

FUSIT Board Meeting

Balcony Meeting to Discuss Winter Open Questions and Minister Options

January 12, 2022, 6:30 PM

Board Members Present: Don Barber (President), Therese O'Connor, (Vice President), Elton Hall, Valerie Graves, John Gaines, Nancy Miller, Simon Catterall, Walt Peck (Treasurer)

Board Members Absent: Diana Nier (Clerk)

Others Present: Emily Richards (DRE), Loretta Heimbuch (Administrative Assistant), Stephanie Ortolano (Music Director), Matt Hare, Marie McRae, Fre Conner, Bruce Fredericks

Minutes taken by Valerie Graves

Discussion topics:

1. Winter Open Question – Topic Selection

- a. *The Open Questions committee is comprised of the whole board.* The open question topic for the winter was discussed over Slack and several board members expressed their support for the topic of mission. The goal at this meeting was to ensure consensus about the topic. There was no opposition expressed or other topics suggested, so consensus was reached.
- b. Simon and Margaret volunteered to help work on the language for the open question. The language will be shared over Slack to include other board members in the process of formulation and the proposed text will be included in the Board packet for the meeting next week when the congregational outreach plan will be discussed.

2. Filling Minister Role, Pathway for 22-23

- a. Keith Kron will meet with the board on Saturday morning. The Board must prepare questions to ensure a productive meeting. FUSIT will not be able to search for a settled minister for the next church year, so other options, including a search for an interim or developmental minister, must be considered.
- b. Each Board member was given a few minutes to share their thoughts on the options for FUSIT for the near and long term.
 - i. Therese – Some other UU churches use a very different structure than ours, such as having an elected church president. We need to map out alternatives to a settled minister and map out another model that involves more service and congregational participation. Those options include a part-time minister, contract minister, or lay-led services. If FUSIT decides on a part time or contract minister, the rest would need to be handled by a robust celebrations team.

Questions for Keith: What are some of the best practices for organizational structure? What is the outlook for finding a minister? How to increase involvement when the congregation is dwindling?

- ii. Simon – While partnership governance can be an asset when attracting a minister, it burdens the minister and leaves the congregation in a vulnerable position when the minister leaves. The option of having an executive director and a minister includes financial issues, and the two individuals must work well together. It's a good idea to let staff and the Board shoulder more responsibility going forward so the minister has more energy for spiritual matters.

Question: How to best support the celebrations team this year without a minister?

- iii. Margaret – I like the idea of a contractual minister and an administrator rather than a full time minister who takes care of everything.

Questions for Keith: With the model of a part-time minister, and part-time administrator is it more or less likely to find good candidates? If it wouldn't work, in his opinion, can Keith share what has worked in his experience?

- iv. John – *Question for Keith: Is the traditional model of Unitarian churches sustainable over the next 3 years, 5 years? 10 years? If not, what might be?*
- v. Elton – *Question for Keith: How can we improve our search and interview process to help us determine their ability to delegate, their administrative skills, and how they deal with criticism? Do ministers recognize that congregations are shifting? The young people coming in are yearning for something spiritual. How do we find ministers who understand those coming into our congregation and not necessarily only those who have been here forever?*
- vi. Walt – The financial overview was shared with the Board. Financial implications of decisions need to be kept in mind going forward. Regarding a part-time minister, I am pessimistic that we will find anyone. We might want to have some sort of flow chart, with the intention to try to find an interim minister, but also have a strong back up plan. What that plan consists of is unclear, but we need to make sure the job is easier for the celebration team if we have no minister. A head of staff is a great idea, but might not be affordable. The administrator could be chief of staff. When searching for an interim minister, if the candidate is not outstanding, we shouldn't hire them. We could instead use the volunteers and the staff we have and provide more resources, better pay, more hours etc.

- vii. Nancy – I agree with Walt about having a plan with a back-up. If we don't find someone who is going to be really good, we pass. We should also look at other alternatives that are out there. There is an association of independent ministers, mostly Christian, and liberal denominations that call ministers. We could look for other resources outside of UUA.

Questions for Keith: What does the future look like for minister and minister alternatives and what that means for FUSIT and other congregations like ours? What models has he seen for dividing up the minister job in places that have been successful in doing that?

FUSIT needs clear job descriptions and clear communication between the staff, minister, and board. We are up for thinking outside the box. Janet Shortall is now retired from Cornell – what pieces would she be interested in doing for a couple years? She would be great with staff.

- viii. Valerie – I agree that the search for a minister should only come to fruition with an excellent candidate in order to save resources. Otherwise, a back-up plan that includes many of the options others have shared can be followed. It makes sense to work with what we have and better support our staff rather than hire a minister who may not be a great fit.
- ix. Don – Jack Taylor preached about walking backwards into the future – we only know where we have been and that informs our steps going forward. We are in a constant transition with ministers. We always seek stability but rarely find it. There may be structures we can implement. Like Nancy, I want to learn what other models have worked in our past and within other liberal religious societies. We need to be resilient to minister transitions with the staff and minister providing shared ministry.

