

# **Governance for Unitarian Universalist Congregations**



**New Congregation and Growth Resources  
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## Introduction

Governance is the system by which a congregation exercises its authority. A congregation may use any system to govern itself; it may change systems frequently or entirely ignore the systems it claims as its own, but as long as the congregation lives, it will continue to exercise authority.

Many times, people take governance choices for granted. Because of their long tradition of universal suffrage, U.S. citizens may expect that everything will be put to a vote of the membership. Liberal religious communities with an emphasis on participation may assume that all decisions should be made by consensus. Still other congregations, eager to be relieved of leadership demands, may be anxious to hand over almost all the authority to a board or minister. Often, congregations learn the full consequences of choosing a particular form of governance only later, when they appear amidst conflict. Congregations can be surprised to discover how meaningful the issues of governance are to them. In a 1997 study of polity, the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, in *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997, Section One: Theological Perspective, sub-section: Six Propositions for Theological Reflection, Expanding Our Concept of Governance, Paragraph 2), wrote:

The complexity arises because of questions of governance involve ontological, ethical, and political questions (i.e., questions of ultimate reality, questions of the good that ought to direct our actions, and questions of forms of government and social power). Questions of polity move us beyond practical concerns to concerns of basic outlook, beliefs, or value commitments.

## The Need for Thoughtful Governance Selection

Although it may sound like dreary stuff, the choice of a good system of governance actually offers many wonderful benefits and is well worth the time and attention of all congregations. The benefits include the following:

- Providing continuity through hard times.
- Maintaining a framework insuring that all members will be represented.
- Offering stimulation for meaningful member participation.
- Creating methods for urgent action that can foster responsiveness.
- Building in methods of review to help avoid unproductive reactivity among members.
- Allowing leadership to be transferred with continuity.

- Shaping the identity of the congregation as a "reasoned body."
- Fostering community when carried out with care.
- Clarifying and justifying the authority vital to taking initiative.
- Making internal lines of authority clear and accessible to individuals outside the church community.
- Adding transparency to decision making.
- Protecting leaders by providing a basis for insuring their actions.

Governance is also a necessary investment so that the congregation is be able to do the following:

- Form a legal entity.
- Apply for not-for-profit religious status (effecting tax deductibility of pledges and other assets).
- Find insurance.
- Establish financial accounts and credit.
- Show good faith in its fiduciary (trustee) issues.

## **Historical Authority**

Governance is a solid word (derived from Middle English) suggesting that a congregation will seek a way of running itself that is appropriate, reliable, fair, and understandable to all involved. The congregation will hold excesses in check; just process will be honored. Another word used frequently by Unitarian Universalists to describe a selected way of applying authority is polity. That word comes from the Greek word for "citizen government," and Unitarian Universalists often pair it with congregational, as in congregational polity. These words are used together because it was once unique for a religious group to have authority over itself. Congregational polity became a phrase to denote a free church—one without ecclesial hierarchy and, consequentially, one on its own, responsible for its own survival. If Unitarian Universalists had to choose the most accurate word to describe our governance or polity, we would have to choose congregational.

The two faith traditions that merged in 1961—the Unitarian and Universalist traditions—each had its own history, yet shared in the tradition of congregational polity. The Unitarians and Universalists each arose from Protestant lineage, specifically the Protestant Radical Reformation wing. When Protestantism was emerging, most followers went from one hierarchical church polity (Catholicism) to another hierarchy, be it Lutheran or Anglican. These churches were organized much as the Catholic Church was, with regional bishops and fairly centralized church authority.

Later, other thoughts on organization emerged when specific churches declared themselves self-ruled. The members of these churches feared being led astray in their desire to lead a holy life and preferred to be accountable only to God and one another. These piety-seeking Protestants were seen as radicals by Protestants and Catholics alike. As one might anticipate, in their isolation, they were often unique in their religious

practices, and their fortunes varied according to how threatening they were to political and other church authority.

When a group of piety seekers struggled with the "papishness" (similarity to Catholicism) of the Church of England, they feared for their eternal souls lest they remain in church hierarchy. Although membership in (or at least attendance at) the church was expected of all citizens, these scripture-focused Christians found the Church of England ritual too rich for decent sensibility and its visual art the equal of graven (immoral) images. They were called Puritans for their belief that religion must rightfully seek simplicity in doctrine and worship. Seeking a place of freedom to live out those Radical Reformation principles, they sought a royal charter forming a corporation for colonial development. The area of their grant was Massachusetts Bay. Hoping to leave hierarchy behind them forever, they sailed off and began to select their own governance.

