

Writing Bylaws for your Congregation

As a new congregation, you will need to adopt a simple set of bylaws. Experience shows that selecting a bylaws committee of at least three people is the most expedient way to get this done. This committee should not attempt to foresee and cover every eventuality, but should strive for brevity and simplicity. Upon completion of the bylaws, the entire congregation should review the draft bylaws and suggest changes. **The bylaws need to provide an article on how they will be amended in the future.**

A sample set of bylaws is included in this packet. Additional bylaws examples are available at on the Leaders section of the UUA website or by sending your request to swhitman@uua.org.

Organizational Structure and Bylaws

The bylaws of your congregation state the formal structure of your institution and provide for maintaining it and changing it. Bylaws serve as useful guidelines for your membership as well as a means of relating your congregation to the UUA, and to the laws governing nonprofit institutions within the state or province where the congregation is based.

Effective bylaws will:

- be brief and clearly stated
- cover only the "bare bones" of the organizational structure
- be **clear on how** to amend
- comply with the laws to which your group is subject
- be readily accessible to all members

In designing or evaluating your organizational structure and writing or revising your bylaws, you should consider the following:

- membership and membership responsibilities (including financial)
- leadership and leadership responsibilities
- decision-making procedures
- provision for continuity and change

The way your congregation is structured should support and enhance its functioning. An effective structure will:

- be open and flexible
- encourage the active involvement of members
- help members accomplish things
- enable members to understand and relate easily to their institution
- be congruent with the values cherished by the members

An example of "basic bylaws" follows. Please use it only as an example. Adapt it to fit your society (its needs and way of doing things). Various alternatives, consequences, and considerations are included parenthetically and in italics within each section.

Addendum

1. UUA Principles and Purposes
2. UUA Membership Policy
3. Sample Letters of Recommendation
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UUA Principles and Purposes

The Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent dignity and worth of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part;

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

The Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member societies and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, color, sex, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test.

UUA Membership Policies

As stated in bylaws, amended July 1, 2003

Section C-2.2. Purposes: *The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.*

Section C-3.3. Admission to Membership: *A church or fellowship may become a member congregation upon acceptance by the Board of Trustees of the Association of its written application for membership in which it subscribes to the principles of and pledges to support the Association. The Board of Trustees shall adopt rules to carry out the intent of this Section.*

Section C-3.5. Certification of Membership: Certification of Membership:
A member congregation shall be recognized as certified during the fiscal year of the Association in which it becomes a member and during each subsequent fiscal year in which it established that during the immediately preceding fiscal year it:

- (a) conducted regular religious services;*
- (b) held at least one business meeting of its members, elected its own officers and maintained adequate records of membership; and*
- (c) made a financial contribution to the Association.*

Member congregations must furnish the Association with a report of their activities showing compliance with subsection (a) and (b) above. Compliance with subsection (c) above shall be determined by appropriate financial records of the Association. A member congregation shall also be considered to be certified for that part of any particular current fiscal year which precedes the deadline established by the Board of Trustees for submitting proof of compliance with subsection (a) and (b) above if during the next preceding fiscal year such a congregation made a financial contribution to the Association and filed the report required by this section during that year. A member congregation which has not been certified for three consecutive fiscal years shall be deemed inactive and placed in an "inactive congregation" category. The Board of Trustees shall make rules to carry out the intent of this section and shall determine which member congregations meet the requirements set forth herein for any fiscal year of the Association.

Section C-3.6. Termination of Membership. *A church or fellowship upon written notification to the Association may withdraw from the Association at any time. The Board of Trustees may terminate the membership of any congregation that, pursuant to the provisions of Section C-3.5, has been placed in an "inactive congregation" category maintained by the Association but shall do so only after consultation with:*

- (a) the local congregation in question, whenever possible;*
- (b) the President of the district in which the congregation is located or such other authorized official as the district designates in writing to the Association; and*

(c) the trustee representing the district in which the congregation is located.

Rule 3.3.3. Membership Requirements for Admission. *A new congregation, to be recognized as a member of the Association, must have thirty (30) of its adult members be members solely of the new congregation.*

Rule 3.3.4. Multiple Local Congregations. *In many communities the liberal religious movement may be better served by the establishment of two or more member congregations.*

(a) It is ordinarily desirable that a new congregation should have the active support and sponsorship of any member congregation or congregations located in the same geographic area.

