

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

September 15, 2021 Minutes

President Don Barber called the regular monthly meeting of the Board of Trustees (BoT) to order at 6:35pm on Wednesday, September 15, 2021.

Trustees Present: Don Barber (President), Therese O'Connor (Vice President), Diana Nier (Clerk), Valerie Graves, Simon Catterall, Nancy Miller, Margaret Nichols, John Gaines, Elton Hall, Walt Peck (Treasurer, ex officio), Rev. Tony Johnson (Minister, ex officio).

Trustees Absent: None

FUSIT Members & Guests: Beth Howard, Fred Balfour, Marie McRae, Wendy Salomon,

Handouts:

- [Resolution Concerning an Ad Hoc Committee on Communication](#)
- [Resolution Appointing Personnel Committee Members](#)
- [Resolution Appointing Governance Committee Members](#)
- [Resolution to Establish and Charge an Ad Hoc Open Questions Committee](#)
- [Summary of meeting with Rev. Renee Ruchotzke on Healthy Congregations](#)
- [Charter for the Healthy Congregations Team \(HCT\) from 2020](#)
- [Volunteer Appreciation Strategies](#)
- [Board Self-Evaluation and Narrative Response](#)

Agenda Item # 1: Opening Reading and Consent Agenda Approval

Rev. Tony lit the chalice and read a selection.

CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS:

- Approve the minutes of the August 18, 2021 Board of Trustees meeting, shown in Google Docs folder as of the date and time of this meeting
- Accept Committee and Team Reports

MOTION: Approve the Consent Agenda Items. Moved by Don Barber, seconded by XXXX.
PASSED.

Agenda Item # 2: Changes To Agenda

- No changes proposed

Agenda Item # 3: Congregational Communication Period

- None of the members present requested to speak.

Agenda Item # 4: Minister's Report and Upcoming Dates

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(Newsletter deadline is Thursday, September 16, 2021.)

Reverend Anthony Johnson updated the board on:

- We have received several applicants for the sexton position. Michelle Waffner is helping to sort through them.
- Rev. Tony has requested the Board approve a change to his housing allowance. Walt Peck read the proposal.

MOTION: Approve the changes to Rev. Tony's Housing Allowance. Moved by Don Barber, seconded by Walt Peck. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 5: Finance Committee Chair

- This item was added to the agenda mid-meeting, because as a financial issue it is tangentially related to the discussion of Rev. Tony's housing allowance.
- In prior years, the Treasurer has acted as the de facto chair of the Finance Committee
- Walt Peck would like to have a more official counterpart on the Committee to support his work as Treasurer

MOTION: Appoint Nathan Fawcett as Finance Committee chair for the 2021-2022 fiscal year. Moved by Don Barber, seconded by John Gaines. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 6: Ad Hoc Communication Committee

- Margaret Nichols presented the revised committee charge

MOTION: Approve the amendments to the committee charge. (Full text appended to the end of the minutes.) Moved by Margaret Nichols, seconded by John Gaines.

- Floor opened to discussion
- Does this supersede Elton's role as contact person for the Board email address?
 - Until such time as the committee offers a different recommendation and the Board approves it, Elton will continue in that role
- What about Nancy and Walt's role in contacting staff?
 - That was strictly related to shaping the narrative announcement
- Will this be an internal Board committee or involve the congregation at large?
 - The latter. "The Committee shall consist of 5-6 members, including a representative of each of the following: the Board of Trustees, the Membership and Outreach Team, the Way Forward Team, the staff, and the congregation at large."

MOTION PASSED.

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Agenda Item # 7: Personnel Committee Appointments

- Don Barber presented the appointments.

MOTION: The Board of Trustees hereby appoints Jenna Rosenberg, Carsten Hess, Susan Murphy, and Walt Peck to the Personnel Committee as volunteers with staggered terms of two year terms for Jenna and Carsten, and 3 year terms for Susan and Walt, and

The Board further resolves that committee members may continue to serve additional 2 year terms and are encouraged to do so for continuity of policy deliberations.

