

First Church Unitarian Governance Task Force

Phase I Report 3/5/16

Governance Task Force members: James Nehring (Chair), Niela Miller, Phyllis Terrey, Susan Tordella, Ron Willett, Joyce Williams

Introduction

This report is the first of two reports by a governance task force commissioned by the First Church Standing Committee in October, 2015. This first report presents the views of First Church members and friends on a range of questions related to Church governance. The second report will present alternative governance approaches. This report is divided into five sections: 1) Background; 2) Methods; 3) Results; 4) Next Steps; and 5) Appendix.

1. Background

During the 2014-2015 church year, the Standing Committee heard comments from many FCU members and friends about church governance, meaning the organizational structure and decision making processes. A big theme of the comments was that our current approach to governance feels unsustainable. There are too many positions to fill, and important roles sometimes remain vacant. Also, roles appear to sometimes overlap, which results in confusion. In response, the Standing Committee decided the time was right to engage in a focused, congregation-wide reflection on our Church governance.

The Standing Committee formed a Governance Task Force and gave it the following charge:

The Standing Committee of First Church, Unitarian of Littleton commissions a Governance Task Force to assess and determine how well the FCU congregation is being served by its current governance structure. This will include an evaluation of the strengths of our current model, as well as any possible gaps or deficiencies that limit our ability as a congregation to exercise governance at a level that best serves our needs.

If the Task Force determines that such gaps or deficiencies warrant changes, they will also research and evaluate other potential methods of governance that could be of value to our congregation.

Ultimately this work will be one of the factors in helping the congregation determine the kind of minister we are looking for as we embark on the settlement process for calling our next minister.

First Church member, Jim Nehring, was invited by the Standing Committee to chair the task force. A call went to the entire Church community for additional members. The

following members volunteered to join and were approved by the Standing Committee: Niela Miller, Phyllis Terrey, Susan Tordella, Joyce Williams, and Ron Willett.

With the Standing Committee's approval the task force divided its work into two phases as follows:

Phase 1-- October, 2015, through Friday, March 18, 2016-- a team of 4-5 persons will conduct interviews with members of the congregation and staff and review FCU documents (e.g. by-laws). The team will then review data to identify themes. Themes will be shared with the Standing Committee and, via the Standing Committee, with the congregation.

Phase 2-- Monday, April 4, 2016, through Friday, October 16, 2016-- a freshly constituted team will seek out and collect literature (or oral testimony) about various governance approaches that are in use or under consideration elsewhere, prepare a summary, and then conduct one or more workshops open to all members of the congregation to study the summary together with themes from the data and ask how it all speaks to the question: How should we govern ourselves? The task force will take notes from the workshop(s) and prepare a report for the Standing Committee that includes: themes from data, summary of governance approaches, themes/recommendations from workshops, and reflections from Task Force members.

This report constitutes the results for Phase 1.

2. Methods

First, the Task Force put together a list key church purposes and a list of ten questions to elicit the perspectives of Church members on issues related to governance. (See Appendix.) In order to ensure a representative sample, the Task Force aimed to engage at least half of the Church members through a one-on-one interview or focus group, framed by the ten questions. If necessary, the Task Force decided, a member who was unavailable face-to-face could participate through a phone interview or written response to the ten questions. During November and December, members were invited to sign up for an interview or focus group session. In total 67 people took part. Total church membership is 132 as of 3/1/16.

Careful notes were taken during interviews and focus groups. Each Task Force member identified themes from his or her notes. The task force met to compare themes and notes and prepared a grand summary of themes emerging from all the data taken together. Themes were organized according to each of the ten questions and representative quotes were identified.

3. Results

Following are themes that emerged from the interviews, focus groups and written responses. Results are organized by the ten questions that framed the interviews. For each question, themes are identified along with representative quotes. For some

questions, themes were unambiguous. For others, divergent responses emerged from the data. For those questions where there was a significant presence of divergent voices, we have included a section headed “Other Perspectives”.

Question 1: What already works well in supporting our church’s purposes?

Major themes

- A congregation that is involved, committed, and talented
- Warm fellowship
- Excellent staff
- Excellent music
- A church that is focused on its purpose
- Meaningful Sunday services
- Reliable commitment to financial obligation
- Warranted meetings that follow democratic principles
- Excellent religious education

Other perspectives

- Update Roberts rules
- Warranted meeting is a rubber stamp
- Warranted meeting should be less structured

Representative Quotes

“Our Sunday services are the best part of FCU.”