(b) The Association will neither initiate nor recognize such a new congregation until after the Association has consulted by mail or by interview with any member congregation or congregations located in the same geographic area. Such consultation shall include a request for letters from the presiding officer of the congregation's governing board and minister of such congregation(s) stating judgment regarding the establishment and/or recognition of the new congregation. The Association may proceed to assist in organizing or recognizing the new congregation despite local protest or objection if the Association believes that such action is in the best interests of the entire movement and that it will strengthen the total Unitarian Universalist position in the community.

Rule 3.3.5. Rules and Regulations for New Congregations. *It is essential that Unitarian Universalist congregations be affirmative in spirit, inclusive in fellowship, and mutually supportive in their relationships with other congregations. The following statements represent the Association's best judgment as to the meaning of this general statement and shall be used by staff and the Board in determining action upon applications for membership.*

(a) In receiving the application of a new congregation for membership in the Association, the Congregational Service staff shall satisfy itself that the group is making its application in good faith and that it will make a sincere effort to carry out the purposes of the Association. (See specifically Article II of the Bylaws.)

(b) The Association interprets its statements of purpose to mean that no congregation can be accepted into membership if its bylaws exclude from its local membership any person because of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin.

(c) All member congregations must be congregational in polity; the final authority to make decisions must be vested in the legal membership of the congregation.

(d) Member congregations shall project and embark upon a balanced program of religious activity including adult worship and/or discussion and when feasible establishment of a church school in the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

(e) New congregations are expected to establish and maintain cooperative relations with Unitarian Universalist agencies, as appropriate and feasible.

(f) A congregation should be incorporated when possible under the laws of the state in which it exists. A congregation shall include in its articles of incorporation or other organizing documents a clause providing that the assets of the congregation will be transferred upon dissolution to the UUA and/or the Canadian Unitarian council. With the prior written approval of the UUA Board of Trustees, the congregation has the option of naming a UUA affiliate organization (such as district, camp, conference center or other congregation), as the recipient of the congregation's assets.

Rule 3.3.6. Order of Administrative Procedure. *The order of administrative procedure:*

a) Application for church or fellowship membership in the Association will first be referred to the Congregational Services staff.

b) The Congregational Services staff will seek information and advice with respect to all applications as follows:

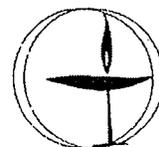
U.S. Congregations - District President

Other Congregations - Executive officer of appropriate Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist international group, if any.

c) The Congregational Services staff will make its recommendation to the President of the Association, and the President shall then make recommendations to the Board of Trustees of the UUA for its final action.

Sample Letter of Recommendation District Office

**Central
Midwest
District** Unitarian
Universalist
Association



November 19, 1998

Board of Trustees
Unitarian Universalist Association
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108

Dear UUA Board Members,

This letter supports the application of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marquette, MI for affiliation with the UUA and with the Central Midwest District. The congregation voted to affiliate at a congregational meeting in October, but in fact have been in conversation about affiliation for some time. Their location, on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, is geographically closest to the Keweenaw UU Fellowship in Houghton, MI, and their connections with the Keweenaw Fellowship, as well as with congregations located in northern Wisconsin, led them to seek affiliation with the Central Midwest District rather than Michigan District. Both district boards have discussed this matter and agree to their request.

The Marquette congregation has been served for several years by a student minister from Meadville/Lombard Theological School, through the Ministerial Opportunities for Development program. They agree with the basic tenets of Unitarian Universalism, and are intentional about their desire to represent our faith community in the middle of the Upper Peninsula. I look forward to continuing my work with this society, and support their request for affiliation.

Yours in faith,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, which appears to read "Helen Bishop".

Helen Bishop
Congregational Services Director

Eisenhower Tower -
1701 S. First Avenue, Suite #310
Maywood, IL 60153
Phone: 708-343-3478
Fax: 708-343-3480
E Mail - 76363.1732@CompuServe.com

Sample Letter of Recommendation Nearby Minister



December 11, 1998

Unitarian Universalist Association
Department of Extension
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108-2800

Dear UUA Board,

I would heartily endorse chartering the UU gathering in Marquette, Michigan as a congregation in the UU Association of Congregations. This is a healthy, eager group that is offering adult services and Religious Education. They are currently served by a student minister from Meadville/Lombard.

