictable monthly rhythm.

[Ministry Titles: Who Does What \(PDF\)](#)

Plain definitions of the titles a congregation hears every week.

Reading Your Context

The program was a triumph at your last church, so you launch it in your new one, and it lands like a joke told in the wrong language. Every experienced pastor has this scar, and the lesson under it is the founding premise of this chapter: churches are particular. A congregation is not an instance of "church" that responds to standard inputs; it is a specific people with a specific history in a specific town, and ministry that works is ministry fitted to the actual body. Doctors call the unfitted version malpractice, prescribing before diagnosing. This chapter is the diagnostic visit.

Three texts to read

Reading a context means reading three texts, and none of them is optional, because each one corrects the other two.

The history

Every congregation is still being shaped by events that may predate everyone in the room. The founding story tells you what the church believes it is for; ask when it started, who started it, and what the town was then. The golden age, and almost every church has one it still measures itself against, tells you what the congregation means by success, which is rarely what you mean by it. And the wounds, the split, the beloved pastor who left badly, the building fight, the scandal nobody names, tell you where the flinches come from. When a reasonable proposal meets unreasonable resistance, you have usually stepped on a grave you did not know was there. Ask gentle versions of "what happened here?" until the map of graves is drawn.

The people

Chapter 7 gave you the formal structure, and the second text is the informal one: who actually holds trust. Every congregation has its matriarchs and patriarchs, the people whose quiet nod makes things possible and whose silence kills them, and they hold no office at all as often as they hold several. Learn who has buried the most family members from this sanctuary, whose kitchen the real meetings happen in, which names come up in every story. This is not politics; it is pastoral cartography, and the same map shows you the lonely, the overlooked, and the newcomers waiting to be given something to do.

The community

The third text is the town, because your church is called to a place and not just a membership roll. Learn who actually lives within fifteen minutes of the building now, not who lived there when the sanctuary was built, and the gap between those two answers explains more struggling churches than any theology does. Walk the streets, eat where people eat, meet the school principal and the police chief and the funeral director, and ask everyone the same disarming question: what does this town need that nobody is providing? Demographic tools and school enrollment data help, but shoe leather teaches what spreadsheets cannot, which is what the place feels like to live in.

The numbers that read the parish

Stories carry most of a context, and a few numbers keep the stories honest, because congregational memory smooths every trend line in the flattering direction. Pull ten years of the basics, worship attendance, professions of faith, baptisms, funerals, and giving, and just look at the slopes; a church that describes itself as "starting to grow again" while the decade line falls steadily is not lying to you, it is grieving, and you need to know which one you are hearing. Your district office holds the annual statistical reports going back years, which makes that whole picture one phone call away. Then set the church's numbers next to the town's: school enrollment trends, new construction, home sales, and the census picture of who actually lives within a short drive now. A congregation that looks like the town of thirty years ago is not failing at evangelism so much as mailing invitations to an address the neighborhood no longer lives at, and seeing that clearly, without blame, is the beginning of every faithful response to it.

Hold the numbers the way you hold the predecessor's briefing, as one witness among several. Attendance cannot see depth and giving cannot see generosity of time, and no spreadsheet has ever measured whether a church loves its town. The numbers earn their place in this chapter because they resist nostalgia, not because they outrank the stories.

! WATCH OUT

Beware the loud sample. The people who talk to a new pastor first and most are not a random draw of the congregation, and the frustrations of the vocal fifteen can masquerade as the will of the whole. This is why structured listening beats open-door listening: one-on-ones you choose, sessions with capped attendance, and a survey everyone receives, together correct for the voices that would otherwise fill every silence. Listen hardest for the people who have not volunteered an opinion, because their quiet is data too.

The listening tour

The tool for reading all three texts at once is the listening tour, and it is the single highest-return activity of a pastor's first year. The mechanics matter, so here is the walkthrough.

1

Book twenty to thirty one-on-ones.

Spread them across the congregation deliberately: longtime members and new ones, every generation, the involved and the drifted, the pillars and the quiet. Meet where they choose, on their porch or in their shop or at the church parlor, because the setting itself tells you things.

2

Ask the same few questions every time.

Something like: how did you come to this church, when has it been at its best, what breaks your heart about it, what do you hope it becomes, and who else should I talk to. Consistent questions turn thirty conversations into a readable data set, and the last question grows your list past the usual suspects.

3

Hold small group listening sessions.

Cap them at a size where everyone must speak, somewhere around a dozen or fifteen, run them with open-ended questions about the church's future, and schedule enough of them that every member has a real invitation. Capped sessions surface the middle of the congregation, the people the loud sample drowns out.

4

Read the artifacts.

Old directories and photo walls, anniversary booklets, a decade of budgets, the cornerstone. Budgets are especially honest: a church's real priorities are in its spending history, not its mission statement.

5

Walk the town and meet its keepers.

The school principal, the librarian, the coaches, the agency directors, the other pastors. Ask them what the town needs and listen for your church's name, including its absence, which is its own report.

6

Write it down and give it back.

Log every conversation the same day, then synthesize the themes and return them to the congregation publicly: here is what I heard, and here is what you love and long for. A congregation that hears itself accurately reflected will trust you with what comes next, and what comes next is usually a vision process.

From listening to vision

Somewhere past the first year, the listening usually wants to become something formal, a vision process, where the congregation moves from being heard to deciding together what God is calling it to next. The full method deserves its own treatment and has one in the resources below, but the shape is worth knowing now: a representative team working over several months through multiple legs of discernment, listening sessions and a survey and shared reading and prayer, converging on a handful of directions the council can adopt and the congregation can own. The order matters more than the technique. Vision grows out of listening, and a vision process launched before the congregation trusts that it has been heard produces a document, not a direction.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC ran this arc on an unusually compressed clock. The new pastor arrived in July 2024 into a post-disaffiliation "season of discovery," and the listening posture of that first six months became a formal vision process in January 2025: a vision team and four legs of discernment (listening sessions, a survey, shared reading, and prayer), with six listening sessions across June and early July, each capped at fifteen participants and guided by open-ended questions about the church's future. The team brought its report to the church council on July 28, and Vision Sunday carried it to the congregation three weeks later with a new vision statement and four values. The process stayed honest to the order this chapter argues for: a full year of being heard before the church was asked to decide anything.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Running a Congregational Vision Process \(Word\)](#): the full working guide, the team, the four legs, the four questions, and how themes become a vision statement, for when your listening tour is ready to become one.

POLITY NOTE

Your district superintendent is a context-reading resource the Discipline builds in: superintendents oversee the ministry of the churches in their district (§§419-424) and typically know your congregation's recent history, its previous transitions, and its reputation in the connection. Ask for that briefing directly. The charge conference records the church also files annually (membership, professions of faith, average attendance) give you a decade of trend lines for the price of a phone call to the district office.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

Book your first five one-on-ones this week, and make one of them with the member everyone describes as "been here forever." Open with the founding story question: what was this church like when you came, and what should I know about how it got here? Take notes on paper, visibly. Being seen writing down an elder's memories is itself a pastoral act.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What is your congregation's golden age, the era it still measures itself against, and how does that memory help and hinder its present? If you do not know the answer, who would you ask, and what does not knowing tell you about how far into the three texts you have read?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Draft your standard listening-tour questions, five or fewer, and book the first five conversations. The tour starts when the first coffee is on the calendar, not when the plan is perfect.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Running a Congregational Vision Process \(Word\)](#)

The reusable guide for turning a listening tour into a congregational direction.

[SFUMC 2025 Vision Process, Full Document \(PDF\)](#)

The actual 25-page process one church used, phased plan, session structure, and worksheets, a worked example to adapt.

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The listening-to-vision arc of From the Field, told month by month.

Ministry Lanes

A new family lingers after worship and asks the question every church prays for: how do we get involved here? And the answer they receive is a tour of the org chart. Well, the Worship Committee is different from the Worship Team, which is different from Worship Planning, and the Missions Team is the umbrella but the Community Dinner has its own signup, and you'd want to talk to, hmm, who is over that now? The family nods politely and gets involved nowhere, not because the church lacked places for them but because it lacked doors. This chapter is about turning a hundred scattered roles into doors a stranger can walk through.

A lane is a door, not a department

A ministry lane is a public-facing door into the serving life of the church, and the definition has a test built in. Stand in the lobby on a Sunday morning and imagine telling a new family: here are the main ways you can connect to the life of this church, each one has a leader you can talk to, and each one has a way to start small. If you can say that in plain English without first explaining the difference between a committee and a ministry team and a council, you have lanes. If you cannot, you have a structure that makes sense to insiders and a wall where the door should be.

The distinction matters because most churches are organized for governance rather than invitation. Chapter 7's committee structure answers the questions the Discipline rightly asks: who oversees, who decides, who is accountable. It was never designed to answer the new family's question, and when a church has no invitation layer, the governance layer gets pressed into service and fails at it, because "join the Worship Committee" is not an invitation, it is a sentence. Lanes are the invitation layer: a small number of plainly named areas, somewhere between six and nine, that together hold every way a person can serve, with names a non-member can use on the first try.

Why bother: the arithmetic of burnout

Beneath the hospitality argument runs a sustainability argument, and it begins with counting. When one congregation inventoried every volunteer role it asked its members to fill, the count came to 121 distinct roles consuming roughly 15,600 hours a year, and nobody in the building had ever seen the whole number before. Uncounted role sprawl produces the pattern every pastor knows: the same ten people holding everything, invisible on-ramps for newcomers, ministries continuing by inertia because ending anything feels like decline, and burnout treated as a personal failing when it is a structural output. You

cannot manage a volunteer economy you have never measured, and you cannot invite people into a structure that has no entrances. Lanes fix the entrances; the inventory tells you the truth about the load.

↓ **GRAB THIS**

[Volunteer Role Inventory Method \(Word\)](#): how to count every volunteer role and hour in your church, the measuring step that makes everything else in this chapter honest.

The anatomy of a working lane

A lane is not a rename; it is a small structure with five working parts, and a lane missing any of them will drift back into being a committee with a friendlier name.

First, a lane leader: one named lay person accountable for the whole lane, who recruits team leaders and rotates people through the sub-teams over time. This is deliberately not the committee chair; the chair handles governance, and the lane leader handles people. Second, an elevator pitch: one paragraph in plain English, no acronyms and no insider vocabulary, readable from the pulpit and handable to a new member without translation. Third, defined on-ramps at several depths: a one-time helper slot for someone who wants to try the lane without commitment, a regular weekly or monthly role for someone joining a team, a sub-team lead for someone ready to coordinate, and a visible path toward lane leadership itself. Fourth, a staff partner: the named staff member who supports the lane day to day, because a lane with no staff connection starves quietly. And fifth, a connection to the relevant committee, so the lane knows which body gives it cover under the Discipline and the invitation layer stays compatible with the governance layer instead of competing with it.

One more distinction keeps the whole system straight. If your church has a vision statement with public values, the lanes nest underneath the vision rather than replacing it. The vision answers what the church is for; the lanes answer where a person fits. Identity at one layer, invitation at the other, and different questions deserve different tools.

! WATCH OUT

The cheapest failure mode here is the rename: the same committees, the same chairs, and a new word on the bulletin board. If the Worship Committee simply becomes "the Worship Lane" with no lane leader and no on-ramps, you have spent change-capital on a synonym, and the next real restructure will be harder because people will remember that the last one meant nothing. Build the five parts or wait until you can.

Ending things well

The inventory always surfaces one more finding, and it is the tender one: ministries that have run their course and continue only because nobody knows how to stop. Every church carries a few, the program whose founder moved away years ago, the event that once drew a hundred and now draws nine, the class that is down to four loyal friends, the committee that exists to plan the thing the church no longer does. They persist because of an unspoken norm that adding ministries is vitality and ending one is decline, and that norm has the arithmetic exactly backward. Every inertial ministry is spending volunteer hours, calendar space, money, and leadership attention that a living ministry needs, and a church that can never end anything will eventually be too encumbered to start anything.

So flip the norm before you name any candidates: teach, from the pulpit and in the council, that faithful endings are a mark of health and ministries are seasons rather than covenants, and that the measure of a ministry is the fruit it bears now and not the love it was founded in. Then sunset well when the time comes. Celebrate the ministry publicly and tell its story, thank its people by name, keep a record of what it was, and release its volunteers with blessing rather than letting them slip away with guilt. A congregation that watches one ministry end with honor becomes willing to start new things, because the cost of a new idea is no longer eternal. The discernment itself belongs naturally to nominations and the council, and the lane structure makes it easier, since a lane leader watching the whole lane can see what is thriving and what is running on memory far sooner than a pastor triaging a hundred separate roles.

Making the move

Restructuring how a whole congregation organizes its serving life is year-two-or-later work, done with the council rather than to it, and it phases well. Here is the walkthrough.

1

Run the inventory first.

Count every volunteer role, its slots, its frequency, and its hours, using the method linked above. Present the totals to the council before proposing anything, because the number itself makes the case better than any speech.

2

Sort everything into public-facing lanes.

Aim for six to nine, named in words a visitor already knows: Worship, Children, Youth, Care, Missions, and whatever your context adds. Every role from the inventory gets a lane, and the sorting arguments are productive; have them with your leaders.

3

Recruit lane leaders before you announce lanes.

Look for the people already operating like lane leaders informally, the ones who recruit and encourage without being asked, and orient them privately first. A lane announced without a leader is a sign taped to a locked door.

4

Write the elevator pitches and define the on-ramps.

One plain paragraph per lane and at least three entry depths, with the one-time helper slot always included, because trying is how joining starts.

5

Pilot with your healthiest lanes.

Launch three or four where leadership is already strong, use the lane vocabulary publicly in your newcomer settings and publications, and let the pilots generate the stories that sell the rest.

6

Roll out fully, then recruit by lane forever after.

When all lanes are named and led, retire role-by-role begging. The newsletter recruits by lane and the ministry fair organizes by lane, and nominations develops leaders the same way. The structure only pays if the church actually uses it as the front door.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

The 121-role inventory above is Spanish Fort UMC's, counted in the spring of 2026 as the first step of exactly this restructure. The church sorted its serving life into eight lanes nested under its four vision values, consolidated the insider vocabulary that had made the old structure unexplainable to newcomers, and phased the rollout: lane leaders named and oriented quietly first, then a pilot with the healthiest lanes, then full public vocabulary in the newcomer class and publications. The working documents it produced along the way, the inventory method, the one-pager, the full written case, and the council presentation, are all linked below, and they are the most complete worked example of this chapter on the hub.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Lanes complement the Discipline's structure; they do not replace it. The committees of ¶¶244-258 still govern, and each lane's fifth element, its committee connection, is what keeps the two layers honest: the Worship lane relates to the worship committee's council representative, the Missions lane to the missions chair, and so on. A congregation considering any structural adaptation should also know ¶247.2, which allows simplified structures with district approval, but the lane model as described here requires no charge conference action at all, because it organizes invitation rather than governance.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

Do not restructure anything in your first year. Instead, run the new-family test this week: ask three people, a staff member, a longtime leader, and the newest member you know, how they would answer "how do I get involved here?" Write down the three answers. If they differ wildly or reach for org-chart vocabulary, you have just diagnosed the wall, and the inventory can go on next year's calendar.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

How many distinct volunteer roles do you estimate your church asks people to fill, and who holds the most of them? Then the harder question: what ministry in your church has run its course and continues only because ending it would feel like admitting decline, and what would a faithful sunset look like?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Run the new-family test from The First Move this week. Three people, one question, three written answers. It costs half an hour and tells you whether this chapter is a someday project or an urgent one.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Volunteer Role Inventory Method (Word)

The counting method: every role, slot, frequency, and hour.

Master Volunteer Sheet Template

The spreadsheet behind the inventory, ready to fill in.

Ministry Lanes One-Pager (PDF) and Ministry Mind Map (PDF)

The eight-lane structure on one page, with the full ministry map alongside.

Volunteer Infrastructure and Lanes Writeup (PDF)

The full written case for the restructure, with the role appendix.

Council Presentation on Volunteer Infrastructure (PowerPoint)

The deck that briefed a church council on the whole thing.

Ministry Fair Playbook (Word)

The once-a-year event where lanes meet the congregation.

PART III

Worship and the Word

Word, Table, Order, and Service

Ask a pastor in her first month what she is most excited about and the answer is nearly always preaching and worship, the Word and the Table. Ask the same pastor in her third year where the week goes and the honest answer is meetings and logistics, and the distance between those two answers is not a personal failure, it is the best-documented drift in pastoral life. This part of the book is about worship, and it opens with the framework that explains why worship, the very center of the church's life and the pastor's call, is somehow always the thing the week tries to squeeze out.

Four words for the whole office

Ordained elders in the United Methodist Church are called to a ministry of Word, Table, Order, and Service, and those four words name the whole of the office. The Word is preaching and pastoral care, the ministry of proclaiming and applying Scripture. The Table is worship and the sacraments, the ministry of leading the gathered people before God. Order is administration and supervision, the ministry of keeping the body organized and aligned. Service is mission, outreach, and evangelism, the ministry of the church for the sake of the world. Where chapter 2's triangle mapped the pulls on your person, these four callings map the contents of the call itself, and together they make a complete job description in nine words.

◆ THE FRAMEWORK

The framework's teeth are in a single comparison. In the imagination, the four callings divide evenly, a quarter of the week each: Word 25, Table 25, Order 25, Service 25. The actual week of a working pastor, as the source framework reports it, runs closer to Word 15, Table 15, Order 30, and Service 40. The precise numbers matter less than the direction of the gap, because it always leans the same way: the parts of the call that first drew you to ministry are the parts most easily squeezed out by everything else.

Sit with what that comparison means. Nobody decides to halve their preaching preparation; the halving happens one reasonable interruption at a time, because Order and Service announce themselves. The budget deadline has a date and the committee meets on Tuesday whether you are ready or not. The Word and the Table have no such advocates. Study time can always be moved and worship planning can always run on last year's pattern, and no one will call the office to complain for months, because the erosion of preaching and worship is slow and cumulative, a thinning rather than a breaking. By the time anyone names it from the pews, the habit that caused it is years deep.

What only you can do

The framework also hands you the sorting principle this whole book keeps returning to. Within the four callings, two belong to the pastor in a way that cannot be delegated: the Word and the Table. Others can and should share pastoral care, but the pulpit is yours, and the sacraments are presided over by the pastor as an act of the office. Order and Service run exactly the other way: they are the callings designed to be shared, the ones where chapter 3's lay leaders and chapter 9's lanes carry the weight, with the pastor ensuring the whole rather than performing it. A week that inverts this, where the pastor personally runs the food drive and chairs three logistics meetings while the sermon gets Saturday's leftovers, has the delegation exactly backward. The question for every recurring task is not whether it matters, everything on the list matters, but whether it requires you.

! WATCH OUT

Do not read this chapter as permission to despise administration. Order is not the enemy of Word and Table; unattended, its collapse is what eventually devours them, because a disorganized church generates exactly the crises that eat study weeks. The framework asks you to right-size Order and share Service, not to abandon them, and pastors who quietly quit administration in the name of preaching soon find they have neither.

Reading the forty percent

One number in the framework deserves its own paragraph, because it surprises people: Service, at forty percent, is the largest slice of the actual week, bigger than Order and more than double either Word or Table. How does mission and outreach eat two days a week? The answer is that a pastor's Service hours are only partly the church's mission program. The rest is the town's standing claim on the office: the funeral for the family with no church, the benevolence requests at the office door, the civic invocations and school boards and ministerial associations, the community crisis that arrives with no appointment. This is real ministry and much of it is unrepeatable, the funeral especially, and the town's claim on you is part of why the church exists in that town at all. But it is also the least schedulable part of the week and the easiest place for a pastor to hide from harder work, because Service always feels holy while you are doing it.

So read your own forty percent with two questions. First, how much of it is genuinely yours, and how much is the congregation's Service routed through you because chapter 9's lanes do not exist yet? A benevolence team and a funeral-lunch ministry and a lane structure move real hours back toward the Word without the town losing anything. Second, is your Service reactive or directed? Hours that only respond to whoever shows up will always be full; hours aimed by the church's actual mission strategy, which Part VI builds, do the same good with a direction. The forty percent is not the enemy. Unexamined, though, it is where the Word's hours went.

The shape of Sunday itself

The four callings also explain the architecture of the service you lead every week. United Methodist worship follows a basic pattern with deep ecumenical roots: the people gather, the Word is proclaimed and responded to, the Table is celebrated with thanksgiving (or its place held by prayer on non-communion Sundays), and the people are sent forth into service. Gathering, Word, Table, sending. Once you see the pattern you will never plan a service casually again, because Sunday morning is not a container for religious content arranged by preference; it is a drama with a shape, and the shape rehearses the whole gospel every week. The congregation gathers as scattered people, meets God in the Word, is fed at the Table, and is sent out for the sake of the world, which is to say that worship itself walks through Word, Table, and Service in order, held together by good Order nobody should notice.

The chapters that follow furnish each part of that architecture: planning the year (chapter 11), the preaching (chapter 12), the sacraments (chapter 13), the music that carries so much of it (chapter 14), and the ushers, setup, and sound that hold it together (chapter 15). This chapter's job is the frame, and the frame's insistence is simple: worship deserves the first fruits of your week, not its remainders.

Auditing a week against the four callings

1

Track one honest week in four columns.

If you kept the time log from chapter 2, re-sort a recent week into Word, Table, Order, and Service. Sermon study and pastoral care go under Word, worship planning and leadership under Table, and be strict about what you file under the last two.

2

Compare your quarters to your reality.

Write your actual percentages next to the imagined even split. The gap is not a verdict; a mission-trip week or a charge conference season will skew honestly. The pattern across a month is what tells the truth.

3

Build guardrails around the Word and the Table.

If preparation and worship planning are the first things sacrificed when the week fills, stop hoping they will survive and schedule them like appointments with the bishop: fixed study blocks, a fixed weekly worship planning meeting, both defended by the office staff.

4

Move one piece of Order or Service off your plate.

Use chapter 3's method: name the task, write the role, and hand it with real authority to someone gifted for it. One handoff per season compounds quickly.

Bring the four callings to your review.

The framework gives your SPRC a vocabulary for workload and expectations without reducing ministry to a task list, and an annual conversation about the four percentages is far more useful than a generic evaluation form.

FROM THE FIELD

The guardrail strategy is visible across the Spanish Fort UMC files from the rebuild years, precisely because the Order and Service demands of that season were enormous. The pulpit was protected by the annual preaching calendar, planned a year ahead so no crisis could claim the sermon's slot. The Table was protected by a fixed weekly worship planning rhythm shared between staff and lay teams rather than resting on the pastor's initiative. And the Order load was deliberately spread through the committee rebuild of chapter 7 and, later, the lane structure of chapter 9. None of those tools was labeled "protecting Word and Table," and all of them were doing exactly that.

↓ GRAB THIS

Word, Table, Order, and Service (Word): the framework document with the imagined-versus-actual comparison, ready for your own audit and your next SPRC conversation.

POLITY NOTE

The fourfold language comes from the Discipline's account of the elder's office (§332), and §340 details the duties that flow from it for both elders and licensed local pastors. The basic pattern of worship, gathering, proclamation and response, thanksgiving and communion, and sending forth, is set out in The United Methodist Hymnal and the Book of Worship, which are the church's official service books and belong on every pastor's shelf.

THE FIRST MOVE

In your first month, before the calendar hardens, claim the two guardrails from step three: a fixed study block and a fixed worship planning time, both weekly, both on the public calendar. Everything else in Part III assumes those two hours exist, and they are far easier to establish now than to reclaim later.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Write your four actual percentages on a card and share them with the group. Whose week is furthest from their imagined split, and what specifically is claiming the difference? Then the constructive half: what guardrail has actually worked for someone in the room, and what defeated the guardrails that failed?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Run the four-column audit on last week, this week. It takes twenty minutes with a calendar open, and the two numbers it produces for Word and Table will tell you exactly how urgently you need the rest of Part III.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Word, Table, Order, and Service (Word)

The framework and self-audit behind this chapter.

The Pastor's Triangle (Word)

The companion framework for the pulls on your person, from chapter 2.

Annual Preaching Schedule Example (PDF)

The strongest single guardrail for the Word, previewed here and built in chapter 12.

Planning the Worship Year

It is the second week of November and somebody in the hallway asks what the church is doing for Advent, and the pastor realizes with a small cold drop that the answer is "whatever we can assemble in eighteen days." The cantata needed to start rehearsing in September, and the sermon series is a title without contents. Nobody planned for this to happen; that is precisely the problem, because worship that nobody plans falls into the calendar's lap over and over, every year, on schedule. The seasons are the most predictable thing in church life, and this chapter is about letting that predictability work for you instead of against you.

The year the church already owns

Here is the good news buried in the church calendar: half of your worship planning was done centuries ago. The Christian year walks the congregation through the whole story of God annually, Advent's waiting into Christmas and Epiphany, Lent's wilderness into Holy Week and the fifty days of Easter, Pentecost into the long green stretch of ordinary time that teaches the church to live what it celebrated. A congregation that keeps the year does not depend on its pastor's creativity for a sense of movement; the year supplies the arc, and the pastor's planning becomes a matter of furnishing seasons rather than inventing weeks. The year also disciplines a church's emotional range. Left to preference, most congregations would live in perpetual harvest-festival cheerfulness, and the year insists on Lent anyway, on lament and repentance and a long Friday, which is half of why the people who keep it are given permission to grieve when their own Novembers come.

Within the year's frame, plan in seasons rather than Sundays. A season is the natural unit of worship planning: one visual environment, one musical palette, one sermon series or lectionary arc, one set of special moments, planned once as a piece. Six to eight season plans a year is a manageable creative load; fifty-two independent Sundays is not, and the difference between those two workloads is the difference between a worship life with coherence and a weekly scramble with a bulletin.