Moved by Don Barber, seconded by Therese O'Connor. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 8: Governance Committee Appointments

- The goal is a committee of 7 to 9 members, with a minimum of one current Board member.
- We currently have 4 names. Nominating Committee is still working to find additional candidates, and hopefully help balance the committee composition.

MOTION: The Board of Trustees hereby appoints Laura Free, Scott Grover, Elton Hall, and John Gaines to the Governance Committee as volunteers with staggered terms of two year terms for John and Scott, and 3 year terms for Laura and Elton, and

The Board further resolves that committee members may continue to serve additional 2 year terms and are encouraged to do so for continuity of governance deliberations.

Moved by John Gaines, seconded by Nancy Miller. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 9: Resolution to Establish and Charge an Ad Hoc Open Questions Committee

- John Gaines read the text of the proposal

MOTION: Approve the creation and charge of an ad hoc Open Questions Committee. (Full text appended to the end of minutes.) Moved by John Gaines, seconded by Elton Hall.

- Floor opened to discussion
- Transition Team reports that Rev. Tony has said the most important areas to consider during this time of transition are:
 - Heritage: know our history but don't wallow in it
 - Leadership: who leads? How can we develop and support leaders?
 - Mission: what is our purpose?

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- Connections: within FUSIT, and between FUSIT and the community at large
- Future: where are we going?
- These transition focuses should be used as the basis for congregational conversations and gatherings. Will that work at cross purposes to the proposed Open Question Engagement Process?
- The purpose of open questions has traditionally been to inform the creation of the next year's Vision of Ministry. How does that goal interact with this proposal?
- Extensive discussion of the purpose and implementation of Open Questions processes both in theory and in practice by FUSIT in the past
- Proposed amendment: add, "and make recommendations to the Board for future Open Questions," to the end of the line, "compile information gathered and present results summaries to the Board"

MOTION: Approve the proposed amendment. Moved by John Gaines, seconded by Don Barber. **PASSED.**

MOTION: Approve the resolution as amended. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 10: Healthy Congregations Discussion

- Therese O'Connor presented the results of her conversation with Rev. Renee Ruchotzke
- We are currently establishing a lot of new committees -- danger of getting overwhelmed
 - Lack of clarity on Healthy Congregation Team's mission
 - Is it serving our needs as a congregation?
 - Is it serving the minister?
- Walt Peck reported on his own experience as a member of the HCT team, starting in February 2021
 - The charge was a bit vague, as was the charge for the Shared Ministry Team
 - However, if they had not existed, our crisis this spring would have been deeper and more complicated
 - It is very important to have SOME kind of team to handle conflicts within the congregation
 - At the moment, finding and contacting the HCT team is not easy
 - The Board never approved the creation of a Healthy Congregations Team. Does it therefore even exist?
 - The 2020-2021 Board believed the Healthy Congregations Team was a Ministry Team and therefore not within the purview of the Board. That is why the HCT was not approved by the Board.
 - The 2020-2021 Board felt it was not our responsibility to weigh in on the composition and charge of Ministry Teams

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- However, due to issues relating to Covid-19 and the pandemic, interrupted communications often meant the Board was unfamiliar with pending Ministry actions
- Rev. Tony expressed concern that the Board has been moving very quickly through items and not really digging into any of them.
 - The Board is also largely new and are learning our roles
 - Additionally, many of these issues have been discussed previously in the intra-Board Slack channel
 - The Board is planning to move to semi-monthly meetings for the immediate future, which should provide more forums for discussion
- The congregation right now doesn't have the time and energy to fill all the committees we would like to have
 - Perhaps some can be combined?
- At the moment, the HCT Team is not meeting, and is therefore open to being dissolved or folded into some other group