I have been acquainted with this group since their first eager members began the journey of forming a congregation. In the few years of their existence, they have grown rapidly and developed responsible leadership and dependable programming. They participate in District functions with enthusiasm and have sought the advice of other congregations' lay leadership and ministers in piloting their development.

The Marquette area is one of the far-flung places where people of current UU faith practices exist and where creative attention can keep this group expanding. I laud their efforts, and hope you will welcome them to the full Association membership they have earned.

Sincerely,

Rev. Emmy Lou Belcher

UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
FELLOWSHIP of
GRAND
TRAVERSE

The Reverend
Emmy Lou Belcher
Minister

6726 Center Road
Traverse City,
Michigan
49686-1802
616/947-3117

Sample Letter of Recommendation District President

Central Midwest District

of the Unitarian Universalist Association
1701 South First Avenue, Ste 310
Maywood, IL 60173

November 11, 1998

708.343.3478
708.343.3480

Board of Trustees of the UUA
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108

Central Midwest District
Board of Directors
Dan Kupusck
UUA Trustee
Barbara W. Brown
President
The Rev. Danny R. Reed
Vice President
Tom Kepler
Immediate Past President
Betty Stikes
Treasurer
Thomas Galloway
Secretary
Michael May
Director-at-Large
Personal & Administration
John Miller
Director-at-Large
Communications

Area Council Presidents:
Penn
Central IL
Margaret Shaklee
Chicago
Penn
North Central
Jim Kurtzman
Southeast WI
Jim Davis
St. Louis

Professional Staff
Dr. Helen Bishop
Congregational Services Director
Carol Davenport
Religious Education Director
Carol Hosmer
Office Manager

Dr. Barbara W. Brown
CMWD President
District Compensation Consultant
13 Lake Pembroke Drive
Springton, MO 63135-1210
1/314.522.6969
1/314.970.2266
1/314.522.0612
1/MSLDD@aol.com

Dear Board of Trustees:

This letter is one of recommendation to affiliate the Marquette Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Marquette, Michigan with the UUA and in support of their affiliation with the Central Midwest District of the UUA. Our board and the board of the Michigan District have been in contact with the Marquette Congregation and have known of their wishes to affiliate, based on their covenantal relationship with other churches in the CMWDistrict, not only in the upper peninsula of Michigan, but also in upper Wisconsin. The Congregational Services Director (district executive) of the CMWD, Dr. Helen Bishop, has encouraged this congregation to complete all necessary documentation and application to become affiliated with the UUA. The congregation voted to do this on October 23, 1998.

Marquette UU Congregation has been a small, but growing group for the last six years. They have tried to have maintain a ministerial presence by use of the Meadville/Lombard Theological School's student minister program over the last four years. They are growing based on intentional programming for Sunday services and Religious Education for their children.

We would welcome another congregation in Michigan and glad to provide services to the Marquette Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

In Peace,



Barbara W. Brown
President of the Central Midwest District

BWB:wp
copy: Board Correspondence ✓

Sample Letter of Recommendation District Trustee



CENTRAL MIDWEST DISTRICT

Jean G. Kapuscik

TRUSTEE
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION
445 S. KENSINGTON AVENUE
LAGRANGE, ILLINOIS 60525
708-579-1448
e-mail: jkapuscik@uua.org

Extension Department Administrator
UUA
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108

In response to a request from the congregation's president, I write to support the admission of the Marquette Unitarian Universalist Congregation to the Unitarian Universalist Association. This group, way north in the Upper Peninsula, has been meeting for six years. There has been some back and forth conversation by this group with both the Michigan District and the Central Midwest District and some reluctance on their part to affiliate at all. Now, however, with agreement between the two Districts and with a decision by the membership to move into affiliation, I certainly support the membership of this congregation.

For the past four years, Marquette has taken part in the MOD Squad, a program that CMwD and Meadville/Lombard Theological School has developed. Each year a M/L student has made a monthly weekend visit to the congregation, meeting with the board, and with committees, offering organizational assistance as well as conducting a worship service. Having had four good yearlong relationships with student ministers has certainly been a part of their preparation for UUA membership. They have also targeted Religious Education for their children as a primary responsibility and this is also a positive sign for potential growth.

It is with real pleasure that I endorse the application from the Marquette Congregation and look forward to making a motion at the Board of Trustees meeting to do so.

Yours in the faith,

Jean G. Kapuscik, CMwD Trustee
UUA Board of Trustees

Sample Bylaws

Article I. Name.