Puritan choice of governance was based upon their shared theology and their admiration of the early Christian community. They formed a polity in which the adult male laity of their common church administered the king's charter. Each had a vote and a share in the corporation (our first impulse to democracy) that the king had granted. Political life and church life were one. They were a theocracy, run by theological principle. They were used to theocracies, as their native land of Britain was one. Governance, education, and taxes were overseen through the parish. In effect, the parish was the local governmental unit. This alliance of civic governance with church governance came to be known as the Standing Order and was to be challenged later by both the Universalists and, later still, the Unitarians.

Even as they empowered their congregations, these citizens feared church hierarchy. They wanted to retain for themselves the local authority over worship and doctrine. They took care in forming their churches, spending a long time in conversation about how they understood their own authority. In her wonderful Minns Lectures, *The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant*, the Reverend Alice Blair Wesley describes how the church of Dedham, Massachusetts, met weekly from the winter of 1637 until November 1638, each meeting examining a question on which everyone reflected and that the participants described as "very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification." From this care to establish a common basis by which they could "walk together," they voluntarily joined themselves, forming themselves as a "free church" with no authority other than their free election to be gathered together.

This vision of the free church was accountable to no other body. Basing themselves in their understanding of the New Testament, they wrote in 1648 of the primacy of the congregation in their primary document, *The Cambridge Platform*: (edited by Henry Wilder Foote, *The Cambridge Platform of 1648, Tercentenary Commemoration at*

Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 27, 1948 Boston: Beacon Press and Pilgrim Press, 1949).

Nor can it with reason be thought but that every church appointed and ordained by Christ, had a ministry appointed and ordained for the same, and yet plain it is that there were no ordinary officers appointed by Christ for any other than congregational churches; elders being appointed to feed not all flocks, but the particular flock of God, over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers, and that flock they must attend, even the whole flock; and one congregation being as much as any ordinary elders can attend, therefore there is no greater church than a congregation which may ordinarily meet in one place.

Over time, these Puritans came to be known by their polity and were called Congregationalists. From that rootstock, liberal Congregationalists later came to be known as Unitarians.

Our Universalist forebears did not seek uniformity in polity. In the earliest days, the 1770s and 1780s, they were often from congregationally oriented Baptist traditions. Governance generally originated in the congregation according to needs. A fast-paced pattern of Universalist growth led to the formation of churches governed in various ways, so no one style of governance emerged.

The Universalists stood outside the mainstream of the Standing Order, a system they challenged. Using legal means, they were successful in challenging the established Congregational Church. This was a great advance in religious liberty. Once vindicated in that challenge, the New England Universalists set about gathering as a "convention" to unify and promote their faith. Although they were largely advisory, conventions later would confer fellowship and ordination. Further organization led to the formation of state conventions after 1825. Universalist historian Russell E. Miller, in *The Larger Hope* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), wrote of the organizing forces at work in Universalism:

Almost every step in the erratic evolution of a coherent and identifiable organization came quite pragmatically. Very little advance planning was evident, particularly in the early years; solutions to problems of organization and cooperation were arrived at on an ad hoc basis, forced by specific exigencies.

When the two traditions, Unitarian and Universalist, merged in 1961, a commission formed to study governance. The commission searched the respective histories and found three commonalities:

- Final authority lies with the individual.
- The essential autonomy of the local church is a given.
- Autonomous churches must come together in free association.

These values remain common among us today. Membership is voluntary. It does not happen by birth or geography. Members join a voluntary association in which the ultimate authority for their religious decisions rests with the individual. When we welcome new members to our congregations, we seek to include, but never to coerce, them. The act of choosing one's religious home remains essential in a free church. Individuals who join us thereby embrace the mission and fellowship, committing themselves to our common community.