What each season asks of you

A planner's tour of the year, briefly. Advent is not Christmas; it is waiting and longing, four weeks of it, and the planning tension is real because the congregation is humming carols while the lectionary is preaching John the Baptist. Hold the tension gently: keep Advent's character in the sermons and prayers, let the music bend toward celebration as the weeks build, and give Christmas its full twelve days on the other side instead of abandoning it on December 26. Epiphany carries the light outward and hands you

January, the church's quiet second September, a natural season for vision and recommitment. Lent is the year's deep breath, forty days of repentance and preparation that want a disciplined plan: an Ash Wednesday service and a churchwide practice or study, and a Holy Week mapped service by service, because Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are half of why Easter lands. Eastertide is fifty days, longer than Lent, and most churches waste it; plan the season so resurrection gets more than one Sunday. Pentecost opens the long green stretch of ordinary time, half the year, which is not filler but formation, the season for series that walk books of the Bible and build the church's ordinary faithfulness.

Two collisions to plan for rather than discover. The civil calendar runs through the church year, Mother's Day and graduation and July Fourth and homecoming, each carrying congregational expectations that the lectionary does not know about; decide season by season what you will honor and what you will gently pass over, and how to fold the honest ones into worship without letting Hallmark write the liturgy. And your own conference calendar, Annual Conference especially, takes you out of the pulpit at fixed times every year, which the year map should show from the start.

Who plans worship

The second discipline is deciding who is in the room, because "the pastor plans worship" is true the way "the cook makes dinner" is true in a restaurant, which is to say partially and dangerously. A workable model has three layers, and they do different jobs. A lay worship committee handles governance and reflection: it evaluates seasons after they happen and speaks for the congregation's experience, and it decides policy questions like service times and communion methods. Volunteer teams execute: musicians, tech, ushers, altar guild, the hands that make Sunday physically happen, covered in chapters 14 and 15. And a weekly staff planning meeting coordinates: the pastor, the musicians, and whoever runs production sit down once a week to walk the coming services in detail. Confusing the layers causes most worship conflict; a committee that tries to plan this Sunday's set list will drive the musicians out, and a staff meeting that quietly changes service times will rightly hear about it. Name the layers, and each one becomes a gift.

! WATCH OUT

The dangerous default is the pastor planning worship alone, and it fails in both directions at once. The service inherits one person's blind spots and tastes and energy level, and the congregation learns that worship is something the pastor produces and they attend. Worse, solo planning is invisible until the pastor leaves, at which point the church discovers that its entire worship life was stored in one departing head. If you inherit a solo-planned worship culture, the weekly planning meeting in this chapter is your first repair, even if it starts as two people and a calendar.

The annual rhythm

The whole system runs on one habit: planning each season before the previous one ends, anchored by one bigger annual session. Here is the walkthrough.

1

Hold an annual planning retreat.

Once a year, ideally in early summer, the pastor and the core worship leaders take a day away and map the coming twelve months: the seasons, the sermon series (chapter 12), the special Sundays, the big musical moments, and the known calendar collisions. You are not writing services; you are drawing the map the year will follow.

2

Write it down as one document.

The year map lives in a single shared artifact, every Sunday listed with its season, series, and specials. The moment it exists, every ministry in the church can plan around worship instead of colliding with it, and the musicians can start the cantata in September.

3

Plan each season six to eight weeks out.

Before each season begins, one working session furnishes it: texts and themes from the series brief, music direction, visual environment, and the special moments, the hanging of the greens or the Ash Wednesday service. This is where the retreat's pencil sketch becomes ink.

4

Run the weekly planning meeting.

Same day, same hour, every week, the worship staff walks the next two Sundays in detail: order, transitions, who does what, what could go wrong. Thirty to sixty minutes, and it is the single highest-leverage meeting in the church. Document the result as a written order of worship or rundown every week, without exception.

5

Evaluate by season, not by Sunday.

After each season, let the worship committee ask what served the congregation and what did not. Sunday-by-Sunday critique burns out volunteers and musicians; seasonal reflection actually improves the next season.

Two practical matters

Combined services deserve a place in the year plan rather than the emergency drawer. Churches with multiple services usually combine them a few times a year, holiday weekends and special occasions, and the difference between a combined service that feels like unity and one that feels like a scheduling failure is entirely in the framing: announce it early and plan it as an event, and let the service itself celebrate the fact that the whole church is in one room. And document everything as you go. This year's orders of

worship and bulletins are the templates that make next year faster, which is why the tools below include real ones rather than blank forms.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's worship year shows the system carrying real weight. Holy Week 2025 ran as a planned arc rather than a scramble: Maundy Thursday communion at six, Good Friday at the same hour, and an Easter Sunday with a sunrise service, a traditional service, and a contemporary service, the choir leading and breakfast served between, every piece of it sitting in the year map months ahead. The same year's calendar planned combined services at ten o'clock on holiday weekends like Memorial Day Sunday, announced well in advance and treated as gatherings of the whole body. The planning documents behind that rhythm, the who-plans model and the season planning guide along with real orders of worship, are linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Liturgical Season Planning \(Word\)](#): planning Advent, Lent, Holy Week, and the rest of the church year, with two years of worked examples to steal from.

POLITY NOTE

The Discipline makes the pastor responsible for the worship life of the congregation, including the oversight of services and the administration of the sacraments (§340.2), and it provides for lay participation in worship leadership through the church council's ministry structure (§252). Responsibility and collaboration are not in tension: the pastor answers for worship the way a conductor answers for the orchestra, which is precisely why the players and the rehearsal schedule matter.

THE FIRST MOVE

In your first month, do not change the worship service; change the meeting. Establish the weekly planning meeting with whoever currently makes Sunday happen, and simply walk the next two weeks together. You will learn how worship actually gets made in this church faster than any document can teach you, and the meeting will still be paying dividends in year five.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

How far ahead is worship actually planned in your church right now, and who is in the room when it happens? If the answer is "two weeks and me," what is the first layer you would add, the annual map, the seasonal session, or the weekly meeting, and what has stopped you so far?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Put the annual planning retreat on the calendar, even if it is months away, and start the weekly planning meeting this week. The map can wait for the retreat; the meeting cannot.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Liturgical Season Planning \(Word\)](#)

The season-by-season planning guide with worked examples.

[Who Plans Worship: Committee, Team, and Staff \(Word\)](#)

The three-layer model for dividing worship work, plus the Tuesday staff rhythm and how far ahead to plan.

[Combined Worship Services Model \(Word\)](#)

When and why to combine services: festival days, local observances, and the low-attendance Sundays that rest your volunteers.

[Example Planning Center Rundown: Good Friday \(PDF\)](#)

A real order of worship as the weekly meeting produces it.

[Worship Bulletin Example \(PDF\)](#) and [Combined Service Bulletin \(PDF\)](#)

Recent bulletins from a standard Sunday and a combined service.

[Event Planning Calendar Template \(Excel\)](#)

The reusable calendar for mapping the whole year event by event.

Preaching and the Annual Preaching Calendar

There is a version of the preaching life nobody chose and thousands of pastors live: it is Tuesday, and the only thing known about Sunday's sermon is that there will be one. The text gets picked by Wednesday's exhaustion and the study happens in fragments between interruptions, and Saturday night does the writing that the week refused to make room for. The sermon that results is usually fine, which is the trap, because fine is survivable, and a pastor can survive that way for thirty years while the pulpit quietly becomes the thinnest part of an otherwise faithful ministry. The alternative is not talent. It is a calendar.

What preaching is for

Start with the conviction underneath the craft, because it dictates the method. Preaching is more than conveying facts about the Bible and more than a weekly motivational talk; it is meant to be a vehicle for divine inspiration that leads to transformed lives, and that transformation comes less through any single sermon than through the habit of sitting under preaching regularly across years. That long-habit view changes everything about how you plan. If the unit of impact were the individual sermon, the right strategy would be swinging for a home run every week, and the pressure of that strategy is exactly what produces Saturday nights. But if the unit of impact is years of Sundays, then the right strategy is a steady, varied, intentional diet, the whole counsel of God across the whole church year, and the tool for a diet is a menu planned in advance.

The menu question is usually framed as lectionary versus series, and it is a false choice. The lectionary, the three-year cycle of appointed readings, guarantees breadth and keeps you honest about texts you would never choose; series preaching, three to six weeks on one book or question, gives the congregation momentum and gives your study compounding returns. A healthy calendar uses both: a Lent preached straight through the lectionary, a fall series on the membership vows, a summer walking a single gospel, an Advent in the prophets. What matters is not the method but the intentionality, because a year of sermons chosen week by week under deadline will reliably orbit the pastor's twelve favorite ideas, and the congregation deserves the other eighty-eight.

Building the annual calendar

The annual preaching calendar is one document with every Sunday of the coming year on it: the season, the series, the sermon title or focus, the texts, and the special days. Building it takes one focused retreat and a few evenings of refinement, and it repays that investment every single week for a year. Here is the walkthrough.

1

Gather the inputs.

The church year with its seasons and fixed days, the lectionary for the stretches you will keep it, your church's vision and current season of life, the questions you keep hearing in one-on-ones, and a list of what you have preached the last two years so the diet stays varied. The listening tour of chapter 8 feeds the pulpit more than any commentary.

2

Block the year into series and arcs.

Work season by season from the year map of chapter 11, giving each stretch a series of three to six weeks. Shorter than three loses momentum, longer than six loses the room, and the arcs should vary in register across the year: doctrinal, biblical-book, pastoral, missional.

3

Assign every Sunday its text and focus.

Not the sermon, just the seed: this text, this direction, one sentence. Expect to revise a fifth of them as the year teaches you things; the calendar is a rail, not a cage, and a death in the congregation or a crisis in the world takes precedence the week it comes.

4

Write a one-page brief per series.

Premise, the weeks with texts and titles, and what you hope forms in the congregation. The brief is how the musicians, the children's ministry, and the communications team build alongside you instead of finding out on Sunday, and it is the difference between a sermon series and a churchwide season.

5

Plan the guest weeks on purpose.

Mark your vacation, study leave, and conference Sundays now, and recruit the pulpit coverage months ahead. A calendar with the gaps planned is what makes chapter 4's rest actually happen.

6

Publish it.

Give the calendar to the staff and worship teams in full, and let the congregation see the series ahead. Anticipation is a form of discipleship, and a member who knows a series on prayer starts in three weeks will invite the neighbor she has been praying for.

The week the calendar buys you

The calendar's real product is a different kind of week. When the text has been known for months, study can start on Monday instead of panic starting on Thursday, and the protected study block from chapter 10 has actual contents. A workable shape, to adapt rather than obey: read the text Monday, slowly and aloud, before any commentary touches it, and write down your honest questions. Let it ride along through Tuesday's visits and meetings, because the text read early has a way of interpreting the week for you, and the week returns the favor. Study deeply midweek, commentaries and language work and the hard decisions about what this sermon is actually about, one sentence, said aloud until it is true. Draft on

Thursday or Friday while the well is full, aiming for done rather than perfect, so that Saturday can hold a light revision and a real rest instead of a composition. Preachers who work this way describe the same surprise, that the sermon starts assembling itself in the ordinary hours because the text got there first, and the ones who preach without manuscripts add that early drafting is what makes internalizing possible.

Interruptions will still come; the funeral falls on Wednesday and the week compresses. The calendar helps here too, because a compressed week that starts with a known text and a season's brief produces a modest, faithful sermon, while a compressed week that starts from nothing produces panic in a stole. Growth in delivery follows the same patience. Record yourself and listen once a month, and ask two or three honest members for specific feedback rather than compliments, changing one thing at a time. The pulpit rewards decades, and the calendar is how you make sure the decades accumulate rather than repeat.

! WATCH OUT

A planned calendar can quietly become a performance schedule if the series exist to be clever rather than to feed. The test of next year's calendar is not whether the titles would look good on a banner but whether, taken together, the year gives your particular congregation the parts of the gospel it is hungriest for and the parts it avoids. Plan the diet, not the marketing, and let chapter 8's listening decide the menu.

🌾 FROM THE FIELD

The Spanish Fort UMC preaching calendar is the most complete worked example on the hub: every Sunday of 2026 mapped a year ahead with series, titles, texts, and special days. The series arcs across 2024 to 2026 show the varied diet in practice, a creedal series to open a new appointment, covenant series in the commitment seasons, a lectionary Lent with a weekday devotional podcast running alongside, and a six-week vision-launch series, Welcome Home, that carried the congregation from Vision Sunday to Commitment Sunday in the fall of 2025. That last one is the strongest example in the files of a calendar doing pastoral work: the church did not just announce its new vision, it was preached into it, week by planned week.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Annual Preaching Schedule Example \(PDF\)](#): the actual year-ahead calendar, every Sunday mapped, to use as the pattern for your own.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Preaching the Word is the first duty the Discipline names for elders and licensed pastors (§340.1), and the office of lay servant provides trained lay speakers who can fill a pulpit faithfully when you are away (§§266-267). Your district's lay servant ministries director keeps the list, and inviting lay servants for your planned guest weeks both covers the calendar and develops the very leaders chapter 3 told you to build.

① THE FIRST MOVE

If you are new, do not attempt a full year yet; plan one season. Take the next natural stretch, the six weeks of Lent, the fall, and build it as a miniature calendar: texts, focuses, one brief. You will learn the method at a survivable scale, and the first season planned ahead will sell you on the year.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Pull up your last twelve months of sermons and sort them honestly: which themes repeated, which parts of Scripture never appeared, and what would a member who attended every week have been fed? Share one gap with the group, and let the group help you plan the series that fills it.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Choose the next liturgical season on your calendar and plan it completely this week: every Sunday, text and focus, one page. That single page is the beginning of your first annual calendar.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Annual Preaching Schedule Example \(PDF\)](#)

The full year-ahead calendar to pattern yours on.

[Series Brief: Welcome Home \(PDF\)](#)

The vision-launch series brief, the strongest worked example of preaching a church into its new season.

[Series Brief: Leaning Into Lent \(PDF\)](#)

A lectionary-based series brief, showing the both/and approach.

[Lenten Devotional Project Plan \(PDF\)](#)

The companion-devotional model: a season-long weekday podcast built alongside a sermon series.

The Sacraments

A young mother calls the office and asks, a little embarrassed, whether her baby can be baptized even though her husband was baptized Baptist and she has not been to church since college, and what she is really asking is whether grace has conditions. How you answer, and how your church celebrates the two sacraments generally, will teach your congregation more actual theology than a year of sermons, because the sacraments are theology people can watch. This chapter is the working theology and the working logistics together, since at the font and the table they were never separate.

What United Methodists believe is happening

United Methodists count two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, because these two were instituted by Christ himself, and we understand both as means of grace, ordinary channels through which God's extraordinary love actually moves. That phrase does real work. A sacrament is not a symbol we perform to show God something; it is something God does through water, bread, and cup, which is why Wesley urged the people called Methodists to receive communion as often as they could. The church's full teaching lives in two official documents worth reading in your first year, *By Water and the Spirit* on baptism and *This Holy Mystery* on communion, and everything below is the working pastor's summary of them.

On baptism: it is God's act before it is ours, the sign of prevenient grace, which is why we baptize people of every age including infants who cannot yet answer for themselves. The congregation answers with them, taking vows to surround the child with a community of love and forgiveness, and the parents promise to raise them in the faith until the child confirms it as their own. And because baptism is God's faithful act, it is never repeated. The member who comes asking to be rebaptized after a powerful renewal is asking a good question with a better answer: God did not fail the first time, and the church offers reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, a full and moving rite, for exactly this moment. Received into the church from another tradition, a person's prior baptism with water in the name of the Trinity is honored, whatever the denomination, which answers the young mother's question about her husband too.

On communion: the table belongs to Christ, not to the congregation, and so the invitation is open. United Methodists do not fence the table by membership or age; all who love Christ, repent of sin, and seek to live in peace are welcome, children included, because we would not teach a child that the family eats while they watch. Christ is really present in the meal, though we decline to over-specify the mechanics, and the grace at the table both pardons and nourishes. By long tradition we serve unfermented grape

juice, a hospitality to any for whom wine is a danger, and a gluten-free option extends the same welcome. None of this is casual; it is generous, and generosity at the table is the point being taught.

! WATCH OUT

The sacraments teach whether you mean them to or not, and sloppiness is a curriculum. A communion liturgy raced through in seven minutes teaches that the meal is an appendix, and a baptism performed with no preparation conversation teaches that it is a photo opportunity. You do not need high ceremony, and reverence is not the same as formality. You need unhurried care, every time, because the congregation is learning what these things are from how you touch them.

The sacraments in practice

1 Set the communion rhythm and publish it.

Monthly on the first Sunday is the common floor, with additional celebrations through the year, Maundy Thursday, Christmas Eve, and more often in seasons if the congregation is ready to grow toward Wesley's constant communion. Put every celebration on the year map from chapter 11 so music and setup are never surprised.

2 Decide the method by season and space.

Intinction moves a large congregation gracefully, the rail invites lingering and prayer, and trays reach the pews when mobility is the barrier. Vary the method with the season, teach the congregation why, and always carry the meal to those who cannot come forward.

3 Train the servers.

Laypeople may assist in distributing the elements, and serving is a formation experience for them; one brief training covers the words to say and what to do when something spills or someone weeps, and the reverent handling of what remains afterward.

4 Build the baptism conversation.

Never baptize a stranger: meet with the parents or the candidate beforehand, walk through what the sacrament means and what the vows will ask, and use the conversation to connect the family to the congregation's life. This meeting is where the young mother's embarrassment is met with grace, and it is often the doorway to a family's return to church.

5 Involve the congregation and mark the moment.

The congregational vow is not decoration; rehearse its meaning from the pulpit, consider a seasonal rhythm of baptism Sundays so the church anticipates them, and mark each baptism with a certificate and a gift, and a named way the church will follow up with the family.

6

Keep the records.

Baptisms, receptions, and communions of record go in the church's permanent registers, and the office needs the details the same week. Records feel bureaucratic until the day a fifty-year-old calls needing proof of baptism, and the church that can answer is the church that kept the book.

7

Reaffirm annually.

A congregational reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, Baptism of the Lord Sunday in January is the natural home, lets the whole church remember its baptism and be thankful, and it gives the would-be rebaptized their moment, every year, with full integrity.

The table beyond the sanctuary

The sacraments do not stay in the building. Extending the table to the homebound and hospitalized is among the tenderest work the office holds: communion carried to a living room where a member has not sat in a pew for three years says, more plainly than any visit, that she is still at the family table. Build it as a rhythm rather than a rarity, ideally the same week the congregation celebrates, so the whole church communes together in scattered rooms. Trained lay members may carry the consecrated elements to the absent as an extension of the congregation's celebration, which both multiplies the reach of the table and forms the carriers; your part is consecrating enough and training them in the brief liturgy for the home, and keeping the list of who receives.

Two edge cases will find you, so meet them here first. You will be asked, usually in a hospital hallway, about emergency baptism for a dying infant or an unbaptized adult near death, and the answer is yes: baptize, with water and the Trinitarian name, and any Christian may do so in true extremity. Record it with the church afterward and, if the person recovers, let the congregation celebrate what was done. And you will be asked to celebrate communion at a wedding or a funeral, which is allowed and sometimes lovely, with one pastoral test: the table must be open to the whole assembly, not staged for two people while the room watches. If the couple wants a private sacrament, the better gift is teaching them why the table does not work that way.

FROM THE FIELD

The rhythm this chapter describes is visible in the Spanish Fort UMC worship files: communion anchoring Maundy Thursday in Holy Week, the sacramental practice documented plainly enough to hand to new servers, and a seasonal approach to baptisms that lets the congregation anticipate and celebrate them rather than discover them in the bulletin. The two practice documents linked below, one for communion and one for baptism, are that church's working versions, written to be adapted rather than admired.

↓ GRAB THIS

Sacraments and Communion Practice (Word): how the sacraments are understood and practiced in one congregation, communion rhythm and the means-of-grace teaching behind it, ready to adapt.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Administering the sacraments is among the pastor's core duties (§340.2(b)), and licensed local pastors administer them within the charge to which they are appointed (§316.1). The official teaching documents, *By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*, were adopted by General Conference and carry the church's full authority on sacramental questions; when a member challenges open table or infant baptism, those documents, not your preference, are the ground you stand on. Membership and baptismal records are required of the local church (§§230-233), and the charge conference audits their keeping.

① THE FIRST MOVE

Before your first communion Sunday in a new appointment, ask two questions of whoever prepares the table: how has this church always done it, and who serves? Celebrate your first communion their way, honoring what you find, and change nothing until the congregation trusts you at the table. Reverence for the sacrament includes reverence for the hands that have been setting it for years.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What would a newcomer conclude about God from watching your church celebrate communion and baptism, knowing nothing else about Christianity? Answer honestly from the last one you led, and name one change of care, not of ceremony, that would teach the sacrament better.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Read *This Holy Mystery* and *By Water and the Spirit* this month, one evening each. Every sacramental question your ministry will face for a decade is answered in those two documents, and the pastor who has read them stops improvising theology at the font.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Sacraments and Communion Practice (Word)

One congregation's working communion practice and teaching.

Baptism Practice and Recognition (Word)

Baptism theology, the seasonal window, and how the baptized are recognized and followed up.

UMC: What We Believe (umc.org)

The doorway to By Water and the Spirit, This Holy Mystery, and the church's official sacramental teaching.

Music and the Arts in Worship

Twenty years from now, your members will not be able to quote your sermons, and they will still be able to sing every word of the songs they sang beside you, which is either humbling or clarifying depending on the day. Methodism was born singing; Charles Wesley wrote the theology into hymns precisely because he knew people carry what they sing long after they forget what they heard. That makes the music of your church a teaching office, not an entertainment budget, and it makes your relationship with your musicians one of the most consequential partnerships in your ministry. Most pastors receive no training in either fact, so here it is.

Sung theology and the pastor who does not sing well

Settle the theology first: music in worship is proclamation and prayer, not preliminaries. The anthem interprets Scripture and the congregational song puts the gospel in people's mouths and memories, and the service music carries the room between movements of the drama chapter 10 described. This means song selection is a theological act. Over a year, the songs are a second preaching calendar, and the same diet questions apply: is the congregation singing lament as well as praise, and are the texts worthy of the memory they will occupy? You do not need musical skill to steward this; you need to read texts, which is your trade. Read the lyrics of everything sung for a month as if they were sermon manuscripts, because functionally they are.

Most churches express this ministry through more than one vocabulary, a sanctuary choir and handbells in one service, a band and its production team in another, and the framing matters enormously: these are not rival churches sharing a building, they are one music ministry with several instruments. The moment a congregation starts keeping score between styles, chapter 6's living room develops a crack down the middle. The pastor sets this tone more than anyone, by honoring both vocabularies publicly, by never using one as the standard to measure the other, and by planning worship so that each service is fully itself rather than an apology for not being the other one.

! WATCH OUT

The style war is never actually about style. When traditional-versus-contemporary conflict flares, it is almost always grief and belonging wearing musical clothes: someone's sense that the church they gave their life to is being traded away, or that their children's church is being held hostage to the past. Argue playlists and you will lose for everyone; hear the grief and name the belonging, and the music conversation usually calms. The pastor who understands this stops refereeing genres and starts shepherding the actual wound.

The partnership

Your musicians, staff or volunteer, paid or willing, are ministry partners with a craft you probably do not share, and the partnership thrives on three clarities. Clarity of role: the pastor answers for the worship life of the church, per chapter 11, and the musician answers for the music within it, and neither conducts the other's rehearsal. You bring the year map and the series briefs; they bring the repertoire and the ensemble; the weekly planning meeting is where the two become one service. Clarity of information: musicians plan further ahead than preachers by necessity, a cantata is chosen in summer and an anthem needs weeks, so the annual calendar from chapter 12 is the single greatest gift you can give them, and springing sermon themes on Tuesday for Sunday is the fastest way to waste a good music ministry. And clarity of care: musicians in church live in a strange exposure, offering their craft to God in front of critics weekly, and a pastor who thanks them specifically and guards them from the loudest complainers, and who treats rehearsal as real ministry, will have allies for a decade.

The arts beyond the anthem

Music is the largest art in most churches and not the only one, and the others are usually waiting for permission. The visual environment preaches all by itself: paraments and banners that change with the seasons teach the church year to people who never read the bulletin, and a Lent that looks different from Easter forms the congregation's sense of time at a glance. Somebody in your congregation sews or paints or arranges, and has never been asked to do it for worship. The same is true of the photographers whose work could carry the church's story through chapter 30's communications, the woodworker who could build the Advent wreath stand, the teenagers who can produce video better than the church currently does, and the children, whose choirs and bells are not cute interludes but apprenticeships in leading worship; a congregation that hears its children sing learns something about its own future that no report conveys. Drama and movement appear more rarely and land hard when they fit the season, a Good Friday reading staged simply, a Christmas pageant that everyone pretends is for the children. None of this requires a budget line at first. It requires a pastor who treats offering one's craft to God as a normal thing members do, and who asks.

The big lifts and the fine print

Twice a year or so, music carries the whole church on its back: the Christmas musical, the Easter morning that swells the choir, the special service that draws the town. These are worth their considerable weight, and they run on planning horizons pastors underestimate. A December musical means summer selection and fall rehearsal calendars, plus decisions about combined choirs, children joining the adults, and hired instrumentalists months in advance, which is why it lives on the annual map and not in November's

inspiration. Budget honestly for these moments, including paying guest musicians fairly, because the congregation's memory of the year is disproportionately made in them.

And the fine print: copyright is real law and churches are not exempt. Performance in worship is broadly covered, but projecting lyrics, printing them in bulletins, livestreaming music, and copying sheet music all require licensing, which is what CCLI and similar licenses exist to cover. Get the church licensed for what it actually does, including the streaming license if Sunday goes online, and keep the reporting current. Never photocopy the anthem the budget did not buy; it is stewardship and it is the law, and it honors the artists whose work feeds your people.