The name of this religious society shall be _____ (for example, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of city, town, or county)

Article II. Purpose.

(Insert the purpose of Covenant here. This article establishes the group as a religious organization. The wording should be determined by the group as a whole. The samples below may be used as guidelines, but are not the only options)

Example One: *The purpose of the congregation is to further individual freedom of belief, discipleship to advancing truth, the democratic process in human relations, brotherhood and sisterhood undivided by nation, race, or creed; and allegiance to the cause of a united world community.*

Example Two: *We unite in the free quest of high values in religion and life.*

Example Three: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.*

Example Four: *In the discipline of truth, irrespective of its source, and in the spirit of universal love, undivided by nation, race, or creed, we unite to strengthen our convictions in the value and need for liberal religion, and through the strength of unity, to give such expression to these convictions as the fellowship decides.*

Example Five: *The purpose of this congregation is to foster liberal religious living through worship, study, service, and fellowship.*

Example Six: *In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of humanity*

Example Seven: *Relying upon reason as our guide, and upon freedom as our method, we seek to grow in understanding of ourselves and our world, to promote and serve the universal human family.*

Example Eight: *We are a fellowship of religious seekers united in love of truth and the spirit of Jesus. We are bound together in religious fellowship for the worship of that God which is eternal in every place and time and we are bound together through service to humanity.*

Example Nine: *The purpose of this society shall be the enjoyment and practice of religion founded upon devotion to individual freedom of belief.*

Article III. Membership.

Any person may become a voting member of _____ (*insert society name*) who is in sympathy with its purposes and programs, has signed the bylaws, and makes an annual contribution of record. It is generally understood that all members should have an understanding of the history and the current situation of the Unitarian Universalist movement. It is specifically understood that membership is open to all qualified persons regardless of race, color, sex, affectional or sexual orientation, age, or national origin.

(Many bylaws state a minimum age for membership. Some differentiate general membership from voting membership, requiring a voting member to be 18 or older and to have made a financial contribution of record within the past year. Some do not require any contribution of record. Some bylaws provide for a waiting period between becoming a member and having the privilege of voting, typically 30 or 90 days. Some require a board vote to confirm membership. Voting membership in nonprofit institutions may be defined by state or provincial law, and bylaws should be in compliance. In some cases, state or provincial laws may state that any member may be an officer. This could be an important consideration in establishing the lower age limits for membership.)

(In some societies, bylaws define a procedure for removing a person from membership through that person's written request or through the recommendation of the governing board or membership committee when the member has died, moved away, or can not be located. Some bylaws also have provisions for removal for cause, specifically violation of behavioral covenants or standards.)

(Bylaws may also provide for official acceptance of new members by formal vote of the governing board and/or the congregation.)

Article IV. Denominational Affiliation.

This society shall be a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association and of the _____ District. It is the intention of this society to make annual financial contributions equal to its full Fair Share as determined by the Association and the District.

Article V. Meetings.

The dates of regular non-business meetings of the congregation shall be determined by the congregation itself, or by any person(s) designated by it. The annual business meeting shall be held each year in the month of _____ at such time and place as shall be fixed by the Executive Committee (Standing Committee or Board of Trustees). Special business meetings may be called at the written request of any ten members. The business to be transacted at all meetings shall be set forth in the notice of the meeting, which shall be sent to all members by mail not less than 15 days prior to the meeting. Twenty percent of the membership (or _____ members) shall constitute a quorum except for instances of calling or dismissing the minister or amending bylaws, for which the quorum shall be forty percent of the membership. Notice of meetings to consider calling or dismissing

a minister, or to consider amending the bylaws shall be sent to all members by mail not less than 30 days prior to the meeting.

(Some bylaws require a larger quorum when certain important decisions are to be made, such as the purchase or sale of property, the calling or dismissal of a minister. In such cases a quorum may be defined as 40 percent of the voting membership.)

(In some bylaws, it requires a greater number of people for requesting a special meeting, and some also allow the board to call special meetings.)

(In some cases, the agenda of the annual meeting is specified in bylaws in order to safeguard the right of the congregation to hear reports of officers and staff, to elect new officers, and to adopt an annual budget.)

Article VI. Officers.