“The music at FCU is excellent and one of the things that keeps me returning.”

“The current approach to R.E. [Spiritual Development] is really good and much better than prior approaches.”

“Formal congregational meetings work well.”

“I was pleased to see the annual meeting, which has a lot of potential for tension, to go so smoothly. Having the pre-meetings where you could get the questions and squabbling done in advance-- it was great to see all those questions pass unanimously.”

“This is a community where people can find what they need.”

“There are traditions here that you grow into and see as part of your life cycle, like special services for New Year’s honoring people who’ve died, flower ceremony, bridging, Church fair, talent auction, seasonal socials, pot lucks.”

“People are willing to devote an incredible amount of hours to church activities and do a pretty good job. The community has lots of energy and is willing to be involved.”

“If warranted meetings are just for rubber stamping "done deals," then where is our democracy?”

Question 2: What changes do you think might better help us serve our purposes?

Major themes

- Redefining, re-organizing, and prioritizing committees and other bodies, including executive team and church council
- Shorter deacon terms
- Simpler structure, fewer committees
- Easier access to governance information
- More flexibility around number of deacons and standing committee members

Other perspectives

- The executive team structure is effective (good coordination)
- The executive team structure is problematic (too many meetings, confusing function, name)
- How can we manage governance easily so we can focus on spirituality?

Representative Quotes

“I’ve never been in a church with so many layers. Normally I grasp pretty well quickly how things work. I’ve never been in a congregation with a Standing Committee, Executive Team and Deacons. I don’t know who’s in charge of anything.”

“We really need to reduce the time commitments expected of church officers and people who volunteer to work in task forces and committees.”

“Clarity is needed about the roles of the various church bodies.”

“What really irritates is when I have not had a chance to speak up on an issue of importance to me and it is brought forward basically as a "done deal." Mostly, leadership at FCU has tried to avoid this scenario, but it still happens.”

“I personally don’t have any problems with the idea of an executive committee that makes most decisions.”

Question 3: Are you aware of an alternative governance model?

Major Themes

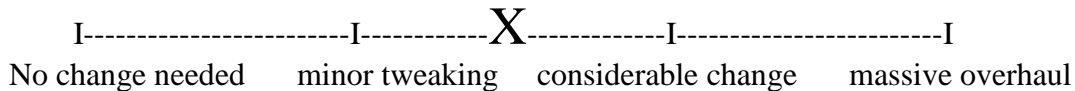
Note: Many participants indicated they are not familiar with a specific model, but offered thoughts about the nature of governance in general.

- Governance needs to distinguish between operational issues and mission-related/policy issues
- Any model adopted needs to emphasize communication between leaders and congregation
- Important to clarify congregation’s views on governance before seeking a settled minister

[Information about specific models and examples were collected by Task Force members. These are the focus for phase 2 of the Governance Task Force (April-October, 2016), during which, congregational workshops are held, exploring various approaches to church governance. Quotes representing themes listed above are spread throughout the report as they relate to other questions.]

Question 4: Indicate how much change you think we need in our church governance:

(Average with wide variation)



- *Overall, wide range of opinion.* Average of all responses is half-way between “minor tweaking” and “considerable change” with approximately even spread from “minor tweaking” to “considerable change.” Several responses were “massive overhaul”. Several responses were “No change needed.” Results are based on comments during interviews and focus groups, not a precise tally, as in a questionnaire or survey.

Question 5: Please explain the thoughts and feelings behind your choice above.

Major themes

- Not enough members to support current governance approach
- Clarify roles, streamline systems
- Decisions should be made by members not leaders
- We need to be more of yes-to-ideas church

Representative Quotes

“Our current governance is too big, and demands too much of volunteers. A church of our size does not need 18 elected officers and a large number of committees and task forces. In fact, I think that this is bad for us because we are less focused on religious experience and too focused on church as a business.”

“Our first and primary purpose is to deliver the best liberal religious experience that is specifically Unitarian Universalist in every way that we can.”

“Our primary focus should be on better, more transparent, more authentic communication at all levels.”

“If no structural change is made then it will be too easy to slide back into problems.”

“The church is not simply for the existing members, but you don’t want to do anything too radical that will drive out existing members. The church is for people in 2020, 2030, 2040 when none of us will be around. In what ways are we a welcoming church to multiple generations who are used to different things? How do you create a service and a space where the elders will feel recognition they are part of the community and service, and welcomes new and younger members? What do we need to be doing in order for FCU to survive past the Baby Boomer generation?”

