

# **Governance Task Force Report, Phase II**

## **First Church Unitarian, Littleton, MA**

**Governance Task Force:**

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## **Introduction:**

This document constitutes the second and final report of the Governance Task Force of First Church Unitarian, Littleton. The Task Force charge for this phase of its work was to investigate potential approaches to church governance, conduct workshops with the congregation to examine options, and make recommendations. In carrying out this charge, the Task Force discovered there was an underlying uncertainty about the precise nature of our current approach to governance. We, therefore, took on the additional task of mapping our current approach. In what follows, we offer a description of our current approach to governance. We then suggest three options for the future. We conclude with recommendations. Below is a table of contents with page numbers for each section.

## **Table of Contents**

Part I: Mapping our Current Approach to Governance	p. 3
Part II: Three Options for the Future	p. 12
<u>Option 1</u> : Stick with the Current Approach and make adjustments	p. 13
<u>Option 2</u> : Transition to a Policy Board Approach	p. 16
<u>Option 3</u> : Search for Additional Options or Invent Something Original	p. 19
Part III: Recommendations	p. 21

## **Part I: Mapping our Current Approach to Governance**

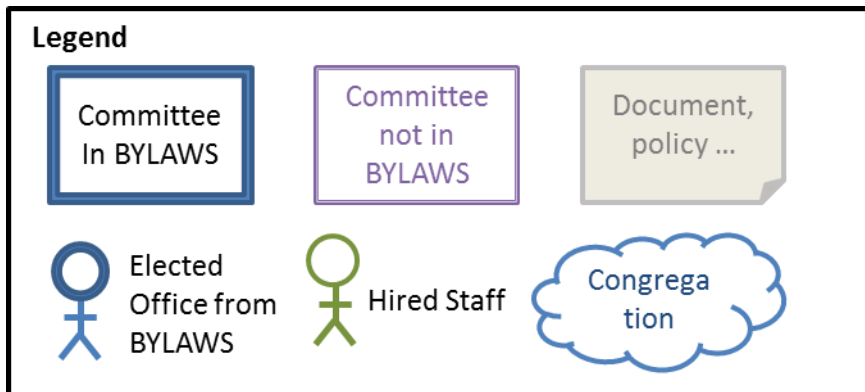
As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we govern ourselves democratically. We make our own bylaws, set our own qualifications for membership, elect our own officers, call our own minister, and hire our own staff. As a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we support their programs as they support ours, but we remain free to chart our own course.

At our Annual Meeting in May, we elect our officers, approve the church budget, and make major decisions affecting the church. Under our bylaws, other meetings of the congregation may be called during the church year with adequate notice.

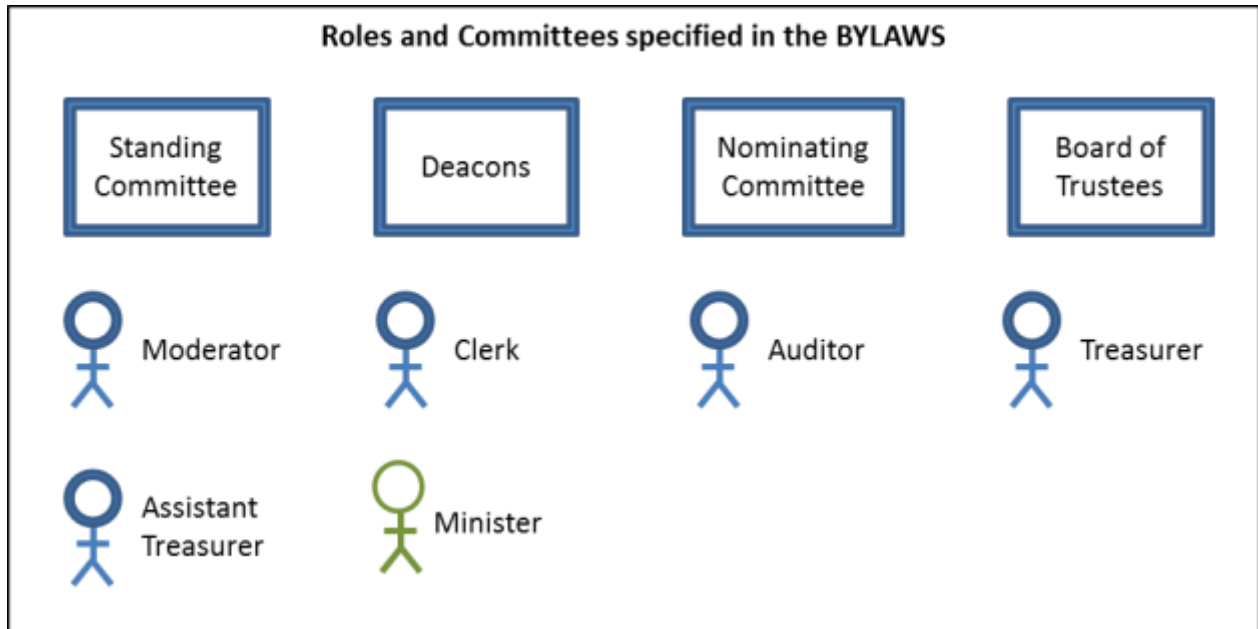
Among our elected officers, the Standing Committee conducts the business affairs of the church, the Board of Trustees manages our trust funds, and the Deacons advise the minister on the spiritual life of the church, including worship.