Because the congregation is essentially autonomous, it is guided by egalitarian and democratic values. No one person is above the others. All members are a part of the governing process. The congregation as a body is the highest authority in its own governance structure, with powers and accountability delegated to the board for greater agility of action. The autonomy of our congregational polity frees us not to avoid authority but to create it ethically within our community. We are free to discern for ourselves the best common means to exercise our religious freedom. Through careful listening, thoughtful evaluation, and respectful relation, we seek high purpose and the deep commitment necessary to transform ourselves, our community, and our world. If we confuse our freedom from external authority with freedom from accountability, we fool ourselves and damage our relations to the larger Unitarian Universalist community.

The relationships among autonomous Unitarian Universalist communities are also voluntary associations. From the earliest times, congregations would meet to confer and advise on matters of importance. They would gather in synods, conferences on matters deemed essential to their common interest. They would gather on market days to reflect upon the sermons they heard and, no doubt, to compare the preaching of their respective ministers. Because we share our heritage, Unitarian Universalist identity, congregational polity, and the challenge of being religiously liberal, we are related one to another. Ours is a common religious proposition, and each congregation is inevitably related to a larger whole. Our free association, particularly our district and Unitarian Universalist Association, is simply a formal recognition of that reality. Therefore, care in those relations is essential to the health of each single congregation.

Even the smallest of congregations can, with a few keystrokes, learn more, do more, and be more in our movement. Indeed, participation in the larger Unitarian Universalist community offers many resources and benefits for those struggling with the limited resources and nascent strengths of smaller congregations. Having a mentor congregation, of slightly larger size and embodying healthy congregational practice, is one of the best methods for enhancing congregational learning.

Our longstanding ideal of freely gathered congregations that are autonomous yet fondly related gives hope for realizing the potential of our liberal religion. Ours should be a powerful transformative faith in the lives of individual Unitarian Universalists and in the larger world. The governance of each congregation should honor and work to make that hope visible in the world.

# The Practicalities of Governance

## Governance Documents

Congregations that are forming usually give governance planning a low priority. Founding documents are often "borrowed" from other congregations or derived from bylaw models available through the Unitarian Universalist Association. This approach is understandable, given the urgent demands of emerging congregations. And for many existing congregations, the passion of the free church heritage has been smothered by legalese and indifference. Where once existed charters in which founders testified to their longing to create a beloved community, now are found lifeless manuals on voting qualifications and procedures. Yet the opportunity to create and renew vital governing agreements strengthens identity and brings members together with greater potential for caring community.

It is possible to have proper legal documents and yet to include clear and inspiring statements that reflect the spirit of the congregation and its reason for existence. Include words that inspire and support the community experience. In preambles, insert meaningful phrases that frame what will follow and ennoble the purpose of the rules that follow. Even bylaws can become living sources of guidance and renewal when they are created authentically in community.

Our liberal religious communities fare best when everyone is empowered. Of course, all organizations need some centralization for coordination and efficiency, and to foster synergies. However, congregations should support decentralization of decision making and action wherever possible. Such decentralization is common in smaller congregations, guided as they often are by individual initiative. Sometimes congregations lose this empowerment, however, when the habit of checking every decision with the minister or board emerges with growth. It is true that the growth of any organization increases the complexity of effects. In other words, the "interdependent web" experienced in the congregation multiplies the effects and the number of people affected. Still, this increasing complexity need not steal initiative. Congregational leadership can intentionally foster an atmosphere in which all are invited to lead and participate. In a climate where innovation and individual initiative occur in a clear framework of mission, more people are freed to act congruent to the stated purposes of the congregation.

The mission, the statement of congregational purpose developed and affirmed by the congregation, must be a living document. It should be known by all, be relevant to all, and be a practical working document for all to use as they engage in the life of the congregation. The mission then becomes an organizing principle of governance—a commitment to a shared purpose, akin to a covenant. That covenant then guides decision making and leaves members of the community free to apply their own reason and experience to the situation at hand.



## **Characteristics of Decentralized Governance**

### **1. Be Guided by Mission**

The mission of a congregation is its reason for existing. The mission matters more than form, historical precedent, or personal preference. Try to see things through the lens of the mission, and if in doubt, ask, "How do you see this relating to our mission?" before assuming something does not.

### **2. Push Decisions toward Practice**

Whenever practical, encourage individuals undertaking projects to make decisions regarding those projects. Leaders feel much happier with their service when they can take into account the context in which the decisions will be applied. Encourage everyone to use the mission as a guide and to take initiative.