Agenda Item # 11: Volunteer Appreciation Strategies

- Can we reinstate the Unsung Heroes for a few people/groups?
- This was dropped as a Board task because it was unsustainable in the long term. Any continuing resumption must carefully consider logistics
- Nancy has offered to send cards, and will send Diana a list of people to add to our Summary for the next monthly newsletter
 - Addendum, 10/20/21: The recognized volunteers are Dick Kurtz, the Recycle Auction Team, and the Nominating Committee
- The rest of this item has been moved to the next meeting

Agenda Item # 12: Board Self-Evaluation & Narrative Response

Process

- Board Self-Evaluation:
 - Diana volunteered to look over the agenda and make recommendations about whether items will run overtime
 - Don prefers that agenda feedback and revisions be a collective process, rather than giving authority to any one person
 - Suggestion for more directed questions versus completely open-ended discussion
 - This ties into circle process
 - Each meeting could include one evaluation question -- we can't look at the whole thing each meeting -- or we could choose a small number to track over time
 - Recommendation for two monthly meetings. One is just for discussion, the other is for actually voting on things

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- One of the main reasons for Slack channel was to have a lot of discussion before the meetings, so the meetings themselves could move more efficiently
 - If that's not working in practice, we may need to review
- Suggestion to switch our practice and use Slack for online voting for more cut-and-dried items. More complex issues can then be discussed in-person during meetings
 - This allows people to check Slack at their own pace rather than trying to hold discussions in something resembling real time
- The trouble with voting on Slack is that it's not transparent. Congregants have no way to look in.
- It's difficult to discuss complicated issues entirely online
- Two monthly meetings is unfortunately not practical for Board members
- Narrative Response Process:
 - Don and Therese made a video about our narrative response which will be released to the congregation soon, along with a letter written by Nancy and Walt
 - How do we want to proceed?
 - We received some deeply emotional responses to the Board Statement. These people deserve a swift and personal response
 - Some people still want more information about the staff departures, even though that is not something the Board can provide
 - Is handling those conversations a task for the Healthy Congregations Team?
 - Staff will need support and clear lines of communication. How should the Board best handle that?
 - Remember that a lot of members are unaware of issues that have totally preoccupied other members. Communication must be geared with the understanding that there are varying involvement and information levels. Do not assume pre-existing knowledge!
 - It is not appropriate for Board members to shoulder emotional counseling duties. People who approach the Board with emotionally fraught comments and inquiries should be referred to Rev. Tony for pastoral care.
 - This is an ongoing process. We will continue to work toward reopening the sanctuary, collect ideas for a second narrative statement on Slack, and post some additional videos as they become relevant.

Agenda Item # 13: October Meeting Agenda Items

- Volunteer appreciation strategies
- Appoint members to the Ad Hoc Open Questions Committee
- Board self-evaluation process
- Narrative response process

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- Healthy Congregations Team, and how teams and committees fit together

Agenda Item # 14: Meeting/Action Summary for Communication

- Diana will post a summary to Slack by noon on Thursday, September 16.

Agenda Item # 15: Closing Words

Rev. Tony read a selection and extinguished the chalice.

Meeting adjourned at 8:25pm.

Minutes taken by Diana Nier, 9/15/2021.

Resolution Concerning an Ad Hoc Committee on Communication

Whereas, we and our congregants are emerging from 16 months of enforced isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and during that time most of us saw few if any of the others in the congregation, and none of them in person;

Whereas, we will likely continue to function in a hybrid communications environment for both meetings and Sunday celebrations, which is likely to lead to both technological and social communication issues and challenges that we have never encountered before;

Whereas, we have a new Administrator, five new members on the Board of Trustees, and an Interim Minister for the 2021-22 church year;

And whereas, good communication between and among all groups in the First Unitarian Society is essential for the health of the Society, its smooth functioning, good morale, and the pursuit of its mission;

Be it resolved, that we will create an Ad Hoc Committee on Communication to gather and share information on communication methods, challenges, and possibilities, and to advise the Board on communication issues.