Our current governance is roughly the board-council model: an elected governing board and then various committees and task forces that report to it or have some responsibility to the governing board.

The following diagrams represent key components of our structure. The legend describes the symbols used:



This diagram lists core offices and committees specified in our bylaws.



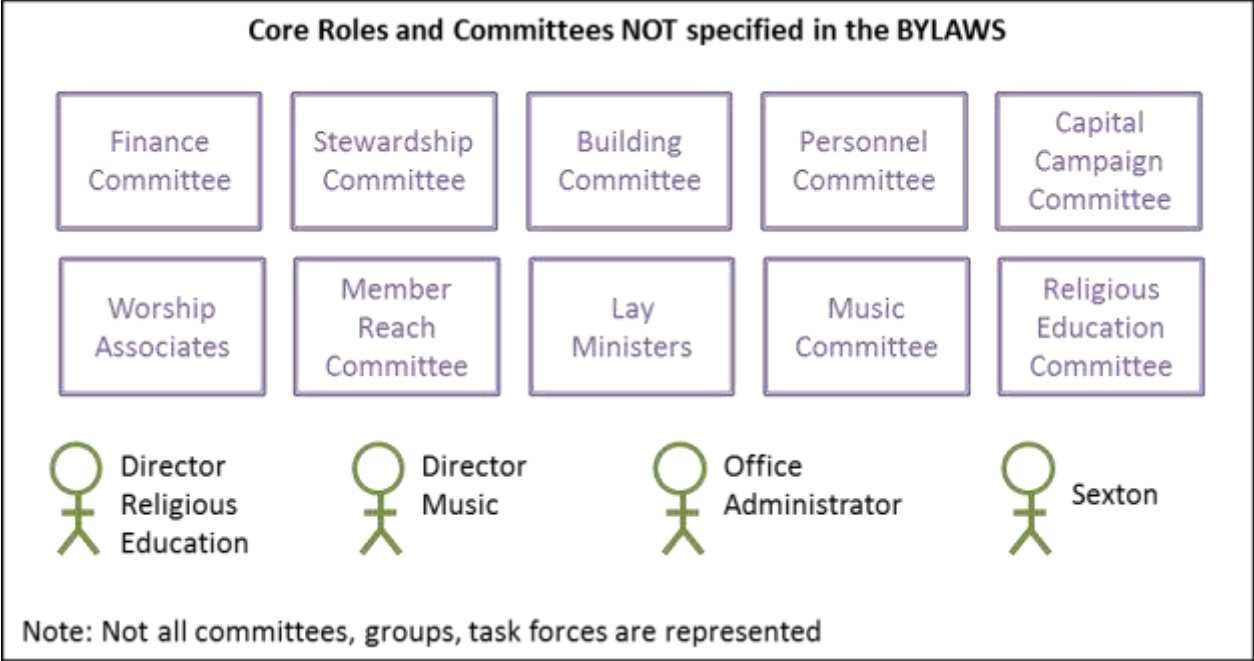
According to the bylaws, committees can be created by the:

- Standing Committee
- Deacons
- Congregation

These three groups are responsible for dissolving any committee they create.

If you are an official committee formed by any of these three, you can ask for funds that need to be voted on by the voting members of the congregation at the Annual Meeting or a specially called meeting.

