

How We Govern

THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING

The Cambridge Platform of 1648 articulated a model of interdependent self-governance that has been how those of our tradition have “done church” now for centuries. We are those who transact creative, cooperative power. In polity, a name for this kind of power is “democracy.” (In theology and ethics, a name for the same kind of power is “Love.”)

To the extent that we practice democracy, we engage our faith in creative, cooperative power. Of the Seven Principles that Member Congregations covenant to affirm and promote, the fifth principle asserts, “The right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” As this commitment to democracy is true of Congregations, it is true of the Association, as well. Associational health might be measured in terms of the health of its democratic process, the ability to sustain collective cooperative decision-making.

GOVERNANCE: WHAT IS IT?

Within a democratic organization, exercising authority in three ways, on behalf of the organization, is called “governance.” These three ways are:

- setting the organization’s overall direction;
- granting and defining the power to pursue that direction;
- monitoring performance, specifically progress toward that direction within the limits that have been set.

In a democracy, authority derives from accountability. The power to govern is only legitimate when based in accountable relationship to the wider membership. So, healthy democracy will include relationships that transact authority and accountability. Assessing governance will include assessing these relationships. Transforming governance will include transforming these relationships.

TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE

A few years ago, the UUA Board of Trustees convened the Fifth Principle Task Force for the purpose of assessing the condition of democracy in the Association. In December 2009, the Fifth Principle Task Force reported, in no uncertain terms, that they observed that the Association’s governance system was “dramatically broken.” This was, unfortunately, not a surprise. Over the five decades of the Association, at least five other task forces had been convened to address this concern, to little reform.

With gratitude for the Fifth Principle Task Force’s report, in January 2010, the UUA Board of Trustees passed a “transforming governance” motion, which said:

Because the next half-century of Unitarian Universalism requires excellence in governance, the UUA Board of Trustees will initiate a transformation of governance at the following levels:

- *UUA Board*

- *General Assembly*
- *Districts and Regions*

The UUA Board will lead by working with other Association leaders in the following ways:

- 1. Working with congregational delegates at General Assemblies in 2011 and 2012 to amend the UUA by-laws to significantly reduce the size of the UUA Board;*
- 2. Inviting the President of the UUA, District Board Members, and District Presidents to continue our substantive discussion of the shift toward regionalization, during General Assembly 2010.*
- 3. Holding some Board meetings in sites other than Boston, as in January 2010, to strengthen relationships with the Association's Member Congregations*
- 4. Engaging youth and young adults and historically marginalized groups throughout Unitarian Universalism, to ensure that their voices are heard in our governance transformation as one of our Sources of Authority and Accountability.*

At the time, that motion seemed bold. But the spirit of sustainable, creative cooperation has proved strong. Since January 2010, the Association has seen incredible change in governance. A new size and more equitable method of representation has been approved for the Board of Trustees. Honest, risk-taking conversation with District leaders has forged new partnerships, deep in trust, toward clarity in roles and relationships with regard to Districts. None of this reform has been easy. But the courage and trust has been great. And democracy has improved. With change ongoing at the level of the UUA Board and the Districts, a third level remained: General Assembly.

TRANSFORMING GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Fifth Principle Task Force made four points to buttress its contention that governance was broken, and especially at the level of General Assembly. They said, “GA is not really democratic in that delegates are neither representative of their congregations, other than being members, nor are they accountable to them; without subsidization of delegates, GA is economically discriminatory, and therefore generationally discriminatory; as long as GA continues as an annual event, its cost is a heavy burden to the Association and the member congregations;” and, lastly, “the GA process is not in alignment with the Board’s embrace of policy governance.”

The UUA Board of Trustees continues to be grateful for the Fifth Principle Task Force’s report, and for how it accelerated the transformation in governance that began with the Board’s adoption of Policy Governance. The Board continues to concur with the analysis that General Assembly falls far short of equitable democracy, specifically that “GA is not really democratic in that delegates are neither representative of their congregations, other than being members, nor are they accountable to them.” So, drawing from the Fifth Principle Task Force, the Board continues to actively seek transformation toward greater democracy at General Assembly. The Board continues to endorse the vision set forth in the Fifth Principle Task Force report, that GA delegates would evolve from “passive receptors” to “policy makers.”

And yet, as time has passed, and conversations have continued, the Board sees need to reflect further in assessing the opportunities and challenges of realizing a democratic General Assembly before implementing the dramatic changes that will be required.

OCTOBER INSIGHTS REQUIRING REFLECTION IN JANUARY

At the October 2012 Board meeting, the Board initiated a conversation about governance reform at General Assembly. This conversation yielded the following insights:

- Reforming General Assembly not only changes governance; it changes how vital constituencies gather. It is unhelpful to consider possible change to governance without considering possible change to gathering. The two topics—“How We Gather” and “How We Govern”—are separate, but linked. Each topic needs its own attention, and yet any final recommendation needs to incorporate consideration of both.
- As reform of Districts required—and requires—listening and understanding among many views and many stakeholders, reform of General Assembly requires the same. In this spirit, the UUA Board has invited stakeholders to join in conversation in Philadelphia in January 2013. Engaging key stakeholders will ensure that reforms truly are sustainable, creative, and cooperative. In particular, in its January 2010 “transforming governance” motion, the Board specifically promised that reform would include, *“Engaging youth and young adults and historically marginalized groups throughout Unitarian Universalism, to ensure that their voices are heard in our governance transformation as one of our Sources of Authority and Accountability.”* This conversation in January 2013 is only one way in which the Board lives out that promise.
- While good governance is a higher value than cost, financial expense is a consideration. Possibilities with significant financial implications include subsidization of delegates (to ensure more accurate representation at General Assembly); exploring holding General Assemblies on a biennial basis; and supporting gatherings of key constituencies, especially for historically marginalized communities, whose vital community-building and training would be adversely affected by reform to General Assembly’s governance. The financial implication of these and other possibilities is not yet clear.
- Toward the vision of delegates who were more representative of, and accountable to, their congregations, and toward a delegate body more able to nimbly engage the democratic process, one vision was that the governance body could be a smaller, subsidized body of delegates. It is not yet clear how the design of such a governance body would affect representation of constituencies, particularly that of People of Color.
- And, of course, at a macro level, how could changes in “how we govern” affect changes in “how we gather.”

CONCLUSION

At present, General Assembly is not yet the embodiment of the sustainable, creative, and cooperative power which we call holy, and in which we place our trust. It is not yet the model of adaptive, engaged democracy which is at the heart of our faith and our community practice. But we continue to experience a system in change, a Unitarian Universalist culture evolving toward the happy day when General Assembly will be known as a powerful, representative, collective decision-making experience that governs wisely and well, charting the course for a vibrant faith in this century and beyond. Realizing that vision will require patience and sacrifice, courage and experimentation. It will require creative partnership among various constituencies. And it will require trust. The UUA Board of Trustees, especially in light of what we've experienced these last several years, is confident we have what is required to move forward in faith, and to reach that happy day.