The Committee shall consist of 5-6 members, including a representative of each of the following: the Board of Trustees, the Membership and Outreach Team, the Way Forward Team, the staff, and the congregation at large. The Committee's term will be one year, with the option to renew its term if needed.

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The scope of the Committee's work may include some or all of the following:

- communication within the Board of Trustees;
- communication between the Board and the Minister;
- communication between the Board and the staff;
- communication between the Board and the Society's various committees and teams;
- communication between the Board and the congregation; and
- communication among members of the congregation.

The Committee may consider social and psychological aspects as well as technological aspects of communication, and communication media, methods, and strategies. It may also consider how to foster communication which is respectful and within the bounds of the First Unitarian Society's covenant.

The Committee will do its work with the goal of arriving at a set of policy recommendations for fostering open, constructive, and meaningful communication at all levels on an ongoing basis at FUSIT. We create this Committee with the recognition that communication is an ongoing challenge, but also with the recognition that effective communication has great potential to foster strong, constructive relationships and build community.

Resolution to Establish and Charge an Ad Hoc Open Questions Committee

Whereas, Bylaws Article IX Committees, says in part: Committees, both standing and ad hoc, function to inform and support the work of governing the Society. Special Committees are more transient in function and shall be empowered at any time at the discretion of the President and with approval of the Board., and

Whereas, Bylaws Article IX Section 1, says in part, Special (or Ad-Hoc) Committees may be appointed by the President and be empowered with approval of the Board., and

Whereas, the Board Policy Book Section 1.1 Role of the Board says in part, The board will govern primarily by discerning mission; planning for the future; partnering with the minister and staff; and holding leaders of the Society, including its own members, accountable for their performance., and

Whereas, the Board Policy Book Section 1.1.1 Annual Work Products of the Board further says in part, in partnership with the minister, staff, and congregation, the board will produce and adopt an annual short list of Open Questions about the Society's future, as the basis for ongoing

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planning conversation in the board, with the minister and staff and with the congregation at large. And,

Whereas, in Governance and Ministry, author Dan Hotchkiss states in part:

- “a crucial part of a board’s work is to connect to its constituents;”
- “open questions are a powerful tool for facilitating congregational participation;”
- “open questions are a way for boards to open themselves up to congregational influence;”
- “[open questions] create space for balcony work where board and its conversation partners step aside from the press of daily business and reflect together about the future;” and
- “responsibility for work on open questions belongs to the board;”

Be it resolved, the Board of Trustees hereby creates an ad hoc Open Questions Committee for the 2021-2022 year to work with the Board to implement and facilitate an Open Question process on topics selected annually by the Board. and

Be it further resolved, that the Open Questions Committee will

- ◆ help the Board provide education for the entire congregation and staff on Open Questions and their role in planning for the future of the Society;
- ◆ recommend to the Board an Open Question process that is broadly inclusive of the entire congregation and its staff to include congregational conversations, discussions with committees and ministry teams, small group ministry gatherings, staff meetings, individual communications, and other modes;
- ◆ record and collect responses and information from each forum;
- ◆ compile information gathered and present results summaries to the Board and
- ◆ make recommendations to the Board for future Open Questions

Be it further resolved, the Open Questions Committee will assist the Board to conduct a minimum of two Open Questions during 2021-2022. The Fall Question will be, ***“In these pandemic times and beyond, how can we as a congregation connect more deeply, inspire healing, and engage all our members?”*** The Winter Question will be on the topic of **Mission** . If the Committee determines, based on lessons learned from the Fall and Winter Questions, that a third Open Question process can be accomplished during 2021-2022, the topic will be **Racism**. and

Be it further resolved, the Open Questions Committee will consist of 5-6 members appointed by the President of the Board, including at least one representative of each of the following: the Board of Trustees, the staff, and the congregation at large. The Committee’s term will be one year, with the option to renew its term if needed.