

# Leadership Development in the Large Congregation

*Rev. Stefan Jonasson  
UUA Director for Large Congregations*

Rarely do I see more heads nodding in agreement than when I describe the annual life-cycle of congregational nominating committees. After being elected at an annual congregational meeting, many—perhaps most—nominating committees go into functional hibernation for at least forty weeks. Like Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day, they poke their noses out of their burrow as the next annual meeting approaches, begin brainstorming names and calling recruits (sometimes reeking of desperation), cobble together a list of nominees and get it to the church office in time for inclusion with the annual report—but just barely. Then the annual cycles begins anew with the selection of a nominating committee for the following year. In a nutshell, most nominating committees are underemployed, no matter how stressed and overworked their members may feel in the weeks leading up to a congregational meeting!

Nominating committees exist for a variety of reasons. Most nominating committees are intended to recruit and recommend lay leaders for election or appointment, reducing the tendency toward self-selection and self-perpetuation among leaders, while maintaining institutional stability and democratic accountability. At their best, they do so with grace and skill. However, nominating committees can have other purposes or motives as well. Some nominating committees exist to keep “the wrong people” off the board; others exist to tap the unsuspecting newcomer for service, often prematurely. Some exist because there are lingering doubts that the board can be fully trusted; others exist to isolate the minister from influencing the selection of lay leaders. Some exist as a salve to a recent congregational conflict; others exist out of force of habit—“we’ve just always done it this way.” Most congregations’ nominating committees simply underperform, some are fundamentally broken, while a few are actually toxic to the health of their congregation. It doesn’t need to be this way.

The quality of congregational leadership can be enhanced—even fundamentally transformed, in some cases—by reimagining the role of the nominating committee and broadening its purpose to make it a leadership development committee. In doing so, the committee’s primary emphasis shifts toward education, while retaining its traditional responsibility for the recruitment and nomination of elected (and in some cases, appointed) lay leaders. What, then, are the key responsibilities of a leadership development committee? There are several:

1. The leadership development committee identifies resources to nurture the long-term health and vitality of the congregation's leadership pool. Resources about which the committee would normally seek to be aware include: denominational consultants and training events; courses offered by institutions in the community, including schools, nonprofits and other churches; published resources, including The Alban Institute's *Congregations* magazine and the Unitarian Universalist Association's *InterConnections*; external consultants such as those of The Alban Institute, the Leadership Network, and the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership; and internal personnel whose gifts in leadership training are too often overlooked, since prophets are indeed "without honour in their own country!"
2. The leadership development committee begins its work at the earliest stages of the membership cycle. Just as a stewardship committee is often called upon to offer a unit in new member orientation sessions, so should the leadership development committee be called upon to talk to newcomers about congregational needs and the opportunities and rewards of volunteer service. Among other considerations, an effort should be made to help demystify how the congregation delivers ministry and programs through the work of ordained ministers, paid staff, lay leaders and a cadre of volunteers.
3. The leadership development committee sponsors year-round leadership training of a nature and frequency determined by local needs and resources. These training opportunities—which can be offered through workshops, seminars, retreats or direct mentorship—should focus on the qualities of good leadership and the development of competencies, rather than instruct participants in "how things get done in this congregation." Among the topics worthy of consideration are: organizational alignment; spiritual growth; time management and personal organization; multicultural awareness; growth and outreach; governance and organizational models; conflict management; stewardship; church size dynamics; emotional systems; risk management; intergenerational awareness; volunteer motivation and support; assessment and evaluation; decision-making; coaching and mentoring; and effective communications. One could go further but this list suffices to demonstrate that there's no shortage of topics in the field of leadership education!
4. The leadership development committee promotes external training opportunities and encourages the participation of congregation members at such events, while helping to secure and assign material resources to help underwrite the cost.
5. The leadership development committee takes responsibility for organizing and providing programming for an annual leadership retreat where the focus is educational. In some congregations, this may be for the board and senior staff only; in others, it may include a much larger circle of leaders and staff. Ideally, this event

will be led by an outside presenter or facilitator who is selected for their ability to address a timely topic in the life of the congregation. (This is different than an annual planning retreat, which properly remains the responsibility of the board.)