At each annual meeting there shall be chosen by ballot a President, a Secretary, and a Treasurer, all of whom shall hold their offices for one year and until their successors have been elected and qualified, and who shall perform the duties usually pertaining to these offices. These officers shall constitute the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee shall have general charge of the property of the society and the conduct of all of its business affairs and the control of its administration, including the appointment of such committees, as it may deem necessary. It may fill vacancies with person who shall serve until the next annual meeting.

A nominating committee of three members, who shall not be members of the Executive Committee, shall also be chosen at the annual meeting.

All officers shall be voting members of the society.

(The decision as to how leadership responsibility shall be vested will depend upon the make up of the group. The organizational structure should not be unwieldy for the size of the society to maintain. We suggest a minimal structure. Larger societies may want to add additional trustees to the Executive Committee. In the interest of continuity, the Executive Committee or Board of Trustees may be established on a rotating basis with one or more members elected for one year, the same number for two years, and the same number for three years. After the initial election, all officers may be elected for full terms so that only a portion of the Executive Committee or Board of Trustees is replaced each year. Some congregations find it useful to have two or three year terms for Board members to reduce turnover and allow for learnings of the first year to be carried into subsequent year(s).)

(The nominating committee is included in bylaws in order to provide for the continuation of the democratic process in the selection of leadership. Other standing committees may also be defined as desired; however, greater flexibility is allowed when bylaws do not require certain committees.)

(Basic duties of officers and trustees may be spelled out in bylaws; however, by no means should the entire charge to various committees be included in bylaws. It is far

more effective to have such detailed guidelines drawn up separately and reviewed regularly as needed.

(As a general rule, those leaders who are elected by the membership are specified in bylaws, whereas those who are appointed need not be specified. A separate article on committees may follow the article on officers.)

Article VII. The Minister.

(Once a society reaches the point of calling a minister, it's helpful to include in the bylaws an article dealing with the nature of the relationship between congregation and minister; procedures for calling a minister; and for terminating the relationship)

The minister shall be responsible for the conduct of worship within the society and the society's spiritual interests and affairs. The minister shall have freedom of the pulpit as well as freedom to express his or her opinion outside the pulpit.

(Note that such a statement is brief and general. By no means should a full job description be included in the bylaws.)

The minister shall be an ex-officio member of the governing board and of such committees as the board shall designate.

The minister shall be called upon recommendation of the Ministerial Search Committee by a four-fifths majority of the qualified members of the society present at any meeting legally called for the purpose; quorum for such a meeting is to be constituted by 40 percent of the voting members rather than 20 percent as called for in Article V.

The minister may be dismissed by a majority vote of the qualified members of the congregation present at any meeting legally called for the purpose; notice of the meeting shall include its purpose to review the tenure of the minister; quorum for such a meeting to be constituted by 40 percent of the voting members rather than 20 percent as called for in Article V.

In the event of the minister's dismissal, his or her salary and allowance shall be continued for three months after date of dismissal. Should the minister offer his or her resignation, three months' notice must be given at the time the resignation is made, except as the governing board may allow an interval of less time.

(Some bylaws specify that the minister be in fellowship with the UUA.

(If additional professional staff person are employed by the society, bylaws should cover terms of their selection and dismissal.

(The article on the minister or the article on committees should provide for the selection of a ministerial search committee, usually composed of seven members who are elected at a special congregational meeting called for that purpose, from a slate prepared by the nominating committee, or half of whom are appointed and half

elected. The most important consideration in selecting a ministerial search committee is that it have the full confidence of the congregation.

(A minister and congregation often agree to establish a Committee on Ministry and may decide to define such a committee in its bylaws)

Article VIII. Fiscal Year.

The fiscal year shall end _____.

(How the fiscal year is defined varies from one society to another. The UUA fiscal year ends June 30 and some convenience is gained when local societies choose the same arrangement.)

Article IX. Dissolution.

In the case of dissolution of the society, all of its property, real and personal, after paying all just claims upon it, shall be conveyed to and vested in the Unitarian Universalist Association or its legal successor, and the Board of Trustees of the society shall perform all actions necessary to effectuate such conveyance.

Article X. Amendments.

These bylaws, so far as allowed by law, may be amended or replaced at any meeting of the society by a two-thirds (2/3) vote of those present and voting. The quorum for such a vote is 40% of the membership of the congregation. Notice of any proposed change shall be contained in the notice of the meeting: Notice of the meeting shall be given to all members of the congregation not less than 30 days prior to the meeting.