

Linkage Working Group Report  
UUA Board of Trustees  
June 23, 2015

Conversations on “Engaging Congregations”

The Linkage Working Group, together with the Transforming Governance Working Group, planned and held several conversations in May and June with stakeholder groups (listed below) to discern concrete steps that will fulfill and conclude the Board initiative to transform General Assembly. The initiative’s goal is a more inclusive and engaging governance process, focusing on issues that truly matter to the future of our faith and our Association.

The conversations focused on more meaningful engagement with congregations. The questions below build on the linkage work of Fall 2014 and will inform the discussion in the General Sessions and in a workshop at this General Assembly. The questions were asked of:

- members of the Board of the Liberal Religious Educators’ Association (LREDA)
- members of the District Presidents Association (DPA)
- the current President and past presidents of the Unitarian Universalist Association
- members of the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers’ Association (UUMA)
- members of Steering Committee of Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM)
- Youth and Young Adult leaders
- members of the General Assembly Planning Committee

**1. Accountability. The UUA Board considers accountability to go to the heart of the democratic process. Yet the concern over lack of delegates’ accountability to congregations and real engagement with the democratic process has been long-standing. It is helpful to think about why accountability is important: Accountability is how we assure that the board and the UUA are doing their work to serve the will of the congregations and of our other sources of authority and accountability. Does this understanding of accountability resonate with you?**

- While a few responses said the understanding was reasonable and accurate, many questioned the likelihood of achieving such accountability, or felt the understanding of accountability was too narrowly or wrongly focused.
- Several noted the questions focused on delegates’ accountability, excluding that of congregations. Two individuals emphasized that accountability between delegates and congregations is a matter of mutual responsibility—congregations need to inform delegates and delegates need to report to congregations. This understanding of accountability also didn’t include congregations’ and delegates’ accountability to the Association.

- Several questioned whether it's realistic to expect such accountability. It's challenging to seek that kind of accountability from delegates who serve in a volunteer role. Also challenging is that the General Sessions of GA really don't focus on what congregations need to hear or are "dying to learn." Congregations simply may not have leadership/interest in this—even if congregational polity puts responsibility on congregations. *"The only time my home congregation has come close to "better than horrible" is when someone takes the initiative to make sure we even know what is on the table at GA. Somebody in every congregation needs to get excited and take ownership. How in the world do we do that?"*
- A focus on the will of the congregations is too narrow—need to be accountable not only to congregations but to the future, and should focus our energies on the latter. Religious leadership has important role in this. The more representational the body is, the more consumerist decisions might be. Primary purpose of GA is not representational—it is inspirational. Very little deliberative decision-making happens at GA.
- Accountability, for delegates, is broader than voting. It includes accountability to others at General Assembly and to the congregation in terms of understanding issues and preparation.
- What is mainly needed for accountability: A strong board to hold the president to account and a mechanism to discipline board if it is not doing its job.
- Consider congregational, rather than delegate, voting to understand will of congregations
- There is no consequence for lack of being in right relationship
- For greater accountability, need to make General Sessions more relevant—there is a disconnect on feeling part of something larger

**2. Shared Experiences at National (or Large Regional) Gatherings. To increase engagement, one idea that the Board is considering is designing our national (or large regional) gatherings to be more about shared experiences and discussion that inform who we are in the world, to help us discern our primary and achievable goals as an association. (For instance, experience at Phoenix GA might further inform or specify our End that "congregations and communities engage in partnership to counter systems of power, privilege and oppression.") If we did this, what sorts of shared experiences and learning would be important?**

- Congregations' sharing of experiences was highlighted more than once—would like to see more focus on a theme than there is now at GA. Shared experiences should be used to engage on theological issues and transforming the lives of our communities. Example: at a regional assembly, Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt and Rev. Marlin Lavanhar held dialogue on engaging diversity.
- Reduce the amount of business at GA to focus on fundamental issues that go to mission and values of the Association. (Cannot eliminate business—some crucial decisions *do* require denomination-wide decision making.)

- Lift up real challenges in lives of congregations and of people, such as passing spiritual tradition from generation to generation. Highlight areas where challenges are being met in constructive ways.
- Experiences related to faith development and religious education in congregations are important.
- Small groups doing projects; hold up reflections. Board would listen to their stories and reflections. Need to include resources for grass roots actions.
- Community-building experiences, such as sharing personal stories and intentional unstructured time for affinity groups.
- Several responses did not see how Phoenix GA, while a positive experience in partnering with local organizations, may inform our Ends of countering oppression and who are in the world.; did not see such shared experiences as related to governance questions
- Intentionally multigenerational experiences—youth need more sharing with non-youth and more youth empowerment—such as speaking as Youth Caucus on an issue in General Sessions
- Greater focus on theology in gatherings. *“(This year’s common read) is about how UUs tend to be active in the political sphere but they have trouble doing it in the name of their faith. Having some kind of organizational activity that focuses on reconciling those two things... would be really effective because we kind of live in a world in which there is plenty of movements, progressive movements, going on, but they’re usually not centered in the name of faith... There are a lot of people out there who don’t realize justice serves a foundation for UU theology.”*

