

Open UUA Committee Report to UUA Board

General Process/What We Have Been Doing

The Open UUA committee began its year at GA 2015 with five members in attendance - two newly appointed members, one current member, and both the incoming and outgoing chairs. Since that time the four committee members have met online monthly.

The committee determined that their first priority should be to review once again the compliance of UUA committee websites to transparency and access standards as stated in the rules, particularly Rule G-2.1. Each of our four members was assigned a portion of the active committee list. Members then researched the compliance of their assigned committees.

By and large, the results were very mixed – with some acceptable and some very poor. Committee minutes and agendas were in many cases not posted to the UUA site. In some cases where information was available, the information available was often old or incomplete. Some committees provided current member lists for the committee, but some lists were either not present or not current. Some committees that had been mostly compliant in the past were so no longer.

Upon review of our research, it was clear that further work with the committees was needed. We sent an e-mail to each of the committee chairs summarizing the relevant rule and asking for phone time to further discuss committee compliance. At this writing, the process of contact and conversations with committee chairs is still ongoing – although most of the committees have been contacted and discussions completed. Still, a number of points are clear. Although most chairs had no problem with complying with the rules, many were simply not aware of the requirements. Often, too, they had no idea how to post materials to the UUA site. Previously, new chairs had attended a training session after GA at which such requirements and methods were explained. This training did not occur at the last GA, and we believe that committee chairs and institutional memory have been negatively impacted by this lack of orientation.

In the course of conversations with the committees, there were also discussions and questions regarding what should be posted in minutes and how long minutes and associated documents should be available online. Some committees consider all or most of their process to be executive session material and, therefore, privileged. We understand that this is appropriate for groups dealing with personnel and other such confidential matters, but other business should be open and transparent.

One group which had specific questions about what needed to be recorded in minutes is the District Presidents Association (DPA). The DPA has a Business Meeting within each of its gatherings, and these Business Meetings tend to be very perfunctory – often

including not much more than election of officers for the year ahead. Some of the presidents attending the meetings would prefer that only minutes of these Business Meetings be posted and not the full content of their meetings – even though the most important work of the DPA is done outside of the regular Business Meeting. In earlier years, a general recap of what the DPA had discussed and/or agreed upon at their meeting would be included in their minutes. We believe that such a practice should be continued. This need not require minutes at the level of who said what during the discussions. Further discussion is needed as to what level of reporting constitutes transparency and appropriate compliance.

Advances in technology can allow for much greater access by visitors to committee meetings. However, committees still need to post time, date and agenda of meetings in a timely manner to allow observers interested in their process of these committees to tune in online. Zoom software is available from the UUA to enable this access by observers.

Transparency and access remains a critical but dynamic issue. Transparency compliance is not a “natural” outcome of committee process. With the regularly changing volunteer personnel making up UUA committees and the resulting loss of institutional memory, transparency compliance may decrease over time without active efforts to forestall such outcomes. The Open UUA committee hopes that transparency and access will increasingly become part of UUA culture. For the near future, until our aspiration is met, compliance review and compliance reminders will remain a necessary aspect of the work of the Open UUA Committee.

UUA Board of Trustees

As we have monitored committees and board behavior with regard to transparency compliance, we congratulate the UUA Board of Trustees for an overall good effort at generally timely posting of meeting dates, agendas, minutes, and invitations to non-board members to observe meetings. An exception is that video conferences are often not as timely in these functions, particularly in posting agendas and materials. Going forward, it would be helpful to have at least the next meeting date (whether face-to-face or Zoom meeting) posted as soon as possible after the previous meeting. It would also be great to have meeting agendas, reports, and any other supporting materials available at least a week in advance. If that is not possible, a notation near the posted date of the meeting indicating when the materials would be available would be a second best option.

A couple of other areas of concern occurred during the 2015 General Assembly. At the Budget Hearing the printed handouts were not made readily available for people entering the meeting. They were kept on a chair in the front row and many people had to actively request copies when they couldn't see them. For those who came in after the meeting started, they had to rely on another audience member to direct them to the front row to retrieve documents. There were no balance sheet copies available and,

when asked, the audience was told that they could find them online. This response gave the impression that there was something that the presenters preferred not to address in the presentation.

