

FIELD NOTE 07 / ASCEND NETWORK

Structure for the Next Season

Give growing responsibility a clear place to live

The governing principle

Structure should make faithfulness possible at the scale God has entrusted to a church. It is not a substitute for calling, and it is not a monument to the founder. Good structure places responsibility with people who have the character, authority, information, and support to carry it. Bad structure leaves everyone waiting for one person or lets power move through relationships no one can name.

Jethro saw Moses judging disputes from morning to evening and warned that both he and the people would wear out (Exodus 18:13-26). In Acts 6:1-7, the apostles answered an overlooked group of widows by appointing trusted people to a defined responsibility. Paul left Titus in Crete to put unfinished matters in order and appoint elders (Titus 1:5-9). These are different settings, not interchangeable organizational charts. Together they show that spiritual leadership takes the arrangement of responsibility seriously.

The goal is a church that can obey Christ without making one leader the answer to every question. Ephesians 4:11-16 describes leaders equipping the saints so the whole body grows as each part works. If the body is growing but every part still waits for one person to move, structure has not caught up with calling.

Distinguish four kinds of authority

Confusion begins when a church uses the word "leader" for four different responsibilities and assumes everyone knows what it means. Write these distinctions down.

Spiritual oversight guards doctrine, prayer, pastoral direction, and the condition of the flock. Elders or pastors who carry this responsibility must meet biblical character standards and be answerable for how they shepherd (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9).

Legal governance is the authority assigned by the church's governing documents and applicable law. It may involve a board, trustees, members, or another structure. A title in ministry does not automatically confer legal power. The church should know who can bind it to contracts, approve budgets, hire or remove officers, and change governing documents.

Operational leadership makes and implements decisions within defined areas such as finance, children's ministry, facilities, outreach, and communications. A director needs a scope, budget authority, expectations, and a person to whom they report. Giving someone responsibility without authority is a way to create frustration and blame.

Relational influence is the trust carried by a mentor, apostolic leader, or respected elder. It can shape decisions deeply. It is not automatically the same as local legal or operational authority. If a church invites formal external counsel or covering, the scope belongs in a written agreement that the

appropriate local leaders understand.

These categories can overlap in one person, especially in a young church. Overlap is not itself a failure. Unexamined overlap becomes dangerous when there is conflict, fatigue, or transition. Name the hats a person wears so the church knows which authority is being exercised in a given moment.

The stages of structure

Church size alone cannot prescribe an org chart. A mobile plant with two services may carry more operational complexity than a larger church in a permanent building. Geography, finances, age of the church, pastoral care needs, and volunteer depth also matter. The following are questions for seasons, not universal attendance thresholds.

The founder-carried season

In an early season, the planter often preaches, recruits, handles urgent care, sets culture, and makes most decisions. This can be necessary for a time. The first structural task is to distinguish what only the founder can carry from what others can learn. Write down recurring work, teach one trusted person to own a meaningful lane, and establish real financial and safeguarding controls before growth makes shortcuts normal.

The team-led season

As ministries multiply, the pastor can no longer be the direct supervisor of every volunteer and the first responder to every need. Appoint leaders over defined areas, give them regular coaching, and create a way to escalate what exceeds their role. A weekly leadership meeting should resolve decisions, surface risk, and coordinate the mission. It should not be a room where every team waits to be told what the pastor already decided privately.

The leader-developing season

When a church has several staff or department leaders, the next challenge is not merely to add managers. It is to develop people who can develop people. Second Timothy 2:2 joins faithful character, entrusted truth, and the ability to teach others. A pipeline needs observation, instruction, supervised practice, feedback, and a responsible release of authority. A strong preacher is not automatically a good supervisor. A reliable operator is not automatically ready for spiritual oversight. Test the actual assignment.

The enduring season

A mature house must be able to survive a leader's vacation, illness, correction, or eventual succession. Name interim leadership, communication authority, access to records, and the process for major decisions when the lead pastor is absent. This is not a prophecy of failure. It is care for the flock and freedom for the leader to be human.

A decision rights map

Take five decisions the church may face this year: a major expense, a staff hire, a new gathering, a doctrinal position, and an allegation against a leader. For each, answer five questions:

- 1 Who brings the recommendation and supporting facts?
- 2 Who must be consulted because they carry responsibility or will be affected?
- 3 Who has the authority to approve or decline?