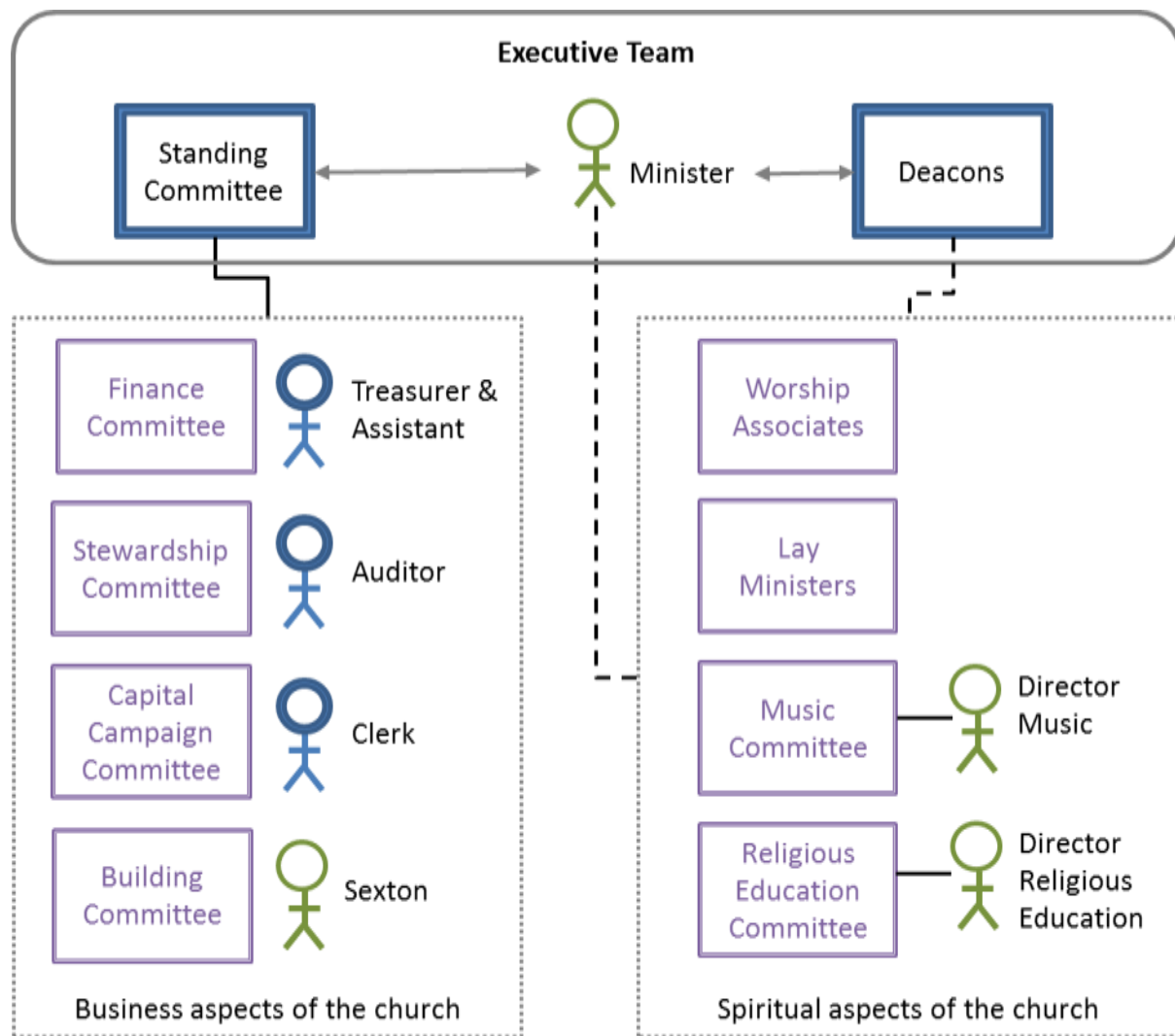
The following diagram lists core officers and committees that are not specified in our bylaws but are fundamental to how we currently operate. A description of each can be found in our annual report on our web site.



In our board-council governance model, the governing board is the executive team comprising the:

- Standing Committee,
- Minister, and
- Deacons

The diagram below shows a high-level view of this organizational scheme, with other major committees and roles. (Not all committees, groups, task forces are represented.)