1

Read a month of lyrics.

Everything sung in every service, read as theological texts. Note what your congregation's sung diet is rich in and missing, and bring the findings to your musicians as a shared curiosity, never as a grade.

2

Give the musicians the year.

Hand over the preaching calendar and series briefs as far ahead as they exist, and ask what the music ministry could do with the lead time. The answer will usually delight you.

3

Fix the weekly coordination.

If chapter 11's planning meeting does not yet include the musicians, repair that this month. Order, transitions, and keys are decided there, not discovered Sunday.

4

Audit the licensing.

One afternoon: what does the church project, print, stream, and copy, and what licenses does it actually hold? Close the gaps and calendar the renewals.

5

Honor both vocabularies in public.

Within one season, find a genuine occasion to celebrate each musical expression from the pulpit, and plan one moment a year when they make music together.

6

Plan the big lift early.

Whatever your church's Christmas tradition is, put its selection and rehearsal calendar on this summer's planning retreat agenda, with the budget conversation attached.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC runs the multiple-vocabulary model this chapter describes: a sanctuary choir and handbells carrying the traditional service, a band and tech team carrying the contemporary one, and an annual Christmas musical as the big lift. The December 2024 musical, *Lessons and Carols*, shows the pieces working together, the choir performing in both morning services, the children singing with the adults, a hired accompanist, and the congregation invited into the singing rather than watching it, all of it planned months ahead on the year map. The structural documents for all three ensembles and the musical production model are linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Christmas Musical Production Model \(Word\)](#): mounting an annual Christmas musical, rehearsal calendar, combined choirs, and hiring orchestra musicians, the full big-lift playbook.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The pastor's oversight of worship (¶340.2) includes its music, and the hymnals and worship books approved by General Conference, *The United Methodist Hymnal* among them, are the church's official song collections. Nothing in the Discipline prescribes a musical style, which is worth saying out loud in a style conflict: the connection that holds together congregations from gospel choirs to praise bands to pipe organs has already settled the question of whether there is one faithful sound.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first month, attend a full rehearsal of every ensemble, choir practice, band rehearsal, handbells, and sit in the back without notes or suggestions. You are not there to evaluate; you are there to learn who these people are and to let them see that their pastor thinks Thursday night matters. Few gestures buy more goodwill for less.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What is your working relationship with your musicians honestly like, and which of the three clarities (role, information, care) is weakest? What would it cost you to strengthen that one this season, and what is the current weakness costing the church?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Schedule an unhurried conversation with your primary musician this week, no agenda beyond two questions: what do you need from me that you are not getting, and what could this music ministry become with more lead time? Bring the preaching calendar as a gift.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Traditional Music: Choir and Handbells (Word)

Structure and seasonal rhythm of a sanctuary choir and handbell choir.

Contemporary Music: Band and Tech (Word)

How a contemporary band and its tech team are organized and scheduled.

Christmas Musical Production Model (Word)

The annual big-lift playbook.

The Unglamorous Rooms

Nobody has ever left a worship service saying the sound was perfect, because perfect sound is inaudible as sound; it is just the sermon, arriving. The same is true of the unlocked doors, the bulletins in the right hands, the paraments in the right color, and the communion table set before anyone arrived. Worship rides on an invisible machine run by people who get noticed only when something breaks, and this chapter is about that machine: who runs it, how it keeps running when volunteers move away, and why the pastor who honors it is guarding the Table as surely as the one who prays over it.

The crew that makes Sunday possible

Chapter 6 called this the garage, and worship's garage has several benches. The hospitality team works the human doorway: greeters, whose whole job is warmth at the threshold, and ushers, whose job is quietly operational, seating, bulletins, the offering, counting attendance, knowing where the first aid kit is and what to do if someone collapses in the third pew. Those are different gifts, and churches that treat them as one interchangeable role get neither done well. The altar guild or setup crew works the sanctuary itself: paraments changed with the seasons, flowers arranged and delivered afterward to the homebound, candles filled, the font ready, the table set with the care chapter 13 asked for. And the production team works the booth: sound, projection, lighting, and the livestream that is now a permanent second front door of chapter 6's house, watched by the homebound and the traveling, and by the not-yet-visiting in numbers most churches undercount.

Take the livestream seriously as worship and not as security footage. Someone's mother in another state worships with you every week; someone considering your church has watched three services before ever parking a car. The production volunteers who serve that congregation deserve the same standing as the choir, and the same planning: the weekly rundown from chapter 11 should reach the booth by midweek, every week, with the service's names and page numbers spelled correctly, because the booth publishes what you hand it.

! WATCH OUT

Every church has one: the single volunteer who alone knows how the soundboard works or what the streaming password is. That person is a treasure and a single point of failure, and the difference between the two is documentation. The Sunday after they move to be near their grandchildren, undocumented knowledge leaves with them, and the church discovers it cannot make its own worship happen. Honor the keeper of each system by asking them to teach it, not just run it.

The plates and the doors

Two of the garage's jobs carry legal weight, so give them their own paragraph each. The offering is the first: from the moment the plates leave the sanctuary, the money is under the finance committee's counting procedures, and the unbreakable rule is that cash is never alone with one person. Two unrelated counters, a sealed bag or a locked drop, a consistent chain of custody every single week, and the treasurer receiving records rather than cash. This is not about suspecting your ushers, and saying so out loud matters; it is about protecting them, because a counting system with one set of hands in it leaves that person unprotected the first time a deposit disagrees with somebody's memory. Chapter 27 covers the full controls, and the ushers are where the controls begin.

Safety is the second. Sunday gathers your town's oldest hearts and youngest lungs into one building, and somebody should have decided in advance what happens when one of them needs help: who calls, who meets the ambulance, where the first aid kit and the AED actually are, and which doors are locked once worship begins versus staffed with a greeter who can welcome the latecomer. The balance between open doors and safe ones is a trustees' policy decision, per chapter 29, but its Sunday execution belongs to the ushers, which is why their training is more than seating charts. A fifteen-minute walkthrough twice a year, everyone shows everyone where things are and who does what, converts a plan on paper into a team that will not freeze.

Systems that survive their people

The machine's health has one test: could Sunday happen well if any single person were suddenly absent? Getting to yes takes four habits, none glamorous, all cheap. Written role descriptions, one page per role, what this job is, when to arrive, what done looks like, so a new volunteer can succeed without apprenticing for a year. Scheduled rotations, built seasons ahead, with enough people per role that no one serves every week; the fastest way to lose a faithful usher is to never let him sit with his wife.

Documentation of the technical systems, the soundboard settings, the streaming setup, the light presets, the projection computer, photographed and written so a substitute can run a baseline service from the binder. And trained backups for every seat, deliberately given real Sundays, because a backup who has never actually done it is a name on paper, not a backup.

1

List every job Sunday requires.

Walk a service mentally from unlocking to lockup, and write down each task and who currently does it. Most pastors find fifteen to twenty-five distinct jobs and at least three names that appear alarmingly often.

2

Write the one-page role descriptions.

Do it with the current holders; they know the real job, and being asked to describe it honors their expertise. These pages feed straight into chapter 9's lane on-ramps.

3

Build the rotation a season at a time.

Publish the schedule, pair newcomers with veterans for their first Sundays, and let the one-time helper slot from chapter 9 feed the pipeline.

4

Document the booth.

One working session: photograph the settings, write the startup and shutdown sequences, list the passwords in the church's password system (not one volunteer's head), and put the binder where the substitute can find it.

5

Train the backups on live Sundays.

Every critical role gets a second person who actually does the job several times a year, with the veteran standing by. Low season is the time; Christmas Eve is not.

6

Thank them where the church can hear it.

Once a season, name the invisible crew from the pulpit or the newsletter, specifically and accurately. The garage runs on almost nothing but knowing that somebody noticed.

🌿 FROM THE FIELD

Watch the machine work in one Spanish Fort UMC weekend. Easter 2025 ran three services, a 6:30 sunrise service, traditional at 8:45, contemporary at 11:00, with the choir leading, breakfast for the congregation cooked and served between services, and every service needing its own setup, sound, ushers, and reset. Nothing about that morning was improvised: the roles were defined and the rotations built, and the setup and hospitality systems were documented well enough to run three different configurations in five hours. The role descriptions and setup systems that church uses are linked below, ready to adapt to your own Sunday machine.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Ushers, Greeters, and Hospitality Roles \(Word\)](#): the role descriptions for the Sunday morning hospitality team, mapped to the guest's path from the parking lot to after worship, the fastest starting point for step two.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The unglamorous rooms sit where two committees meet: worship volunteers serve under the pastor's worship oversight (§340.2), while the building itself, its safety, and its insurance belong to the trustees (§258.3, §§2525 ff.). Ushers are usually the first responders to a Sunday emergency, so their training belongs in the trustees' safety planning of chapter 29, and the offering they collect must follow the finance committee's counting procedures (§258.4) from the moment the plates leave the sanctuary. The garage, in other words, is governed too.

① THE FIRST MOVE

On your first Sundays, arrive earlier than you need to and stay later, and learn the machine by name: who unlocks, who makes the coffee, who runs the board, who resets the sanctuary. Thank each one specifically before you have any reason to ask anything of them. These are also, not incidentally, some of the most loyal and least heard people in the congregation, and the pastor who knows the garage is trusted everywhere else in the house.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Run the absence test on your own church: name the one person whose sudden absence would most visibly break next Sunday. What do they alone know, and what would it take, concretely and this season, to turn their knowledge into a system with a backup?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Do step one this week: walk next Sunday mentally from unlock to lockup and write the full job list with names attached. The list is the map of your machine, and the repeated names on it are your first conversations.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Ushers, Greeters, and Hospitality Roles \(Word\)](#)

Role descriptions for the Sunday hospitality team, mapped to the guest's path through the morning.

[Sanctuary Setup and Supplies \(Word\)](#)

The systems behind paraments, flowers, pew supplies, and weekly setup.

[Example Planning Center Rundown \(PDF\)](#)

The weekly rundown that keeps the booth and the chancel on the same page.

PART IV

Caring for People

A Congregational Care System

Ruth spent four days in the hospital after her fall, and nobody from the church came, and by the time the pastor heard about it, from Ruth's daughter, in the grocery store, with an edge in her voice, the sentence had already hardened into the one every pastor dreads: the church doesn't care about us anymore. Here is what actually happened. The church cared enormously; the church simply never found out. Nobody called the office and the prayer chain heard a garbled version two counties late, and the pastor was at a conference for two of the four days. Care failed without a single uncaring person involved, which is the whole lesson of this chapter: compassion without a system fails predictably, and the failure always gets interpreted as indifference.

Care is a system wearing a warm coat

New pastors tend to hear the word system as cold when it sits next to the word care, so settle that first. A care system is not a substitute for love; it is what love builds so that no one falls through. The shepherd of Jesus's parable could leave the ninety-nine for the one precisely because he counted, and counting is a system. A congregation that relies on spontaneous compassion delivers care in proportion to visibility, which means the beloved long-time member with a church-going daughter gets forty casseroles and the quiet man in the back pew gets missed entirely. The system exists for the quiet man.

The second settled fact comes from chapters 2 and 3: the pastor cannot be the system. In a congregation of any size, the pastor who personally delivers all the care becomes the bottleneck of all the care, and the congregation learns that only pastoral visits count, which simultaneously exhausts you and demotes every gifted lay caregiver in the building. Your role is architectural: you carry the crisis moments personally, you build and feed the system that carries everything else, and you teach the congregation that a visit from a trained care team member is the church at their door, not the church's substitute.

The tiers and the intake

Practical care sorts into tiers, and naming them tells everyone what to expect. Crisis care is the emergency tier, hospitalization or a death in the family, and it belongs substantially to the pastor, fast; speed is the message, and nothing else you do this week outranks it. Ongoing care is the long tier, the homebound and the long illness and the caregiver who is slowly drowning, and it belongs to teams on a rhythm: trained visitors and communion carriers from chapter 13, and callers with a monthly list. Quiet care is the tier nobody announces, the grief anniversary, the divorce in progress, the job lost, the young mother underwater, and it is caught by watchers rather than reported through channels, which is why Sunday

school classes and small groups, the natural care webs of a congregation, need to know they are part of the system. And congregational touch is the broad tier, the prayer chain, the card ministry, the meal train, the ride to the doctor, light per person and enormous in aggregate.

Every tier depends on the same fragile thing: the church finding out. Build the intake channel deliberately and teach it relentlessly. One phone number and one email that reach the care coordinator or the office, prayer request cards that actually get read the same day, class and group leaders who know to pass a name along, and the standing public message, said from the pulpit until it is folklore, that telling the church is not bothering the pastor. Then handle what comes in with adult confidentiality: care information moves on a need-to-know basis, never through the prayer chain without the family's permission, and a prayer request is not a news release. One breach of that trust costs you years of intake.

! WATCH OUT

Do not confuse the prayer chain with the care system. A prayer chain spreads information and intercession, and it is beautiful and unaccountable: nobody on it is responsible for showing up. The care failure mode of many churches is assuming that because everyone knew, someone went. Knowing is not going. Every name that enters the system needs a person attached to it, by name, with a when.

The visit itself

Since the crisis tier is yours, here is the craft of the hospital visit nobody teaches. Keep it short; fifteen minutes is a full pastoral visit for a sick person, and the visitor who stays an hour is meeting his own needs. Sit where the patient can see you without strain, never on the bed, and let them set the conversation's depth: some patients need to talk about the surgery and some need desperately to talk about anything else, and following their lead is the skill. Close with Scripture and prayer, brief and specific, using the person's name and the actual situation, and ask before you take their hand. Know the building's rules and rhythms: quiet hours and shift changes, and the privacy laws that mean the hospital will not tell you a member is there, which is why the intake channel from this chapter, not the hospital, is how you find out. On the way out, a word with the family in the hallway is often the realest ministry of the visit, because the patient is medicated and the daughter is terrified.

Homebound visits run on the opposite clock: these members have nothing but time, loneliness is the ailment, and the visit itself is the medicine. Come with the sacrament when you can, per chapter 13, and bring news of the church and take their news back. Treat their prayers as an assignment for the congregation's prayer ministry, because homebound saints who pray daily for the church are not care recipients only; they are an unassigned intercession team, and telling them so restores a vocation the shut-in years took.

Building it

1 **Map how care flows today.**

Take a recent month and trace five real situations: how did the church find out, who responded, how fast, and who was missed? The map of what actually happens, not the brochure version, tells you what to build first.

2 **Define the tiers and the response standard for each.**

Write it down plainly: hospitalization gets a pastoral contact within a day and a visit as the situation warrants; homebound members get a visit and communion monthly; every death gets the full funeral care of chapter 17 plus a year of follow-up. Standards turn good intentions into commitments someone can keep or fix.

3 **Build the single intake channel and teach it.**

One number, one email, one coordinator who checks both daily. Teach it from the pulpit quarterly, print it in the bulletin, and thank people publicly for using it, because every thank-you trains ten more families to call.

4 **Recruit and train the team.**

Visitors, callers, card writers, meal organizers, communion carriers. Formal models like Stephen Ministry train lay caregivers to a depth that transforms a congregation's capacity, and even without the formal program, its insight holds: caregivers need training and assignment and supervision, not just willingness.

5 **Run the weekly care huddle.**

Fifteen minutes in staff meeting or with the care coordinator, every week, walking one list: who is in the hospital, who is homebound, who is in quiet crisis, who has nobody assigned, and what changed. This meeting is the system's heartbeat, and when it stops, Ruth happens.

6 **Keep a care log that respects the trust.**

A simple confidential record of contacts made, so follow-through is visible and nobody is missed twice. Who is authorized to see it is a decision you make on purpose, not by drift.

FROM THE FIELD

When Spanish Fort UMC sorted its serving life into lanes in 2026, Care became one of the eight, and the lane's contents show what a full system looks like gathered in one place: hospital and homebound visitation, bereavement care, the prayer chain, a card ministry, and membership care callers, with a Stephen Ministry relaunch planned as the lane's training backbone. Gathering it into one lane with one leader did quietly important work: care stopped being a scatter of ministries that each assumed another one had Ruth covered, and became a single accountable answer to the question of who gets seen and how. The care system writeup and the Stephen Ministry structure are linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Congregational Care System \(Word\)](#): one church's full care system on paper, tiers, teams, and intake, ready to adapt to your size.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Pastoral visitation and the care of members are core duties of the office (§340.2(a)), and the Discipline directs the church to exercise ongoing care and accountability for its membership (§§227-228), including the members who have drifted from participation, which makes the care system part of membership ministry and not an optional kindness. The annual membership audit your charge conference expects is, read pastorally, a care list.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In week one of a new appointment, get three lists from the office before anything else: who is currently hospitalized, who is homebound, and who has had a death in the family in the last year. Chapter 5 already sent you to the bedsides; this is the standing version. Those three lists, kept current, are the seed of the whole system.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Tell the group about your church's most recent care failure, the Ruth story you know about, without names. Trace it honestly: where exactly did the system break, at intake, at assignment, or at follow-through? What single repair would have caught it?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Start the weekly care huddle this week, whatever else exists or does not. One list, fifteen minutes, every week. Systems grow from heartbeats, and this is the heartbeat.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Congregational Care System (Word)

The full system: tiers, teams, and intake.

Stephen Ministry Structure (Word)

The trained lay caregiver model and how a church structures it.

Spiritual Guidance and Direction (Word)

The deeper one-on-one care ministry alongside the visiting teams.

The Holy Moments

The phone rings at six in the morning and a voice you half-recognize says that her husband died an hour ago and asks if you can come, and every new pastor discovers in that moment that seminary taught them eschatology but not what to do with their hands in a new widow's kitchen. Weddings, funerals, and the baptisms of chapter 13 are the hours when a pastor stands closest to people, at thresholds they will remember in detail for the rest of their lives, and the ministry done there is never neutral: it builds trust that lasts decades or it leaves a wound that outlasts your appointment. This chapter is the craft of those hours.

Funerals: the church at its best hour

Go now. That is the first rule of the death call, and nearly the whole of it: when the phone rings, you go, that morning, in whatever state your calendar is in, because your presence in the first hours says everything the family will ever need to know about whether the church is real. You do not need eloquence in the kitchen. Presence and prayer and unhurried listening are the work, along with the quiet practical mercies: who else needs calling, whether the funeral home has been chosen, when the family would like to meet, whether anyone has eaten. Grief makes people helpless in administrative ways, and a pastor who gently carries the logistics is doing pastoral care, not paperwork.

The family meeting, a day or so later, is where the service is born, and its secret is that it is mostly listening. Ask about the person and write down what you hear, the stories, the exact phrases, the laughter, the contradictions, because specificity is what makes a funeral feel true and generic funerals are the ones families never forgive. Then shape a service that does the two things a Christian funeral must do at once: honor this particular life honestly, and proclaim the resurrection. A eulogy alone is a memorial; a witness to the resurrection with this person's story woven through it is a funeral, and grieving people can tell the difference even when they cannot name it. Plan the practical layers with the same care, the music the family needs, the grandchild who wants to read, the military honors, the graveside's brief and weighty words, and coordinate with the funeral home early, because they run the day's machinery and a good working relationship with the local directors will serve you for years.

Then comes the part most pastors skip: the year after. The casseroles stop in three weeks, and the grief does not, and the care system of chapter 16 should carry the widow forward on purpose, a visit after the relatives leave, a call at the anniversary, a card at the first Christmas, her name on the quiet-care list for a year. Families measure the church by the funeral; they measure the gospel by what happens after it.

↓ **GRAB THIS**

Funeral Process and Templates (Word): the checklist, bulletin templates, and service texts from an active funeral ministry, so your six a.m. call has a spine under it.

The hard funerals

Some funerals arrive with extra weight, and it helps to have thought about them before they come. The suicide funeral is the hardest and the most important to do well: name the death honestly, without euphemism and without dwelling, proclaim that nothing, not even this, separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and watch the room's shoulders drop, because half the gathered grief is fear about the soul of the one they lost, and the gospel has an answer for it. The funeral of the person nobody mourns, the estranged father, the difficult sister, asks a different honesty: do not eulogize a fiction the family knows is false, and do not audit the deceased either; commend a complicated life to a merciful God, which is, after all, what every commendation is. The funeral where the family is at war needs your logistics more than your theology, seating and speaking order and a firm hand on the plan, agreed in advance with the principals separately if needed. And the practical landscape has shifted under all of them: cremation is now common and fully honored in United Methodist practice, and services often happen weeks after deaths, which makes the pastoral arc this chapter teaches, presence at the death and care in the gap and follow-up after, matter even more when the service itself is delayed. None of these funerals will go perfectly, and all of them will be remembered for whether the pastor was honest and kind and unafraid.

Weddings: policy is a pastoral instrument

Weddings run on longer clocks and hotter expectations, and the pastor's best friend is a written wedding policy adopted before anyone needs it. The policy answers, in calm advance prose, everything that becomes a conflict when answered on the fly: who may be married at the church, what the church costs and what the musicians and custodian are paid, who officiates and whether visiting clergy may, what the premarital counseling expectation is, and what the building rules are for decorations, photography, and the reception. None of that is bureaucracy. A policy protects the couple from surprise and the volunteers from exploitation, and it protects you from being the villain in somebody's wedding story, because "the policy says" is a gentler sentence than "I say."

The counseling is where the real ministry lives. A wedding is a service; a marriage is the thing the church actually cares about, and a session-by-session premarital framework, communication, money, family patterns, faith, conflict, turns the pastor from an event vendor into the first pastor of the new household. Couples who counseled with you call you when the third year gets hard, which is the point. As for the day itself, one craft note carries most of the weight: you run the rehearsal, kindly and firmly and completely,

because a wedding party that knows exactly what happens next relaxes, and a relaxed wedding lets the vows be heard. On honoraria, have a settled personal policy, and never let money become ambiguous between you and a family; many pastors decline fees from members outright, and clarity matters more than the particular rule.

! WATCH OUT

The funeral of a person you never met, requested by a family with no church, is not an imposition; it is the front porch of chapter 6 at its widest. Treat the unchurched funeral and wedding as full ministry, with the same preparation and the same follow-up, and resist the quiet clergy temptation to give the stranger the abbreviated version. Some of the most fruitful pastoral relationships of your ministry will begin at the graveside of someone you knew only through two hours of a family's stories.

The rhythm of the moments

1

Build the funeral packet before the phone rings.

A checklist from death call to follow-up, bulletin templates, your file of service texts and readings. The packet is what lets you be fully present in the kitchen instead of composing logistics in your head.

2

Adopt the wedding policy in a calm season.

Take a working draft through the trustees and council before the next contested question arrives, and hand every inquiring couple the same document on day one.

3

Choose your premarital framework and hold the line.

Sessions before the wedding, scheduled at the first meeting. Couples occasionally balk, and the ones who complete it almost universally name it later as the most valuable part.

4

Wire the follow-up into the care system.

Every funeral generates a year of quiet-care entries, and every wedding a first-anniversary touch. The moments are doorways, not events, and the system is what keeps the door open.

5

Debrief yourself.

After each funeral and wedding, ten minutes of notes: what worked and what you would change, and what the family taught you. Your hundredth funeral will be pastoral in ways your third cannot be, and the notes are how the hundred accumulate.

FROM THE FIELD

The funeral resources linked in this chapter come from a congregation that treats funeral ministry as a system rather than a sequence of improvisations: a standing checklist, bulletin templates, service texts, and the follow-up rhythm, maintained and revised as the ministry learns. The wedding side runs the same way, a written policy with fees and expectations, and a session-by-session premarital counseling framework. None of it removes the humanity of the moments; it is what frees the pastor's full attention for the humanity, because nothing administrative is being invented at the graveside.

POLITY NOTE

Conducting weddings and funerals belongs to the pastor's duties (§340.2(a)), and the decision to perform any particular marriage rests with the pastor, which is a discretion the Discipline protects. Marriage also sits under state law: confirm your license or registration requirements in your state before your first wedding, because officiating without meeting the civil requirements creates a legal tangle no couple deserves. The services themselves are in the Book of Worship, whose funeral liturgy is titled, exactly right, A Service of Death and Resurrection.

THE FIRST MOVE

Before your first death call in a new appointment, introduce yourself to the local funeral directors, a short visit, this week if you are newly arrived. They are the other professionals in the room at every funeral you will ever do here, they know the town's families better than the membership database does, and the pastor they already know gets the six a.m. call handled twice as smoothly.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Tell the group about the best funeral you have ever attended or led, and name what made it true. Then the working question: if the six a.m. call came tomorrow, what would you be improvising that a packet or a practiced rhythm should already have decided?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Assemble your funeral packet this week, starting from the template below and your own tradition's service texts. It is the one tool in this book you will need with no warning at all.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Funeral Process and Templates (Word)

Checklist, bulletins, and service texts from an active funeral ministry.

Wedding Policies and Planning (Word)

Wedding policy, fees, and planning documents to adapt.

Pre-Marital Counseling Framework (Word)

The session-by-session approach to preparing couples.

Welcoming and Keeping New People

The Hendersons visited three Sundays in a row in September, new to town, two kids, clearly looking for a church home, and in October they stopped coming, and here is the uncomfortable audit question: who noticed? Not the greeters, who greeted three hundred people. Not the pastor, who shook their hands twice and lost the name both times. The Hendersons joined a church across town whose welcome was not warmer, only organized, and they will never know how much the first church would have loved them, because love that has no system for noticing strangers stays a secret. Every congregation believes it is friendly, and most are, to each other. This chapter is about being findable and followable and joinable by people who owe you nothing.

