

Openness Implementation Committee History

Presented by Arthur Ungar, Chair at the 2005 General Assembly

Many persons have been concerned about the availability of information about the UUA, mostly focused on a few committees. Meetings were closed, or they were not announced publicly, or observers were not allowed to speak. Work on formulating an action plan started in 2003, largely at the instigation of Carol Agate. Emails resulted in the creation in March 2003 of a public list openuuu.org. There were ongoing discussion for months about what openness would look like, and how to make it happen. Things like a bylaw, a business resolution, a petition, or some other approach were considered.

At the beginning of the list, Jim Mason posted the following:

Here are some basic requirements of local, state, and federal governments, followed by how the UUA operates.

****All meetings must be announced and open to the public****

UUA board meetings are open; committee meetings are not. The UUA board has Friday afternoon sessions to discuss one subject in depth. These are often closed.

****The public must be allowed to speak to any item on the agenda.****

The public is not invited to speak at UUA board and committee meetings. There is no "open-mike" to allow people to make a two-minute statement.

****Boards, commissions, and committees meet at a U-shaped table with public seats at the open end.****

The UUA board meets around a rectangular table so the audience looks at people's backs. It is hard to follow the discussion and there is a feeling of not being welcome.

****The agenda must be available to the public at least 72 hours in advance of each meeting.****

The agenda is sometimes posted on the web site and sometimes not.

****The public must be given advance copies of all reports to be discussed at the meeting.****

This is usually provided on a web site by clicking on the agenda item to go to the relevant report. The UUA rarely provides reports. The usual approach has been to inform the public only after the board has voted on an issue.

****Draft minutes must be posted promptly.****

The UUA believes their minutes cannot be public until they have been approved, although a designated trustee at each meeting does provide to the public a summary of each meeting. When these summaries mention an item (e.g., the disagreement between the MFC and the UUMA, the report on the selection of the president and the moderator) the report being discussed is not provided. Committees do not make their minutes available at all.

****Votes must be recorded.****

No information is provided on how board members vote. When it is time for elections, voters have received no input as to how their representatives have voted.

****All appointments must be advertised and applicants considered.****

The committee on committees and the nominating committee do solicit applications for people to serve on standing committees. But some of the most interesting tasks are performed by board committees and ad hoc committees, with no public appointment process at all.

****Private email discussion is prohibited.****

Although board meetings are supposed to be open, board members freely discuss issues on line. The discussion takes place on closed lists.

Before the ready availability of electronic communications many of these requirements would not have been financially feasible for the UUA. There is no longer any reason why they cannot be met.

So, here is the crucial point – technology has made it much easier and cheaper to make information available to everyone. Of course, there was the usual discussion that not everyone has Internet access, but most people can get to a library or a friend if they really want access.

Jim Mason went on:

So what have been the arguments against making things more open? All these are statements made by trustees or staff.

"No one is interested." This is a chicken-or-egg issue. When people are aware of issues, they are very much interested, as the lively discussion on UU email lists shows. Sometimes putting out there information on what is happening brings offers from people with skills that can help in the process. In any case, the information should be out there, and then people can decide whether or not they are interested.

"It is too expensive." If keeping people informed is too expensive, it's time for the UUA to reconsider its priorities. If it's a question of staff time, more use can be made of volunteers. In fact, as our congregations know, the more people are involved the more they give. Whatever extra costs there are could be more than recovered by the increased involvement and recognition of being part of a larger group.

"Our meeting rooms cannot handle extra people." Most meetings are held in hotels. Renting a larger room would be a very small expense. If more hospitable board meetings actually drew more than the handful of guests who now attend, the added participation of our members would make it worthwhile to rent space in a nearby hotel.

"People serving on boards and committees are volunteers, and should not be subject to onerous rules." Most people who serve on municipal boards and commissions are volunteers, and there is usually no shortage of candidates at election or appointment time.

"Many discussions are not for public consumption." Executive sessions are always permitted for discussions of personnel, negotiations, or litigation.

"No one else cares about this." It should not matter how many people care if the issue is doing the right thing. But if you add your name to those below you can show the UUA board that people do care.

"There would be unnecessary controversy over unresolved issues." If there is controversy, it is not unnecessary. It is better to learn about it before the vote is taken, rather than having to retract the vote later, as has happened.

So, the openuua list became the vehicle for a discussion of what to do. We began drafting a UUA bylaw. There were many posts by Carol Agate, quite a few from me, some from John Blue, Beth McGregor, Dan O'Connell, Barbara Williams-Pemberton, and some from a handful of others. There were major debates on specifics, such as should conference calls and email lists be required to be open. We tried to let people know about the list to broaden the participation, but that was not easy.

We finally came up with a draft bylaw Rule. Several participants took the draft to their church boards and others, which resulted in 38 submitting it to the Planning Committee for the General Assembly. The UUA Board, faced with a certain vote at the GA and having reservations about some of the specifics, set up a task force to negotiate a compromise. They appointed eight people: Ned Wight, John Blevins, Tim Fitzgerald, Tamara Payne-Alex from the Board, and volunteers from the OpenUUA-1 list Carol Agate, Gila Jones, Beth McGregor and me.

