

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

President Don Barber called the regular monthly meeting of the Board of Trustees (BoT) to order at 6:33pm on Wednesday, December 15, 2021.

Trustees Present: Don Barber (President), Diana Nier (Clerk), Simon Catterall, Nancy Miller, Margaret Nichols, John Gaines, Valerie Graves, and Walt Peck (Treasurer, ex officio)

Trustees Absent: Therese O'Connor (Vice President), Elton Hall

FUSIT Members & Guests: Michelle Waffner (Administrator), Emily Richardson (DRE), Angela Zhang, Nathan Fawcett, Fred Balfour, James Skaley, Marie McRae, Fred Conner, Dick Kurtz, Matt Hare

Handouts:

- [Minutes of 11-17-2021 Board Meeting](#)
- [Treasurer's Report](#)
- [Mid-Year Financial Projections, Nov. 2021](#)
- ***Board Committee Reports:*** [Communications Policy Committee, Finance, Stewardship, Open Questions](#)
- ***Ministry Team Reports:*** [Congregational Admin, Buildings & Grounds, Care Team, Celebrations Team, Engagement & Outreach, Hospitality Teams, Religious Education, Healthy Congregations Team, Small Group Ministry, Social Justice Council](#)
- [Proposed Motion in Regard to the Personnel Committee](#)
- [Draft Procedures for Responding to Controversial Communications and Related Issues](#)

Agenda Item # 1: Welcome and Chalice Lighting

Walt Peck lit the chalice and read a selection.

Agenda Item # 2: Congregational Communication Period

- Fred Balfour asked about standardizing tech for hybrid meetings. Fred, Angela Zhang, and Simon Catterall will resume this work.
- Jim Skaley raised some concerns about financial issues

Agenda Item # 3: Changes to Agenda

- Executive Session added to the end of the agenda

Agenda Item # 4: Consent Agenda

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS:

- Approve the minutes of the November 17, 2021 Board of Trustees meeting, shown in Google Docs folder as of the date and time of this meeting
- Accept the Treasurer's Report, Board Committee Reports, and Ministry Team Reports

MOTION: Approve the Consent Agenda Items. Moved by Don Barber, seconded by John Gaines. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 5: Ministry Reports and Upcoming Dates

- Don Barber contacted Rev. Renee Ruchotzke to ask about UUA resources for congregations without a minister. She connected him with Dan Hotchkiss, who is interested in helping us
 - Don has brought this possibility to the Governance Committee, who are interested in bringing Dan Hotchkiss to Ithaca for some training and guidance on navigating partnership governance without a minister
 - We currently have hardly any policies on how to operate without a minister, which is a significant oversight
- With the exception of personnel issues, the Board has little liability for FUSIT affairs
 - Whitney Kummerow, a local lawyer, may be available to give some professional training to the Personnel Committee
 - Personnel Committee will put together a list of questions for Ms. Kummerow
- Way Forward Team will meet Saturday 12/18/21 to discuss potential plans for moving back toward a more closed/virtual structure as Covid-19 cases surge

Agenda Item # 6: Personnel Committee Resolution & Support

- Walt Peck explained the various inconsistencies the Personnel Committee has been finding in their review of FUSIT employee policies.
- Personnel Committee seeks official authority to continue their review and make recommendations to the Board.

MOTION: The Board of Trustees delegates responsibility to the Personnel Committee to review and update the employee handbook, church human resource policies, employment communications, and past employment practices on an ongoing basis. In addition, the Personnel Committee shall be given the assignment to conduct an annual review of staff benefits. On the basis of these reviews, the Personnel Committee shall make recommendations to the Board for adoption. Moved by Walt Peck, seconded by Nancy Miller.

The floor was opened for discussion.

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

- How can we ensure that Finance has a voice in matters related to employee compensation? Walt Peck is the Treasurer and a member of the Personnel Committee, and efforts will be made to keep communication open.