The visit they almost made

Welcome begins before the parking lot. By the time a family visits, they have almost certainly visited your website and social media, watched a livestream or two, and formed a working picture of whether they will fit, which means the front porch of chapter 6 is digital first: service times findable in five seconds and an honest photo of what worship actually looks like, and a plain page that answers a visitor's real questions, what to wear, where to park, what happens with my kids, where the bathrooms are. Then comes the physical visit, and the craft is to walk it as a stranger. Signage should carry a newcomer from the parking lot to the front door to the nursery, because asking directions three times is three small humiliations, and greeters should be trained to spot unfamiliar faces and walk people to places rather than point. Above all comes the children's check-in, because for a young family the security and warmth of the kids' hallway is the whole audition. A church that gets chapter 19's check-in system right is telling parents the truest welcome there is: your children are safe here.

The visit ends with the one moment that costs a church nothing and decides nearly everything: whether anyone learns their name. A connection card that people actually fill out, a gift at a welcome table, a QR code that works, a greeter who introduces the family to one other family, any mechanism will do, but some mechanism must exist, because follow-up is impossible with people who remained anonymous.

Who is actually visiting

Design the welcome for the people who actually come, and they arrive in two broad kinds. Transfer visitors grew up in church somewhere: they know the hymns, they are fluent in the customs, and what they are shopping for is relationship, a church where their kids will be known and their gifts will be wanted. For them the welcome system's job is speed to belonging, the sponsor family and the lane

placement, because they will join wherever friendship happens first. Unchurched and dechurched visitors are the second kind, and their numbers grow every year: the family with no church memory at all, and the adult who left years ago carrying a wound. For them, everything your congregation does on autopilot is a foreign language, when to stand, what a narthex is, what page anything is on, whether the offering plate is a bill, and worship that never explains itself quietly tells them this was not built with you in mind. The fix costs nothing: a pastor who narrates gently ("we're going to stand and sing; the words will be on the screen") and bulletins without acronyms, and a congregation taught that explaining is not dumbing down, it is holding the door. The dechurched visitor needs one more thing, patience with their guardedness, because they are not evaluating your programming; they are testing whether church can be trusted again, and the only evidence that counts is how your people treat them across months.

The forty-eight hours and the path

Follow-up is a race against evaporation, and the standard is simple: some personal touch within two days, warm and pressure-free. A handwritten note from the pastor outperforms everything else per minute spent; a text or email from the children's director to the family whose kids checked in runs a close second. What the touch must not be is an ambush, no unannounced doorstep visits in this century and no adding anyone to a newsletter list they did not ask for, and no treating a first visit as a membership inquiry. The message is only this: we noticed you and we are glad you came, and here is a human you can reply to.

From there, returning visitors need a lit path, because a church that is easy to visit and hard to join loses people in the corridor between. The pattern that works is a low-pressure gathering on a predictable rhythm, a visitor class, a Meet the Pastor evening, where newcomers hear the church's story and its vision and what membership means, and can ask their real questions in a room where asking is the point. Membership itself, when they choose it, should be taught as covenant rather than paperwork: the vows to uphold the church by prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness are a serious promise, and newcomers respect a church that treats them as one. Then, the step most churches skip, close the loop after the vows: a new member with a friend and a place to serve within a few months stays, and one with neither drifts back out the same door, which is exactly what chapter 9's lanes and their one-time on-ramps are for. Assign each new household a sponsor family, place them in a lane, and check at ninety days whether belonging actually happened.

! WATCH OUT

Watch the back door as carefully as the front. Churches count who arrives and rarely notice who quietly stops coming, and by the time an absence is felt, the story the absent family tells themselves ("nobody noticed") has set like concrete. A monthly glance at attendance patterns and small groups that flag their own missing, and a norm that a caring call after three absent Sundays is love rather than surveillance, will keep more people than any growth program will attract.

Building the welcome system

1

Audit the visit as a stranger.

Ask a friend from outside the church to visit, park, find the nursery, and report honestly; do the same audit on the website tonight. Fix the three worst humiliations first.

2

Install the name mechanism.

Connection cards, a welcome table with a small gift, a QR code that works, whatever fits your culture, plus a person whose Sunday job is collecting what comes in.

3

Build the forty-eight-hour touch.

Decide who sends what within two days of every first visit, and put it on somebody's Monday checklist by name. Handwritten from the pastor for first visits is the gold standard.

4

Set the visitor class rhythm.

A predictable gathering, quarterly or better, on the calendar all year, so there is always a next open door to invite a returning visitor through.

5

Close the loop on every new member.

Sponsor family and lane placement, and a ninety-day check: do they have a friend and a job? If not, that is the pastor's or lane leader's next conversation.

6

Watch the back door monthly.

A standing review of who has gone quiet, with a kind contact assigned. Recovered relationships at three weeks are easy; at three years they are archaeology.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's pathway runs on the pattern this chapter teaches: a Visitor Class, called Meet the Pastor, on a standing rhythm as the lit corridor between visiting and joining, with the church's vision and the meaning of membership taught in the room, plus plain-language membership status definitions with the Discipline references attached, so joining is explained rather than assumed. A full congregational guidebook, print and digital, then walks a new household through everything the church does. The lane structure of chapter 9 then gives every new member a named answer to "where do I fit?" All three documents are linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Visitor Class and Meet the Pastor \(Word\)](#): the structure and content of the newcomer gathering, ready to adapt to your rhythm.

¶ POLITY NOTE

United Methodist membership has precise shapes worth teaching accurately: the baptized member, anyone baptized in the congregation's care, and the professing member, who has taken the vows of the baptismal covenant and been received (¶215), with the professing vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness spelled out in ¶217. People join by profession of faith, by transfer from another UMC congregation, or from other denominations (¶217), and the pastor is charged with instructing candidates for membership (¶216.3), which is the polity's name for your visitor class.

① THE FIRST MOVE

This Sunday, stand where the visitors stand: arrive by the main visitor entrance, not the office door, ten minutes before the service, and watch what a stranger would meet. Then read the last month of connection cards, if they exist, and find out what happened to each name. The gap between those two experiences is your welcome system's true state.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Think of the last family that visited your church three times and vanished. Reconstruct what they experienced at each step, found you, visited, returned, was or was not followed up, and name the exact link where the chain broke. What would it cost to fix that one link before Sunday?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Do the stranger's audit this Sunday and the website audit tonight, and write down the three worst moments of each. Those six fixes are your welcome ministry's actual to-do list, ahead of any new program.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Visitor Class and Meet the Pastor (Word)

The newcomer gathering, structured and reusable.

Membership Status Definitions (Word)

Plain-language member statuses with Book of Discipline references.

Ushers, Greeters, and Hospitality Roles (Word)

The Sunday-morning team that executes the welcome, from chapter 15.

Safe Sanctuaries

The nursery is short a volunteer for Sunday, a beloved member offers to step in, and she has not been screened or trained, and someone says the sentence this chapter exists to answer: "Oh, it's fine, we know everyone here." Every congregation that ever experienced abuse believed it knew everyone there. The people who harm children seek out institutions that run on trust instead of process, precisely because trust without process is an open door, and the church, warm and volunteer-hungry and reluctant to offend, has historically been exactly that door. Safe Sanctuaries is how the United Methodist Church closes it without chilling the warmth, and it is not an administrative burden on your ministry with children. It is a ministry with children, done as carefully as children deserve.

Why the church does this

Start with the theology, because the policy only holds when the congregation believes it. Children and vulnerable adults are a sacred trust, the people Jesus placed in the center of the room when the disciples were arguing about greatness, and protecting them is not a concession to a litigious age; it is a direct expression of the gospel. The millstone saying is the sternest sentence Jesus ever spoke, and it is about this. When a church adopts screening and supervision rules, it is saying out loud that the safety of a child outranks the convenience of an adult and even the feelings of a good-hearted volunteer, which is a properly Christian ordering of priorities. Said that way, from the pulpit, the policy stops feeling like suspicion and starts feeling like what it is, a congregation taking its baptismal vows to its children seriously.

The realism matters too, and it should be spoken as plainly as the theology: abuse happens in churches, it is nearly always committed by someone known and trusted rather than a stranger, and institutions that assume it cannot happen to them are the ones where it does. Good policy is not cynicism about your people. It is honesty about how harm actually works, and it protects the innocent volunteer as much as the child, because clear rules mean no good person is ever alone in an unwitnessable situation with an accusation's worth of ambiguity.

The pillars of the policy

Every workable Safe Sanctuaries policy stands on the same few pillars. Screening: every person who works with children, youth, or vulnerable adults completes an application and a background check, clergy and staff included, with a waiting period, commonly six months of active participation, before a newcomer can serve, because predators are drawn to fast access. The two-adult rule: no adult is alone

with a child or children who are not their own, ever, in a classroom or a vehicle or a text thread, and where a second adult is momentarily impossible, doors stand open and another adult roams. Visibility: windows in classroom doors and open-door policies, and digital communication that always includes a parent or a second leader. Check-in and check-out: children enter and leave children's spaces through a controlled system that matches each child to an authorized adult, which is both a security wall and, as chapter 18 said, the loudest welcome a visiting parent ever hears. Training: everyone who serves is trained before serving and recertified on a rhythm, annually in many conferences, so the rules live in people rather than in a binder. And reporting: a clear, published procedure for what happens when anyone suspects harm.

Reporting deserves its own paragraph, because this is where churches historically failed. Suspected abuse is reported to the civil authorities, full stop; clergy and church volunteers are mandatory reporters in most states, and even where the law is narrower, the policy should treat reporting as required. The church's process, notifying the pastor and conference, caring for everyone involved, never investigates instead of the authorities, never handles it internally, and never weighs the reputation of the institution against the safety of a child. Write the allegation-response plan now, in peacetime: who is notified in what order, who speaks for the church, how the accused is treated with both seriousness and due process, and how care reaches the child and the family and the congregation. The hour an allegation arrives is the worst possible hour to design a process.

! WATCH OUT

The policy that exists on paper and not in practice is worse than none, because it documents that the church knew what to do and did not do it. The common drifts are all soft-hearted: the background check waived for the longtime member and the two-adult rule relaxed because the second volunteer canceled, and the training deadline extended all year. Hold the line kindly and completely, and when a beloved member bristles at being screened, the answer is warm and total: everyone is screened, the pastor first, because the rule only protects children if it has no exceptions to hide behind.

Vulnerable adults, cameras, and phones

Two extensions of the policy get overlooked because the name says sanctuaries and the mind pictures children. The first is vulnerable adults, who are inside the policy's scope on purpose: the homebound member visited alone, the adult with developmental disabilities in your day program, the elderly widow whose finances a helpful volunteer began managing, the grieving man a counselor-hearted member sees weekly. The same architecture applies, screening for those who serve them and no unwitnessable one-on-one situations as the default, and reporting that goes to the authorities, and the care ministries of chapter 16 should run inside these rules rather than alongside them. Financial exploitation of elders is among the

most common abuses a church will actually encounter, and a care team trained to notice it is protection no camera provides.

The second extension is digital. The two-adult rule applies to communication: no leader texts or messages a minor one-on-one, and every digital channel includes a second adult or a parent, with youth ministry group chats built that way from the start. Photos need their own discipline, a media permission gathered at registration and an honored list of children who may not be photographed, and no posting of children's names with faces on public channels. None of this is paranoia; it is the same visibility principle the classroom windows enforce, extended to the rooms where ministry increasingly happens. Write the digital rules into the policy explicitly, because a policy written before smartphones does not cover the place your youth ministry actually lives.

Standing it up

1

Adopt or refresh the written policy.

Start from your annual conference's model policy, adapt it with your trustees and children's leaders, and take it through formal adoption so it carries the church's full authority. If a policy exists, read it against current practice; the gap is your work list.

2

Screen everyone, starting at the top.

Applications and background checks for all who serve children, youth, and vulnerable adults, clergy and staff first and visibly, with renewals on the calendar and records kept confidentially.

3

Train before serving, recertify on a rhythm.

Every volunteer trained before their first Sunday and recertified annually, with completion tracked by name. An online course makes this radically easier; see *From the Field*.

4

Implement check-in and the visibility rules.

A check-in system matched to your size, from paper tags to KidCheck, and windows or open doors on every children's space, with the two-adult rule staffed into every schedule before the schedule publishes.

5

Publish the reporting procedure.

Everyone who serves knows exactly whom to tell and that the authorities are called; the allegation-response plan is written, and the trustees and SPRC know their roles in it.

6

Audit annually.

Once a year, someone walks the whole system, screenings current, training current, doors and windows right, consent forms on file for trips, and reports compliance to the council and charge conference. What is audited stays real.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's trustees adopted the current child and vulnerable adult protection policy in 2025, with screening and the two-adult rule and check-in on the pillars this chapter describes. Then the church solved the training bottleneck, the annual recertification that always lags, by building a free online Safe Sanctuaries course: six modules with quizzes drawn from the Alabama-West Florida Conference model policy, the conference training video, a signed digital acknowledgment, a printable certificate, and an emailed completion record, all working on any phone with nothing to install. Volunteers certify in one sitting from their couch and the church keeps records automatically, and the course is shared on the hub for any congregation to use live or self-host. The policy and course and supporting forms are all linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Safe Sanctuaries Online Training Course \(live\)](#): the free six-module certification course, ready to send your volunteers to today, or [download the course file \(HTML\)](#) to host your own copy.

POLITY NOTE

Safe Sanctuaries began as a General Conference resolution on reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church, first adopted in 1996 and continued in the Book of Resolutions since, and annual conferences implement it through model policies that local churches adapt and adopt; many conferences and insurers now require a current policy and training records. Your conference's model policy is the authoritative starting point, and your charge conference is the natural place to report compliance annually. Mandatory reporting itself is state law and applies regardless of what any church document says.

THE FIRST MOVE

In your first month, ask three questions of your children's ministry leader: where is our written policy, when was each current volunteer last screened and trained, and what would we do tonight if someone reported abuse? If any answer takes more than a day to produce, you have found week one of this chapter's work, and finding it now, calmly, is the entire point.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Which pillar is softest in your church right now, screening, two adults, visibility, check-in, training, or reporting, and what is the specific soft-hearted reason it got soft? Practice aloud, with the group, the warm and total answer you will give the beloved member who bristles at being screened.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Ask the three First Move questions this week, whatever year of your appointment this is. Nothing else in this book carries this chapter's combination of moral weight and legal weight, and no one will fault the pastor who checked.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Safe Sanctuary Policy \(PDF\)](#)

A current adopted policy: theological basis, screening, two-adult rule, and check-in.

[Safe Sanctuaries Online Training Course \(live\)](#) · [self-host file \(HTML\)](#)

The free six-module certification course with quizzes, certificate, and emailed completion record.

[KidCheck Sign-In/Out Guidelines \(PDF\)](#)

A working check-in system's guidelines.

[Activity Consent Form \(PDF\)](#)

Release and consent covering trips and activities.

PART V

Forming Disciples

The Christian Life

A faithful member catches you after worship, a little sheepish, and says: I've been coming here for eleven years, and shouldn't I feel further along by now? Underneath the question is a picture she carries of the Christian life as a straight line, a course you complete, and by that picture eleven years should have covered more distance. Every discipleship program the church runs quietly answers her question one way or another, and most answer it badly, because they inherit the straight-line picture too: classes with graduations and studies with completions, and a vague implication that mature Christians eventually finish. Part V of this book is about forming disciples, and it opens with a better picture of what a disciple's life actually looks like.

Followers of the Way

Before anyone called them Christians, the people who gave their lives to Jesus were known as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2), and that older name tells the truth the straight line hides: faith is an ongoing act of trust and movement, a road walked rather than a course completed. The framework this chapter teaches, written by Rev. Michael Precht, gives the Way an ancient image, the labyrinth, a single winding path to a center and back that Christians have walked and traced as an aid to prayer for most of the church's history. The oldest known Christian labyrinth was built around the year 324 and survives in a church in Algeria, and the most famous was laid into the floor of Chartres Cathedral around 1200. The image earns its long tenure because three things are true of a labyrinth that are also true of a life with God.

◆ THE FRAMEWORK

The labyrinth is open. A labyrinth is not a maze; there are no dead ends or tricks or secret paths, and the only way to get lost is to look too far ahead. Anyone can know Jesus by taking the next step and then the next, walking by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). *The labyrinth has thin places.* The path swings near the center and away again, so a walker can be closer than she knows when God feels distant, and her path is always bringing her forward. *And everyone is in it together.* If the Way were a straight line, the veterans would be far ahead of the beginners; the labyrinth's turns bring all disciples alongside each other to encourage one another. The walk inward is prayer and surrender, the center is the heart of God, and the walk back out returns you to the world. From *The Christian Life* by Rev. Michael Precht (2024).

Now give the framework to the sheepish member, because it answers her exactly. She is not behind, because the Way has no behind; there is only the next step, and the feeling of being far from the center is a report about the path's current turn, not about her progress. The seasons when God felt close and the

seasons when God felt absent were not advance and relapse; they were the thin places and the far stretches of a path that was carrying her forward the whole time. And the new believer in her Sunday school class is not eleven years behind her; the labyrinth's turns have put them shoulder to shoulder, which is why the new believer's questions keep blessing her. This picture will do more for your congregation's spiritual health than a shelf of programs, and it costs one sermon to teach.

The five practices

A path still needs a way of walking, and the framework maps the disciplines that shape a Christian's life, the same five the membership vows of chapter 18 promise: prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. These are not five programs; they are five practices that draw us near to God and each other, with witness at the heart of everything. Prayers is the inner life of chapter 4, scaled to every member. Presence is the discipline of showing up, to worship and to one another, in a culture that treats attendance as optional everywhere. Gifts is generosity of money and of the abilities God distributed. Service is the kitchen of chapter 6, faith working outward. And witness is a life that points past itself, in words when asked and in shape always.

The practices give a church its formation curriculum and its measurement. Map every ministry you run onto the five, and you will usually find two practices over-served and one nearly abandoned, the same audit logic as the Church House, applied to formation. Measure members' walks by practices rather than attendance alone, because a member can attend for decades without ever praying at home or serving anywhere, and the church that only counts presence will call that discipleship. The chapters after this one furnish the practices by age and stage: children and youth in chapter 21, adults and small groups in chapter 22, confirmation and the milestones in chapter 23.

! WATCH OUT

Do not let formation collapse into content delivery. A church can teach forty Bible studies a year and form nobody, because information was never the engine of transformation; practice is, which is why the framework names practices and not topics. The study that changes people is the one that ends with something to do before next week, and the class that changes people is the one where the members pray for each other by name between meetings. Content matters, and content alone is a library, not a labyrinth.

Putting the framework to work

1 **Teach the Way to the whole church.**

One sermon or a short series on the labyrinth and the five practices, so the congregation shares a picture of the Christian life before you build anything on it. The framework document below is ready to hand out alongside.

2 **Map your ministries onto the five practices.**

With your leaders, place every class, group, and ministry under the practice it mainly forms. Note the crowded practices and the abandoned one; that gap is your next year's formation agenda.

3 **Build a next-step culture.**

Train leaders to end every study, class, and season by asking each person one question: what is your next step on the Way? Small and concrete and theirs. A congregation that expects a next step stops treating discipleship as a spectator's subject.

4 **Use the framework at the doorways.**

The visitor class of chapter 18, the confirmation class of chapter 23, and the baptism conversations of chapter 13 are where people first learn what your church thinks the Christian life is. Put the labyrinth and the five practices in all three, and the vows people take will have a picture attached.

5 **Revisit annually.**

Once a year, in leadership planning, re-run the mapping of step two and ask what the past year actually formed. Formation drifts like everything else, and the framework is the instrument you re-tune by.

FROM THE FIELD

The Christian Life framework is itself a small case study in a healthy pattern: a congregation's own clergy writing its formation theology down in plain language rather than importing it. Written at Spanish Fort UMC by Rev. Michael Precht, the two-page document gives the church one shared picture, the labyrinth and the five practices, that the rest of the formation ministries can hang from, and it links the practices directly to the vows every member has already taken, so discipleship and membership tell one story instead of two. It sits on the hub for any congregation to adopt, and its brevity is part of its usefulness; a framework the whole church can actually read is worth more than a curriculum nobody finishes.

GRAB THIS

[The Christian Life: The Labyrinth \(PDF\)](#): the framework document itself, short enough to hand to every member, ready for step one.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Formation is not a program area of the United Methodist Church; it is the mission. ¶120 states the mission as making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and ¶122 describes the process in a rhythm the labyrinth would recognize: reaching and receiving people, relating them to God, nurturing them in Christian living, and sending them into the world. The five practices are the membership vows of ¶217, which means every professing member has already promised the whole framework out loud.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

Before building any formation structure in a new appointment, ask a dozen members one question, in one-on-ones or the listening tour of chapter 8: how does someone grow as a Christian here? The answers will tell you whether the congregation carries any shared picture at all, and in most churches the honest finding, that everyone has a private theory and nobody has a common one, is the mandate for step one.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which of the five practices is strongest in your own life right now, and which has quietly gone dark? Then the congregational version: which practice does your church's programming over-serve, and which does it barely touch? Compare the two answers, because pastors tend to build churches that share their gaps.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Read the framework document below this week, and put the one-sermon teaching of the Way on your preaching calendar within the next season. Everything else in Part V assumes the congregation shares this picture.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[The Christian Life: The Labyrinth \(PDF\)](#)

The framework by Rev. Michael Precht: the Way, the labyrinth, and the five practices.

[What Makes Us Us: Study Guide \(PDF\)](#)

A short-term study on United Methodist identity, a natural companion season.

[The Pastor's Triangle \(Word\)](#)

The teaching line from chapter 2, for the leaders who will facilitate rather than lecture.

Children and Youth

Somewhere in your church is a woman who has served in the nursery approximately every Sunday since the Clinton administration, and the congregation calls her a saint, which she is, and her sainthood is also the load-bearing wall of a structure nobody designed. When she is gone, the church will discover that it never had a children's ministry; it had Miss Donna. The same discovery waits in youth ministry, where a charismatic leader departs and the group evaporates within a year, because the ministry was a personality with a room. This chapter is about building children's and youth ministry as architecture, structures that survive their people, form actual disciples, and treat parents as partners rather than customers.

Families first, structures second

Begin with the theological order, because it decides the design. The church is not the primary disciple-maker of children; parents are, by the design of Deuteronomy 6 and by the arithmetic of hours, since even a devout family gives the church perhaps a hundred hours of a child's year while the home holds the other thousands. A children's ministry built on this truth ministers through parents as much as to kids: it equips the home with what to talk about at dinner, sends the faith formation of Sunday home in a form parents can continue, and treats the drop-off parent at the fall festival as the actual mission field. A ministry built the other way, as a service the church performs while parents wait in the car, forms consumers, and the data of a generation says the faith of consumer households evaporates at graduation.

The second design principle is the one Miss Donna's church skipped: structure over personality. Every age tier needs a defined program with a name, a curriculum, a leader team, and a written rhythm, so that any trained volunteer can deliver it and no single departure can kill it. That is not bureaucracy; it is the same documentation discipline chapter 15 applied to the soundboard, applied to something infinitely more valuable.

The architecture by age

A full children's structure runs in tiers, each with its own developmental job. The nursery is ministry, not childcare, the church's first wordless sermon to a family, and its excellence is measured in safety and warmth, and in communication with parents. Sunday morning children's programming typically has two rooms: Sunday school for formation in classes, and children's church or children's worship, which is not a holding pen during the sermon but a real service teaching children how to worship, so that the transition into big church is a graduation rather than a shock. Beyond Sunday morning, tiered midweek or evening programming lets formation go deeper than an hour a week allows; one working model runs three age

tiers, preschoolers, early elementary, and upper elementary, each with age-fitted teaching and its own identity. And the calendar carries the big moments, Vacation Bible School and the fall festival and camps and retreats, which chapter 6 called the back yard: high-energy events that are simultaneously formation for the church's kids and the widest front door the church owns for new families.

Youth ministry keeps the same architecture with the developmental dial turned: a weekly gathering that is the group's home base, teaching that takes their questions seriously rather than managing them, adults who show up consistently enough to be trusted, and the intensity moments, retreats and mission trips and summer events, where most of the actual transformation happens because proximity does what programming cannot. The milestone track of chapter 23, confirmation especially, runs through the middle of it. And a word about the phones: youth ministry now happens partly in group chats and feeds, which is where the digital rules of chapter 19 stop being compliance and become the ministry's actual operating environment.

! WATCH OUT

Do not hire or recruit your way out of parent engagement. The congregation that solves every children's ministry problem with a staff position teaches parents that formation is a purchasable service, and the youth group that communicates only with teenagers builds a ministry parents cannot support because they cannot see it. Every structure in this chapter should have a parent-facing side: what we taught and what to ask at dinner, and what is coming. The families are not the audience of this ministry; they are half the staff.

Parents in the governance

The structural insight most churches miss is putting parents in the leadership, formally. A children's leadership team, a small group of parents and key volunteers meeting quarterly with the children's director, gives the ministry what a lone staffer can never generate alone: parental buy-in, an early-warning system for problems, a recruiting network, and continuity when staff changes. Youth ministry wants the same body, a parent council that carries the lay leadership of the youth lane and connects it to the church council of chapter 7. These teams are not oversight committees second-guessing the director; they are the ministry's parent-partners institutionalized, and chairs of both belong in your chapter 9 lane structure as the lay leadership of their lanes.

Building it

1

Audit the tiers against the actual children.

List every child and youth connected to the church by age, then lay the current programming over the list. Most churches find a tier with programming and no kids, and a cluster of kids with no tier. Build for the children you have, not the ones the structure remembers.

2

Write down every program's skeleton.

Name, purpose, curriculum, leader team, weekly rhythm, safety coverage, one page each, exactly like chapter 15's role descriptions. This is the step that retires the Miss Donna dependency, and it honors her by asking her to teach what she knows.

3

Stand up the parent leadership teams.

A children's leadership team and a youth parent council, quarterly, with real agendas: calendar, curriculum direction, volunteer pipeline, and problems while they are small.