**\*\* Not all committees, groups, task forces are represented**

The two bodies comprising the Executive Team (Standing Committee and Deacons) meet separately. The minister helps share information between the groups; however, the Minister is a non-voting member of both these committees. Also, the Standing Committee and Deacon Chairperson sit in on each other's meeting to stay informed.

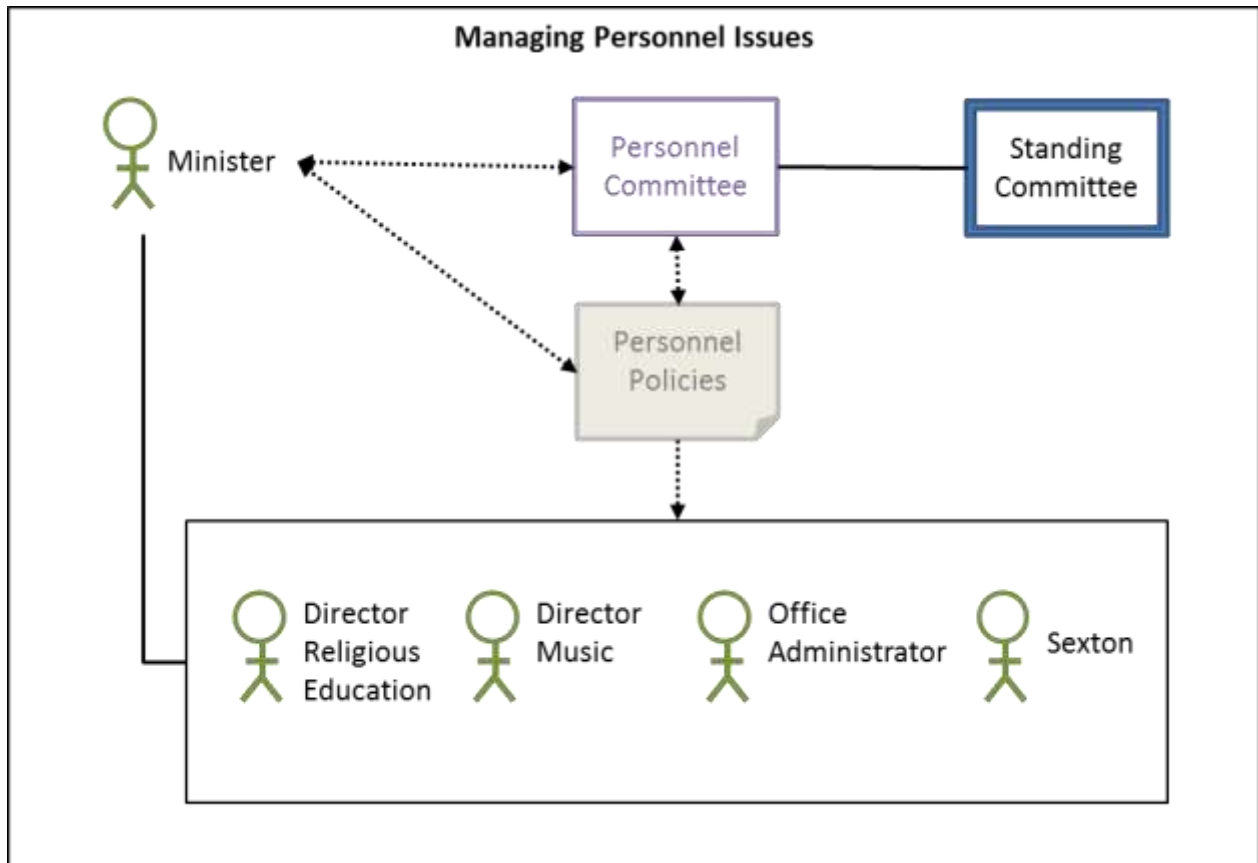
The Standing Committee manages the business of the church. Committees formed by the Standing Committee and offices from the bylaws report to the Standing Committee.

The Deacons serve as a liaison for the committees that support the spiritual life of the church and work with the minister. The Office Administrator is not shown in the diagram, but serves as "communication central" for the congregation.

*Note:* The creation of the Worship Associates has created a lack of clarity between the duties of the Deacons and this committee and has changed some of the communication lines between the other committees focused on worship. Also, since there is no direct reporting structure for the committees focused on worship (right side of diagram), it is not clear how much autonomy each has and who they take their decision making to, when needed.