Questions for Keith: What structures and system designs might be impediments to keeping ministers? Is it a culture for ministers to do good work and move on? Is FUSIT's experiences similar to other societies, and how can the experiences be less painful and more of an opportunity for growth? What action steps can we take to create a healthy congregation that focuses on gratitude?

3. Identify Further Questions for Keith Kron:

- a. *How do other churches "do it" financially? To be competitive in the market – a church has to spend \$130,000 - \$150,000 on a minister. How do other churches manage?*
- b. *What is the size difference for churches that pay for full-time ministers?*

- c. *What models has he seen where UU has worked with other liberal religions to cooperate and provide services?*
- d. *What do you know about part time ministers?*
- e. *What are the benefits of a developmental minister?*
- f. *What are the prospects for a minister of any type right now?*

General Comments:

- In the course “healthy board habits” Ithaca was designated as a “large” congregation.
- A flow chart of our options would be a great visual – a decision tree.

Financial comments:

- Were the financial challenges we see now, apparent before pandemic? Will they be less apparent after the pandemic?
 - Response: If it had not been for a very generous donation for last fiscal year and the PPP money, we would not be able to pay our bills right now. During the end of Margaret’s tenure there were concerns. But since – yes, pledges are down. We need to think about how we want to spend money – do we want to provide benefits for the staff we have? There are things that will make it financially challenging going forward. A strong ministry can help, but either way it is tight. But if we have some savings from not having a minister, in the next couple of years, we could be in a stronger position to hire someone.
- One ongoing issue – we have one high paying donor who is getting older. Our situation is fragile. The pledging units have come down steadily.
- We have a really hefty endowment – larger than many churches. It should be for rainy days and we may have some storms ahead. Maybe we need to use some endowment money. I think that is what it is there for.
- I know two congregations that have been around a long time and have large endowments, and they don’t work hard to invite in new people. I’m concerned about bringing the endowment into operations. That kind of dependency is not good for the community. If we want more, we need to include more people, give more, or lessen what we want.
- We had a situation in the past when we were looking for a settled minister when we didn’t have the money. A donor supplemented the budget for a fixed period to allow the congregation to hire the minister they needed. We are not likely to find those kinds of donors in our current congregation.

Comments related to minister options:

- The option of a developmental minister hasn’t really been discussed or considered. That might be exactly what we need.
- It would be good to focus on what we need to work on as a congregation. A developmental minister could help with that.

- Developmental ministers might be from the same pool as interim but also receive training on being a developmental minister.
- The pool of ministers is small.
- The pandemic has changed ideas around work – There might be people who want to work part-time and are very good. Other congregations have part time ministers.
- Part-time ministers can do other work and be more involved in the community – might be more likely to stay.
- 5th Principle project – there is a group of UU ministers who are upset with UUA and think that UUA is deviating from our principles and moving it toward a credo-based religion. That group of ministers resigned from the UUA. There is an active website with information. To what extent this has impacted Unitarian ministers? Ministers may be struggling, not just with the pressures of the pandemic, but also with internal problems within the UUA. If ministers are not just leaving because of congregations, unrealistic expectations, governance issues, and lack of preparation, but also because a group of established ministers left the UUA. I am not sure if it should be brought up with Keith.
- This group of people are using this complaint as a way to mask what they see as the dangers of anti-racism – the movement was born out of a push back against anti-racism work and structural racism investigation, as well as LGBTQ inclusivity.
- When we meet with Keith, we should keep a little perspective about his biases and interests. We have questions for Keith, which is great, but also need to think independently.
- In religions in general, in this country after World War II, all congregations saw a decline, the same thing happened during the Vietnam war. We need to think about the life cycle of the church. The pandemic is another large event that could be affecting churches in general.
- In this century, numbers in mainline congregations are still drifting down. The UU has grown recently, evangelicals have spikes when there are stresses, mega churches are getting into trouble. Some religions fake their numbers: they might count everyone baptized, when only a 1/3 attend church.
- Regardless of the overall trend, this is why our mission is so important. We are here not just to maintain an institution; we are here to serve the mission. That makes the mission essential.
- We are looking for something sustainable, but that might not be in our grasp in the near future. We might need to have interim steps.
- How far outside the box does it make sense to think about this? What are the guardrails? If we go outside of that system, what could that look like and what experiences have other churches had taking that route? Do we have to have an ordained minister?
 - Response: No restrictions on what we do, but we also need to evaluate the risks.
- In one congregation, their minister had retired and they offered a job to me as a part time un-ordained minister. UUA would prefer that everyone have an ordained minister, but did not seem upset with the option. In Alaska, a church had two searches, had a developmental minister for 4 years, and then hired a retired Methodist minister. UUA was not opposed.

- “What are the guardrails?” is a really good question. Problems arise when the minister and the congregation diverge in their beliefs. Going inside or outside the UUA process does not determine the best candidate.
- In order to be a UUA minister, someone just has to be ordained by a congregation.
- There is basic belief in the 7 principles that needs to be shared.
- Ordain Emily!!
- As a congregant, I hope we get a minister. Maybe we can ask other ministers if they know anyone that wants to live in Ithaca?

Informational:

UUA is offering a workshop on restorative justice practices, which would be good for Board members and the healthy congregations team.