### **3. Encourage Conversations on Learnings**

Create an atmosphere in which people value learning highly. Disappointments are signs of stretching and growing in a congregation. New undertakings will require experiments and even failure. If we only do what we know we will always succeed in doing, we are not trying enough new things! Be a learning organization.

### **4. Create Roles Limited Only by Necessary Coordination**

Tell committee chairs and staff that they are free to pursue their piece of the mission and to yield that freedom only when coordination is required. Make coordination easy by having mailing lists and calendar management in one place that is accessible by all leaders.

### **5. Feed the Loop**

Nothing will stop effective decentralization faster than a failure to communicate. Decentralized decision making without a feedback loop is really unaccountable autonomy. When people make decisions or undertake actions without communication of the process and results, it keeps everyone in the dark. Everyone is disempowered. Even wild successes need communication to be understood and valued. Adding even ten minutes of reflection time for participants at the end of an event or project, and then having participants report on their discoveries, generates increased learning for the whole congregation.

## Practical Decision Making

How a congregation makes decisions should reflect all the characteristics of a free church. Respectful participation, democratic values, and reference to common principles and mission should be common in our practices and most clearly evident in congregational meetings. A congregation generally has only a few of these meetings in a year. In particular, holding the annual meeting is a customary practice that powerfully "commissions" leadership to direct the undertakings of the congregation.

Usually, the election of both board members and officers, as well as the approval of budgets, is a part of the annual meeting. In selecting who will represent the congregation and the means by which it will operate, the congregation exercises its authority in support of a plan (explicit or not) for the near future. Deliberations at the annual meeting should follow the principle of seeking the common good. The meeting should also provide clear authority to the elected leaders to carry out the will of the congregation between congregational meetings. The annual meeting should be a mandate of care and is best embodied by an informed "followership" that respects its leaders.

The congregation should take care to include minority voices in considering important issues. Often these sources contain wisdom that the group has not previously considered. However, it is human nature to focus upon the familiar and the near at hand. This focus may lead us to ignore perspectives and wisdom from different cultures, classes, sexual identities, or racial identities. It is a healthy practice to appoint a process observer to any decision-making body. This observer can point out habits that disempower minorities, the young, the old, newcomers, or individuals who are culturally different from the majority of members. A process observer can reflect upon what is happening constructively to ensure that the meeting process includes and fully considers all participants.

In any decision-making process, emotions can harm or enoble. Participants can lift up and redeem a discussion or embitter it with judgment and disrespect. It is up to the congregation to establish a culture in which healthy practices are the norm in decision making. Sometimes this is best accomplished by the establishment of a Covenant of Right Relations or some other document stating the congregation's intention to adhere to respectful and caring processes through specific means and principles of action. For further information on covenants, please refer to the resource *Vision, Mission, and Covenant: Creating a Future Together*, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "Vision, Mission, Covenant."\*

### **The Congregational Board as a "Small Group" of the Congregation**

Charles Arn, an expert on congregational growth, suggests that boards see themselves as a small group or "covenant group" within the larger congregation's program of small group ministry, or covenant groups. The suggestion is likely to draw a hearty laugh from those boards who linger over their agendas after 11 p.m. Arn says that is exactly the problem: Boards cannot work together effectively because the members understand one another too little. He suggests including opportunities for deeper sharing, times of silence, and attention to group process that invite participation from all.

In our Unitarian Universalist faith, a chalice lighting and a thoughtful reflection upon "what we leave behind in order to attend the meeting" can foster a growing understanding of our separate lives and challenges. An unhurried reflection upon what was difficult or inspiring in the meeting makes for appropriate closure to important governance work.

Consider the opportunity for the board to grow in understanding of itself as the ultimate exercise of teamwork.