6. The leadership development committee also assumes responsibility for the basic orientation of new board members, committee members and other key lay leaders. Sound orientation includes reminding new and continuing office-holders of the history and mission of the congregation; providing an overview of its ministries and programs, policies and procedures; and equipping them with the basic tools necessary for the positions to which they have been called to serve. Among other tools, office-holders should receive a packet of informational materials to help them navigate their way.
7. In congregations where the board evaluates its own work, it can be desirable for the leadership development committee to facilitate the process, helping the board collectively and individually to discern the effectiveness of their efforts and the opportunities for growth.
8. Finally, the leadership development committee continues to be responsible for nominating members of the congregation to elected offices and such other positions as the congregation may designate in its bylaws of policies. After a year as the congregation's leadership educators, though, it will be better able to identify good-quality recruits, many of whom "fly under the radar" in congregations that invest little energy in leadership development.

In order to function most effectively, it's important for members of the leadership development committee to be familiar with the congregation's mission, governance model, organizational structures, bylaws, policies and staff structures. Additionally, they should be demonstrated leaders in their own right and familiar with basic concepts of volunteer recruitment, nurture and retention. Ideally, the committee will include members reflecting different lengths of tenure in the congregation, taking care to avoid skewing excessively towards either long-tenured members or relative newcomers. And the committee needs to include the congregation's ordained minister(s), who will contribute inspiration and perspective. The minister is typically the best professional resource a congregation has access to, so why isolate him or her from the leadership development process? (In some congregations, sensitivity may dictate that ministers recuse themselves from the nominating function, while, in other congregations, the minister's input will be welcomed and encouraged.) Finally, it goes without saying that all should be committed to the congregation's mission.

This model for a leadership development committee involves more work throughout the year, but that's accompanied by the reward of developing competent and resilient leaders to guide your congregation in pursuing its mission in the world.

## Selected Resources

***Congregations*** – A quarterly magazine from The Alban Institute featuring practical, research-based information and ideas for effective ministry in an ever-changing environment. The *Alban Weekly* eNewsletter is a valuable addition. ([www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org))

***InterConnections*** – A quarterly newsletter for lay leaders and professional staff in Unitarian Universalist congregations, providing information and resources that help make congregations vital. ([www.uua.org/publications/interconnections/](http://www.uua.org/publications/interconnections/))

**The Leader's Library** – An online, intuitive library of articles and other resources relevant to individual interests and roles as a congregational leader: whether lay or professional. ([www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/](http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/))

**Congregational Resource Guide** – Another online collection of resources, similar to The Leader's Library, provided by The Alban Institute. ([www.congregationalresources.org](http://www.congregationalresources.org))

**Nonprofit Good Practice Guide** – An online collection of easily accessible nonprofit resources and continuously updated information on all aspects of nonprofit leadership and management. ([www.npgoodpractice.org](http://www.npgoodpractice.org))

**Leadership Development Curriculum** by Lynn Thomas and Anne Bewley. This is a 10-module self-guiding curriculum addressing: responsibilities of governing boards; distinguishing board work from committee work; developing agendas; shared ministry at board meetings; improving accountability and follow-through; encouraging participation at meetings; turning ideas into outcomes; involving volunteers; mentoring volunteer leadership; and giving and receiving feedback. (Available from: Kailo Enterprise, % Anne Bewley, 58 Holderness Road, Center Sandwich, NH 03227.)

**Net Results** – A source of practical, hands-on, relevant ideas you can really use in your congregation, although generally requiring some translation for Unitarian Universalists! ([www.netresults.org](http://www.netresults.org))