"The system works well if we just want to keep treading water"

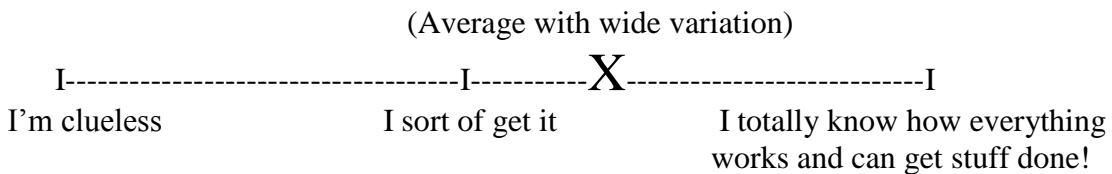
“...in a lot of ways I think the structure we have is okay.”

“There is too much micromanaging by the Standing Committee.”

Other perspectives

- Current approach with deacons and standing committee works well
- We need to embrace discomfort and make radical change

Question 6: Indicate how well you feel you understand church governance:



- *Responses ranged across full spectrum of options.* Average of all responses was between “sort of” and “totally”, but closer to “sort of”. . . Participants with leadership experience in church tended toward the right side of the continuum. Respondents with less leadership experience tended toward the left side of the continuum.

Question 7: Please explain the thoughts or feelings behind your choice above

Major themes

- I want to do stuff, but I don't not know the right protocol.
- I'm always guessing who decides what.
- I know how to do stuff, but don't feel empowered to do it.
- I know how to do stuff, but can't explain it to others.

Representative Quotes

“I sort of get it. Still, some elements I ‘m clueless about.”

“I'm between clueless and sort of get it. I need a description of all the positions and what they're supposed to do.”

“I am confused with Deacons and Standing Committee. What are their roles and are there other ways to do it?”

“I totally know how everything works, but I CAN'T get stuff done!!”

“I feel pretty ignorant about how church runs. I would love an FCU 101 course, an organizational chart. A mini-course after service: here's what the standing committee does, there's what the deacons do, etc. It might be more than a poster on the wall.”

Question 8: What do you see as the role of the minister in governance? What about other church staff (music director, RE director, office manager, sexton)?

Major Themes

- Minister: advisor, spiritual leader, supervisor of staff, mediator, facilitator, management skills (for staff)
- Staff: should have operational authority in own area

Representative Quotes

“I see the minister providing spiritual guidance to the community as a whole and pastoral guidance to us as individuals. In so far as governance impinges on that, the minister has a say, but in terms of running the place, I don't think the minister has much authority.”

“It’s different to vote on things vs. having operational authority over an area of expertise. For example, there was a discussion in Standing Committee about the order of service, and I think that should be the minister’s domain.”

“[The minister is] sort of the CEO but that sounds too corporate, more like a team leader in terms of leading other staff but in a collaborative way.”

“It amazes me how many things come to us [the Standing Committee] as opposed to the staff person in charge. For example, looking at outside rentals of church space and revenue for church. I don’t know why a committee is doing this, why can’t we have a church staff person do that?”

“Whose church is this? It’s ours. It is our responsibility to govern this church, not [the minister’s].”

Question 9: If you were invited to take on a leadership role in the church, is there anything about our governance that would make you hesitate? Explain.

Major Themes

- Time commitment
- Lack of clarity
- Potential for interpersonal conflict

Representative Quotes

“Everything you might sign up for turns out being bigger than advertised. Somehow we need to merge organizational needs and time available of members.”

“If you can’t take on a leadership role, where are there more opportunities to take on a specific, defined task, without it taking over your life?”

“Having the authority to do things. For example with [a committee I was on] we came up with a structure for a new website and then I got a big NO.”

“Time commitment.”

“Lack of clarity.”

“I’ve witnessed a few vocal opinionated confrontations that, for a volunteer role, I don’t want to be in conflict or find myself in some sort of power struggle.”

Question 10: What else do you want to say?

Comprehensive list of Comments (paraphrased)

- Healing conversations are needed.

- Lack of clarity for roles and responsibilities
- Good idea to open up a governance discussion.
- Focus more on covenant of Right Relations
- Spiritual work of church more important than business
- Training needed for communication
- Bodies beyond standing committee/deacons are ill-defined relative to governance
- We need to stick around when things get tough
- Need to keep better records for policy/governance
- We need clarity around brand, image in community
- We need clarity about how to start initiatives
- We need a radical overhaul of vision, mission, gov. strategies
- Politics are inevitable
- We need to consolidate the executive function
- Distinguish program vs. policy
- Committee on ministry is powerful but unelected
- Building is inadequate
- Feedback/reflection should be made a part of annual meeting
- Need more technology
- Configuration of sanctuary needs rethinking
- What is needed to accommodate future demographics? How make church appealing to people these days?
- We should be willing to experiment with new processes in governance, services and other aspects of church life.