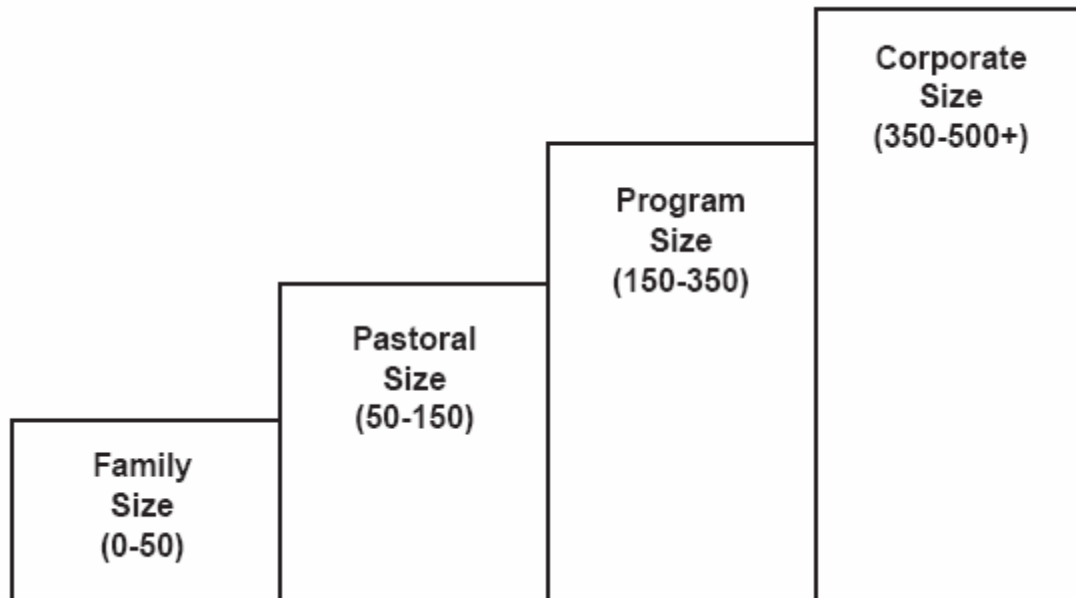
Respectful opinions should be respectfully heard. Still, no one or two persons should halt actions that have broad support. All decision making is imperfect. All decisions are imperfect. Each member should search his or her heart and mind to discern the truly important from the personal preference and should take care to listen with openness and to "speak truth with love." Above all, as participants in any decision-making endeavor, we should all mentally try on the phrase "I can live with that." Doing so may enable us to discover that even difficult outcomes need not define or undermine our commitment to our congregation.

Once decisions are made, congregations should make a serious effort to live them out. Let them be tried with dullest support and evaluated in fullest fairness. Leaders should consider evidence, focus on the positive, improve upon what works, and let go any attachment to what does not prove effective. Honest evaluation, then, serves as grist for the learning mill. Communicating to the congregation what works and what does not work gives leaders an opportunity inform the congregation of meaningful findings so that future decision making is enhanced.

### **Governance and Size**

All congregations must understand that the instruments of congregational polity will vary with the size of the congregation. The practices of governance must be suited to the characteristics of the individual congregation.

In 1983, Arlin Rothauge, an Episcopal minister, found that congregations functioned differently according to size (Sizing Up a Congregation for New Ministry [New York: Seabury Press, 1983]). Until then, it had been widely assumed that any successful program was appropriate for all churches. Rothauge discovered that the reason why programs succeeded in one place and not in another was a factor of the dynamics at work in congregations. The best predictor of these dynamics was congregational size. Rothauge found four size types and documented their size ranges according to Sunday attendance:



**Church Size Typologies**

Further studies of congregations have led to the addition of other typologies and refinements to Rothauge's categories, but his insights remain the preferred way of viewing congregation types.

Researcher and consultant Alice Mann has thoroughly considered the dynamics of congregations of each size and their transitions (see Size Transitions in Unitarian Universalist Congregations, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and searching "Size Transitions"\*). Her research and experience suggest that a congregation's governance style and structure will bear the hallmarks of the size "traits" of the congregation, and that successful movement from one size type to another requires considerable congregational learning. A congregation can become dysfunctional when it attempts to keep old styles of functioning at the same time that a size change calls for other governance styles more appropriate to the new size. Mann and others remind us that congregations may hold onto practices well after they are appropriate. For example, a pastoral church that is approaching program status may still be struggling to function as a family church. Thus, congregations should perform clear-eyed analysis,

perhaps involving others outside the congregation, to make sure they undertake only one transition at a time.

Mann's research is relevant to governance. Church size will predict which methods and practices of governance are most appropriate for a given congregation. A family-size congregation may be harmed by the use of governance techniques appropriate for program-size congregations. Congregations must follow a philosophy of "right-sized" governance. They can govern effectively only if their practices are effective within the dynamics of their present size. Trying to force a pastoral-size congregation to function as if it were corporate size, for example, is a formula for volunteer burnout. Such a church has neither the staff nor the resources to support its practices and will eventually experience the failed fruit of overreaching and the loss of size-appropriate success. This lesson is important for congregations with new members who are already Unitarian Universalists and have come from different-sized congregations. The new members may have very different expectations of church because of the shift they experience from one size (their former congregation's size) to another (their new congregation's size).