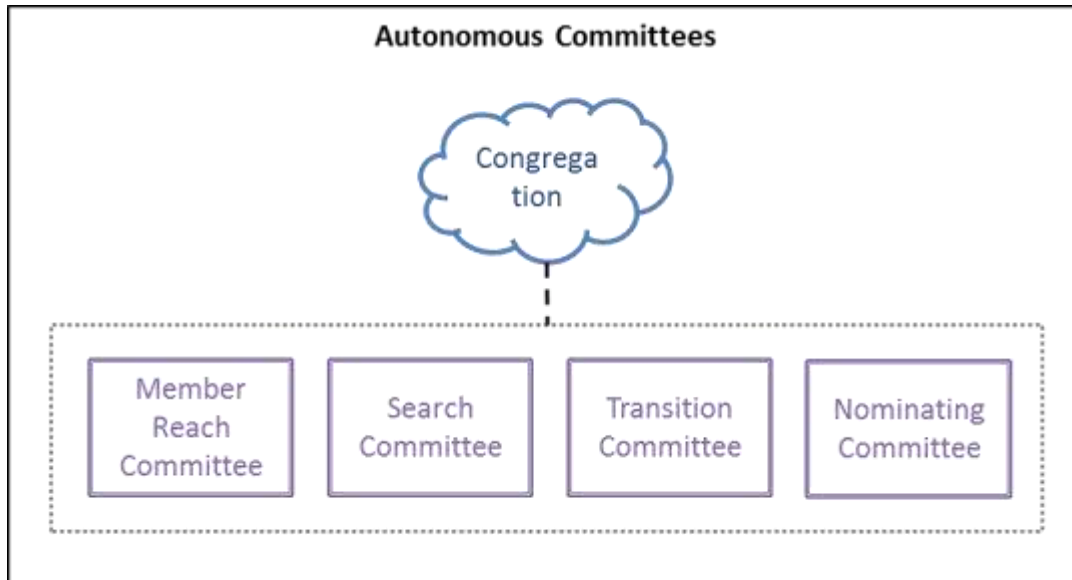


The following diagram represents the core aspects of how personnel are managed.



- The minister manages personnel issues for the paid staff.
- The Standing Committee formed the Personnel Committee to work with the minister to create Personnel Policies.
- The Personnel Policies and the Personnel Committee support the minister in managing the paid staff.
- The Personnel Policies also inform the paid staff.

Other key committees are represented in the following diagram. These committees are autonomous and currently do not have a clear reporting structure.