Discussion was called. **PASSED.**

Agenda Item # 7: Open Question Project

- The Board is also acting as the Open Question Committee, as part of the Vision of Ministry process for the 2022-23 fiscal year
- As of December 15, the final day for participation, we have received 153 responses to the fall Open Question.
- Various challenges:
 - Only half of the Small Group Ministry groups responded. Hopefully that response rate will improve as new facilitators are trained in January
 - Several Listening Circles reported uncertainty about the point/goal of the Open Question, which suggests we need to communicate more clearly
- Margaret and Therese have begun collating the gathered responses, but have been holding off on more detailed analysis until the response period closed
- Once the data is analyzed, the Board will consider how to incorporate it into our Vision of Ministry for the coming year.
- Call for a Board volunteer to facilitate the winter Open Question process
 - Results inconclusive
- What will the winter Open Question be?
 - The topic is too large for this meeting. Should we schedule a balcony meeting, or designate a small group to choose a question and some preliminary wording?
 - If we use a Slack channel, all Board members can participate
 - Given that this is a task of the Open Questions Committee rather than a task of the Board, we can handle this via Slack and it doesn't need Board approval
- May want to add Discernment Circles to the response-gathering process, to help people contribute in a more structured fashion
 - It is unlikely we will get wide participation, so only schedule a few meetings
- Deadline for responses to the winter question should be mid-March
- The spring Open Question should relate to anti-racism. The Anti-Racism Team would like to help develop that question so we have it ready for March.
- Hopefully this schedule will provide enough time to create a Vision of Ministry before the Annual Meeting in June

Agenda Item # 8: 22-23 Minister Decision Process Planning

- The Board should be ready to announce our Ministry intentions by February

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

- Keith Kron will speak in January about the stresses ministers are under during Covid, and how the UUA can support congregations through these troubled times
- Need to decide among settled, interim, developmental, or contract ministry
- This decision will have substantial budget consequences -- big enough that we may need to have two separate budgets (A and B) to account for different outcomes to a ministerial search. Our budget process begins in January.
- We are too late to find a settled minister through the UUA for the 2022-23 fiscal year.
 - In the past, it has been very important to work through the UUA; does that still hold true? The UUA was not very helpful with Rev. Tony.
 - We are not the only denomination with a dearth of available ministers, so looking outside the UUA may not be helpful
- What if we continue to build up our own lay leadership for another year, so we enter the search process on a stronger footing?
 - This is what we did in the years before we called Rev. Margaret
 - Caveat: this raises the chance of burnout -- it's unclear how many people are actually participating in teams and committees
 - Staff and Celebrations Team may be at highest risk
 - Staff perspective is that it's better to have no minister than a minister who isn't committed, energetic, and ready to be a communications hub
 - Historically FUSIT (as with most congregations) has had a lot of ministerial turnover; long, stable periods are the exception rather than the rule. We should keep that in mind and not pin all our hopes on a long-term settled minister.
- What if we split the current ministerial role into two jobs? One spiritual/pastoral, and one more of an executive director? This could work well with contract ministry, and might help mitigate issues with ministerial transitions
- Liberal religious congregations all over America are facing huge challenges
- Congregations are more attractive when confident than when desperate. Some form of contract ministry might be a step en route to a more traditional settled ministry
- Historically there has been a strong correlation between attendance/participation and pledging. People need to feel part of the process -- it's important for the Board to be transparent about all ministry options under consideration

Agenda Item # 9: Contingency Budget

- Walt Peck presented the Mid-Year Financial Projections
 - Income is about as projected, though with a different balance of sources: pledges are up, rent, auction, and plate collection are down)
 - Expenses are significantly down due to Rev. Tony's resignation
 - We are projected to run a ~\$47 thousand surplus for this fiscal year

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

- We have several contingency items that the Board may or may not want to add back into the budget, given these changed circumstances
- Walt recommends holding off on deciding what to do about any contingency spending until January when we may have a better idea of what our ministry expenses will be
- Next year we will have a ~\$33 thousand budget hole because the PPP loan funds will run out. Should we save surplus funds to cover that?
- Some items we placed in the contingency budget may be irrelevant given the ongoing pandemic situation, such as an assistant DRE
- The Board agrees to postpone any decisions about contingency budget items until January at the earliest.
 - Treasurer and Finance Committee will keep the Board updated

Agenda Item # 10: Communication Committee Recommendations

- Margaret Nichols presented the Communication Committee's draft procedures for responding to controversial communications and related issues.
- The Committee is still seeking feedback from staff, the Healthy Congregations Team, the Engagement & Outreach Team, the Board, the Team Leaders Council, etc.
 - Engagement & Outreach canceled their December meeting, and want to know what the response deadline is
 - Engagement & Outreach is also working on how to integrate the Welcome Table with Hospitality Teams
- Board members will give feedback on the procedures to the Communication Committee
- The Communication Committee is seeking some concrete proposals for creating and nurturing a culture of gratitude
 - Appreciation: Beverly West and Carol Kammen, for their history of FUSIT
 - Start with a card and flowers, then something public -- either a segment of a service or an entire sermon on FUSIT history
 - Nancy and Emily will work out the details; Walt may give a sermon

Agenda Item # 11: Meeting/Action Summary for Communication

- Diana briefly summarized the meeting
- To discuss in January: continuing the communications procedure discussion, set Board goals for the next quarter, ministerial options, culture of appreciation

Agenda Item # 12: Closing Words

Walt Peck extinguished the chalice and read a selection.