4

Build the annual event calendar early.

VBS, the fall festival, camps, and retreats, each with its own playbook, planned on the year map of chapter 11 so the whole church's calendar carries them rather than colliding with them.

5

Staff the safety before the schedule.

Every tier and event runs inside chapter 19: screened and trained volunteers and the two-adult rule and check-in. The volunteer math happens here, and the one-time helper on-ramps of chapter 9 are how the math works without conscription.

6

Send formation home weekly.

One consistent channel to parents, what we taught and one question for the dinner table, and what is next, in whatever medium your parents actually read. Small, weekly, and forever.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's children's ministry runs the tiered architecture: Sunday mornings with Sunday school, children's worship, and nursery, and a Sunday evening structure in three age tiers, Little Lights for the youngest, Shine Kids for early elementary, and Connect for upper elementary, each with its own identity and age-fitted formation. A Children's Leadership Team of parents and volunteers meets quarterly with the children's director, and the youth side mirrors it with a parent council carrying the lay leadership of the youth lane. The big-event layer runs on written playbooks, VBS and the fall festival each documented down to volunteer slots, which is why the events survive leader transitions. The whole set of structural documents is linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

Children's Leadership Team Model (Word): how a quarterly parent and volunteer team supports the children's director, the highest-leverage structure in this chapter.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The Discipline charges the local church with the nurture of children and youth within its ministry of Christian formation (§§225-226 address the care of children as baptized and preparatory members), and youth have a formal place in church governance: the charge conference structure includes youth representation, and young people are eligible for election to church offices. Safe Sanctuaries compliance for everything in this chapter is covered in chapter 19, and your conference's camping and retreat ministries are connectional resources many congregations forget they already own.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first month, spend one full Sunday morning inside the children's wing, from nursery drop-off to children's church, watching as a parent would. Then take the children's director or lead volunteer to lunch and ask what they need that they have stopped asking for. No part of the church is more used to being praised and under-resourced, and the pastor who actually looked will be trusted there for years.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Who is your church's Miss Donna, the person whose departure would reveal that a ministry was a personality rather than a structure? What would it look like to honor her by documenting and team-building around her strengths this year, while she is still there to teach it?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Run step one this week: the list of actual children and youth by age, laid against the current programming. The gaps you find set the agenda for your next conversation with the children's and youth leaders.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Sunday Morning: Sunday School, Children's Church, Nursery (Word)

The Sunday morning tier structure.

Sunday Evening Programming Model (Word)

The three age tiers: Little Lights, Shine Kids, and Connect.

Children's Leadership Team Model (Word)

The quarterly parent leadership structure.

Youth Parent Council (Word)

The youth-side lay leadership body.

Youth Weekly Rhythm and Morning Devo (Word)

The weekly youth structure.

VBS Playbook (Word) and Fall Festival Playbook (Word)

The two big back-yard events, documented to survive transitions.

Youth Retreat Planning (Word), Children's Winter Retreat (Word), and Camp Checklist (Word)

The intensity moments, planned.

Youth Mission Trips (Word)

Where proximity does what programming cannot.

Adult Discipleship and Small Groups

In most congregations, formal Christian education ends at eighteen with a quiet unspoken graduation, and a member can then spend fifty years hearing one sermon a week and nothing else, which is roughly like sustaining a marriage on an annual holiday card. The adults are not resistant; ask them and they will tell you they wish they knew the Bible better and had real friends at church, and that they wish someone had ever invited them into something. The machinery for all three wishes is the same machinery, adult classes and groups, and this chapter is about building an ecosystem of them rather than a lone Bible study that has met since 1987 and would like to be left alone.

An ecosystem, not a program

Adults are formed by the combination chapter 20 named, practice plus relationship plus content, and no single group type delivers all three to every kind of adult, which is why the working picture is an ecosystem with several distinct organisms. Long-term Sunday classes are the deep roots: communities that study together for years and, more importantly, become the care webs of chapter 16, the people who show up at each other's surgeries and funerals. Short-term studies are the on-ramps: four to eight weeks on one topic with a defined end date, which is exactly the commitment a newcomer or a busy parent can say yes to, and the door through which people who would never join a decades-old class enter the ecosystem. Fellowship groups are the sitting room of chapter 6 organized: supper clubs and affinity groups where belonging grows without homework, which is not a lesser form of formation but the soil of it, since nobody stays anywhere they have no friends. Men's and women's ministries run their own tiers of all three, from the monthly breakfast to the deep weekly study. And once a year or so, a churchwide study season puts the whole congregation, classes, groups, youth, and the pulpit, inside one book or theme at once, the most unifying formation tool a church owns.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Short-Term Classes \(Word\)](#): the on-ramp organism, how to run four-to-eight-week topical classes that bring new adults into the ecosystem.

Launching, leading, and letting go

Ecosystems grow by births, and here is the finding that surprises new pastors: existing classes almost never absorb new people in meaningful numbers, however warmly they intend to, because a group with

fifteen years of shared funerals is a family, and visitors can feel that they are guests in it. Growth comes from launching new classes and groups, seeded with a recruited core of four or six people and a defined identity, often by life stage or by the short-term on-ramp maturing into a standing group. Launching is pastoral work you should expect to do every year or two, and protecting the new class from being absorbed or judged by the old ones is part of the launch.

Leaders decide whether any of it forms anyone, and the crucial distinction is the teaching line from chapter 2: most adult groups need facilitators, not lecturers. A facilitator's gifts are questions and patience, and the discipline of not answering first, and people with those gifts rarely volunteer because they assume teaching means expertise. Recruit them personally, train them in the difference, and free them from the expectation of being the Bible answer person; the pastor remains the ecosystem's theological backstop, one question away. On curriculum, use the good published material freely and legally, buy the licenses, do not photocopy, per chapter 14's fine print, and do not underestimate homegrown studies: material written by your own pastors for your own congregation, like a study on your denomination's identity in a season when members are asking exactly that, will often out-form anything shipped from a warehouse, because it answers questions your actual people are asking.

Anatomy of a launch

Since launches are the growth engine, here is one from the inside. It begins invisibly, with the pastor or a leader personally recruiting the core, four to six people asked face to face, not announced from the pulpit, because the core is being asked to build something and public announcements recruit attenders rather than builders. The core meets once before anything is public to settle identity and hospitality: who this group is for and when and where it meets, and who is bringing the food, which sounds trivial and is not, since groups that eat together jell at roughly twice the speed of groups that do not. Then comes the public doorway, a defined start date and a named topic with an end date, announced through the pulpit and chapter 18's newcomer pathway, and the core's real work begins: each member personally invites two or three people, because personal invitation outperforms every announcement ever made.

The first six weeks decide the group's culture, so design them. Names learned and used, every voice heard by week two, prayer for each other by name beginning early, and the facilitator resisting the urge to fill silence, since the silence after a good question is where formation happens. Somewhere around the end of the defined study, the group faces its fork: end with gratitude, per the sunset teaching, or continue as a standing group, and the healthy version of continuing is a decision the members make out loud rather than a drift. Groups that choose to continue should inherit one more expectation gently: someday, some of you will be the recruited core of the next launch. That single sentence, planted early, is how an ecosystem keeps bearing.

! WATCH OUT

Guard the ecosystem's theology without policing it. Adult groups that pick their own material will occasionally pick something doctrinally strange, and the heavy-handed response, banning books, vetting everything, teaches leaders to stop asking. The sustainable posture is a light review rhythm: leaders run material choices past the pastor or a designated staffer, the answer is nearly always yes, and the rare no comes with a conversation and an alternative. You are curating a diet, not operating a censor's office, and the relationship in which a leader asks is worth more than any rule.

Building the ecosystem

1

Map what exists.

Every class and group, with its size, its average age, its type in the ecosystem, and its openness to newcomers honestly assessed. Most churches discover they have several deep-roots organisms and no on-ramps at all.

2

Identify the missing organism and the missing people.

Which adults have no group that fits them, the young families, the new retirees, the men, the newcomers of chapter 18? The gap names your next launch.

3

Launch one new thing a year.

Recruit the core first, four to six people by personal invitation, give it a defined identity and start date, and publicize it through chapter 18's pathway so newcomers land in it. Protect it for its first year.

4

Recruit and train facilitators on purpose.

Personal invitations to the question-askers, one training season on facilitation versus lecturing, and a standing leaders' gathering twice a year for encouragement and the light review rhythm.

5

Run a churchwide season annually.

One book or theme in every venue for four to six weeks, planned on the year map of chapter 11 alongside the preaching calendar of chapter 12. It refreshes tired classes and gives the whole church one conversation.

6

Prune with honor.

The class that has dwindled to four friends is a fellowship group now, and that is fine; rename the expectation rather than pretending. The study that ended should end, per chapter 9's sunset teaching, with gratitude and a story.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's adult ecosystem shows the organisms working together: five Sunday morning classes with a sixth launching in August 2026, which is the launch discipline in practice; short-term classes as on-ramps, including topical offerings like a study on faith and technology; men's and women's ministries running tiered engagement; and fellowship groups carrying the belonging layer. The churchwide season is a standing tool there too, most visibly in early 2026 when a six-week sermon series on United Methodist identity, *What Makes Us, Us*, ran with a companion study guide written in-house, so the classes and the pulpit spent the season in one conversation. The structural documents for every organism are linked below.

POLITY NOTE

Wesley would recognize this chapter as a renovation of his own system: the early Methodist class meeting, a dozen people attending to each other's souls weekly, was the formation engine of the movement, and Christian conference remains one of the means of grace. The Discipline assigns the local church's education and formation work to its ministry structure under the church council (§252), and the small group is not an innovation in Methodism; it is the family business.

THE FIRST MOVE

In your first months, visit every adult class and group once, as a guest and not an evaluator, and ask each one two questions: how did this group start, and when did someone last join it? The origin stories will teach you how launches happen in this church's culture, and the second answer will tell you, gently and precisely, whether you have an ecosystem or a set of sealed rooms.

FOR YOUR COHORT

When did your church last successfully launch a new adult class or group, and what made it take root or fail? If the honest answer is more than five years ago, what population would your first launch serve, and which four people would you personally recruit as its core?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Draw the ecosystem map of step one this week, one page, every group, with ages and openness marked. The missing organism will be obvious, and the launch conversation starts there.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Launching and Structuring Sunday Classes \(Word\)](#)

The deep-roots organism and the launch discipline.

[Short-Term Classes \(Word\)](#)

The on-ramp organism.

[Fellowship Groups Model \(Word\)](#)

Belonging without homework, organized.

[Men's Ministry \(Word\)](#) and [Women's Ministry and Bible Study \(Word\)](#)

The tiered gender-specific ministries.

[What Makes Us Us: Study Guide \(PDF\)](#)

A homegrown churchwide-season study, the worked example.

[Bible Basics Participant Guide \(PDF\)](#)

A foundational overview class for adults starting from zero.

Confirmation and the Milestones of Faith

A mother calls the office and asks when her son gets confirmed and what confirmation actually is, and she is asking sincerely, because she was confirmed herself at twelve and remembers the white robe and nothing else. The honest answer many churches could give is that confirmation is a class we run because we have always run it, pointed at a Sunday whose meaning nobody has explained to the confirmands' parents. It deserves so much better, because confirmation is the hinge of the whole formation arc this part of the book has been building, the moment a baptized child answers for herself, and it works best when it is not an isolated class but the summit of a whole trail of milestones the church marks from the font to the graduation stage.

What confirmation is

Confirmation completes a circuit that baptism opened. When the church baptized her as an infant, per chapter 13, her parents and the congregation took vows on her behalf, and God's grace did not wait for her consent; the whole scene was prevenient grace enacted. Confirmation is her first public answer: she professes the faith of her baptism as her own and takes the vows herself, and she becomes a professing member of the church. Two pastoral clarities follow from that theology. First, confirmation is not graduation, and every church fights this misunderstanding or surrenders to it; it is not the completion of church but the owning of it, a beginning marked in front of witnesses. Second, confirmation is a profession, which means it must be free: the eighth grader who is not ready should be honored in waiting, not processed with the cohort, because a coerced profession teaches a teenager that the church's words are ceremonies rather than promises.

The class itself, typically a season between sixth and ninth grade depending on your tradition's local custom, carries a straightforward curriculum: the story of Scripture, the creed and core doctrine at an honest young-teen level, what United Methodists believe and why (grace in its Wesleyan shapes, the sacraments, the connection), the vows they will take, and the practices of chapter 20 as the shape of the life they are claiming. The craft is in the delivery: mentors matter more than materials, and pairing each confirmand with an adult member who is not their parent, who shares the season and sits with them at the service, converts a class into a web of relationships that outlasts it. The pastor teaches at least part of the class personally, both because the Discipline expects the pastor's instruction and because the confirmands are deciding, among other things, whether the church's leadership can be trusted with questions. Parents get their own orientation at the start and their own charge at the end, since the household is where the profession will be lived.

! WATCH OUT

Watch the confirmation cliff. In many churches, confirmation Sunday is functionally the last Sunday, the family exhales, the teenager has "finished," and the church quietly loses the very people it just received. The cliff is a design flaw, not a mystery: confirmation was allowed to feel like graduation, and nothing was waiting on the other side. Build the other side before the class starts: a role in worship, a place in the youth ministry's leadership, a service assignment from chapter 9's on-ramps, a spot on next summer's mission trip, so that the week after confirmation has more church in it than the week before, not less.

Doubt, readiness, and the adults the process missed

Three pastoral situations recur around confirmation, and handling them well is most of the job. The first is doubt inside the class, the thirteen-year-old who says he is not sure he believes any of it, and the response that forms him is welcome rather than alarm: doubt spoken aloud in church is not a threat to faith, it is faith doing its growing in public, and a class where hard questions are honored produces sturdier professions than a class where they are managed. Teach the confirmands that the church has carried their questions for two thousand years without breaking. The second is unreadiness at the deadline, the confirmand who reaches the Sunday and cannot honestly say the vows, and the pastoral move is to make waiting dignified: a private word and an assurance that the door stays open, and a real follow-up next year, because the teenager who was allowed to wait learns that the church means what it says, which is precisely the lesson confirmation exists to teach.

The third walks into your office as a forty-year-old: the adult who was baptized and never confirmed, or never baptized at all, and assumes she missed her chance. She did not. Adults profess the faith and are received as professing members through the same covenant, usually through the visitor class of chapter 18 and a conversation with the pastor rather than a youth classroom, and the unbaptized adult receives baptism and profession together in one shining moment. Watch for these people deliberately, because they rarely volunteer their status; the membership records of chapter 13 will show you baptized members who never professed, and a gentle personal invitation to complete what their parents began is among the most fruitful letters a pastor ever sends.

The trail of milestones

Confirmation lands differently when it is one summit on a marked trail rather than the only religious event of childhood. A milestone system names the moments the church will mark for every child, plans them into the year map of chapter 11, and hands the family something at each one: the baptism of chapter 13 with its anniversary remembrances; a Bible presented publicly at the age your church chooses, commonly around third grade, with parents standing alongside; first communion instruction, since

United Methodist children are welcome at the table and deserve to be taught what they are receiving; acolyte and worship-serving roles that give children real jobs in the liturgy; confirmation as the great public summit; and senior recognition, the church's blessing over its graduates as they leave for whatever is next, with the congregation's promise that its doors and its prayers go with them. Each milestone does the same three-fold work: it forms the child, it engages the family at a moment of natural openness, and it teaches the congregation to see its children as members in motion rather than scenery.

Building the trail

1

Set the confirmation rhythm and age.

Annual or every other year depending on cohort size, at a consistent age the congregation learns to expect. Publish next year's dates before this year's class ends.

2

Design the class arc.

A season, not a semester of homework: weekly sessions with the curriculum above, a retreat if you can manage it, visits to the church's ministries in action, and at least a session or two taught personally by the pastor.

3

Recruit the mentors.

One trusted, screened adult per confirmand, per chapter 19's rules, recruited by personal invitation. Their job description is presence: attend when they can and pray daily for their confirmand by name, and stand with them at the service.

4

Bring the parents inside.

An orientation at the start and a mid-course update, and a parents' charge near the end. The question every parent should be able to answer is the one the mother asked at this chapter's opening.

5

Make the Sunday weighty.

Confirmation happens in primary worship, not a side service: the vows taken clearly, the congregation's own vow renewed in response, hands laid on each confirmand by name, and the new professing members received with celebration.

6

Map the full trail.

With your children's and youth leaders, put every milestone, baptism anniversaries, Bibles, first communion teaching, acolyte commissioning, confirmation, senior recognition, on the annual calendar with an owner and a playbook each, so no child's moment depends on somebody remembering.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

The milestone logic shows clearly at the trail's far end in the Spanish Fort UMC files: senior recognition is run as a documented playbook, with reusable graphics and a service plan, so the church's blessing over its graduates happens with the same care every year regardless of who coordinates it. Confirmation sits inside the youth lane's annual rhythm alongside the retreats and mission trips of chapter 21, which is the structural point of this whole part: milestones live on calendars with owners, and the ones that live in somebody's memory eventually skip a child who deserved them.

↓ GRAB THIS

Senior Recognition Playbook (Word): the graduating-seniors milestone as a complete reusable playbook, the pattern to copy for every other milestone on your trail.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Confirmation in the Discipline is the profession of the baptismal faith that makes a baptized member a professing member (¶¶216-217), and preparing people for it belongs explicitly to the pastor: ¶216.3 directs the pastor to instruct candidates in the meaning of the Christian faith and the vows they will take, and ¶226.4 provides for the church's ministry with young people moving toward profession. Record the confirmations in the membership registers of chapter 13's step six, because each one changes a member's status, and the charge conference counts professions of faith as one of the church's vital signs.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In a new appointment, find out where the church is in its confirmation cycle before you change anything: when the last class was and who taught it, and which baptized youth have never been confirmed. That last list is worth real attention, because in most churches it is longer than anyone expects, and a personal invitation from the new pastor to a fifteen-year-old the process skipped is exactly the kind of shepherding that never shows up in a program.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What does the year after confirmation look like for a teenager in your church, honestly? If you have a confirmation cliff, name what is missing on the far side, and design one concrete thing, a role or a responsibility or a belonging, that could be waiting for next year's class the Monday after their profession.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Sketch your church's current milestone trail on one page, every moment the church marks from baptism to graduation, with its owner. The blanks on the page are Part V's remaining work, and most churches can add one missing milestone this year.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Senior Recognition Playbook (Word)

The milestone-as-playbook pattern, worked out for graduates.

Baptism Practice and Recognition (Word)

The trail's first milestone, from chapter 13.

Youth Weekly Rhythm and Morning Devo (Word)

The youth structure confirmation lives inside.

PART VI

Turning Outward

Building a Missions Strategy, Local and Global

Ask what your church does in missions and you will get a list: a canned food drive in November, a check to three agencies whose newsletters nobody reads, blankets in January, whatever the youth did last summer, and a line item labeled Missions that the finance committee debates annually without anyone able to say what it accomplished. Every item on the list is good, and the list is not a strategy; it is sediment, the accumulated residue of decades of good impulses, each added and none ever weighed. Part VI of this book is about the church turned outward, and it starts with the difference between scattering goodwill and directing presence.

From sediment to strategy

A missions strategy begins with the question chapter 8 taught you to ask: what has God put in front of this particular church? Not churches in general, this one, with its town and its gifts and its context. The church across from the elementary school and the church beside the retirement towers are being handed different assignments, and a congregation that reads its context honestly will usually find two or three needs with its name on them. Strategy is choosing those few and going deep, because the arithmetic of impact is unforgiving: a church that does twelve mission activities thinly is present nowhere, while a church that does four deeply becomes the congregation the school calls and the agency plans around, and the one the neighborhood actually knows. Depth also transforms the missional relationship itself, from transaction to presence. Writing checks is the easiest form of missions and the least converting, in both directions; nobody's heart is changed by a disbursement. The strategy this chapter builds keeps money in it and refuses to let money be the whole of it, because the biblical pattern is presence: the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood, and the church follows suit or follows something else.

The portfolio

A healthy missions life runs a portfolio with four distinct holdings. Anchor presence is the deep end: one or two recurring, relational, local commitments the church owns, a weekly community dinner or a tutoring partnership, where the same members show up for the same neighbors long enough to learn names. Standing partnerships are the middle: a defined set of local and global partners, each with a written understanding of what the church gives (money, volunteers, space, advocacy) and a named liaison who keeps the relationship human. Episodic drives are the broad end: the collection drives that mobilize the whole congregation a few times a year, flood buckets and blankets and school supplies, run on a reusable model with rotating per-drive leaders so no one person carries the year. And global engagement

holds the long-distance work: mission trips that prioritize partnership over tourism and missionary support with real correspondence attached, and a disaster response capacity, which for a Gulf Coast church is not optional and for every church is a matter of time.

The operator of the portfolio is the missions team, and it works like every healthy structure in this book: a defined meeting rhythm, a budget it actually manages, per-project leaders it recruits and rotates, and a reporting line to the council. The missions team's most important discipline is saying the gracious no, because the sediment of the opening paragraph accumulates precisely when every good idea is automatically adopted, and a team with a strategy can decline warmly: that is good work, and it is not ours.

The knock at the office door

One stream of mission arrives unscheduled: the person at the office door who needs help with a light bill, a tank of gas, a prescription, a night in a motel. Every pastor faces this weekly somewhere, and improvising each case produces the worst of both worlds, inconsistent mercy and a pastor who dreads the doorbell. Build a benevolence practice instead, and build it on dignity. A written policy sets what the church helps with and how much and how often per household, so that the answer does not depend on who answers the phone or how compelling the story is told; payments go to the biller rather than in cash, not out of suspicion but because it keeps the help aimed at the need; and a small benevolence fund with its own line and its own rules keeps this mercy from competing with the budget every time. Know your town's agencies well enough to refer with a warm handoff instead of a brochure, because the community ministry that can make one phone call on someone's behalf is worth ten that hand out numbers. And train whoever covers the office, because the knock comes on your day off too.

Two dignity rules carry the whole practice. Never make someone perform their poverty; take the request at the level of detail they offer and help or decline kindly, and skip the interrogation, because the occasional scam survived is cheaper than the routine humiliation of the honest. And treat the person at the door as a neighbor rather than a case, which sometimes means the most valuable thing exchanged is not the fifty dollars but the coffee and the name remembered, and the sense that a church took them seriously. Some of the anchor presences of this chapter's portfolio began as a knock somebody answered well.

! WATCH OUT

Beware missions that never meets the mission field. A congregation can run drives and fund agencies and pack boxes for years while never once sharing a table with the people served, and that arrangement quietly forms members who love the idea of neighbors more than neighbors. Every holding in the portfolio should have at least one door through which members meet actual people, because proximity is where mission converts the missionaries, which was always half the point.

Building the strategy

1

Inventory the sediment.

List every mission activity and dollar of the last year, with hours and people attached, exactly like chapter 9's role inventory. Most churches are surprised both by how much they do and how little of it anyone could explain.

2

Ask the context question.

From chapter 8's listening and the town's keepers: what does this community need that nobody is providing, and what has God already equipped this congregation to offer? Where those answers overlap is your anchor.

3

Choose the anchors and name the portfolio.

One or two anchor presences, a defined partner list, a drive calendar, and your global commitments, written on one page the congregation can see.

4

Put every partnership in writing.

A simple memorandum per partner: what we give, what we expect, who the liaison is, when we review. Relationships with definitions outlive enthusiasm.

5

Calendar the drives with rotating leaders.

A reusable drive model, one leader per drive rather than one exhausted chair per decade, and the year's drives on the church calendar from January.

6

Report stories, not tonnage.

The congregation funds what it can feel. Once a season, put a name and a story from the mission field in front of the church, with permission and dignity, and watch the budget line stop being debated.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's missions operation shows the portfolio in working order: a missions team with a defined meeting rhythm and per-drive leader rotation, a collections model reused across flood buckets, blankets, paper products, and veterans supplies, written partner relationships including collections partners like the state veterans home, missionary support and a disaster response team on the global-and-crisis end, and anchor presences that grew deep enough to become chapter 26's story, a weekly community dinner and a thrift store. The one-day mobilization version is there too, a serve day model that puts the whole congregation into the community at once. Every document is linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Missions Team Operations \(Word\)](#): the team's meeting rhythm, leader rotation, and budget walkthrough, the operator's manual for the whole portfolio.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The connection is a missions asset most congregations underuse. Apportionments already place your church in mission on every continent (¶¶124-125 frame the church's mission reach), and the General Board of Global Ministries and UMCOR give you vetted channels for global giving and disaster response, including Advance projects where designated gifts go fully to the named work. When the hurricane comes, your conference's disaster response network is the structure your team plugs into, which is a reason to build the relationship before the storm.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first season, go along on whatever mission work already exists, serve the dinner and ride with the delivery and pack the buckets, before you evaluate any of it. The inventory of step one lands very differently coming from a pastor who has worn the apron, and the anchor God intends may introduce itself while you are serving.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Name your church's missions sediment honestly: what is on the list that no one could explain, and what would your context say your one deep anchor should be? Then the harder question: which existing activity would you have to gracefully end to go deep on it, and who will grieve that ending?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Run the inventory of step one this month with your missions chair or team: every activity, dollar, hour, and person from the last year, on one page. Strategy starts with seeing the sediment whole.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Missions Team Operations (Word)

Meeting rhythm, leader rotation, and the mission-line budget.

Collections Drive Model (Word)

The reusable drive with worked examples.

Mission Partner Relationships (Word)

Partnerships with definitions and liaisons.

Serve Day Model (Word)

The whole congregation in the community at once.

Disaster Response Team (Word)

The capacity you build before the storm.

Missionary Support Model (Word)

Support with correspondence attached.

Youth Mission Trips (Word)

The trip structure, from chapter 21.