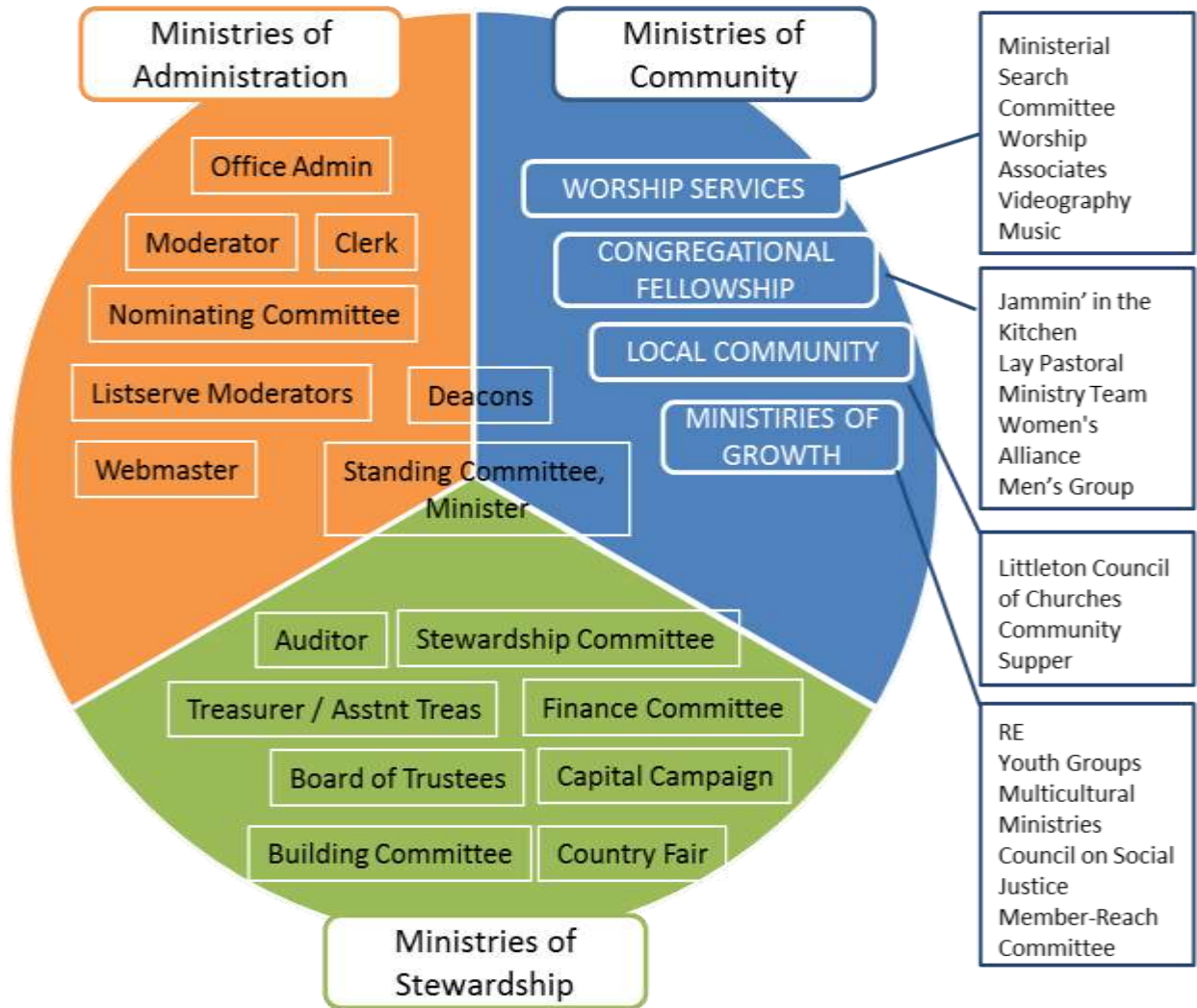
Both the Search Committee and Transition Team Committee were formed through the Standing Committee. The Congregation voted to approve the Search Committee. The Standing Committee will provide the contract to the new minister and the hire must be voted by the congregation.

Additional notes about our governance include:

- Any activity or event that involves the Sanctuary should go through the minister.
- Any activity or event that involves other churches or people coming into the church from the outside community should go through the minister.
- For any building use questions, first consult the FCU Building Policy (located on the web site). Second, check with the Standing Committee.
- The Nominating Committee is a “stand-alone” committee – the committee chair invites new members to serve on the committee.
- Policies are stored in a file cabinet in the Admin Officer. Minutes from meetings posted outside the office.
- Policies and Forms are on the web site that help us govern, namely:
  - Building Use/Rental
  - Safe Congregations
  - Conflict Resolution
  - Social Justice Task Force
  - Solicitations of Signatures on Church Property
  - Term Limits
  - Weather/Power Cancellation Policy
  - Communications
  - Fundraising

- Financing Large Projects
- The Current Officers and Elected Positions

This list of ministries from our annual report shows additional committees not mentioned above.



## **Part II: Three Options for the Future**

## **Option 1: Stick with the Current Approach and Make Adjustments**

Our current approach, a variant of the “board-council” model as described above, has been the subject of recent criticism, which prompted the Standing Committee to form the Governance Task Force. One option for the future is to address these criticisms while retaining the current overall Board-Council approach. Below, we outline the major criticisms, and identify possible solutions with pros and cons that the Task Force has gathered from congregational discussions, relevant literature, and its own deliberations.

- **There are too many committees and roles to fill and not enough members to fill them.**

Possible solutions:

1. Consider consolidating and eliminating some committees, and encourage the Nominating Committee to give more consideration to re-nominating officers whose terms are ending.

Pro: These actions would create a larger pool of potential members for the remaining roles.

Con: Eliminating committees might increase the workload of the remaining committees and officers.

### **Consider consolidating Deacons, Lay Pastoral Ministers and Lay Worship Committee**

Pro: These committees often appear to have overlapping responsibilities which is confusing. A smaller committee would free up people for other responsibilities

Con: Need to consider this is a significant cultural change.

### **Consider reducing Standing Committee to five members.**

Pro: Given size of the church difficult to find enough people to consistently have six people.