- 4 Who communicates and implements the decision?
- 5 Who reviews the outcome and records what was learned?

Do not write names only. Write roles, because people change. Compare the map to bylaws, employment agreements, and actual practice. If the pastor thinks the board decides, the board thinks a staff member decides, and the staff member thinks prayer meeting decided, the church is carrying a hidden conflict.

Major spiritual decisions still require prayer and discernment. Prayer does not erase the need to know who can commit the church to a lease. Administrative clarity does not decide what the Spirit is saying. Both belong in a trustworthy process.

Appoint without rushing and release without hoarding

Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13 emphasize character and household credibility for recognized church leadership. A growing church often needs people quickly, but a vacant role is not a reason to ignore patterns of conduct. Create a path where a potential leader can serve, be observed, receive correction, learn doctrine and culture, and demonstrate care for people before receiving wider authority.

The opposite error is never releasing anyone. A founder may say, "No one can do it the way I do," and then wonder why the church cannot grow. The task is to teach the purpose and standard, delegate a real outcome, allow a developing leader to exercise judgment, and review the result. Training can include mistakes that are correctable. It must not expose people to avoidable harm in sensitive roles.

Every ministry lane should answer: who leads, who is being developed, and what happens if the leader steps away? If all three answers point to one person, the lane is fragile.

The board and the pastor

A healthy board should protect mission, integrity, and accountability, not compete to run every ministry detail. A pastor should lead with conviction and provide the board with honest information, not reduce it to a signature. The governing documents determine formal authority, while trust and good practice determine whether that authority serves the church well.

Establish a regular reporting rhythm for finances, major risks, and strategic decisions. Record conflicts of interest. Ensure expenses involving senior leaders receive independent review. Give the board a way to hear concerns that do not have to pass through the person involved. When a pastor needs counsel, the board should know the difference between a trusted outside voice and a person with formal authority over the organization.

This is not legal advice or a universal board model. It is a call to make spiritual and organizational responsibility intelligible to the people who must exercise it.

A case for the leadership table

A church has grown from 180 to 520 people in two years. The founding pastor still approves every purchase, every social post, every volunteer appointment, and every change to Sunday flow. Department leaders are capable but hesitate to act. The pastor is exhausted and interprets requests for clarity as threats to vision. The board receives a financial report but does not understand who approved several new commitments.

The remedy is not a sudden transfer of control. Begin by naming three levels of decisions: what the pastor alone must lead, what the pastor and governing leaders decide together, and what trained

directors may decide within an approved budget and standard. Give directors written authority and a review rhythm. Establish independent financial approval where needed. Tell the team what changed and how to escalate an exception. Let the founder keep responsibility for vision and formation while releasing routine decisions that no longer require his personal judgment.

If the founder's fear is ignored, the new chart will remain paper. If the team's fatigue is ignored, the church will lose leaders. Honest conversation is part of the structural work.

A 60-day structure reset

Days 1-15: List the decisions that wait on one person. Identify delays, duplicated work, and decisions made without the right people. Compare actual practice with written governance.

Days 16-30: Clarify three leadership lanes. Give each a purpose, decision scope, budget boundary, reporting relationship, and escalation route. Name the next person being developed.

Days 31-45: Run one consequential decision through the new map. Document who recommended, consulted, approved, implemented, and reviewed it. Invite honest feedback from the people carrying the work.

Days 46-60: Repair what failed. Remove an unnecessary approval layer, strengthen a missing safeguard, and set a quarterly review. Structure is a tool to refine, not a shrine to defend.

Questions to bring to your table

- Which decisions are delayed because one person is carrying what a team should carry?
- Where have we given responsibility without authority, training, or support?
- Do our governing documents and actual practices agree?
- Who is being formed for the next level of leadership, and what evidence of character have we seen?
- If our senior leader were absent for six weeks, would the house know who leads and how?

The charge: Give the vision a structure that can carry it without consuming the people. A healthy house has clear authority, developed leaders, honest oversight, and enough order to keep building when the founder is not in the room.

Scripture for further study

Exodus 18:13-26; Acts 6:1-7; 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

AT THE LEADERSHIP TABLE

One decision waiting on the wrong person

The role that should carry it

Date to review the new responsibility
