

Getting Good at Governance Transition to Policy Governance at First Unitarian Des Moines

Church leaders began the process of moving toward a Policy Governance (PG) model during the interim ministry of 1998-2000, as a better way to govern our church as we grew from a smaller, pastoral church to a larger, program church. PG would move us from a system where the Board of Trustees was seen as running the church, to one in which the professional and volunteer staff would carry out the mission/vision of the church as identified and articulated by an always-future-thinking Board, whose work is informed by an ongoing, intentional relationship with the congregation and the staff .

One interim step included establishing a system to link the 9-member Board of Trustees to the various committees and ministries via a Board Liaison system. This system called for 5 program areas (councils) with a Board Member assigned to each one; ideally, the councils would meet a couple of times a year, and the Board Member would stay connected through regular communications (i.e. phone and e-mail). In reality, the councils were inconsistent about meeting, and some ministries operated independent to Board input while others had regular connections.

Meanwhile, the church experienced healthy growth, launched and completed a capital campaign, and weathered the ensuing construction, staff changes, etc. The Board of Trustees was heavily involved in all these changes, and the transition to Policy Governance was placed on the back burner.

In 2007, the congregation carried out an appreciative inquiry process to identify the strengths of the congregation, and the areas in which it wanted to grow and improve. In June 2008, the minister and Board of Trustees made a joint commitment to learn more about Policy Governance, and to further the transition to a true PG structure. They decided to enlist the help of Unity Consulting, a ministry of Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, MN, and applied for and received a grant from the Prairie Star District to help cover the consulting costs.

As of June 2009, we have made considerable progress. The Board has articulated key components of the structure, including its values, stakeholders, and ends statements, and has begun the work of establishing the policies which will guide the church into the future. They hope to complete the transition over the next 12 months.

Our Global End, which sets forth the church we hope to be at our very best reads:
“First Unitarian Church of Des Moines invites people into a respectful, authentic, joyful religious community that nurtures meaningful connections, pursues justice, and inspires service.”