An odd number of members ensures there can be majority decisions

Con: Might require a larger time commitment of other members

### **Consider reducing Deacons to three members**

Pro: This is consistent with reducing size of committees

Allows for decision making by majority vote

Con: Requires by law vote

Possible larger time commitment by other Deacons

2. Consider more time-limited task forces around specific issues in place of open-ended committees

Pro: This might encourage more member participation.

Con: Some issues might be assigned to a task force when what they really need is an on-going committee.

3. Clarify who has the right to appoint and dissolve committees

Pro: This would reduce confusion

Con: None

- **Roles, responsibilities, and protocols are confusing.**

Possible solutions

1. Have readily available job descriptions, policies, and current lists of officers and members of committees in a file cabinet in the Volunteer Center.

Pro: This would make it easier for members to access information and reduce confusion.

Con: It might be difficult to find space for this, and it would take effort to keep the material up to date.

2. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Deacons, Lay Pastoral Ministers, and Worship Committee.

Pro: This would reduce confusion.

Con: None.

3. Clarify who has the right to appoint and dissolve committees

Pro: This would reduce confusion

Con: None

- **Leadership roles require too much time commitment.**

Possible solutions:

1. Give more power to committees: make charges clear and provide dates for reports.

Pro: This would make members more willing to serve on committees and would lighten the load of the Standing Committee or Deacons.

Con: None

2. Decrease the length of the term for deacons.

Pro: This would make more members willing to fill this role.

Con: This would require a change to the Bylaws and to the Constitution. It might

decrease continuity.

### **Institutional Approach**

Making organizational change in a church is always difficult. Some people are change averse others want drastic change. The Executive Team needs to strongly support and explain these proposed changes. It will be important to build congregational awareness during the process of deciding on and instituting changes. We recommend that whatever changes are made should be on an experimental basis subject to review in a year. Since this year would be an "as if" year, we would hope by-law and constitutional changes would not occur until final acceptance of the change.

### **Individual Approach**

FCU members as individuals need to be engaged in this governance process. We need to be open to change in our individual roles and functions, habits, routines and identities. We must recognize that the risk of the status quo is greater than the risk of change.

## **Option 2: Transition to a Policy Board Approach**

### **What it is:**

The “Policy Board” model of governance is a way for an organization to arrange itself to serve two main functions:

*Mission* -- how we clarify and carry out our mission/vision/values, now and into the future, and

*Management* – how we mind the store/manage the operations.

There would be a governing board (more or less folding together the Standing Committee and Deacons) that would become the “policy board” to look at things such as what we need to be doing over the coming year and the coming few years to know that our mission and vision are being fulfilled. “End statements.” What do we need to be working on so we will know we are on track to be who we aspire to be?

In contrast to the governing board, the management team talks about what they need to be doing day-to-day to keep the shop running.

Under the policy board model,

- Decisions would be made about which committees report to the policy board and which to the management team.
- The policy board develops the policies and management team implements.
- Committees and task forces would meet with whichever governing body oversees them, maybe once a year to check in, or as needed, if there is an issue they can’t handle themselves.
- The minister’s role could be as non-voting member and liaison to “policy board” and as convener and leader of the management team.
- For staff to be involved in decision-making, they could be brought into the management team.

### **Pros:**

- Model has been floating around UU churches for a while now. Taught in theological school now and most ministers will be familiar with it.
- Helps to clarify who to go to for what, and makes sure the two main functions of the church are addressed for current sustainability of the Church community and for its future thriving.



- Helps avoid the main governing body becoming overwhelmed with committee details. The double-duty of mission and operations has proved too much for some other churches/organizations.
- Also helps reduce confusion about who gives permission for what. Management team meets every two weeks and can help move an idea forward more quickly, or, if there is an issue with it, makes sure it gets to policy board.
- Tends to move things along more smoothly and efficiently. It doesn't lessen total number of volunteer hours but tends to redistribute the work more efficiently
- Runs pretty smoothly once you figure out which committees and task forces go to which entity.
- Could free up Deacons to serve in other roles that may, potentially, be even more valuable.

#### **Cons:**

- Still have to decide which governing bodies make what kinds of policies.
- Not necessarily fewer volunteer hours or simpler than FCU's current governing structure.
- Tends to put more responsibility onto staff and minister.
- May be less of a match for a newer minister, more of a match for a more experienced minister.