Fundraisers, Community Events, and Outreach that Works

Last spring the church ran its beloved annual bazaar, and forty volunteers gave a combined four hundred hours across six weeks of preparation, and when the treasurer finished the math the event had netted eleven hundred dollars, which works out to less than three dollars per volunteer-hour, and nobody dared say so out loud because the bazaar is beloved. Meanwhile the trunk or treat in October cost the church almost nothing, drew three hundred neighborhood families, and generated exactly zero follow-up, so its enormous harvest evaporated by November. Neither event failed for lack of effort. Both failed for lack of clarity about what they were for, and clarity about purpose is the entire secret of this chapter.

Every event is for one thing

Church events serve three different purposes that get fatally blended: raising money, building fellowship, and reaching the community. An event can produce side benefits in all three, and it can only be designed and judged by one, because the purposes pull design decisions in opposite directions. A fundraiser wants maximum net, which means controlling costs and pricing honestly, and concentrating volunteer effort where dollars follow. A fellowship event wants maximum belonging, which means the bazaar that nets three dollars an hour might be a triumph, if the church would stop calling it a fundraiser and start calling it what it is, six weeks of intergenerational community that happens to end in a sale. And a community-reach event wants maximum new families with a working bridge to the church's life, which means success is measured at the follow-up, not the headcount. The pastoral work is simply forcing the question on every event: which one is this? Say it out loud, design for it, and judge by it, and most of the church's event angst dissolves.

For actual fundraisers, respect the math and the playbook. Run the honest arithmetic on net proceeds per volunteer-hour, because volunteer hours are the church's scarcest currency, per chapter 9's inventory, and an event that burns four hundred of them for eleven hundred dollars is spending the endowment to buy pocket change. The fundraisers that endure are the ones with documented playbooks and genuine margins, and every region has its classics; on the Gulf Coast the Boston Butt sale is practically a sacrament of its own, presold and high-margin, one intense weekend rather than six diffuse weeks. Keep a library of small fundraiser playbooks, spaghetti dinners and chili cookoffs and yard sales, so the youth trip or the roof fund can pick a proven vehicle instead of inventing one, and let the silent-auction paperwork be a template rather than a fresh agony each year.

↓ **GRAB THIS**

[Boston Butt Sale Playbook \(Word\)](#): the complete how-to for the Gulf South's favorite church fundraiser, the pattern of a documented, high-margin event.

The bridge is the event

Community events are the back yard of chapter 6 at full capacity, and the trunk or treat that drew three hundred families did the hard part; what it lacked was a bridge, and the bridge is embarrassingly buildable. A community event connected to chapter 18's welcome system captures names graciously (a drawing or a photo delivery or a kids' event signup), sends the forty-eight-hour touch, and puts the next open door in every hand, this fall festival flyer includes children's ministry Christmas events, because the family that came for candy in October is deciding about Christmas Eve in December. Without the bridge, a community event is a gift to the neighborhood, which is genuinely fine if that is its declared purpose; churches should throw parties that want nothing back. The failure mode is only in wanting the harvest while building no bridge to carry it, then concluding sadly that events don't work.

All three event types run on the same operational spine this book keeps installing: a written playbook per event, per chapter 15's documentation discipline, a named leader per event with the rotation habits of chapter 24's drives, placement on the annual calendar of chapter 11 so events feed rather than collide with the church's rhythm, and a debrief that updates the playbook while memory is fresh. Events that live in playbooks survive their founders, and events that live in founders die with their tenure.

Getting the town to actually come

A community event that only the congregation hears about is a fellowship event with outdoor seating, so publicity deserves real design. The channels are ordinary and cumulative: the road sign changed early enough to be read twice, the school flyer folders and neighborhood social media groups where families actually look, the community calendars run by the town and the local paper, and the yard signs members plant like campaign season. But the finding every church rediscovers is that no channel outperforms an invited friend, which means the highest-leverage publicity is internal: put invitation cards in the pews two weeks out, physical cards a member can hand a coworker, and say from the pulpit that the event exists so that our people have something easy to invite someone to. An invitation culture, once established, makes every event twice its size, and it is built by the pastor treating inviting as a normal act of witness, the fifth practice of chapter 20, rather than a marketing favor to the church.

Then be ready to be found. The event's page on the church website should answer a stranger's questions the way chapter 18 taught, and whoever staffs the welcome table at the event is standing at the front

porch of chapter 6 during its busiest hour of the year. Publicity that works and hospitality that receives are one system, and the bridge back to the church's life is its final span.

! WATCH OUT

Watch for the zombie event, the one that no longer serves any of the three purposes and continues because its founder is beloved or its absence would feel like decline. Zombie events are where chapter 9's sunset teaching earns its keep: celebrate what it was, thank its people by name, and let it die with honor. The volunteer-hours it releases are exactly what the understaffed event with a real purpose has been starving for.

Running the audit

1

List the year's events and declare each one's purpose.

Fundraiser, fellowship, or community reach, one label per event, decided by the leaders who own them. Expect this conversation to be clarifying and slightly uncomfortable.

2

Run the fundraiser math.

Net proceeds and volunteer-hours for each money event. Reclassify the beloved low-netters as the fellowship they are, and invest the real fundraising energy in one or two high-margin playbook events.

3

Build the bridge into every community event.

A gracious name-capture, the forty-eight-hour touch, and the next invitation in hand, wired before the event is announced, with the welcome team of chapter 18 at the table from the first planning meeting.

4

Playbook the keepers.

One document per surviving event: timeline, roles, budget, vendors, lessons. The fall festival's forty-five volunteer slots should be a checklist, not an oral tradition.

5

Place the year's events on the map.

Events on the annual calendar from chapter 11, spaced so the same volunteers are not asked for October, November, and December in a row.

6

Debrief within two weeks.

Thirty minutes, the leaders, three questions: did it serve its declared purpose, what does the playbook need changed, and does it run again? The third question is allowed to be answered no.

FROM THE FIELD

The playbook discipline proved itself at Spanish Fort UMC's trunk or treat the year the rain came. The event is a documented community-reach playbook, trunks and volunteer corps and family activities, and when weather forced everything indoors, the volunteers adapted their trunks into indoor activity stations and the children's and family life ministries redeployed, and the PrimeTimers' cookies and cake walk carried on, because a structure everyone understood could flex without collapsing. The event drew its neighborhood crowd anyway. An improvised event meets rain and cancels; a playbooked one meets rain and moves inside.

POLITY NOTE

Fundraising in a United Methodist church runs under the finance committee's oversight (§258.4), with the counting and depositing rules of chapter 27 applying to a bake sale cash box exactly as they apply to the offering plate. Money raised for a stated purpose is designated giving and must go to that purpose, and events involving the building sit under the trustees' facility policies (§258.3). None of this is burdensome in practice; it is one conversation with the finance chair per event, and it protects the volunteers who handle the money.

THE FIRST MOVE

Attend the church's biggest annual event once before you evaluate anything about it, and work it rather than watch it, take a shift at the grill or the registration table. Events are load-bearing culture in most congregations, and the pastor who worked the booth has standing to ask the purpose question that the pastor with the clipboard does not.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Classify your church's three biggest events honestly: what is each one actually for, and what is it officially for, and where do those answers differ? Then find the zombie: which event serves none of the three purposes anymore, and what would an honorable sunset look like?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Do step one this month: the year's event list with a declared purpose beside each. One page, one leaders' conversation, and the design and judgment of every event afterward gets easier.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Boston Butt Sale Playbook \(Word\)](#)

The high-margin classic, fully documented.

[Mission Fundraiser Library \(Word\)](#)

Spaghetti dinners, chili cookoff, talent show, yard sales, each as a small playbook.

[Trunk or Treat Playbook \(Word\)](#)

The community-reach event that consistently draws new families.

[Silent Auction Donation Letter \(Word\)](#) and [Donation Form \(Word\)](#)

The auction paperwork as templates.

[Ministry Fair Playbook \(Word\)](#)

The inward-facing event where lanes meet the congregation, from chapter 9.

Starting Something New

Sometimes an outward-facing ministry outgrows its container. The community dinner is feeding a hundred people a week and a local grant would fund it, except the grantmaker does not fund churches. The thrift store idea needs a lease and employees someday, and revenue streams the church treasurer eyes with alarm. Somebody asks the meeting's pivotal question, should this be its own thing?, and suddenly a room full of faithful volunteers is discussing 501(c)(3) status, and nobody present has ever formed one. This chapter is for that room: when a ministry should become its own organization, when it absolutely should not, and how to do it properly when the answer is yes.

Ministry or entity

Start with the presumption that new things begin as church ministries, because a ministry is cheap to launch and cheap to end, and covered by the church's existing insurance and governance and books. The community table and the tutoring program and the clothes closet can all run for years as line items under the missions team, and most should forever. The question of separate incorporation arises when specific pressures appear, and it is worth naming them precisely. Liability: an operation with a storefront or vehicles or employees carries risks the church's trustees should not quietly absorb. Funding: many foundations and corporations and government programs will fund a community nonprofit and will not fund a congregation, so incorporation opens doors that stay closed to the church. Scale and focus: an operation with its own staff and hours and inventory needs a governing board that thinks about it every month, not a church council that reaches it under new business. And durability: a separately incorporated mission can survive pastoral transitions, and even a congregation's decline, because its life is not legally welded to the church's.

Count the full cost before saying yes, because a nonprofit is not a filing, it is a second institution your people must govern forever: annual meetings and minutes, separate finances and tax filings, board recruitment in perpetuity, and the slow drift risk that the child organization and the parent church stop knowing each other. If the pressures above are not actually present, stay a ministry. If some are, consider the middle path of fiscal sponsorship, operating under an existing nonprofit's umbrella, while the case ripens. And when the pressures are real and the leaders are ready, incorporate properly, which is a known trail rather than a mystery.

! WATCH OUT

The relationship between church and nonprofit is where these ventures quietly fail a decade later, so write it down at the founding, while everyone is friends: what the church provides (space, funds, volunteers, board seats), what the nonprofit owes back (reporting and brand care and mission alignment), who owns what, and how either party would gracefully exit. A covenant nobody needs for ten years is exactly the document that prevents the eleventh year's board fight, and the worked example below includes one.

The founding trail

1

Prove it as a ministry first.

Run the work inside the church long enough to know it is real: actual neighbors served and volunteers who return, and demand that outgrows the container. Incorporate a proven work, never an idea.

2

Recruit the founding board before the paperwork.

Five to nine people chosen for governance gifts and mission love, not as honors, with the church's relationship to the board decided up front: how many seats the church names, and who serves as the living bridge.

3

Adopt the governing documents.

Bylaws fitted to the mission, a conflict of interest policy, board member agreements so every member knows the job they accepted, and initial board resolutions that make it all official. Templates for every one of these exist below; adapt rather than invent.

4

File the legal sequence.

Incorporate with the state, obtain the EIN, and apply for 501(c)(3) recognition with Form 1023, whose narrative sections are where you tell the mission's story in the IRS's dialect. Engage a nonprofit attorney or an experienced guide for this step; the templates make it affordable, and counsel makes it right.

5

Separate the money completely, from day one.

Its own bank account, its own books, its own financial controls policy, its own donation receipts. No pass-throughs and no shared cash boxes, and no church treasurer doing double duty indefinitely. Clean money separation protects both institutions and every person who handles a dollar.

Sign the relationship covenant and launch loudly.

The church-relationship document from the Watch Out box, adopted by both boards, then a public launch that tells the town what this new thing is and whose love built it.

Governing the child for the long haul

Founding is a season; governing is forever, and the nonprofit's second decade is decided by habits set in its second year. The board needs a renewal rhythm, staggered terms and an intentional pipeline, so it does not calcify into the founding friends aging in place, and it needs the annual disciplines kept boringly current: the budget adopted, the officers elected, the minutes filed, the state and IRS filings on the calendar with an owner. Mission alignment is the subtler maintenance, because successful nonprofits drift toward their funding, and the church's board seats plus the annual report to charge conference are the alignment instruments; use them as conversations rather than formalities. And hold the relationship loosely enough to bless its changes. Some church-born nonprofits eventually stand fully on their own, and letting one go with pride is a kind of sending; others complete their work or lose their viability, and the founding documents' dissolution clause, written back when everyone was friends, is what lets an ending be orderly and honorable rather than a scramble. The parent church's real bequest to its child organization is not the startup funds; it is the governance culture, and the child will keep whichever one it was actually shown.

The other end of the scale

For every ministry that becomes an entity, a dozen should stay gloriously simple, and the community table is the pattern: a recurring free meal needs a playbook, a food-safe kitchen crew, a hospitality culture that seats guests as neighbors rather than clients, and nothing else, no board or bylaws or EIN. The craft at this end of the scale is protecting simplicity on purpose, resisting the committee-forming reflex, and letting the ministry's depth come from consistency, the same tables and the same welcome every week, which is the anchor presence chapter 24 called the deep end of missions. Some of the most transforming work your church will ever do runs on a folding table and a sign-up sheet, and the wisdom of this chapter is knowing which work that is.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC walked the whole trail with Eastern Shore Outreach, the 501(c)(3) it formed as its community-mission arm, with a thrift store among its works, and the founding was done thoroughly enough that the entire document set now lives on the hub as reusable templates: the bylaws, the conflict of interest policy, the board member agreement, the initial resolutions, the financial controls policy, the minutes template, the Form 1023 narrative, the donation receipt, and the church-relationship overview that the Watch Out box insists on. Alongside it, the story document explains the why and how in plain language. Together with the thrift store playbook, it is the most complete start-a-nonprofit kit a church is likely to find anywhere, precisely because a church actually used it.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Starting a 501\(c\)\(3\) Nonprofit Arm: Why and How \(Word\)](#): the story and the decision framework, the right first read before any paperwork.

¶ POLITY NOTE

A separately incorporated nonprofit is not church property and sits outside the trust clause (¶2501), which is part of the point and part of the caution: the church's trustees must be clear about which assets belong to whom, especially where the nonprofit uses church space, and the trustees' packet language about boundaries for extension ministries applies here directly (¶258.3, ¶¶2525 ff.). Church-founded community organizations are a long Methodist tradition, and the charge conference should hear an annual report on any nonprofit the church birthed, because covenant partners tell each other how the year went.

① THE FIRST MOVE

If you inherit a church-adjacent nonprofit in a new appointment, read its founding documents and its church-relationship covenant in your first months, and meet its board chair early, because you have inherited a covenant, not just a neighbor. If no written relationship exists, drafting one together is the gentlest possible season to fix what will otherwise become the eleventh-year fight.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Is there a work in your church right now pressing against its container, and which of the four pressures (liability, funding, scale, durability) is actually present? Or is the truer answer that something simple is being over-organized, and the folding table just needs defending?

YOUR NEXT STEP

If the question of this chapter is live in your church, read the why-and-how story document this week and bring the ministry-or-entity framework to the next conversation. If it is not live, file the kit's location away; the meeting where somebody asks the pivotal question tends to arrive without warning.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Why and How: the Story (Word)

The decision framework and the founding narrative.

Bylaws (Word), Conflict of Interest Policy (Word), Board Member Agreement (Word), and Initial Board Resolutions (Word)

The governing documents, ready to adapt.

Form 1023 Narrative (Word)

The IRS application's story sections, worked.

Financial Controls Policy (Word), Minutes Template (Word), and Donation Receipt Template (Word)

The operating spine.

Overview and Church Relationship (Word)

The covenant the Watch Out box insists on.

Thrift Store Startup and Operations (Word)

The storefront worked example, concept to daily operations.

Community Dinner System (Word)

The folding-table end of the scale, kept gloriously simple.

PART VII

Running the Church

Money: Budgets, Stewardship, and Financial Controls

Most pastors received exactly zero training in church finance and then were handed legal responsibility for an organization with a six-figure budget and a payroll and a counting room full of loose cash, and the two standard coping strategies are equally bad: total avoidance ("I leave that to the finance folks"), which abdicates real pastoral authority and real fiduciary duty, and total control, which exhausts the pastor and unsettles everyone else. There is a third way, and it is the same one this book keeps teaching: understand the system well enough to lead it, build it strong enough to run without heroics, and keep your own hands at the right distance from the cash. Money in a church is never just money; it is discipleship made visible, which is why this chapter belongs to the pastor and not only to the treasurer.

The budget is a theological document

A church budget is the congregation's actual priorities written in the most honest language it owns, and reading one tells you more about a church than its mission statement ever will, per chapter 8. Building one is straightforward when the rhythm is respected: ministry areas submit needs in early fall, the finance committee assembles a draft against realistic income projections, the council reviews, and the charge conference or council adopts before the year begins. Two disciplines make the difference between budgets that lead and budgets that haunt. Project income honestly, from actual giving history and named pledges rather than hopes, because a budget built on optimism becomes a year of monthly bad news, and a church can absorb a hard number at budget time far better than a slow bleed of missed targets. And treat the budget as a plan rather than a cage: monthly reports to the council compare actual to plan, significant variances get explained rather than hidden, and midyear adjustments are ordinary governance rather than crisis.

Giving itself runs on systems too. Pledge campaigns, digital giving that works on a phone in the pew, quarterly statements that thank as well as report, and a follow-up process for commitment cards, so that the member who pledged in October is thanked in November and not first contacted in March about being behind. None of this is manipulative; it is the same operational respect this book gives every other ministry, applied to generosity.

Stewardship is discipleship, not fundraising

The annual pledge campaign is the most visible stewardship moment and the least of the work. Stewardship is year-round formation in the practice of Gifts from chapter 20: preaching that talks about money as plainly as Jesus did, which was often; testimony from members whose generosity changed

them; teaching on household finance, because members drowning in debt cannot give freely and the church that helps them swim serves them either way; and a culture where the budget is transparent and questions are welcome, and thanks is constant. The campaign then becomes what it should be, a covenant season rather than a shakedown: a few weeks of focused preaching on promise and gratitude and commitment cards brought forward in worship as an act of devotion, with the results reported back in celebration. Churches that do the year-round work discover the campaign stops being dreaded, and the numbers follow the formation rather than the pressure.

↓ **GRAB THIS**

[Year-Round Stewardship Plan \(PDF\)](#): the whole calendar of stewardship formation, with the campaign as one season inside it.

Controls protect people, not just money

Internal controls sound like accounting and are actually pastoral care, because every control exists to protect a beloved volunteer from being alone with temptation or alone with an accusation. The non-negotiables are few and absolute. Separation of duties: the person who counts is not the person who records, who is not the person who reconciles the bank statement, so no single set of hands touches money end to end. Two unrelated counters, always, per chapter 15, with counts documented and sealed. The pastor stays out of the counting and check-signing entirely, both for integrity and for the appearance of it, while staying fully informed; you should read the financial reports fluently and never touch the cash. Dual signatures or approvals above a threshold and written expense policies, and the background rhythm maintenance: bank statements reviewed by someone who cannot write checks, and an annual audit, which the Discipline requires and which a small church can do credibly with the denomination's local-audit guide rather than an expensive firm. When a church resists controls because "we trust each other," teach the reframe: controls are how the church guarantees that its trust is never tested, which is the kindest thing it can do for the people who serve.

! WATCH OUT

The gravest money wound in church life is not theft; it is the designated gift mishandled. Money given for the youth trip that quietly covers the light bill, a memorial gift spent on something the family never intended, these breaches surface years later and cost congregations their oldest trust. The rule is simple and total: designated money goes to its designation or back to its giver, restricted funds are tracked separately every month, and the church says no, graciously, to designations it cannot honor before accepting them.

Your own paycheck

One corner of church finance is yours alone, and nobody teaches it: clergy compensation is tax-strange, and the strangeness costs real money when ignored. Clergy are usually employees for income tax and self-employed for Social Security, which means quarterly estimates or voluntary withholding arrangements most new pastors discover too late. The housing allowance is the profession's one great provision, the portion of compensation the church designates for housing is excludable from income tax within the legal limits, and the catch is procedural: the charge conference or council must designate it in writing before the year it covers, so a pastor who arrives in July should check that the designation exists today rather than at tax time. An accountable reimbursement plan for ministry expenses, adopted in writing, turns what would be lost deductions into clean reimbursements. None of this requires you to become an accountant; it requires one conversation with your conference treasurer's office or a clergy-experienced tax preparer in your first year, and the treasurer's office fields these questions all day.

The other side of your paycheck is your giving, and it is leadership. A pastor who preaches stewardship while giving nothing preaches with a hollow chest, and congregations sense it without ever seeing a ledger. Give first and proportionally to the church you serve and decide with your family what faithfulness means at your income, and when the campaign comes, be able to say honestly from the pulpit that your household has made its commitment. You will never need to name the number; the freedom in your voice will carry the sermon.

Putting the money house in order

1

Learn your church's money map in month one.

Per chapter 5: sit with the treasurer and finance chair until you can trace a dollar from the offering plate to the bank to the ledger to the report, and read three years of budgets against actuals.

2

Audit the controls against the non-negotiables.

Separation of duties, two counters, pastor out of the cash, dual approvals, monthly reconciliation by a non-signer. Close the worst gap first; most churches have exactly one person doing three incompatible jobs out of pure faithfulness.

3

Fix the income projection.

Next budget cycle, build income from giving history and pledges rather than adding three percent to last year's hope. One honest budget resets the whole conversation.

4

Install the year-round stewardship calendar.

Quarterly statements with gratitude, generosity testimony in worship a few times a year, one money-discipleship offering annually, and the campaign as its covenant season.

5

Get the audit done.

Annually, per the Discipline, using the local church audit guide if a firm is beyond the budget. An audit is not suspicion; it is the finance committee keeping its promises out loud.

6

Report money pastorally.

Monthly numbers to the council, an annual plain-language report to the congregation, and the discipline of telling the truth in both directions, deficits without panic and surpluses without complacency.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's books tell a whole arc of this chapter in three years. The 2024 disaffiliation removed more than \$650,000 in annual household giving, and the church answered with an honest budget rather than a hopeful one: 2025 expenses were planned at about \$1.34 million, roughly \$430,000 below the prior year, built around a projected deficit the leadership named out loud. Then the formation work ran alongside the cuts, a covenant-season commitment campaign with cards brought forward in worship, a digital commitment card, quarterly statements as part of a year-round stewardship plan, and internal controls developed from denominational models, and the honesty was rewarded: average household pledges rose from \$5,300 to \$7,200, and by late the following February the year-to-date surplus had already exceeded the full year's projected deficit. The budget, the stewardship plan, the controls, and the counting procedures are all linked below.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The finance committee's composition and duties are set by ¶258.4, including the annual audit requirement (¶258.4(d)) and the provision that the offering is counted by two unrelated persons. The treasurer and financial secretary roles are deliberately distinct, and the pastor's compensation is set by the charge conference (¶247.13), which is one more reason the pastor stays out of the counting room. Apportionments, per chapter 7, are the connectional obligation the budget carries first, not last.

① THE FIRST MOVE

Within your first month, ask the finance chair two questions in one sitting: who counts, records, and reconciles, are they different people, and when was the last audit? The answers tell you whether this chapter is maintenance or triage in your church, and asking early signals that the new pastor considers the money part of the ministry, which resets the culture by itself.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which coping strategy is your temptation, avoidance or control, and what has it cost so far? Then the practical audit: could your church survive the three-question test (separation of duties, last audit, designated funds tracked) if a conference auditor asked tomorrow?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Schedule the money-map sitting with your treasurer this week if you have never done it, or the controls audit of step two if you have. Nothing in this chapter requires expertise; all of it requires attention.

GRAB THE TOOLS

Annual Budget (Excel)

A real church budget as a working template.

Year-Round Stewardship Plan (PDF) and Stewardship Campaign Model (Word)

The formation calendar and the covenant season.

Commitment Card Follow-Up Process (Word)

Tracking, thanking, and following up after pledge season.

Internal Controls (Word) and Counting and Depositing Procedures (Word)

The non-negotiables, written down.

Local Church Audit Guide (GCFA)

The annual audit without hiring a firm.

Business Partnership Program (Word)

A supplementary income model beyond household giving.

People: Staff, Volunteers, and the SPRC

Nobody warns a new pastor that the hardest part of the job is being somebody's boss. The preaching was trained for and the funerals were at least imagined, but on the first Monday there is a staff, two people or twelve, whose livelihoods and morale and ministries now run partly through your leadership, and most pastors arrive with no supervisory experience beyond having once been supervised. Chapter 3 taught you to build a team around your gaps; this chapter is the daily craft of leading the team you have, the policies that keep employment fair, and the hardest room in the church, the one where someone has to be told it is not working.

Supervision is pastoral care with expectations

Good church supervision holds two truths at once: staff members are souls you shepherd, and they are also employees with jobs to do, and collapsing either truth into the other produces the two classic failures. The boss-only pastor gets compliance and turnover; the chaplain-only pastor gets warmth and drift, a staff that feels loved and has not been told what excellent looks like in years. The both/and runs on a simple rhythm: a standing one-on-one with each direct report, weekly or biweekly, that covers their ministry and their soul in the same conversation; a written job description per role, per chapter 3, so expectations are documents rather than moods; an annual review built on self-appraisal and development rather than surprise, because nothing in a fair review should be heard for the first time there; and real investment in growth, conference training and books and stretch assignments, since churches that develop their people keep them. Add the discipline of public credit and private correction, and the staff culture largely builds itself.

Volunteers are the larger workforce, per chapter 9's arithmetic, and they run on the same architecture with one substitution: where staff have compensation, volunteers have meaning, and the currency of volunteer leadership is clarity plus gratitude. Clear roles, real training, defined seasons with permission to rest, and thanks that is specific and public. The lane structure of chapter 9 is this chapter's volunteer system; what the pastor adds personally is the culture, because a congregation watches how the pastor treats the nursery worker and the sound tech, and treats its own volunteers accordingly.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Employee Handbook \(Word\)](#): a full church staff handbook, policies, procedures, and benefits, the written floor under everything in this chapter.