Congregations, then, must consider key governance issues in light of size dynamics. The following chart documents some of the common issues of governance that congregations face. It includes size-specific responses, but congregations should not regard them as prescriptive. They are typical responses to governance issues. What should become clear is that these responses differ greatly according to congregational size. A congregation may never experience more than one size category in a human lifetime, or it may move through the sizes briskly. Nevertheless, at some point, a congregation must move through the issues if its members are to continue learning and growing. Congregational life demands adaptation and continual learning if a congregation is to continue to be relevant. As Alice Mann has cautioned us in a familiar riff on an old prayer, "God grant me the humility to let go of my baggage; the courage to act on the basis of my experience; and the wisdom to know the difference" (The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations [Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998]). Please see the following chart where these issues of governance will be outlined. The issues are discussed in more detail in the text following the chart.

<b>Governance Issues Characterized by Congregation Size</b>				
<b>Issue</b>	<b>Family Size</b>	<b>Pastoral Size</b>	<b>Program Size</b>	<b>Corporate Size</b>
<b>Authority</b> —In all sizes, the congregation itself is the highest authority; from there you can see how sizes differ in delegating	Collectively held, delegated to board	Placed with board, functionally delegated to minister	Board, delegated to minister and delegated functionally to minister, staff, and committee chairs	Board, delegated to minister—CEO (to interpret and carry out policy) or to minister-led staff
<b>Institutional focus</b>	Whole	Whole	Parts	Parts/whole
<b>Focus issue</b>	Continuity	Funding	Program participation	Authentic policy
<b>Shadow issue</b>	Control	Accountability	Vitality	Relevance
<b>Process</b>	Committee, task group and (if needed) staff meetings, e-mail "trial balloons," congregational meetings	Committee, task group and staff meetings, forums, seminars, congregational meetings	Committee and task group meetings, staff meetings, forums, informal discussion sessions, congregational meetings, councils, seminars	Committee and task group meetings, staff meetings, forums, informal discussion sessions, congregational meetings, councils, seminars
<b>Development needs</b>	Church organization, hiring, member welcome and incorporation	"Best practices" for church operations, organization, volunteer coordination, working with ministry and staff, visioning and multiyear planning, stewardship cultivation	Committee "Best practices," strategic planning, stewardship, worship arts, governance, media relations	Policy Governance through staff: small group ministries, stewardship, electronic communication and outreach, facilities management, starting new churches (church planting)

<b>Documentation</b>	Board meeting minutes, mission, sometimes bylaws, possibly archives	Committees and board minutes, mission, goals, bylaws, multiyear planning, beginning archives	Committees and board minutes, mission, vision, goals, bylaws, strategic planning, ongoing archives	Committees and board minutes, mission, vision, goals, bylaws, strategic planning, public archives
<b>Key to action</b>	Leaders to members	Leaders to group	Staff to leaders	Minister--CEO to board, or staff to leaders or board to leaders
<b>Communication methods</b>	Word of mouth, newsletter and Web site, announcements, telephone trees, whole-member e-mails	Newsletter, orders of service, Web site, pulpit announcements, increasing use of e-mail by board, orientations	Newsletter, weekly bulletin (in order of service), Web site, decreased pulpit announcements, special mailings, e-mail lists, orientations	Newsletter, weekly bulletin (in order of service), Web site, rare announcements, informational meetings, special mailings, e-mail lists, orientations
<b>Organization style</b>	Informal (family norms)	Informal to highly formal, but increasingly organizationally styled	Established formal systems of control with informality at the fringes	Formal roles for board, minister-CEO, staff, and chairs; high accountability of lay volunteers
<b>Standards</b>	Did we succeed?	Did we—the minister and community members—like it?	Was it functional?	Did it serve our ends?
<b>Evaluative method</b>	Consulting member preferences	Anecdotal and informal board review	Some systematic inquiry and anecdote	Board evaluation of ends achieved, staff review of means
<b>Coordination</b>	Activist	Consultative	Functional	Professional in policy, managerial in staff