#### **Questions raised:**

- How would the policy model lead to less work or less time or fewer leaders, how would it be simpler?
- Do staff and volunteers keep to about the same size?
- What is role of deacons?
- How and when does a church decide when/if a transition to a new governance model should happen?
- Which of these models is going to attract the greatest number of ministers?
- Who would decide which committees exist or get folded into others?

#### **Congregational perspectives:**

- Simplify, clarify, and streamline our governance structure – too many governance positions for the size of our church community.

- Fair amount of opinions expressed desiring to re-vamp entire governance structure and create only what is relevant and necessary, now, from a “blank slate.”
- Some others expressed, “be careful to not throw out the baby with the bathwater!”
- Consider a model based on a circle vs. a hierarchy.
- Make greater use of current technology.
- Importance of addressing (and identifying) *communications* issues vs. structural issues.

### **Resources to Learn More About Policy Board Governance**

The UUA Website maintains an excellent page devoted to Policy Board Governance. It includes descriptive information as well further links to additional resources. The URL is: <http://www.uua.org/governance/policybased>

### Option 3: Search for Additional Options or Invent Something Original

A consideration of option 3 acknowledges that the work of the Task Force to date, although considerable and earnest, has not been an exhaustive survey of all governance models currently or formerly utilized by bodies such as FCU. Members of the congregation have aided the Task Force in identifying known governance approaches in other churches, among UUA bodies and others\*, but there may be many small churches or other entities employing governance approaches we haven't yet learned about - the Task Force has accessed only those brought into focus. Similarly, there are an unlimited number of as-yet-unimagined possibilities for a unique model designed solely for and by FCU.

Option 3 embraces a renewed search for an appropriate existing model or the work of inventing our own approach. In considering this option, some realities and possibilities should be kept in view:

#### Pros:

- We need a governance approach that fits (and fits well) our dimensions and priorities. It's possible someone has come up with a suitable approach we don't know about AND/OR it's possible we have in our midst the ingenuity and stamina to create a new model.
- It's possible that our search of other models currently in use has been too limited, since we have relied primarily upon the knowledge and experience of FCU congregants and UUA resources. There may be other research sources available.
- Any search for additional options and any effort at inventing something original will likely be more labor-intensive than the Task Force's work thus far and thus will engage more individuals at FCU, resulting in broader involvement in the process.

#### Cons:

- We may or may not find an existing model that's just right for us and we may or may not be – collectively - up to the hard task of designing and implementing new & unique governance structure.
- The Task Force and the substantial number of FCU congregants who have been involved in the project constitute a significant investment in the governance review project thus far. A renewed search for governance models or a drive to create something original could diminish the collective support and enthusiasm for the work done thus far.
- This is an area of speculation in a field of complete unknowns. We may find ourselves back at Options 1 & 2 at the end of six months.

\*Further information about such models available upon request.

## **Part III. Recommendations**

### **Recommendation #1:**

Regardless of which option is chosen, we recommend that, in the interim, the Church develop a governance handbook that will provide the congregation with a clear description of our current governance system consisting of narrative, diagrams, job descriptions, and any other material that helps to clarify how decisions are made and who makes them. In addition to the handbook, a visual display diagramming and summarizing handbook content should be posted in a prominent and accessible location in the church.

### **Recommendation #2:**

We recommend that the Ministerial Search Committee discuss this report and share it, and the previous report, submitted in March 2016 (“Phase I”), with all ministerial candidates and alert all candidates that governance is a topic currently under consideration at First Church.

### **Recommendation #3:**

We recommend that the Governance Task Force be continued for six months as a “phase III” (until May 15) for the purpose of engaging the congregation in a fuller examination of all three options for the future as outlined above and development of a governance handbook. Current Task Force members will be given the option of continuing or retiring. New members will be recruited to replace those retiring. Upon the completion of its work, the Task Force will deliver to the Standing Committee a report detailing the specifics of each option with pros and cons, congregational feedback, and recommendations. The Task Force will also produce a governance handbook as described in Recommendation #1 above. The handbook and report will be shared with the new minister and congregation to guide them in setting a course for governance at First Church Unitarian. An additional outcome of the Task Force’s work will be the opportunity for those congregants interested in questions and issues surrounding governance and the search for solutions to be engaged in the process. With heightened engagement, fuller examination of options, and a new minister attuned to the church’s recent work on governance, the congregation will be poised to move forward productively.

**Note: Material in red in this report constitutes a simplified form of Recommendation 3, as requested by the Standing Committee.**