The task force made some modifications to the Rule, which eliminated the requirement for email lists to be open. The Board then put on the agenda for last year's GA. Faced with two similar drafts, the delegates overwhelmingly approved the Board's. So, Rule Rule #G-2.1 was adopted. The Rule directs the Board to implement it and to report back to the GA.

The Board created the Openness Implementation Committee, with the charge shown in your handout. We actually began work last February. Since then we have created guidelines for UUA committees and task forces. They are on the handout and are posted on the web. We created a list for the committee which is open to observers. The openuua.org list continues to be available for anyone to discuss issues, but it has been nearly dormant.

The UUA Board has been very cooperative, initially setting up the task force to work out an agreement on the Rule, really improving their own posting of information, and then appointing our committee. After each Board meeting they now post notes of the meeting prepared by a Board member. These are available much sooner and more interesting than the formal minutes which show up after they have been approved. The Office of Electronic Communications staff has helped by putting up the web pages promptly. They are planning to install a content management system to make it easier to maintain all of the information that needs to be posted.

We are working with committees one by one to resolve any questions that they have and to encourage them to become more active in posting their information. As you might expect, some have been aggressively positive, while others are passive.

In May of 2003. Beth McGregor, former Trustee from Ballou Channing District raised a number of new issues that concerned her. I hope that these questions will stimulate some discussions today:

1. With improvements in electronic communications, I think it can be relatively easy to get more info to the in-group, the policy wonks, the UUA-and-GA junkies, who know what they want to know and are willing to take the time to look it up. It's already happening. My concern has long been far more with those who aren't in any UUA 'in-group': i.e., the relatively unconnected and often overwhelmed congregational leaders, and the

GA delegates whose congregations have sent them with no expectations or training. How do we make information accessible, manageable (neither an overload nor a labyrinth), and interesting to those folks? How do we let them know in brief, simple, accurate ways what the information resources and the basic issues are and how they can weigh in on them or find out more? How do we encourage them to learn and to speak? How do we get them to take congregational delegate status seriously?

2. How do we find out what (if anything) our congregational leaders most want and need to know about the UUA and its governance? (Might there be an opportunity at GA for Open-UUA to ask a random group of congregational delegates what they most want to know and/or are most confused or concerned about regarding the state of the UUA and UUA governance? Just listening to them might be illuminating.)

3. I know that most district trustees like me take seriously their role as two-way carriers of information, concerns and insights. One of the reasons we put up with an unwieldy, expensively large Board squeezed around a huge table is that folks seem to like the idea of each district having its own trustee. (Witness the overwhelming vote to add a Mid-South trustee last year.) So I'd like to know how people feel about the effectiveness and democratic value of the district trustee system. How good a connection does it provide between congregations and the Association? How might congregational leaders become more aware of and comfortable engaging their district trustee in dialogue?

As we look at models of polity, does the one-district-one-trustee system provide enough in openness and access to overcome some of its drawbacks (like cost and lack of enough at-large seats to get the best skill balance and diversity)?

4. Someone mentioned issues about the democratic election and functioning of congregational officers and GA delegates. I think it would be beneficial to all of us hear "best practices" of congregations who do this well, just as it would be beneficial to the UUA and district boards to be more aware of "best practices" among non-profit boards of humanitarian and religious organizations. (I find these board-to-board parallels and models more useful than looking at municipal governments, for instance.)

5. How can we build true diversity and openness in developing leadership and filling committee positions by making non-"in group" folks of all ages in the congregations comfortable and confident in putting themselves and their fellow congregants forward? How do we create a culture of welcoming those in who have skills and insights to share but know very little about the UUA? Posting openings is good but not enough.

6. Jargon, tech-speak, unexplained references, and acronyms. How can those of us in the in-groups (probably most people on this list!) police ourselves and official UUA communications to ensure that they address people in broadly accessible language that doesn't require prior in-group knowledge?

6. Finding ways in addition to the web to reach and involve people who don't have the time, inclination, skill, or good equipment and speedy internet connections to spend lots of time online.

7. I'd be curious to know how many congregational leaders read the long board reports, minutes, agendas, Moderator and President reports, Financial Advisor reports, etc. My own informal poll in my district tells me that lots of people read my shorter, more personal and district-tailored reports, but not the reports on the UUA website, even though I mention them and list the links in my reports.

This is of course an unscientific sample, but what I'm getting at is basically this--how do we determine what gets us the most "bang for the buck" in widespread awareness by and involvement of our congregations in UUA governance, and prioritize our efforts accordingly?

Some of these issues go well beyond what our committee has considered so far. However, the UUA Board has encouraged us to interpret our charge broadly, to tell them what we hear from the members,

and to make recommendations to them for whatever we see as potential for improvement. We are interested in hearing from you what you think is important for us to consider.