## Governance Issues Characterized by Congregation Size

**Authority** is usually the first issue. As we have seen, authority is congregational, but size influences how authority is applied. As we move from smaller to larger, the body to which the congregation delegates authority increases in complexity, and often in formality. This formality is sometimes seen as un-Unitarian Universalist, inconsistent with Unitarian Universalist principles and authentic congregational life. What is actually happening is that because about half of our congregations are family to pastoral size, informal systems are dominant. This commonality is mistaken for an organizational value, when it is actually a function of size. In a faith tradition that requires no specific theological creed for membership, we must be careful not to replace theological creedalism with organizational creedalism.

**Institutional focus** changes with size types. It is easy to see the whole congregation when it spans thirty individuals in a family-size church. However, the focus of a program-size congregation should be on the programs that give it that name. Program congregations focus on rich programmatic offerings. Individuals in program-size congregations naturally should not be as concerned with the whole, lest they provide only those programs of which all members approve. A healthy, growing congregation need not fear change. It should study the heck out of it! Ample opportunities for learning are available through reading, seminars, and workshops. No congregation should be unaware of the governance needs appropriate to its size.

Each size congregation has a **focus issue**. For each focus issue, there is a **shadow issue**. A corporate-size congregation, applying the Policy Governance—or any other governance structure—that defines desirable ends for a CEO—minister, needs to be sure the ends are appropriate to that congregation. A pastoral-size congregation, learning to accommodate the financial needs of ministry, office, some staff, and a permanent spiritual home, will learn the shadow lesson that these things come with a need for mature and generous giving.

The **process** of engaging with governance issues—their discovery and exploration—is also a function of size. The relatively informal systems of a family church work because this church is inherently less complex and more personal by virtue of its size. Although the use of committees may seem a universal of congregational life, they do vary in structure and formality. Whereas some congregations simply "gather the willing," others form committees by election or by employing board selection. For these reasons, the word committee must be used carefully. Will it use Robert's rules of consensus? Will it use modified consensus, or simply discussion? Clearly stating the rules for process up front and allowing reasonable effort to include diverse views are actions that contribute to a regard for the outcomes of governance. It is because of such clarity and care in process that large, or corporate-size, congregation governance can indeed be participatory, and the smallest congregation can be amazingly efficient and professional in its proceedings. Quality in governance transcends all sizes.



### **Less Policy Can Be Good Policy**

Boards routinely face decisions about requests for a policy. Sometimes it is possible to create a policy that addresses the issue at hand and puts in place a sound policy. However, bad policy can result from attempting to make policy in the "microsituation." A board that is preoccupied with the single decision before it can create policy that is overly narrow.

Sometimes it is better not to use such decisions as occasions to make policy. In such cases, the board might make the decision with the proviso that it will have a forthcoming policy that may or may not be entirely consistent with the decision it made on the present specific case. The board also may decline to make a policy or simply refer to related policies that already exist.

A recent focus upon "Policy Governance" for corporate-size congregations has included a focus upon board development (for example, see [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) and go to the Leaders' Library, then search for "Policy Governance"\* for a Unitarian Universalist take on the Carver Model of Policy Governance). Development, for a board, means being engaged in systematic learning about its roles and necessary skills. In that definition, the board's **development needs** are an intentional focus of board energy. But all governance methods require the development of their practitioners. Failure to provide that development focus retards the growth and quality of leadership. As a group, Unitarian Universalists value learning and are very capable of enhancing their abilities through theory and application. Therefore, it is strange that boards so often neglect their own learning. Board retreats, when held, are too often planning sessions that do not include exposure to topics relevant to the work. District seminars are often lightly attended and yet feature topics that are at the root of much congregational anxiety and concern. To take ourselves seriously as religious communities is to meet the need for learning with intentional focus. The agendas of board or committee meetings frequently should include the sharing of research, readings, or successes from other congregations. Leadership should presume a willingness to learn and should apply appropriate findings to the congregation.

The challenges of creating inspirational organizational documents, which have been discussed, must be accompanied by the internal **documentation** necessary to inform action. Face-to-face communication may work today, but who will know what was decided tomorrow? Documenting, by whatever method has been chosen, is a courtesy to all involved. It is virtually the only way a congregation can make sense of what was experienced and learned. It is the only practical way to connect the experience of the past with the experience of the future.