Appendix:

Letter of Invitation to Participate in an Interview and Interview Questions

November, 2015

Dear FCU Member/Friend,

This letter is an invitation to take part in an interview conducted by FCU's Governance Task Force. A member of the Task Force will be in touch with you soon to schedule a time. Please read below to understand what this is all about.

The Standing Committee (FCU's governing board) has heard comments this year from many FCU members and friends about our approach to governance. Governance means our *organizational structure and decision making processes*. A theme of the comments is that church governance feels unsustainable. There are too many positions to fill, and important roles sometimes remain vacant. Also, roles appear to sometimes overlap, which results in confusion. In response, the Standing Committee has decided the time is right to engage in a focused, congregation-wide reflection on our Church governance, and it has charged a Governance Task Force to gather information and develop a report. That's where you come in. 😊

The Task Force will be interviewing members and friends of FCU to learn your thoughts and experiences. Please note that the Task Force is NOT in charge of changing the church's governance approach. The Task Force is charged with assessing our current approach to governance, exploring alternatives, and making a report to the Standing Committee.

On the back of this sheet are the interview questions. We suggest looking them over and giving them some thought before your interview. You might want to write a few notes. A member of the Governance Task Force will be in touch soon to invite you personally and identify a date and time. The interview will probably take 15 minutes.

We will take notes during the interview. Be assured that your name and personal identifiers will not be used in any reporting from the Task Force. Personal information will be used only for statistical purposes.

In order to help you think about the interview questions, we offer below an informal summary of our church's purposes. Please think about these as you consider the interview questions.

Our Church's Purposes:

- To nurture community with social events, caring for and about each other, service within and outside church, all-church gatherings, multicultural programs and other justice actions;
- To explore a wide range of beliefs and spiritual practices in a spirit of love through our Sunday services and initiatives such as Soul Matters;
- To educate the children in worldwide practices of faith and creative activities;
- To provide music and other practices for uplift, self-expression and worship;
- To take care of our building and grounds;
- To stay solvent for all church-related activities, projects, and improvements

We look forward to hearing your perspective. Please feel free to speak with any of us on the Task Force if you have a question. A member of the Task Force will contact you soon.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Jim Nehring (Chair), Niela Miller, Phyllis Terrey, Susan Tordella, Ron Willett, Joyce Williams
email contact: governance@fculittle.org

Governance Task Force Interview Questions

(Please bring this sheet with you to your interview. See related letter on other side.)

Questions about You (Write your answers for this section in advance to be collected after interview.)

1. What is your name? (This information will help the Task Force keep track of who has been interviewed. You will not be identified in any Task Force reports.)
2. In what year did you become a member of FCU or a regular participant? Approximate year is fine if you don't remember exactly.
3. What is your age range? Circle one. 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 65+
4. In what ways are you or have you been involved in FCU over the years, and, in particular, have you played any decision making/leadership roles? Please give us a summary.

Questions about Governance (Please consider these questions in advance and jot down a few notes.)

1. Here, we would like to explore with you FCU's approach to governance and your ideas about it.
 - a. What already works well in supporting our church's purposes? (See other side.) Can you think of a related experience you've had at FCU to illustrate your thoughts?
 - b. What changes do you think might better help us serve our purposes? Can you think of a related experience you've had at FCU to illustrate your thoughts?
 - c. Are you aware of an alternative governance model? Can you tell us about it?
 - d. Indicate how much change you think we need in our church governance by circling the item below that comes closest to your feelings.

No change needed	minor tweaking	considerable change	massive overhaul
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 - e. Please explain the thoughts or feelings behind your choice in part d above.
 - f. Indicate how well you feel you understand church governance by circling the item below that comes closest to your feelings.

I'm clueless	I sort of get it	I totally know how everything works and can get stuff done!
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 - g. Please explain the thoughts or feelings behind your choice in part f above.
2. What do you see as the role of the minister in governance? What about other church staff (music director, RE director, office manager, sexton)?
3. If you were invited to take on a leadership role in the church, is there anything about our governance that would make you hesitate? Please explain.
4. What else do you want to say?