

Proposed Business Resolution General Assembly Consideration June 2022

Renewing UUA Bylaws for Theologically Grounded and Mission-Focused Governance

Unitarian Universalism is called to create spirit-filled, liberating, inclusive, and holistic communities that foreshadow the world of our dreams. Against the backdrop of a looming ecological catastrophe, a multiracial, multicultural democracy struggles to emerge and survive in the face of ferocious resistance. Our faith can be a wellspring to dismantle white supremacy culture, and all forms of oppression. We need more effective and impactful systems and leadership to bring about communities where everyone can thrive.

To meet this moment, the UUA needs to be mission-focused, unified, innovative, and bold. But we are hampered by our overly complicated and inefficient governance, enshrined in our bylaws which date from our founding more than 60 years ago and have been patched and mended piecemeal ever since. This creates obstacles for meaningful participation in the UUA's governance. It diverts precious resources (including volunteers) toward maintaining the structure that has been, rather than freeing our energies to live our mission in ways that meet today's need.

Our bylaws were built for a very different time and for a different purpose. In June 2020, the Commission on Institutional Change issued its report, *Widening the Circle of Concern*. The report identifies significant challenges in our governance structure that prevent us from living faithfully into a liberatory expression of Unitarian Universalism where all can thrive. The 1993 Commission on Governance and 2014 Strengthening Governance reports included calls to make significant changes to governance, including the leadership structure, the role of covenant in governance, and meaningful engagement in decision making by congregational delegates.

We need bylaws that provide role clarity, accountability to our values, and flexibility that allows for innovation and meaningful participation so we can unleash the leadership gifts of our people and the impact and values of our Association in the wider world. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the reality that many of our bylaw-codified volunteer positions require unreasonable time expectations. Our structure is rooted in outdated models of volunteer labor that don't represent the reality of many people's lives today, nor the diversity in leadership we need for our Association.

During 2020 and 2021, thousands of UUs along with over one hundred core leaders volunteered for UU the Vote making it one of the most successful Association-wide justice efforts. During this same period, many of our bylaw standing committees went unfilled. People want to offer their gifts to the Association. However, our structures serve the institution as it was, rather than what it needs to be. We are following the lead of many congregations who have updated their bylaws to remove many standing committees recognizing changing models of volunteerism and the need for flexibility and innovation.

The pandemic also created the opportunity to hold the General Assembly virtually. This has allowed even more innovative ways to gather and engage our congregations and delegates in governance. It also reveals how the current bylaws fundamentally constrain our ability to reimagine General Assembly in ways that have long been called for by delegates. The UUA bylaws contain significant inconsistencies and outdated sections because the mechanism to amend them is costly in terms of leaders' and delegates' time and attention. This is why a wholesale re-write rather than piecemeal changes is needed.

In conclusion, the time to reimagine our bylaws to create a dynamic, accountable, flexible and responsive governance system is now.

Therefore the 2022 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association calls on the UUA Board of Trustees to conduct a thorough review and rewrite of the UUA Bylaws. This review should involve stakeholders in collaborative discernment and conversation about considered changes. These new bylaws should create a governance system that supports the UUA in accountably achieving its mission and aspirations consistent with our core values.

This process will be mindful of the specific work of the Article 2 Study Commission charged to renew Article 2 of the UUA bylaws. There should be communication across these efforts so that they are supportive of each other and so all of our bylaws reflect our Association's purpose and core values.

These values and goals should guide the new bylaws framework:

- a. Reflect our theological commitment to liberation and inclusion
- b. Provide accountability to our long-standing anti-racist and anti-oppressive commitments
- c. Create flexibility, allowing for innovation and experimentation
- d. Provide clarity of role and authority among leaders and groups that support diverse leadership
- e. Enhance meaningful participation in governance by UU congregations, delegates, stakeholders.
- f. Address foundational areas of governance required in bylaws, leaving details of policy and procedures to documents that can be revised between General Assemblies.
- g. Written in plain language to be understandable and clear.

Finally, the hope of the 2022 General Assembly is that substantial bylaw replacement will be brought to the General Assembly for consideration at the 2023 and/or 2024 General Assembly.