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

Meeting adjourned at 8:18pm.

Minutes taken by Diana Nier, 12/15/21.

Executive Session: The Board went into Executive Session at 8:20pm. Topics discussed included ongoing repercussions from and reactions to the staff departures and surrounding events in the summer of 2020, and staff appreciation.

Executive Session Adjourned at 9:02pm.

Proposed Motion in Regard to the Personnel Committee

As we move further into an unspecified period of time during which we at First Unitarian of Ithaca are without a minister, it is incumbent upon the lay leadership to actively perform a number of functions that have been traditionally handled by the minister. Included in these functions are a number of issues on the personnel side of our organization. In particular, the Personnel Committee has become aware of a variety of inconsistencies amongst the Employee Handbook, UUA Guidelines, church policy, and actual practice. The need to explore these inconsistencies, as well as the need to bring our personnel practices in line with the interests of the Society as well as current and future members of the staff, have prompted this resolution.

Therefore, be it resolved that the Board of Trustees delegates responsibility to the Personnel Committee to review and update the employee handbook, church human resource policies, employment communications, and past employment practices on an ongoing basis. In addition, the Personnel Committee shall be given the assignment to conduct an annual review of staff benefits. On the basis of these reviews, the Personnel Committee shall make recommendations to the Board for adoption.

Procedures for Responding to Controversial Communications & Related Issues

Responding to accusatory or controversial media or conversations

Accusatory or controversial remarks between congregants can be referred to the Healthy Congregations Team, in consultation with the minister. In the event of a conflict which involves

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

multiple people (such as factions) and deep division, the Board, in consultation with the Healthy Congregations Team and the minister, may decide to ask a local conflict resolution organization such as the Community Dispute Resolution Center for assistance.

Accusatory or controversial remarks made by someone outside of the First Unitarian Society can be referred to the Board and the minister, who will determine how to respond.

In general, the initial response should be one of curiosity and concern rather than defensiveness. We should strive to fulfill the Second Principle by promoting justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, recognizing that compassion is especially called for in the current environment of pervasive pandemic stress. The person (or people) responding to the situation can begin by setting aside their own emotional reaction to what has been said and seeking to understand the feelings and point of view that prompted the remarks. Drawing out the person who made the remarks can help defuse the situation somewhat, help the person feel they are being heard, and also reveal their underlying assumptions, which can help the responder determine how to help them come back into covenant. Make sure that both parties are clear about what the other is saying. Paraphrasing the other person's statements and confirming that the summary is accurate is essential.

Who speaks for the Board of Trustees

The Board's designated corresponding member may speak for the Board in answering questions or responding to messages from congregants, using judgment to determine when an issue needs to be referred to the Board as a whole. Similarly, Board members designated to be liaisons with the staff may speak for the Board in answering staff members' questions and responding to their messages, using judgment as to when an issue needs to come before the Board as a whole. The Board should inform the congregation as to who these designated Board members are.

In other situations, where a Board decision is required, the Board will decide the issue by majority vote. However, in a situation that calls for a quick decision, the Executive Committee (ExCo) may decide and then report its actions subject to reconsideration and amendment by the full Board (Bylaws, Article IV, section 4). If an immediate decision is required and there is no time to consult ExCo beforehand, the Board President may decide the issue and then report their actions subject to reconsideration and amendment by the full Board.

Response to visitors on Sunday morning

If a visitor asks for immediate assistance just before or during the service or coffee hour on Sunday morning, they can be courteously directed to the Engagement & Outreach representative at the newcomers' table in the parlor. The E & O representative will have on hand

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Board of Trustees Meeting

December 15, 2021 Minutes

a list of resources that the visitor can be referred to. Hospitality Team members should be aware of the situation and know to direct the visitor to the newcomers' table.

Education process

We should seek to educate our congregation, and to remind them on an ongoing basis, as to what our covenant says, what it means to be in covenant, and how they can communicate respectfully and with an open mind and heart. The minister, the DRE, and the Healthy Congregations Team can all contribute to this ongoing education process in various ways, such as periodically giving a sermon on the topic, conducting or sponsoring an annual workshop on the topic, etc. In the absence of a minister, the Board, the Team Leaders Council, and the Healthy Congregations Team may coordinate the proposed educational actions for each church year.