First Unitarian Church of Portland Oregon
Forum on Church Governance and Policy Updates
February 25, 2018
Notes from Forum

Governance under the First Unitarian Church is articulated under a set of Bylaws and Governing Policies. Changes to Bylaws require approval of both Church members and the Board of Trustees; Governing Policies may be modified by the Board of Trustees. Since 2015, the Board has focused on reviewing the Governing Policies in an effort to make them more efficient and aligned with the Church’s mission. The Board of Trustees and its Governing Committee began an effort in 2015 to consider changes to our Governing Policies, which include statements on our Church’s mission and practical rules on how the Board operates in relationship with the Executive Team. To in support of this effort, the Board held a congregational forum on February 25, 2018.

The purpose of the forum was twofold:
   To provide an overview of First Unitarian’s governance
   To explain the specific changes proposed by the Governance Committee.

The Board, led by the Governance Committee chair and Treasurer made a presentation, available here.

After the presentation, the Board opened the forum for discussion, questions, comments.

Key to Comments:
C = Congregant question/comment, Bd = Board response/comment

C - Concern that the follow-up “Me Too” meeting was scheduled against this forum. What does this show in terms of ET concern with board functions.

C - I appreciate how minutia and details can hang things up and that a more open approach works better. Can you give an example of a policy that has hung things up?
Bd - There are often confused opinions of policy and what is factual - this creates more walls than pathways to solutions. We all want to be accountable so want something more understandable.
C - Can you give a more specific example.
Bd - In following policy a few years ago the board found itself in the office reviewing personnel packets.
C - What did you find?
Bd - That some were not complete and policies not being met. We expect the staff to do their own review.

C - Read from her letter previously submitted. After listening to this presentation, congregant has changed her opinion on how the financial sections of the policies are followed - audit vs. board review. And applauds Bill’s financial acumen.

C - Audit process might want to vary depending on what is being audited. Some topics need a review more frequently than every 3 years- like personnel records, building maintenance. To get through the review, certain areas should be picked up each year.
Bd - Agree to large extent, although our small staff bears the brunt of balancing our budget through number of FTE, so we have to weigh ability of staff to do this work and participate in audits as well as the cost of them.

C - What policy governance sources did we use - she didn’t hear reference to any other large UU churches and their experiences. For instance Madison WI who use PBG has many of the policies we’re proposing to delete. Asks that we look at those and consider them. Bd - we heard mixed reports on the success of these in other UU churches, and don’t see PBG as the whole answer. Problem apparent is the board is acting in the way the staff should by taking on those responsibilities and not addressing the competency of the ET. C - Did we talk to any of those churches to see how it’s working and how well? Bd - Yes, we did look at Madison. Bd - Let’s not be misled to understand that because we’ve taken our “fingers” out of the day-to-day doesn’t mean we can’t put our “noses” into it. Idea that if it’s not spelled out we can’t address is not the case in the updates.

C - Are we moving from policy governance to mission governance? Bd - No, policy-based is still our form of governance.

C - He’d like us to be addressing how we can better meet our mission. Sees that as community and inclusion - key words. Lots of congregants are interested in being the collaborators of the 3-legged stool consisting of the congregation, the board, and ET. He wants more congregational involvement so more voices are heard. And not only hearing voices but responding to what’s heard and including congregants in the decision-making process. Many have offered input and received no feedback or thanks. (Applause from comments) Bd - There are many ways to participate in the church - remember that all the board members are congregants.

C - Every time I’ve wanted to be involved the door has been open. Comment - changing the policy of monetary contribution to the UUA - she wants to be sure we continue to value as she does the larger UU community and wants to see us support it more strongly. Bd - Agree that we want to support and we want to be realistic and encouraging. Invite all with comments specific to the budget to attend the Finance Comm meeting Tues 2/27 where the draft budget will be discussed. Bd - would love to hear more ideas over the course of the year from congregants.

C - The congregant comment time at monthly board meetings does not allow any dialogue - really wants a two-way dialogue. Can we have policy governance review on a more regular basis - like one policy a month which would allow discussion that is spread out and congregants can feel like they are heard. Thank you to the board and those who created these policies - he respects all their work. He loves this church and struggles with its governance.

C - These policies seem to move toward ‘top down’ vs ‘people up’ governance. A large church needs more effort put into how we listen to congregants.

C - Two issues - wants to see more transparency in form of reports on website, particularly since a lot of congregants can’t get to meetings. Are monthly reports available? What do we mean by enhanced communication? Bd - Part of enhanced communication are the 3 Board forums and 4 Senior Minister Q&A’s scheduled each year. Bd - Finance reports are sometimes separately posted on webpage, yet prior month are always in the board packet for the upcoming board meeting.
C - Next time add a slide that states “this is what we are trying to accomplish”. If he had to state what he heard it is - taking the board out of the business of compliance checking the ET and empower the ET. Board more of a steering committee and less compliance.

C - What are we going to do with the comments. What impact will this forum have on the board?  
Bd - This is an ongoing process with further review over time. We’ll share the comments from this forum with the congregation. 
Bd - We hear all that is said and will continue the discussion.