The Workshop on Re-imagining Governance, turned out to be a presentation on the future of General Assembly, but it was titled in such a way that most readers had no clue that was the content of the workshop. Regular GA junkies might have understood the jargon and figured out what this was going to be about, but those less familiar with the history of this issue would likely have been in the dark. When the Vice Moderator welcomed attendees to the session, one of her first remarks was to apologize for the opaque manner in which the event had been publicized. It appears that there was some awareness that the publicity was a problem, so it would have been helpful if it had been corrected before it was released. This is, at the very least, not transparent but could be interpreted by some as deceptive. More attention to the details of publicity for future workshops and events would be welcome.

Which Bodies Need to Be Open and Transparent?

When Rule G-2.1 on Democratic Process was first approved in 2004, the UUA Board had not yet adopted Policy Governance as its governance model. In those early years, therefore, there would have been no need to discriminate between independent, board-appointed, and staff committees, commissions, and task forces – although most groups meeting those descriptions would likely have been independent or board-appointed groups.

In practice, each year the Open UUA Committee has received an updated list of committees and their respective chairs with the understanding that those were the groups that were to be overseen in their compliance. In fact, these groups currently represent an assortment of group types: 6 elected groups, 16 board-appointed groups, and 9 staff-appointed groups.

In working with these groups over the years, there has generally not been much questioning from the groups about whether or not Rule G-2.1 did apply to them. This year, however, when the Panel on Theological Education was contacted, they indicated that they had recently transitioned from being a board-appointed committee to being a staff-appointed committee and wondered if the Rule applied to them under our Policy Governance model. We referred the question to our Moderator, Jim Key, who indicated that he believed that the Panel on Theological Education was a committee of the administration governed, in his opinion, by the intent of Rule G-2.1. He further suggested, however, that we include this issue in our report to the Board and request the Board's affirmation or disaffirmation of this view.

Members of the Open UUA Committee would like the Board to consider broadening the application of Rule G-2.1 even further to include some staff activities more broadly. In our attendance at General Assemblies and District and/or Regional gatherings, we have

often heard attendees express their frustration about the lack of openness and transparency in the operations of the staff. They have indicated that new programs or policies are sprung upon them with little or no notice and that they have had little or no opportunity for input. If the Board were to feel that more openness and transparency around staff activities were appropriate, it could encourage those with executive limitations policies asking for more visibility for work in progress and opportunities for input. Such policies would need to be carefully crafted to balance the executive's prerogative in selection of means with our owners/customers interest in openness and transparency. Executive limitations policies are intended to place limits on the means which can be used in attainment of the desired ends – usually prohibiting practices which are unlawful, imprudent, or in violation of commonly accepted practices. In this case, we would argue that it would be imprudent to keep congregations in the dark about new plans if it could lead to dissatisfaction with and/or alienation from the Association and possible reductions in financial or other support.

A case in point might be the recent unveiling of the new logo for the Association. Most folks had no idea that a new logo was even being considered. Even less, was there an understanding of why a new logo was needed. The reaction that resulted might have been avoided or, at least much reduced, by having alerted our members that a new logo was being for considered and explaining the reasons for the change and the process that would be undertaken. To be even more open, an opportunity for feedback or an explanation of the feedback process that would be undertaken might have been given. In the end, we believe that this would have been a more satisfying process – even if the end result were to be the same.

In another case, changes were made in the fellowshiping process by the elimination of the Regional Sub-Committees on Candidacy. To our knowledge, the ministerial students affected and the congregations that supported them only found out about the changes after they had already been made. They did not feel that they had been consulted or invited to provide input into the decision. We believe that more notice about what was being considered and more opportunity for input from those likely to be affected could have reduced some of the tensions created by this change.

Actions/Guidance Requested of Board

The Open UUA Committee requests the attention of the UUA Board to the following items.

