

2024 April Board retreat BIG QUESTIONS

Who is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association?

We have traditionally defined membership of the UUA as congregations. The board has recognized “Covenanted Communities”, bonded groups of UU’s, but not congregations in the traditional sense, may/should become members of the UUA.

Does the expanded definition of membership fully include all those that could or should be considered stakeholders in the UUA?

The Commission on Institutional Change recommended that the UUA at all levels encourage and recognize the caucusing of people from marginalized identities. National networks of people with marginalized identities have been forming, and they include not only UU’s who are members of congregations, but people who are adjacent to Unitarian Universalism but do not belong to congregations.

Who should be empowered to recognize these national networks as members of the UUA and grant them delegates for General Assembly? Should the bylaws establish detailed membership requirements? Or, should the Bylaws provide more general criteria, and empower the UUA Board of Trustees to implement the membership section, according to a set of established, transparent rules?

Congregational polity and a covenant among congregations.

What does it mean to be a member of the UUA? Does membership carry with it any mutual obligations? Are there standards of conduct or participation that member congregations must meet?

We have a long tradition of congregational polity. Which has been interpreted as congregational autonomy, often in absolute terms.

But there has been a counter trend ever since 1961. The first significant place where absolute congregational autonomy was questioned was over an early dispute as to whether local UU Congregations could be segregated.

The early UUA voted to require all congregations to be open to people of all races. In doing so they set a precedent that our commitment to local congregational autonomy gives way to our broader UUA commitment to open and inclusive communities.

Since then, the UUA leadership and administration has been consistent in leading congregations in becoming more inclusive. Programs and trainings like the Welcoming Congregations, various anti racism trainings, Beyond Categorical Thinking, and other anti -oppression resources have all encouraged member congregations to confront systemic bias within their local congregations. The UUA leads in identifying systemic oppressions: the congregations follow, some enthusiastically, some reluctantly.

Congregational polity, understood as congregational autonomy, has also been challenged by the problem of ministerial misconduct. A policy of pure congregational autonomy would not provide any mechanism, from the outside, for addressing the problem of ministerial misconduct within a local congregation. A misconducting minister could remain in place as long as they had the support of the local board and congregation. Indeed, this was often the case.

The UUA has established the precedent that justice within congregations is a higher value than allowing the maximum autonomy for ministers and congregations to manage their relationship. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee is empowered to require that ministers in fellowship with the UUA conduct themselves according to clear and transparent ethical standards.

There are some unresolved questions about the relationship between congregational polity /autonomy and our broader UU values.

1. Suppose a congregation treats its religious professionals and other employees unfairly or even oppressively. The Commission on Institutional Change reported that religious professionals of color have been harmed by racist bias and action in local congregations. Members report that some congregations repeatedly mistreat ministers rather than address other problems within the congregation.

Does the agreement of a congregation to be part of the UUA give the UUA as a whole an authority to hold congregations accountable to our values of justice in their internal relationships?

2. Does the agreement to be part of the UUA of congregations entail a commitment to provide financial support to the UUA? Or to participate in General Assembly?