The SPRC done well

Chapter 7 introduced the staff-parish relations committee and chapter 3 made it your team-building partner; here is its operating manual. A healthy SPRC meets on a rhythm rather than in response to crises, keeps strict confidentiality as its first culture, and does its four jobs in proportion: supporting and encouraging the staff and pastor, which should be most of its time; recommending positions and compensation to the council; conducting the annual evaluations, on the no-surprises rule above; and receiving concerns about staff or pastor through a defined door rather than a parking-lot whisper network. That defined door matters more than any other SPRC habit. Teach the congregation that staff concerns go to the SPRC chair, teach the committee that anonymous complaints are received but never acted on unexamined, and teach everyone that the SPRC is not a grievance dumpster; it is the guardian of the relationships the church's ministry runs on. For your own relationship with the committee, bring them the truth early, your triangle profile and your workload reality and your family's needs, because an SPRC that only hears from the pastor at appointment time cannot advocate for anyone.

Colleagues in collars, and the desk that runs the church

Two staff relationships have their own physics. If you serve with other clergy, an associate pastor or a deacon, you are supervising a colleague who shares your ordination and answers, like you, to the bishop, and the relationship works on explicit lanes rather than assumed hierarchy: which ministries the associate owns outright and where the pulpit is shared, and what only the senior carries. Give an associate real ownership and public credit, and never correct a colleague's preaching or leadership in front of the congregation, because the church is watching how clergy treat clergy and learning its theology of authority from it. A deacon's distinct calling to Word, Service, Compassion, and Justice is not a junior elder's; honor the difference in the assignments. And when an associate is appointed away, per the system, send them well, because clergy remember for whole careers how their departures were handled.

The other physics belong to the church office. The administrative assistant or office manager is the congregation's nervous system, the person who knows where everything is and hears everything first, and translates the pastor to the congregation and back, and two protections keep that role healthy. Guard them from becoming everyone's assistant; the office serves the church's work through a defined door, not every committee's errands on demand. And never let them become the sole holder of the systems, per chapter 15's single-point-of-failure rule, because the day the twenty-year office manager retires, an undocumented church loses its memory. Document and cross-train, and thank them in public, because no one on the payroll is more essential or less applauded.

When it is not working

Sooner or later a staff member underperforms seriously, or worse, and the church's usual instinct, endure it for years because firing feels unchristian, is neither kind nor faithful; it quietly teaches the whole staff that excellence is optional and lets a ministry wither under someone miscast. The faithful path is process: name the gap privately and specifically, with a written improvement plan and real support and a defined timeline; document as you go, not to build a case but to keep everyone honest; involve the SPRC as the policy requires; and if the season ends without change, end the employment with severance where possible and dignity always, and the truth told kindly. Hiring's rigor is the other half of the same stewardship, because most dismissal agonies were hiring shortcuts: write the role first per chapter 3, check the references you were given and one you were not, screen per chapter 19 where the role touches the vulnerable, and never hire under pressure of an empty chair. The handbook and written policies below exist exactly so that none of this is invented mid-crisis.

! WATCH OUT

The most dangerous personnel pattern in a church is triangulation: the member who complains to the pastor about a staff member and the staffer who complains to a board member about the pastor, and the SPRC member who carries a grievance secondhand. Every triangle bypasses the person who could actually fix the thing. Adopt the discipline publicly and keep it personally: concerns travel to the person involved or through the defined door, and a complaint about someone, carried to you, gets one response, warmly and every time: have you talked with them? Churches that break triangles stay healthy through almost anything; churches that feed them are sick in good times.

Building the people system

1

Stand up the one-on-ones.

A standing rhythm with each direct report, on the calendar, covering ministry and soul. This single habit outperforms every other supervisory tool combined.

2

Get every role on paper.

Job descriptions for staff, role descriptions for key volunteers, reviewed annually. Where none exist, write them with the people in the roles, per chapter 15.

3

Adopt the written floor.

An employee handbook and hiring-and-dismissal policies through the SPRC and council, before they are needed, because policy adopted during a conflict is ammunition, and policy adopted in peace is protection.

4

Install the annual review rhythm.

Self-appraisal, development plan, no surprises, every staff member every year, the pastor included via the SPRC's evaluation duty.

5

Define the door and break the triangles.

Teach the concern pathway from the pulpit once a year, and hold the "have you talked with them?" line without exception, including for complaints you privately agree with.

6

Invest in growth visibly.

A training line in the budget, one development goal per staffer per year, and public celebration when your people level up. The church that grows its staff rarely has to replace them.

🌾 FROM THE FIELD

The personnel documents on the hub come from a church that had to run this whole chapter under stress: Spanish Fort UMC rebuilt a halved staff across two years, per chapter 3, and did it on written rails, an employee handbook covering policies through benefits, SPRC-adopted hiring and dismissal policies, self-appraisal and development-plan forms for the annual rhythm, role-first job descriptions like the youth minister posting, and a staff org chart that kept the structure legible while it changed. The rebuild years also tested the SPRC's confidentiality and support culture through multiple transitions, which is exactly when a committee discovers whether it was built on rhythm or on crisis.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The SPRC's duties, composition, and confidentiality expectations are set by ¶258.2, including the evaluation and consultation roles this chapter leans on, and the pastor is the administrative officer supervising the staff (¶340.2(c)(2) places the church's program staff under the pastor's direction). Employment law is real law for churches: wage and hour rules and the tax treatment of clergy versus lay staff, and your state's employment statutes, all apply, and the conference treasurer's office and GCFA publish guidance most small churches never discover. When in doubt on a personnel matter with legal edges, call the conference before the lawyer; they have seen it before.

① THE FIRST MOVE

Chapter 5 sent you to one-on-ones with the staff in month one; the supervisory version starts in month two: establish the standing rhythm, ask each person for their job description, and where none exists, make writing it together the first assignment. You will learn the real org chart, and the staff will learn that the new pastor manages by clarity rather than by weather.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which failure is your temptation, boss-only or chaplain-only, and what has your staff already learned to expect from it? Then the braver share: is there an under-performance situation you have been enduring instead of addressing, and what would the first step of a fair process look like this month?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Put the standing one-on-ones on the calendar this week, every direct report, a rhythm you can keep. Everything else in this chapter grows out of that soil.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Employee Handbook \(Word\)](#)

The full written floor.

[Hiring and Dismissal Policies \(PDF\)](#)

The SPRC's written employment policy.

[Staff Self Appraisal \(PDF\)](#) and [Employee Development Plan \(PDF\)](#)

The annual review rhythm's paperwork.

[Staff Structure and Org Chart \(PDF\)](#)

The structure kept legible.

[SPRC Guide \(PDF\)](#)

The committee's four jobs and its confidentiality culture.

[Volunteer Role Inventory Method \(Word\)](#)

The volunteer half of the workforce, from chapter 9.

Property, Safety, and Risk

The building will interrupt your ministry on its own schedule: the air conditioner dies on the hottest Sunday of the year, the roof reveals itself during the children's program, the scout troop asks to store a trailer, and a member trips on the cracked sidewalk everyone had learned to step over. Pastors did not enter ministry to think about HVAC and liability, which is exactly why churches that depend on the pastor thinking about them fail at both. This chapter is about the system that carries the physical church, the trustees and their tools, so that the building serves the mission instead of consuming it, and so that the day something truly bad happens, the church already knows what to do.

The trustees' quiet portfolio

Chapter 7 gave the trustees their charter; here is their working portfolio. Maintenance runs in two modes, and the difference is the whole game: reactive maintenance answers breakdowns, while planned maintenance prevents them, with the roof inspected before it leaks, the HVAC serviced on schedule, and a walk-through rhythm that catches the cracked sidewalk before the fall. A property and maintenance system, a documented inventory of the buildings' systems with service schedules and vendor relationships, converts the building from a series of surprises into a calendar, and it converts the trustees from a repair committee into stewards. The same documentation discipline covers the money side of property: leases and use agreements in writing and centrally filed, a facility use policy that answers who may use the building, for what, at what cost, and with what insurance, so the scout trailer question has an answer instead of an argument, and the deferred maintenance list kept honest and priced, because a deferred list nobody prices becomes a crisis nobody budgeted.

Insurance is the portfolio's backstop, and most churches are simultaneously over-confident and under-documented. Coverage should be reviewed annually with an agent who knows churches, liability limits and property valuations that track construction costs, and the riders your actual ministries need, vehicles, workers' compensation, sexual misconduct coverage, and cyber for the church that takes online payments. The under-documented half is what makes claims miserable: a photo-based asset inventory, every room and its contents on camera with the file stored off-site, turns a catastrophic claim from an archaeology project into a checklist, and it costs one volunteer one afternoon a year.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Property Insurance Inventory Method \(Word\)](#): the photo-based asset inventory that makes insurance claims and renewals radically easier, one afternoon a year.

Safety as hospitality

Safety planning is the trustees' side of promises other chapters made: the Safe Sanctuaries architecture of chapter 19, the ushers' emergency readiness of chapter 15, and the check-in security of chapter 21 all run on trustee-owned infrastructure, locks and cameras and lighting and policy. The remaining pieces are the ones nobody wants to plan and every church must: a medical emergency plan with first aid kits and an AED that people can actually find, fire and evacuation basics walked annually, a severe weather plan for your region's actual threats, and, soberly, a plan for a violent intruder, built with local law enforcement's help rather than a committee's imagination, trained quietly so the greeters know their part without the congregation living in fear. Frame all of it as hospitality rather than fortress-building, because that is what it is: the church that knows what to do in the worst five minutes is offering its guests the deepest welcome there is, and the planning is done precisely so that Sunday can stay warm and open.

! WATCH OUT

The building can quietly become the congregation's true religion. Watch for the signs: maintenance spending that crowds out ministry year after year, a sanctuary treated as too sacred for the youth, trustees empowered to veto ministries because of carpet, and the memorial-plaque logic where every object is somebody's untouchable tribute. The building is a tool consecrated to a mission, per chapter 7's warning about inverted org charts, and the pastoral work is keeping the sentence in that order. Churches die of building-first thinking while their buildings stand gleaming.

The building working weekdays

Most church buildings sit substantially empty six days a week, which is a stewardship question hiding in plain sight, and the trustees' portfolio includes putting the building to kingdom work between Sundays. The recovery groups are the classic and often the holiest use of the fellowship hall, the AA meeting on Tuesday nights may be the most honest worship in the building, and scouts, homeschool co-ops, community associations, and the town's blood drive all turn empty rooms into front porches, per chapter 6's many doors. A weekday preschool or parents-day-out program is the largest version, simultaneously a genuine ministry to families and a steady income stream, and the widest bridge to young households most churches ever build, and it deserves its own governance, a board, per the preschool structures on the hub, rather than ad hoc oversight. The facility use policy of this chapter is what makes all of it sustainable: consistent terms, insurance certificates from outside groups, fees that honor costs without gouging mission, and clarity about what the building's availability does and does not imply about endorsement. A building that works all week is not a rental business; it is the parish's largest physical gift being unwrapped more than once a week.

Putting the portfolio in order

1

Walk the property with the trustees chair.

Early in your appointment, per chapter 6's building walk, but this time with a notepad and the chair: every system, its age, its service schedule, and the deferred list with honest prices attached.

2

Document the property systems.

The maintenance inventory with schedules and vendors, leases and agreements centrally filed, and the facility use policy adopted if none exists. One season of trustee meetings can build the whole file from the templates below.

3

Run the insurance review.

Annual, with a church-experienced agent, coverage against current values and actual ministries, and the photo inventory completed and stored off-site before renewal.

4

Build the emergency plans with professionals.

Medical, fire, weather, and intruder, drafted with local responders, adopted by the trustees, and trained into the ushers and greeters on the twice-a-year walkthrough of chapter 15.

5

Prepare for your region's disaster before its season.

Whatever your geography sends, hurricane, tornado, flood, or fire, a written before-during-after plan, reviewed annually on the calendar, connected to the conference's disaster response network of chapter 24.

6

Report the physical church to the council annually.

The state of the buildings and the deferred list with its prices, and the insurance posture, in plain language, so property decisions are made by the church's governance rather than discovered by it.

FROM THE FIELD

A Gulf Coast church plans for the storm because the storm is not hypothetical, and Spanish Fort UMC's hurricane preparedness plan is the fullest disaster document on the hub: before, during, and after, from the pre-season checklist through the recovery phase, paired with a disaster management cycle that keeps the planning honest year over year. The same church's trustee files show the rest of the portfolio in working order, a facility use policy, lease management, documented property and maintenance systems, and the photo-based insurance inventory, much of it built during the rebuild years when deferred repairs from the disaffiliation season had to be triaged with real prices attached. All of it is linked below, ready to adapt to your own geography and buildings.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The trustees hold and manage property under ¶258.3 and ¶¶2525-2551, always subject to the trust clause of ¶2501, which means local church property is held in trust for the denomination and major property actions, purchases, sales, and mortgages, require charge conference action and district superintendent involvement (¶¶2539-2541). The annual accessibility audit the Discipline expects of trustees (¶2533.6) belongs on the same calendar as the insurance review, and it is hospitality dressed as compliance: the church that audits its ramps and restrooms is asking who cannot get into the house.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first quarter, ask the trustees chair three questions: where is the insurance policy and when was it reviewed, what is on the deferred maintenance list and what would it cost, and what is our plan if the worst thing happened on a Sunday? You are not auditing; you are learning which of this chapter's systems exist, and the questions themselves tell the trustees their new pastor takes their quiet portfolio seriously.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

What is your church's cracked sidewalk, the known risk everyone has learned to step over, and what has kept it unfixed? And which emergency plan does your church actually lack, honestly, medical, fire, weather, or intruder, and who in your community could help you write it this season?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Schedule the property walk with your trustees chair this month, notepad in hand. Every other step in this chapter comes out of what you learn on that walk.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Hurricane Plan \(PDF\)](#), [Preparedness Doc \(Word\)](#), and [Disaster Management Cycle \(PDF\)](#)

The full before-during-after disaster set.

[Property Insurance Inventory Method \(Word\)](#)

The photo-based asset inventory.

[Facility Use Policy \(Word\)](#)

Who uses the building, for what, on what terms.

[Property and Maintenance Systems \(Word\)](#) and [Lease Management \(Word\)](#)

The building as a calendar instead of a surprise.

Trustees Packet (PDF)

The committee's charter, from chapter 7.

Communications: Telling the Church's Story

"Nobody told me about that" is the most common complaint in congregational life, and it is usually spoken by someone who received four announcements about the thing through three channels, which tells you the real problem: church communication fails not from too little information but from too little system, a firehose of unranked announcements that trains everyone to tune out. Meanwhile the town's picture of your church is being formed by a website nobody updates and a social feed that went quiet in March. Communications is not decoration on the church's work; it is how the congregation coordinates and how the community first meets you, per chapter 18, and it deserves the same operating discipline as the money and the building.

Two audiences, one voice

Church communications serves two audiences with different questions. The congregation needs coordination: what is happening and when, and what is mine to do, delivered on rhythms it can trust. The community needs introduction: who is this church and what does it feel like, and would I belong there, answered mostly before anyone visits. The channels sort accordingly. Inward, the weekly all-church email is the backbone, one email, same day each week, ranked rather than exhaustive, because a weekly email people actually open is worth ten newsletters they archive; the bulletin carries Sunday; and a monthly or seasonal publication can carry the longer stories and the calendar depth. Outward, the website is the front porch of chapter 6 and gets audited like one, service times in five seconds and an "I'm new" path per chapter 18; social media works when it shows the church's actual life in photos and moments rather than event flyers, on a sustainable rhythm honest about your capacity; and the community's other channels, the school folder and the local paper and the road sign, carry your events per chapter 25.

Across all of it runs one discipline that separates churches that communicate from churches that emit: a single calendar and a single intake. Everything the church wants said goes through one door, a communications request with a lead time, onto one master calendar that ranks the church's messages, because when everything is announced everything is noise, and somebody, staff or volunteer, owns the whole with authority to say "next week instead." That owner also keeps the voice, warm and plain and consistent, so the church sounds like one congregation rather than twelve committees.

! WATCH OUT

The announcement moment in worship is the communications system's pressure valve, and it will absorb the whole service if allowed. Hold the line at two or three spoken announcements chosen by rank, everything else in print and pixels, and route the disappointed toward the intake door. The service is worship, per Part III, and every added announcement teaches the congregation that the email is optional, which unravels the backbone you are building.

The pastor's pen

Within the system, one channel belongs to you personally, and it may be the highest-return writing a pastor does: a short weekly note from the pastor, in the email or alongside it, in your own voice, pastoral rather than promotional. A few hundred words on the week's life, with a thread of Scripture and a window into the church's story, and over a year or two the notes accumulate into something no announcement ever builds: a congregation that hears its pastor's voice midweek and trusts it, and forwards it to the neighbor they are working up the courage to invite. The note also disciplines you the way chapter 12's calendar does, a weekly writing rhythm that keeps your prose warm and your finger on the congregation's pulse. Guard its character: the moment the pastor's note becomes a nagging channel or a promotion platform, its currency is spent.

The bigger cousin of the weekly voice is the church's visual identity, and once in a great while a church needs the full treatment: a rebrand, done with professional help, when the church's name or look or story no longer tells the truth about who it has become. A rebrand is a communications project the way a wedding is a party, the visible tip of something deeper, and it works when it follows real change rather than substituting for it, per the vision work of chapter 8 and the change leadership of Part VIII. Between rebrands, the everyday version of the same stewardship is consistency: the logo used correctly and the colors and fonts kept, and the photography actually showing your people, because a church's look is a promise about its care.

When the news is bad

Some week, the church will need to communicate something hard: a beloved staff departure, an allegation, a death that makes the news, a public controversy the congregation is reading about before you speak. Crisis communication runs on rules decided in peacetime, per chapter 19's response plan. One person speaks for the church, decided now, and everyone else, staff and leaders included, refers inquiries there without commentary. Speak to your own people first and fast, because a congregation that learns hard news from the newspaper learns something worse about its leaders, and a brief honest word from the pastor, what we know and what we are doing and how we will care for those involved, beats every

polished statement that arrives a day late. Say enough and no more: truth without speculation and care without legal admissions you have no authority to make, and the humility to say we do not know yet when you do not. And keep pastoring in public, because the congregation reads the crisis communications for information and reads their pastor's bearing for whether the gospel still holds. It does, and the calm plainness of your voice on the worst week is itself a sermon the church will remember longer than the crisis.

Building the system

1 **Audit every channel in one afternoon.**

Website as a stranger, per chapter 18; the last month of emails, socials, and bulletins as a member. Note where the information firehose is unranked and where the outward channels have gone stale.

2 **Install the single intake and master calendar.**

One request door with lead times, one calendar, one owner with ranking authority, adopted by the council so the authority is real.

3 **Rebuild the weekly email as the backbone.**

Same day weekly and ranked rather than exhaustive, readable in two minutes, with the pastor's note as its heartbeat. Measure opens for a season and let the data retire the channels nobody reads.

4 **Set the outward rhythms honestly.**

A website audit twice a year and a social cadence your actual capacity can sustain, with photography permissions per chapter 19 built into every event.

5 **Start the pastor's note and do not stop.**

Weekly and short and in your voice, through vacations via guest writers or planned-ahead pieces. Consistency is the entire trick.

6 **Recruit the communications lane.**

Per chapter 9, this is usually the thinnest lane by volunteer count, and it hides gifted people: the retired teacher who edits, the young parent who photographs, the college student who cuts video, the member who runs social feeds professionally. Name a lane leader and give the ministry the dignity of a real team.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's communications system shows the whole architecture: a weekly congregational email with a documented format, a churchwide email and calendar rhythm behind it, a monthly publication carrying the longer stories, defined website structure and social media rhythms, and a weekly Pastor's Note that has run for years, long enough that the compiled collection on the hub spans two years of them and the practice has its own how-and-why document. The church also did the once-in-a-generation piece, a full rebrand with a professional firm in the middle of its rebuild years, discovery through design through rollout, and the case study of that process, with the brand kit, is on the hub for any church weighing the same road. Every document is linked below.

↓ GRAB THIS

[Pastor's Note as a Weekly Practice \(Word\)](#): why and how a weekly written word from the pastor builds trust over time, the highest-return channel in this chapter.

POLITY NOTE

Communications carries legal freight churches forget: the photo and media permissions of chapter 19 for anything showing children, copyright licensing per chapter 14 for music and images in print and stream, and the CCLI-style streaming license if worship goes online. Denominational identity is part of the story too; the Cross and Flame is a trademarked insignia with usage standards, and your conference communications office both enforces and helps, offering training and resources most local churches never request. When the newspaper calls on a hard day, per chapter 19's response plan, the one voice that speaks for the church should already be decided.

THE FIRST MOVE

Start the pastor's note in your first month, before the rest of the system is touched. It requires nobody's permission, costs an hour a week, and begins building the midweek trust that every later change in this chapter, and in this book, will draw on. Chapter 5 called the first ninety days a season of being known; the note is how a few hundred households hear your voice every week while you get there.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Open your church's website and socials in front of the group and let them react as strangers for five minutes; take notes and do the same for theirs. Then the inward question: what does your congregation currently trust to be true of your communications, that the email comes every Thursday and announcements are ranked and the pastor writes weekly, and what have they learned not to trust?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Write the first pastor's note this week and send it through whatever channel exists. The system of this chapter can be built over a year; the voice starts now.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Weekly Email Format \(Word\)](#) and [Churchwide Email and Calendar Rhythm \(Word\)](#)

The backbone and its operating rhythm.

.....
[Pastor's Note as a Weekly Practice \(Word\)](#) and [Two Years of Pastor's Notes \(PDF\)](#)

The practice and the proof.

.....
[Monthly Publication Example \(PDF\)](#)

The longer-story channel.

.....
[Website Structure \(Word\)](#) and [Social Media Rhythm \(Word\)](#)

The outward channels, systematized.

.....
[Church Rebrand Case Study \(Word\)](#)

The full professional rebrand: discovery, design, rollout, and the brand kit.

PART VIII

Leading Change and the Long View

Casting Vision and Running a Vision Process

Every church has a mission statement somewhere, usually on a wall, occasionally in a drawer, and the test of whether it is a vision or a decoration is one question: does anybody use it to decide anything? A living vision is the tool a council reaches for when two good ideas compete for one budget line, and the sentence a new member hears in the visitor class and recognizes on Sunday, and the reason a ministry gets launched while another gets lovingly retired. This final part of the book is about leading change, and it opens with the discipline that makes all other change legible: helping a congregation discern together what God is calling it to become, and then saying it so often and so concretely that the church starts steering by it.

When a vision process, and when not

Chapter 8 taught the order that governs everything here: vision grows out of listening, and a process launched before the congregation trusts it has been heard produces a document rather than a direction. Assuming the listening is real, the seasons that call for a formal process are recognizable: after a rupture or a rebuild, when the church knows it survived but not yet what for, and at a genuine transition, a new era of leadership or a changed community or a building decision looming. Steady drift calls for one too, when years of momentum have left the church busy and directionless, running last decade's programs on this decade's fumes. The seasons that do not call for one are just as recognizable: the first year of an appointment, per chapter 5, and an active crisis that needs a decision rather than a discernment. The plain itch to relabel is not a season at all. A vision process is a congregation's slow, prayerful answer to what now; it is not a rebrand, per chapter 30, though a rebrand sometimes rightly follows it.

The shape of the process

A workable process has a representative team and several months, and it walks on more than one leg so that no single voice, including yours, can carry it alone. Four legs together keep the discernment honest: listening sessions, small and capped per chapter 8, open-ended and scheduled until every member has had a genuine invitation; a survey, so the quiet and the absent are heard alongside the room-fillers; shared reading, a book or two that stretches the team's imagination beyond its own memories; and prayer, named as a leg rather than assumed as an atmosphere, because a team that only analyzes produces a plan, and the church needs a calling. The team's craft is synthesis: the legs produce themes, the themes get tested back against the congregation, and somewhere in the testing a statement begins to form, short enough to say from memory and specific enough to steer with, usually accompanied by a

handful of values that give it working edges. The output that matters most is not the statement, though; it is the recommendations, the four or five concrete directions the process commits the church to, because a vision without launched consequences teaches the congregation that discernment is decorative.

↓ **GRAB THIS**

[Running a Congregational Vision Process \(Word\)](#): the full working guide, team, legs, questions, and how themes become a statement and recommendations become ministries.

Casting it until it steers

The process ends and the real work begins, because a vision nobody hears is a minute in a binder. Casting starts with a moment: a Vision Sunday, the whole church in one room, the statement and values presented as the congregation's own discernment rather than the leadership's decree, because that is what they are. Then comes the sustained work, and preaching is its strongest engine: a sermon series that walks the congregation through its new vision one value at a time, per chapter 12, so the vision is heard in Scripture's voice rather than strategy's, ideally landing at a commitment moment where the church answers with its pledges and its hands. And then the embedding, which is where most visions die or live: the values become the organizing frame of chapter 9's lanes, the budget of chapter 27 gets read against them, the visitor class of chapter 18 teaches them, and the council of chapter 7 uses them to decide things in front of everyone. Repeat the vision until you are tired of saying it, which is roughly when the congregation is beginning to hear it, and revisit it formally every year, because visions age and honest churches say so.

! WATCH OUT

The subtle failure is the pastor's vision wearing the congregation's clothes. If the process is engineered to ratify what you already decided, the church will smell it and participation will politely collapse, and worse, when you are appointed away the vision leaves in your car. Run the process so honestly that it could surprise you, and let it. A vision the congregation genuinely discerned survives pastoral transitions, which is the whole reason to do it this way; a vision that was yours all along was never the church's, only borrowed.