**3. More Shared Experiences at the Congregational Level. Another idea that the Board is considering is to encourage more shared experiences and discussion at the congregational level, so congregations discuss not only current issues but our broader hopes as an association (as stated in our Ends). For instance, through shared speakers, cluster meetings or community engagement, congregations might reflect on ways they deepen the spiritual and religious exploration by people in their communities. Or, rather than focus on any particular goal, congregations could discuss which of our stated aspirations really matter most in our current world. What are models of participation that you think would engage congregations?**

- Within the congregation, encourage more conversation before GA, tied to national issues. Support of professional ministry and resources from the UUA is needed for conversations on UUA governance and business. Congregations need better materials, including more accessible user-friendly communication on goals of GA and the Association. Consider delegate study groups that emphasize deep listening (appreciative inquiry). Consider shared speakers and pulpit exchanges, particularly by ministers

of color. Get national representatives out into the congregations to motivate and inspire.

- Considers resources for clusters and other affiliated groups who do not know where to start. Bring leadership to cluster meetings and district assemblies. Define clusters better, to further engage congregations. In congregations, consider meetings that discuss topics driven by GA agenda and Board topics—and include non-UU's and greater community in conversations on issues that we can make a difference on. Include covenanting communities. Look at styles of outreach and communication from congregations that are good at this. Consider a covenanting youth group that could share in conversations among UU congregations. One youth leader said, *"We should be able to hear from the UUA and respond. That is our responsibility and our accountability to our faith."* Some groups are taking initiative. One young adult, in describing how well his YA group is doing, said *"I think there are plenty of people out there who have great ideas of how to engage their congregations and initiate this kind of collective experience...it's just a matter of being able to find them and empower them."*
- On a national level, bring congregations, 3 or 4 times a year, electronically, the best thinking and inspirational leadership on provocative questions. Congregations are focused on investing in the future. Such leadership would draw people together in common mission, challenge status quo, and draw congregations into discussion of what to do to make this a living church 50 years from now. Think about regional gathering places for these discussions.
- Need to include experiences—not just "go talk about this." Need way to bring conversations back to the larger body. May need relationship-building and healing between congregations.

**4. Voting in Congregations. One outcome of greater engagement at the congregational level could be more opportunities for congregations or delegates to vote remotely on issues, rather than at a national gathering. What do you think the impact of such a change would be for our association?**

- Could lead to more informed voting, more energy and engagement on issues beyond congregational walls, greater equity of participation and more conversation. Could build interest in off-site participation, could remove some financial barriers to participation, delegates could become more able to represent the congregations and more accountable to them; could empower individuals to believe they have voice in national organization and compel them to be active beyond the congregation; could incentivize people to participate who otherwise would not (off-site participation is difficult without a community). May increase awareness of what it is to be in covenant and how to bring it alive as we do governance.
- Concerns: voting might be uninformed, loss of face-to-face interaction and full debate with larger community; loss of the wisdom and energy that comes from

that face-to-face debate; loss of power of affinity groups and historically marginalized groups to effect governance change. Congregations may be more interested in providing feedback on future of the Association than actual voting.

**5. Other than focusing engagement on shared experiences and discussion, what might it take for congregational leadership to be more invested in the decisions made at General Assembly and in the future of the GA?**

- Do more important stuff at GA and engage people in the living work of our faith. Empower and trust the people we have charged with governing.
- Reduce barriers to attendance at regional/national gatherings.
- Have a clearly articulated effort for growth—to deepen commitment to the Association, need to show mission is being carried out.
- Campaigns for President/Moderator can more broadly engage congregations if voting is by congregations rather than delegates—campaigns are strong opportunity to discuss where we are going.
- Educate on who we are and what we stand for in RE curriculum and also in adult education. Adult education could address what it means, not only theologically but structurally, to be part of UUA.
- Discern large questions that make an obvious difference in our world and let delegates work on them together.
- Provide more opportunities to gather in different ways.
- Provide more public communications from the Board that connect the Ends and work of the UUA to congregations.
- Have more outreach for participation from large congregations, where there may be tendency to be satisfied with participation at the local level.
- Educate on how UUA governance can affect congregational life.
- Build relationships of trust.
- Ensure engagement leads to meaningful consequences and outcomes.
- People need to see themselves as faith community called to serve the world.
- Responsiveness to feedback and ability of UUA to be flexible and versatile in addressing all the input.

**6. Who do you want to ensure that we include in this dialogue?**

- Congregational Presidents
- Seminarians
- Other denominations—we should regularly have inspiring and thoughtful visitors from other movements who may be struggling with the same things we are
- Camps and conference centers
- Musicians and administrators groups
- CLF

- UUMN
- UUSC
- ARE, Equal Access, Council for Cross Cultural Engagement,
- GA Right Relations Team
- Religious Professionals of Color
- Diversity of Ministry Team
- More young adults
- More youth
- Groups not well represented at GA
- Seminaries
- Large church ministers
- Small congregations
- UUMA
- LREDA