

MINISTERIAL RESEARCH TASK FORCE

SUMMARY REPORT

This summary was prepared by the Board of Trustees to share some of the task force's key findings with the congregation.

Background

An important area of focus identified as a priority for the interim period is examining different approaches to ministerial authority and areas of responsibility. To aid in this exploration, in May 2019, the Board of Trustees convened a Ministerial Research Task Force charged with researching clergy team configurations currently in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Task Force

Ministerial Research Task Force members were Jake Blasczyk, March Schweitzer, John McGevna, and Melinda Gustafson Gervasi, along with the Reverends Kelly Crocker and Doug Wadkins.

The purpose of the task force was to explore the question, "How do other congregations approach having multiple ministers serving that congregation think about ministry among them?" The group reached out to congregations of varying clergy team configurations and complexity to explore best practices, lessons learned, and to consider the strengths and challenges of various approaches. At the conclusion of the research, the task force provided a report to the FUS Board of Trustees.

Research Process

The task force focused its research around written questions sent to representatives of each church we reviewed. The respondents were invited to (1) respond in-depth via a written response with a possible short follow-up phone interview, (2) return notes for a follow-up interview, or (3) choose a phone interview of 30-45 minutes. The lay task force members divided up the churches and individually contacted them.

Churches Consulted

The task force researched seven churches. All were large UUA churches; each were chosen to represent different ministerial models; and the task force interacted directly with 15 respondents from among the seven congregations (seven senior ministers, two associate ministers, one church administrator, and five board members). Five of the seven congregations had more ministers than FUS.

All Souls Unitarian, Tulsa, OK (Certified members: 2,230. Pledging units: 846. Founded 1921. Total Expenditures: \$2,019,636.)

First Unitarian Church of Dallas, TX (Certified members: 1,011. Pledging units: 697. Founded in 1899. Total Expenditures: \$1,967,195.)

First Universalist of Minneapolis, MN (Certified Members: 1080. Pledging units: 691. Founded 1859. Total Expenditures: \$1,568,683.)

First Unitarian of Portland, OR (Certified members: 982. Pledging Units: 966. Founded in 1866, Total Expenditures: \$2,120,961.)

First Unitarian Universalist of San Diego, CA (Certified members: 618. Pledging units: 413. Founded 1873. Two sites: Hillcrest and South Bay. Total Expenditures: \$1,462,166.)

Unitarian Universalist of Bloomington, IN (Certified members: 533. Pledging units: 352. Founded in 1949. Total Expenditures: \$604,593.)

Beacon Unitarian Universalist of Summit, NJ (Certified Members: 485. Pledging Units: 249. Total Expenditures: \$869,252. Founded in 1907.)

What We Learned

Summary

Ministerial authority is organized simultaneously along both supervisory lines and by a portfolio of responsibility. Supervisory models range from hierarchical “Senior Minister as CEO” models to “Team Leadership” in which authority is shared among called ministers and sometimes a non-called minister or lay Executive Director. Areas of programmatic responsibility (day-to-day operations, public and pulpit presence, pastoral care) are distributed in a variety of ways in each supervisory model. In other words, each ministerial configuration embodies the supervisory structure and how overall ministry is defined and made operational in the context of the congregation’s history, community, vision, and governance.

Supervisory models

Senior Minister as CEO

Advantages/Disadvantages of the CEO model.

Clear lines of authority, ability to hire and fire subordinates and clear identification of who is accountable were three-related advantages consistently mentioned in responses. As one senior minister noted, “parishioners and others know who has accountability and authority.”

The very strength of concentrated authority can also cut against the efficacy of the CEO model for our movement. One minister observed that congregation members may be more comfortable with centralized power and authority in one individual, “Because of our society’s view of power, it does seem like there’s a cultural connection to associate one person as being ‘in charge.’” But he added that the senior minister model, especially with males in that position means “continuing a model of power that is hierarchical and feeds into societal views of power (male patriarchy) while overburdening the one individual with responsibility.”

The central disadvantages of the strong senior minister/CEO configurations stem from the fact that they are dependent on the skill level and personal characteristics of one individual. As one minister who occupies the far end of the CEO model said, “The model of a strong Senior Minister is of course highly dependent on the integrity and leadership abilities of the Senior Minister and that minister’s ability to empower others and work with other strong professionals without feeling threatened.” Senior ministers in this model reported having used their sabbatical to go to business school or creating a “chief of staff” position to take responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the church and supervision of all staff. Senior ministers with most of the power and authority in the “CEO” model also report that the role can be daunting. Senior ministers in this kind of configuration used terms like “burden” and “aleness” in describing their role. One minister also noted that she feels strongly that being both a minister and CEO is asking too much of a senior minister and that being both results in ethical/spiritual conflicts.

Alternate Models

Advantages/Disadvantages of Alternate Models

Three of the seven churches we interviewed had some form of team responsibility and accountability for the church.

The many distinct advantages of these configurations address head-on many of the disadvantages of the CEO model: the heavy burden of ministry is shared; decisions are considered to be “better” because they are made collectively and from different perspectives; minister overtime is more sustainable, in part because the burden of ministry is shared; the ministry positions are more appealing to young ministers raising families; ministers can focus on their particular skills sets and thus greater job satisfaction; and the team structure models alternatives to patriarchal and hierarchal patterns of power prevalent in society.

The main noted disadvantage of the team model is that more time may be required to make decisions. However, some also considered requiring more time a plus, given particular issues.

Ministerial Portfolio

The allocation of responsibility areas – or portfolios – among ministers is not dependent on the supervisory model within which the ministers work.

Ministers are responsible for designing and delivering meaningful and inspiring worship services in all studied configurations, but the shape of this responsibility varies. While some senior ministers consider being the principal spiritual leader and architect of worship services to be one of their major functions, at other congregations, the associate minister leads the worship team. In two of the churches studied, two ministers share equally the responsibility for worship.

Responsibility for pastoral care and social justice programing differs across configurations. A common pattern for pastoral care and social justice is for an associate or an assistant to lead and manage the church’s programs. The senior minister may also share in the pastoral care.

Ministerial portfolios change as needs change. In one case, the Minister of Worship and Outreach oversaw the church’s extensive social action initiatives while her other team member took the lead on pastoral care. However, according to this minister, she and her team members are doing more “teaming” because “so many ministerial areas overlap that it was nearly impossible not to do so. Worship, Pastoral Care, Social Justice, Communications, Membership, and yes, Facilities.”

Written portfolios and covenants are important. Covenants spell out the expectations, state behaviors, and make clear the underlying attitudes guiding ministerial relationships. Responses from all seven studied churches indicated that they had covenants, although they varied widely in scope and depth. Churches with ministerial configurations different than the strong singular senior model/CEO had written portfolios to assure that under co-ministry and team-leadership ministry configurations lines of authority, accountability, and responsibility are clear and understandable. Coaching by an outsider can be another tool for fostering healthy ministerial relationships and for preventing deterioration or dysfunction in the complex relationship. Coaching, used regularly at one congregation, was less prevalent than expected in the seven studied congregations.