1. See That Regular New Committee Chair Trainings Are Conducted

On several occasions, the Open UUA committee noted that many of the difficulties in complying with the transparency guidelines might be avoided by adequate training of new chairs of committees. For example, one of the most common reasons stated for failure to comply is that board chairs simply did not know about the guidelines or the resources available to help them in adhering to the guidelines. While the Open UUA

committee exists in part to spread awareness of the guidelines and to ensure compliance, it would be much simpler, consistent, and proactive to train new committee chairs before their tenure starts than addressing non-compliance later. A common opportunity for training would also help us achieve more consistent reporting. The UUA has often had a training for new committee chairs after General Assembly, but that was not done in 2015. We suggest that such trainings be done annually and that the Orientation Manual for Chairs of Board-Appointed UUA Committees – which includes information on expectations of openness and transparency – be distributed at that time. Elected Committees should also have such a manual, as well as any Staff-Appointed committees that are deemed to need open and transparent processes. We will continue to explore the most effective ways to be transparent and how to transmit that information to committee chairs. We will also work with anyone that can help us develop systems and cultures that lead towards greater transparency and openness.

2. Clarify Which Committees Are Covered By Rule G2.1

The governance system of the UUA and the names/responsibilities/structures of certain committees has changed significantly since the rules and language regarding committee transparency were adopted. This has created some ambiguity in understanding which committees are meant to comply by the rule. For example, committees such as the Panel on Theological Education and Committee on Military Ministry have been unsure of if the rule applies to them. Moderator Keys instructed the committees to, for the time being, comply, pending review from the board. A clear position on which types of committees (Elected, Board-Appointed, Staff-Appointed) are meant to adhere to the guidelines is necessary. In addition, the Open UUA committee has had some conversation about how transparency guidelines apply to UUA staff. We ask that the board consider how transparency applies to UUA staff as well as the general value of an open association. Guidance as to what elements of a meeting should be covered would also be welcome. That would require clear guidelines on what can and cannot be conducted in Executive Session and whether the general content of District President Association meetings should be available (not just the 'Business Meetings').

It should be noted that there are Executive Limitations in the current UUA Board policies that could be interpreted to apply here. Policy 2.2 on the Treatment of Congregations declares that "with respect to member congregations or those congregations seeking membership, the President shall not cause or allow conditions, procedures, decisions or services that are untimely, disrespectful, inequitable, discriminatory or not transparent." Policy 2.1 on the Treatment of People declares that "with respect to interactions with people, the President shall not cause or allow conditions, procedures, or decisions that are unsafe, undignified, disrespectful, unnecessarily intrusive, or oppressive." If these policies are not seen as requiring transparency of the staff with our congregations and dignified and respectful treatment of people by the staff, then they could be tweaked to do so.

3. Determine How Long Records Should Be Available Online

Several of the committees contacted wanted to know how long their minutes and supporting documents should be available. We would like guidance from the Board as to how long documents should be accessible from their respective committee web pages and how long they should be available by request after that. For the very long term, a decision should be made about a format for record archives – the IT world has gone from tape to floppy discs to CDs and DVDs, and we don't know what the future might hold, but we do know that records currently stored on tape or floppy disc will be very difficult for us to access now and into the future.

4. Determine How Observers Must Be Accommodated

Since Rule G2.1 has been adopted there have been significant developments in telecommunications and the ways that UUA business can be conducted has changed accordingly. While it is clear that the rule requires that in-person observers and visitors to meetings be accommodated, it is not clear how far committees must go to accommodate other would-be observers. Are only physical visitors to be welcomed? Can something like Zoom be utilized to welcome guests, and how can this be made widely accessible to committees? What about teleconferences? Clarity and direction on what, precisely, is meant by “accommodation” would prove worthwhile. Would this require additional expense that would require adjustment of committee budgets?

5. Specify a Mechanism for Enforcing Transparency Guidelines

There currently exists no mechanism or system for ensuring compliance with transparency guidelines. While the Open UUA exists to enforce compliance, and most committees are eager and willing to comply, a conversation on how, specifically, to *require* a good faith effort to comply is necessary. What body shall make the official determination that a committee is not in compliance (the Open UUA Committee, the Board, or ??). What consequences will fall to committees that are out of compliance.

Dick Jacke, Chair
Cheri Cody
Bob Falanga
Matt Weinstein