Vision fatigue, and the second process

Two complications deserve honest treatment. The first is the congregation that has seen processes before: the strategic plan of 2011, the visioning weekend of 2016, each producing a binder and changing nothing, and the members who lived through them will meet your process with a politeness that is actually pessimism. Do not argue with the fatigue; out-behave it. Name the history plainly, this church has done

visioning before and watched it evaporate, and here is what will be different, then make the difference structural: recommendations with owners and dates and a first visible action within a month of Vision Sunday, and the annual out-loud review, because fatigue is cured by follow-through and by absolutely nothing else.

The second is the vision that aged honorably. Five or seven years on, a good vision stops steering, not because it failed but because it succeeded; the recommendations got built, the congregation changed around them, and the statement's edges have gone soft with familiarity. The refresh is lighter than the founding: a shortened process, a season of listening and a smaller team, that asks whether the discernment still describes God's call or needs re-forming. Sometimes the statement survives and the values get new working edges; sometimes the church discovers it is being called somewhere genuinely new. Either way, treat vision as the church's living discernment rather than its founding document, and the congregation learns that seeking God's direction is a rhythm of its life, not an event from a particular pastorate.

Running it

1

Test the season.

Is the listening of chapter 8 real and recent, and does the moment match the calls-for-it list above? If not, do the listening first; the process will still be there.

2

Charter the team.

Representative across ages and tenures and ministries, blessed publicly by the council, with a defined timeline of several months and a written charge: discern, synthesize, and recommend.

3

Walk the four legs.

Listening sessions until invitation is universal, the survey for the quiet, the shared reading for stretch, and prayer with the same scheduling seriousness as the sessions.

4

Synthesize and test back.

Themes drafted, shown to the congregation for correction, then shaped into the statement and the values and the recommendations. Expect this to take longer than the calendar wants.

5

Adopt and cast.

Council adoption, Vision Sunday, the preaching series, and the commitment moment, planned as one arc on chapter 11's year map.

6

Embed and revisit.

Lanes, budget, visitor class, and council decisions read against the values, with an annual review where the church asks out loud whether it is living what it discerned.

FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC's 2025 process ran this whole arc on a documented clock. A vision team launched in January, walked the four legs through the spring, and held six capped listening sessions across June and early July; the team's report reached the church council on July 28, and Vision Sunday on August 17 gave the congregation its new statement, to be a home connecting all people through worship, service, fellowship, and discipleship, guided by Christ's love, with four values: Worship, Serve, Connect, and Grow. The casting followed the textbook: a six-week Welcome Home preaching series carried the vision to Commitment Sunday and the Church House became the organizing image per chapter 6, and the embedding kept going for years, the values framing the lane structure of chapter 9 and the recommendations becoming launched work, including the building committee that took up the campus question. The full 25-page process document, the reusable guide, and the series brief are all linked below.

POLITY NOTE

A vision process needs no special polity; it runs on the ordinary authority of the council (§252) with the charge conference's annual rhythms carrying any structural consequences, and that ordinariness is a feature, because it means any congregation can begin one this year. Where recommendations touch property, per chapter 29, the trustees and the district enter per §§2539-2541, and a building-sized recommendation deserves its own chartered committee with its own defined mandate, which is exactly what the building committee framework below provides.

THE FIRST MOVE

Find the church's existing vision or mission statement in your first month, wherever it lives, and quietly test it against this chapter's question: when was the last time anyone used it to decide anything? Ask two or three leaders the same question. The answers tell you whether you inherited a steering wheel or a wall decoration, and either answer is useful to know before year two.

FOR YOUR COHORT

Recite your church's vision statement from memory, right now, in front of the group. Whatever just happened, and something just happened, discuss it: if you could not say it, what would a statement worth memorizing sound like, and if you could, when did it last decide something real?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Run The First Move's test this week. If the statement steers, strengthen the embedding; if it decorates, put the season question of step one on your calendar for a conversation with your lay leadership this quarter.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[Running a Congregational Vision Process \(Word\)](#)

The reusable guide.

[SFUMC 2025 Vision Process, Full Document \(PDF\)](#)

The worked 25-page example with phases and worksheets.

[Series Brief: Welcome Home \(PDF\)](#)

The vision-launch preaching series, from chapter 12.

[Forming and Running a Building Committee \(Word\)](#)

When a recommendation is building-sized: composition, timeline, and decision criteria.

Navigating Conflict, Decline, and Disaffiliation

This is the chapter nobody wants to need, so let it begin with its one governing conviction: conflict in a congregation is not a sign that something has gone wrong with the church; it is a sign that the church is made of people, and the New Testament, which is substantially a collection of letters to churches in conflict, treats it as the expected weather of life together. The pastoral difference is never between churches that fight and churches that do not. It is between churches that fight well, honestly and face to face and inside a covenant, and churches where conflict goes underground and comes back up as decline and dry rot. This chapter is about fighting well, naming decline truthfully, and shepherding a congregation through the hardest weather the last decade dealt, the rupture of a denomination.

Conflict, fought well

The mechanics of healthy conflict are mostly habits this book already installed. The triangle-breaking rule of chapter 28, concerns travel to the person involved, is Matthew 18 in street clothes, and it does more for congregational health than any mediation technique, because most church conflict is not disagreement, it is unrouted grievance gathering interest. When a real disagreement surfaces, get it into a room: the parties, face to face, with a calm third presence when needed, ground rules that everyone speaks for themselves, and the pastoral insistence on distinguishing positions from interests, because the fight about the carpet is almost never about the carpet, per chapter 14's style wars, and the person who names the grief under the position usually dissolves half the battle. Know your own limits honestly: the pastor mediates most conflicts and is a party to some, and when you are the issue, or the sides have hardened, calling the district superintendent or a trained outside mediator is wisdom rather than failure. And hold the line that protects everything else: disagreement is welcome, and covenant behavior is required, no anonymous letters given standing and no parking-lot campaigns, and no weaponized withholding of pledges, named as out of bounds from the pulpit in peacetime so the boundary exists before it is tested.

Decline, named truthfully

Most American congregations are smaller than they were, and the pastoral malpractice is not decline itself; it is the two dishonest responses to it. Denial keeps the church staffed and budgeted and scheduled for a congregation that left years ago, exhausting the remnant to maintain a museum of a larger past, and despair reads the trend lines of chapter 8 as a verdict and quietly stops trying. The faithful third way is honest right-sizing with unembarrassed hope: name the real numbers out loud, per chapter 8, grieve what deserves grieving, then fit the church's structure to its actual body, fewer committees per chapter 7's

simplified options and a building used per chapter 29 rather than merely heated, and a budget per chapter 27 built on the giving that exists, so that the congregation's remaining energy goes to mission instead of maintenance. Decline reverses, when it does, through the unglamorous front doors this book keeps building, welcome and community presence and formation, and some faithful churches will not grow again and are not failures; a small church that loves its town and forms its people, and dies well decades from now having planted what it could, is a completed story rather than a defeated one.

! WATCH OUT

In seasons of conflict and loss, watch your own soul first, because congregational anxiety is contagious and the pastor is the most exposed person in the building. The anchors of chapter 4 stop being self-care and become survival equipment: the sabbath kept, the person who hears your unfiltered truth, the counselor normalized, the family protected from absorbing the church's weather. A non-anxious pastor is the single most stabilizing presence a conflicted congregation can have, and non-anxiety is not a temperament; it is a maintained condition, and everyone can tell when the maintenance has stopped.

When the denomination itself ruptures

The United Methodist Church's recent season taught a generation of pastors what denominational rupture asks of a congregation, and the lessons deserve writing down while they are fresh. When the wider church divides, every local congregation inherits a question it did not ask for, and the pastoral work has a shape. First, process over pressure: whatever the church decides, stay or leave, the deciding must be done in a way the losing side can call fair, with real information and real listening, and votes conducted by the book, because congregations recover from outcomes far more readily than from processes they distrust. Second, pastor everyone, including the people leaving: the families who depart are not enemies, they are sheep changing folds, and the pastor who blesses their going and keeps the friendships that survive, and refuses to preach against the congregation down the road, is doing the gospel's work in public. Third, expect grief to outlast the vote by years, because the departures empty pews that held friendships and choirs and committee seats, and chapter 16's care systems should treat a rupture like a season of many funerals. And fourth, rebuild identity on purpose: a congregation that stayed needs to relearn why, taught rather than assumed, which is what an identity study and season can do, and a congregation that lost heavily needs the whole arc of this book, the honest budget and the leadership rebuild and the vision process, run patiently and in order.

1

Install the peacetime disciplines now.

The concern pathway, the covenant behavior line, and the triangle-breaking rule, taught before any storm, because conflict systems built during conflict arrive too late.

2

Route the live disagreement into a room.

Parties face to face, interests under positions, a third presence when needed, and the DS or a mediator when you are the issue.

3

Name the numbers in the open.

The decade trend lines of chapter 8, presented without spin to the council annually, so that decline, where real, is a shared fact rather than a whispered fear.

4

Right-size with dignity, not despair.

Structure and budget and building fitted to the actual congregation, framed as faithfulness, with the freed energy visibly reinvested in mission.

5

In a rupture, protect the process and pastor all sides.

Fair process by the book, blessing for the leaving, care systems at funeral-season intensity for the staying, and your own soul under chapter 4's anchors throughout.

6

Rebuild identity deliberately afterward.

Teach why this church is what it is, then run the recovery arc, honest money and rebuilt leadership and vision, in order and without rushing the grief.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

Spanish Fort UMC lived the rupture section. The disaffiliation season divided the congregation, some wanted to leave the denomination and others did not, and the church remained United Methodist; about 117 families departed, most of them, roughly two hundred people, forming a new congregation three miles down the road, and when the dust settled the church had lost close to forty percent of its membership and most of its staff. What the two-year history records next is the rebuild this book has been drawing on all along: the honest budget of chapter 27, the committee rebuild of chapter 7, the vision process of chapter 31, and, tellingly, a six-week churchwide season on United Methodist identity, What Makes Us, Us, taught two years after the split, because the congregation that stayed needed to relearn out loud why. The identity study and the full history are linked below.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The formal disaffiliation provision of the recent season, ¶2553, expired at the end of 2023, so the specific legal pathway that era used is closed, and the trust clause of ¶2501 remains the governing reality for local church property. What remains permanently available is the ordinary machinery this chapter leans on: the district superintendent's role in conflict (¶¶419-424), church conferences for congregation-wide votes when the DS calls them (¶248), and the closure and legacy provisions (¶2549) for congregations completing their story. In any structural conflict, call the district early; superintendents have walked more churches through more ruptures than any pastor ever will.

① THE FIRST MOVE

In your first listening tour, per chapter 8, ask gently about the last big fight: what was it about and how did it end, and who is still not speaking to whom? Every congregation has one, and the new pastor who knows where the old fractures run steps on fewer of them, and knows which peacetime discipline to install first.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Which is your church actually facing, unrouted conflict, unnamed decline, or unfinished rupture grief, and which dishonest response, denial or despair, is the congregation's temptation? Then the personal audit from the Watch Out box: how is the maintenance of your own non-anxiety actually going, and who would tell you the truth about it?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Install one peacetime discipline this month: teach the concern pathway from the pulpit, or bring the covenant-behavior line to the council for adoption. Storm-proofing is bought in fair weather, and this week is fair weather somewhere in your church.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The rupture and rebuild, told honestly.

[What Makes Us Us: Study Guide \(PDF\)](#)

The identity-rebuilding season for a congregation that stayed.

[SPRC Guide \(PDF\)](#)

The confidential room where much conflict is rightly handled.

A Two-Year Case Study: Rebuilding a Church

Thirty-two chapters of this book have borrowed pieces of one church's story, and this chapter finally tells it in order, because the pieces teach differently when you can see them as one connected sequence with a clock running. Spanish Fort UMC, on the Alabama Gulf Coast, is not offered here as a miracle or a model to copy; it is offered as an honest worked example, the church's own history says "not a highlight reel," of what it looks like when the systems this book teaches get built under the worst conditions, in the right order, by ordinary people. Read it less for what the church did and more for when it did each thing, because the sequence is the lesson.

The floor: what July 2024 looked like

The disaffiliation season had divided the congregation, some wanting to leave the denomination and some not, and the church remained United Methodist; about 117 families left, most forming a new congregation three miles down the road, and when the dust settled the membership was down close to forty percent, the giving down more than \$650,000 a year, the staff cut roughly in half, and the committees hollowed by resignations. The budget had been rewritten around a projected deficit of roughly \$486,000. Into that arrived a new pastor, and the first recorded decision was a naming: the end-of-summer report called it "a season of discovery," which framed everything after it, because a church told it is in a rescue braces, and a church told it is in a discovery looks around.

Year one: survive honestly

The first year ran on the sequence chapters 5 and 27 teach. Presence came first, a July arrival and a first sermon two weeks in, opening a six-week series on the Apostles' Creed, central and creedal for a congregation that needed ground more than novelty. The structural triage followed: all five administrative committees rebuilt inside the existing structure rather than redesigned, 38 lay people stepping into the seats by year's end, and the fall's commitment campaign run as a covenant season, cards brought forward in worship sixty days into the appointment. The money was handled with the chapter 27 honesty that defines the whole case: the 2025 budget was built at about \$1.34 million, roughly \$430,000 below the prior year, sized to the church that existed rather than the one being mourned. And quietly, the long game started early, a rebrand engaged with a professional firm in the fall, because the leadership judged that the church's identity work could not wait for its balance sheet to heal. By the first year's end the signs had turned: around fifty new members since July and average household pledges up from \$5,300 to \$7,200, with federal employee-retention refunds landing as unbudgeted grace.

Year two: choose a direction

With the floor holding, year two was the discernment year of chapter 31. A vision team launched in January and walked the four legs through spring and summer, six capped listening sessions in June and July, while the new visual identity delivered in March went into use and the trustees worked down deferred repairs. The team reported to the council in late July; Vision Sunday in August gave the congregation its statement and its four values, Worship, Serve, Connect, and Grow, with the Church House of chapter 6 as the organizing image; and the Welcome Home preaching series carried the vision six weeks to a Commitment Sunday. The same season rebuilt the staff around named gaps per chapter 3, an associate pastor in July, a youth minister in August, an executive assistant after Labor Day, and the trustees' campus question got its own chartered building committee rather than a council agenda item. None of it was smooth month to month; the history records deficit months inside surplus years and staff departures mid-transition, with cost management as a standing agenda item, which is what rebuilding actually feels like from inside.

Year three: build the structures that outlast

The third year turned direction into architecture, the work of Parts II and VII of this book. The volunteer economy was counted, 121 roles and roughly 15,600 hours, and reorganized into the eight lanes of chapter 9, nested under the vision's four values. The care ministries consolidated into a lane with a plan for a trained-caregiver relaunch per chapter 16. The congregation's systems started becoming shareable documents, the guidebook and the Safe Sanctuaries online course of chapter 19, and the playbooks and policies that fill this book's tool lists, and the church that had been rebuilt began, deliberately, teaching other churches how, which is where the Resource Hub and this handbook come from. Two years after a congregation lost nearly half of itself, its working documents had become a library other congregations download.

What it cost

Read honestly, the case also records its price, and the price is part of the lesson. The rebuild years ran on an Executive-corner tilt that chapter 2's triangle would flag instantly, a pastor's weeks heavy with budgets and staffing and systems, held survivable only by the guardrails of chapter 10, the year-ahead preaching calendar and the shared worship planning that kept the pulpit from paying for the rebuild. The lay leaders who said yes in the emergency, the 38 who refilled the committees, carried loads that the later lane structure of chapter 9 was partly designed to relieve, because the church could see its own volunteer arithmetic heading toward burnout. And underneath the org charts, the grief of chapter 32 ran its own timetable: friendships split across two congregations three miles apart and pews that stayed empty on the anniversaries, and a community's questions that members answered in grocery stores for years. None of

this contradicts the recovery; it is what recovery is made of, and a pastor reading this case should budget for the price alongside the sequence, in their own schedule and their volunteers' seasons, and in the congregation's need to grieve while it builds.

What the case teaches

1

Sequence beats speed.

Presence before systems, honesty before vision, vision before structure. Every phase leaned on the one before it, and the vision process in year one would have failed for the same reason it succeeded in year two: trust arrives on foot.

2

Name the season out loud.

"A season of discovery" did more work than any program. Congregations can walk through almost anything they have been given language for.

3

Tell the money the truth.

The \$430,000 budget cut was the most pastoral act of year one, because a church that watches its leaders face reality learns it can face reality too, and giving followed the honesty.

4

Rebuild with the people you have.

Thirty-eight lay people filled the committees, and the case's staff hires came slowly and against named gaps. The rebuild was not imported; it was called up.

5

Let identity work run alongside repair.

The rebrand, the creedal preaching, and later the identity study were not luxuries deferred until solvency; they were how a wounded congregation remembered who it was while it healed.

6

Turn your recovery into someone else's toolkit.

The documented systems that carried the rebuild became the hub that serves other churches, which is the long game of chapter 34 in action: nothing faithful should have to be invented twice.

FROM THE FIELD

This whole chapter is a From the Field box, so let this one hold the caveat instead. The case is one church in one context with one set of gifts, a suburban Gulf Coast congregation with real lay capacity and a conference that supported it, and your church's floor and timeline will differ. What transfers is not the calendar; it is the order of operations and the habits, the honest naming, the honest money, the listening before the vision, and the documentation as you go. The full manuscript, month by month with the setbacks left in, is the first tool below, and it reads in an evening.

↓ GRAB THIS

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#): the complete account behind this chapter, financial reset, vision process, rebrand, and systems, written as an honest worked example.

¶ POLITY NOTE

Notice how much of the rebuild ran on ordinary polity used well rather than exceptions sought: the committees of ¶258 refilled rather than redesigned, the charge conference rhythms kept, the appointment system delivering a pastor and later an associate, and the connectional relationships, district and conference, held close throughout. The Discipline is often experienced as constraint; this case reads it as scaffolding, which is nearer to what it was written to be.

① THE FIRST MOVE

Read the two-year history itself this month, whatever condition your church is in, and as you read, mark each move with the chapter of this book that teaches it. The exercise stitches the whole handbook together, and it will leave you with something better than admiration for one church: a sequenced instinct for your own.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Map your own church onto the case's clock: is your congregation at a floor, holding a floor, choosing a direction, or building structures that outlast? What does the sequence say your next season's work actually is, and what step is your church tempted to skip ahead to?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Answer the cohort question for yourself on one page: where your church sits on the sequence, and what the case says comes next. Bring it to your lay leader or SPRC chair as a conversation, not a plan.

GRAB THE TOOLS

[SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History \(Word\)](#)

The full manuscript, month by month.

[SFUMC 2025 Vision Process \(PDF\)](#)

Year two's discernment, documented.

[Church Rebrand Case Study \(Word\)](#)

The identity work that ran alongside the repair.

[Volunteer Infrastructure and Lanes Writeup \(PDF\)](#)

Year three's architecture.

Playing the Long Game

United Methodist pastors live inside a paradox the appointment system builds on purpose: you are sent to a congregation you did not choose, for a term nobody will tell you the length of, and asked to love it without reservation anyway. The temptation is to resolve the paradox in one of two cheap directions, the caretaker who never plants anything deeper than his likely tenure, or the empire builder who welds every system to his own personality so the place cannot run without him. The faithful resolution is stranger and better, and it is this book's closing instruction: work as if you will be there forever, and prepare as if you are leaving tomorrow. The two halves sound contradictory and are actually the same discipline viewed from both ends, because ministry built for the long haul and ministry built to hand off turn out to be built the same way.

Work like you will be there forever

Forever-work means planting on timelines longer than a tenure. Preach as a decades-long diet, per chapter 12, rather than a highlight reel; form children per Part V whose confirmations you may never see; recruit and develop the young leader whose chairing years will bless your successor; let the building committee run its full seventeen-month discernment rather than forcing a decision that flatters your era. Forever-work is also how you love a place: learn the town per chapter 8 as if your grandchildren would live there and build the community relationships of chapter 24 that take five years to mean anything, and start the endowment or the preschool or the nonprofit of chapter 26 whose maturity belongs to another pastorate. The congregations that thrive across generations are the ones where a chain of pastors each planted trees they never sat under, and the chain only holds if your link does.

Prepare like you are leaving tomorrow

Tomorrow-preparation is the documentation discipline this book has been quietly installing since chapter 15, now named as a spiritual practice: every system written down, every role described, every playbook current, every password in the church's keeping rather than your head, so that the ministry is genuinely the church's and not your hostage. Run the succession test on yourself annually, the same one chapter 15 ran on the soundboard: if the appointment came this June, what would break? Whatever the answer, that is this year's documentation work. Keep the records clean, per chapter 13 and chapter 27, keep the leadership bench deep, per chapter 3, and keep your own files ready to hand over, because the measure of a pastorate is not how much the church needed you while you were there; it is how well it flourished after you left, and that measure is being set right now, in whether you build systems or dependencies.

! WATCH OUT

The long game has a counterfeit called legacy anxiety, the pastor who starts managing how he will be remembered and protecting his changes from revision, and competing with a successor he has never met. Hold your work with open hands: your best structures will be revised, your favorite ministry may be sunset by the next discernment, per chapter 9, and none of that undoes the formation that happened in people while the structures stood. You are not building monuments; you are keeping a garden for the length of your season, and gardens are judged by their fruit, not by whether the next gardener kept your rows.

Leaving well, and what outlasts you

Someday the phone call comes, and leaving is a pastoral act with its own craft. Announce it by the book and pastor the grief it causes, per chapter 16, including your own household's. Spend the final months finishing and documenting rather than launching, and resist every temptation to make promises that bind your successor; say the goodbyes personally to the people who carried the years with you. Then honor the oldest wisdom of the itinerancy: when you leave, leave. The next pastor gets your prayers and your absence, the congregation gets released to love its new shepherd, and the friendships that continue do so as friendships, never as a shadow pastorate; you return for funerals and weddings only by the current pastor's invitation, and you speak of your successor, always and everywhere, with blessing.

And one more form of the long game reaches past your churches entirely: give your work away. Every playbook, policy, framework, and system this book has helped you build cost your congregation real sweat, and somewhere a first-time pastor is facing the same blank page alone. Share what you built, through your conference relationships and cohorts like the one this book keeps addressing, and through the commons this book is itself part of, the Resource Hub that one rebuilt congregation stocked with its working documents so that nothing faithful would have to be invented twice. A pastorate ends; the tools and the people it formed keep going, and that, finally, is the long game.

The disciplines of the long view

1

Plant one thing a year you will not harvest.

A leader developed, a fund seeded, a partnership begun, a tree in the churchyard if nothing else. Name it privately and tend it.

2

Run the succession test annually.

If the appointment came this June, what breaks? Document or delegate the answer before next June, per chapter 15's discipline.

3

Keep a successor file.

The living documents a new pastor would need in week one: the leadership roster, the year map, the care list protocol, the passwords' location, the informal power map you wish you had been handed. Update it each January.

4

Develop the next generation on purpose.

One young or new leader per year given real authority and real coaching, per chapter 3, with nominations, the committee you chair, treated as the long game's engine room.

5

Practice open hands quarterly.

In your own prayer, per chapter 4, release the church by name to the God it belonged to before you came. This is the interior discipline that makes every exterior one possible.

6

When the time comes, leave by the craft.

Finish and document, promise nothing forward, say the goodbyes, and then leave fully, blessing the church's future out loud on your last Sunday.

🌱 FROM THE FIELD

The long game is why this book exists. A congregation that had every reason to spend a decade licking its wounds instead spent its rebuild documenting everything, and then gave the documents away: the playbooks and policies and frameworks became a shared library, the library became the Church Resource Hub, and the hub's tools, linked from every chapter you have read, are now the working equipment of congregations that will never know the church that wrote them. That is tomorrow-preparation and forever-work in a single gesture, and it is available to any church of any size, because the hub accepts contributions, and somewhere in your filing cabinet is the document another pastor is praying someone already wrote.

↓ GRAB THIS

[The Church Resource Hub](#): the whole toolbox this book has been handing you, and the place to leave your own tools behind, via the contribute page, for the pastor who comes after all of us.

¶ POLITY NOTE

The itinerancy itself (¶¶338, 425-430) is the polity of the long game: pastors are sent, and sent again, precisely so that no congregation's life depends on one shepherd and no shepherd mistakes a season for a possession. The system's gift runs both directions, churches learn to be the church under many pastors, and pastors learn to hold their work with the open hands this chapter asks for, because the Discipline scheduled the letting go from the day of the first appointment.

1 THE FIRST MOVE

Chapter 1 asked you to write your call story on one page and keep it where you could find it. Find it now, at this book's last box as at its first, read it, and add one paragraph: what you now know about the work that you did not know when you said yes. That page, updated across a career, is the longest game you will play, and it started before any appointment and outlasts them all.

“ FOR YOUR COHORT

Last question of the book, so make it count: if your appointment ended this June, what would you be proudest to leave behind and what would break, and what do you wish you had planted three years ago? Let the answers set each member's next season, and then, cohort, decide when you are meeting again, because the long game is not played alone.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Do The First Move today: reread the call story, add the paragraph. Then pick one discipline from the steps, the succession test is the natural first, and put it on the calendar. The long game starts wherever you are standing.

GRAB THE TOOLS

The Church Resource Hub

The toolbox, and the place to contribute yours.

SFUMC 24-26: A Two-Year Church History (Word)

The case study of chapter 33, which is also a study in tomorrow-preparation.

Forming and Running a Building Committee (Word)

A seventeen-month discernment as a worked example of forever-work.

The Pastor's Triangle (Word)

Where the book began: the framework for the person who carries all of it.

The Pastor's Handbook is a companion to the Church Resource Hub (churchresourcehub.github.io), a shared library of systems, processes, and working documents from real churches.

The handbook travels with two companions, the Church Resource Hub and Woods Lisenby: Theology and Practice (theologybot.vercel.app), gathered at Doing Church Together (doingchurchtogether.org).