Board composition changes quickly. Preserving a record of what was done, and why, saves much rework and speculation over policy and operating decisions. These times of

easy electronic communication have lessened the barriers to good documentation. More people can be advised, included, and consulted. Therefore, we have the opportunity today to live out our values by keeping one another better informed.

Initiative must start somewhere. The locus of this initiative varies according to size type and is the key to understanding how to produce action in the congregation. In each size of congregation, a key linkage initiates the majority (though certainly not all) of congregational action.

In pastoral congregations, the minister and board lead together and focus on the whole—a change from the leader-to-member style of family-size congregations. When the board and minister of a pastoral-size congregation agree on a needed action, they generally communicate their findings to the whole congregation. This method accounts for an amazing amount of decision making at board meetings, which may feel "undemocratic" to a congregation used to participatory governance. However, this style of governance is quite natural and is a normal adaptation to the realities of size and the addition of professional ministry. It points to the need for those in the **key to action** relationship to make that process transparent, advising of the issues in play, soliciting input, and reporting outcomes.

Each size of congregation has key relationships spurring action, and congregations of each size must consider how to avoid "not bringing the congregation along," a common error when new learning and intense transitions are under way. Consistent communication can help in this challenge, but **communication methods** also vary with size. For example, program-size congregations generally experience fast growth in communication methods. Weekly bulletins expand the reach beyond announcements. E-mail lists and increasingly sophisticated Web sites keep congregants in touch with even last-minute changes in events. No pastoral-size church has quite the same need, because of the simpler nature of the programs. No corporate-size congregation could get along without such devices of communication.

Whatever the congregation size, important communication principles apply. Use multiple methods—never less than three—to communicate information; methods may be visual, oral, via mail, or electronic. The governing board should supply pictures, stories, graphics, and statistics to explain its perspectives (especially at canvass time!). Redundancy in communication sends the signal that governing groups want to inform and encourage participation.

The relative formality and norms of size types—or **organization style**—have been explored by researchers, but our leaders must study them. Members new to Unitarian Universalism, or those coming to congregations of sizes unfamiliar to them, will require orientation to both the potential strengths and potential weaknesses of size types. If we clearly see the benefits of each size, we can better understand the challenges.

Differences in governance are never wholly good or bad; they are only appropriate and functional or inappropriate and less functional.

How does a congregation evaluate itself, and by what **standards**? This question is at the heart of governance. Whether the evaluation is about the viability of our programs or the relevance of our policy, it is always a question about whether our means have served our congregation appropriately for its size. Most congregants, when asked if their governance method is working well, can answer in a flash. They know the answer without needing much reflection. Therefore, the standards question is usually simple and intuitively known—and well worth the time taken to ask.

**Evaluations**, however, require something more. They require methods to define who will be involved, what will be evaluated, and how the evaluations will be documented and conveyed. In family-size congregations, a member or committee chair may take it upon himself or herself to make a report to the board. In a corporate-size church, skilled professionals may lead such evaluations using the latest techniques. Whatever the means, some systematic review of governance is appropriate to all sizes of congregations and fosters a learning attitude in congregational life.

**Coordination** of the governing functions of any size of congregation must then be adapted to the workings of the group. A family-size congregation will naturally have a board that carries out the church's work—a board of "doers" as likely to perform a task as to consider its need. A policy board would make a grave error in jumping in to perform a task delegated to the minister-CEO and foul the working relationship between itself and the minister. The character of the organization will define what actions of governance are appropriate. A congregation and its governing board must be aware that coordination must match the organization now, not the organization of a decade ago. That attitude will allow wisdom to be gained and chaos to be avoided. As in most things, seeing reality clearly is the essential organizational strength, and this is especially true in the work of governance.

### **Humanity of Governing**

No system of governance can long exist without the goodwill of the congregation. Habits of inquiry must preempt habits of judgment. Practices of consultation must underlie decision making, and respect for pathos must be as genuine as that for passion. Whatever the issues, sizes, history, or precedents may be, compassion and care have no equal in service to our congregational governance. The willingness of persons to respectfully listen and honor the other's concerns is ever the greatest practice of true governing of self and of religious community. It is the practice by which we learn to walk together in our religious journey and the practice by which we are transformed.

**\*Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.