

NEWSLETTER COLUMN

The Winding Path to Governance Leads to Formation of Governance Task Force and Hiring of Nationally Recognized Consultant

By Kathy Luker, Past-President, for the Governance Task Force

The Board of Trustees' goal of redefining governance at the First Unitarian Society of Madison culminates a more than ten year effort by church leadership to improve the daily functioning of FUS and to provide a dynamic vehicle as we grow into the future.

Early in 1997, the Board of Trustees called upon the Society and its staff to enter upon a process of thinking and planning by which we might approach the coming century with confidence. That process, known as **Vision 2000**, led to a governance task force that presented a report and recommendations for change. However, adoption of those recommendations was not forthcoming as other concerns took precedence and board and staff leadership failed to follow through.

I joined the Board of Trustees in 2003 and had served under five Presidents prior to my own term as President in 2009-10. During those years the Board continued to struggle in its efforts to implement a systems-wide leadership structure that suited the needs and realities of our changing organization. Board and staff weren't able to achieve the necessary level of consensus to create effective processes for the development of mission, vision, strategies, organizational structure, decision-making authority and oversight.

In 2002-03 a Board-appointed **Governance and Roles Task Force** was asked to review and make specific proposals to the Trustees regarding changes in, or clarification of, the governance structure of FUS and the roles of significant players in the work of the Society. While some of the recommendations were implemented others were not.

A 2007-09 strategic planning process involving a broad spectrum of staff and lay leaders led to the current **Strategic Plan** under which we're operating today.

After attending the UU Large Church Conference in the spring of 2008 and learning of research performed by Susan Beaumont, a senior consultant from the Alban Institute, our staff and lay leaders learned that FUS was in an awkward position. As Beaumont described it, we were in some ways a 'Professional' church and in other ways a 'Strategic' church. At that point it became clear that we were charting new territory without a skilled navigator.

During the 2008-09 church year **Staff and Lay Leader Roles** were further developed with broad input from the relevant parties. For example, the **role of the FUS Board of Trustees** is to represent the congregation in overseeing the direction of the First Unitarian Society and organizational performance. The Board focuses on the following activities

- Maintain an accountable, transparent and responsive board that provides leadership to the Society
- Set the goals and vision for the Society and provide oversight to operations
- Ensure programming meets the needs of the Society/FUS Community
- Oversee the Executive Team, currently comprised of the Parish Minister, Associate Minister and Church Administrator

Still, despite this important work the Board struggled with the implementation of its own role and concluded that one reason for this was a lack of foundational policies that could serve to guide decision-making.

Early in 2009-10 the Board and senior staff, after further professional consultation and much deliberation, committed to improving and strengthening the governance and management practices at FUS. Dan Hotchkiss, an ordained UU minister and Alban Institute consultant who specializes in church governance was retained to advise and guide us. Our shared objective is as follows: *To establish a coherent, mission-based governance plan, complete with appropriate structures, policies, and practices. The plan must be consistent with the congregation's core organizational values, appropriate to its present and anticipated size, and capable of articulating mission, choosing strategies, and carrying out effective work.*

In July of 2010 the Board formed and charged a **Governance Task Force** whose members are Lorna Aaronson, Brian Hellmer, Susan Koenig, Kathy Luker, and Michael Schuler.

The Board realizes that past attempts to adopt policy-based governance have been only partially successful. Therefore, in an effort to maximize the probability of success for this initiative, the Board has created this task force and charged it to:

- Create a structured timeline to have the Board examine the key policy decisions that need to be made before moving toward a trial run of policy-based governance;
- Produce draft policy proposals for the Board to discuss using various resources;
- Insure a high level of internal consistency in the policies being affirmed and ultimately approved;
- Communicate policy proposals that have been affirmed by the Board to the broad membership of FUS for further feedback;
- Provide the Board with a summary of the feedback on affirmed policies.

So, what do I conclude from all of this? Governance and policy development is darned hard but I am optimistic that at last we may succeed by tapping into the resources of Dan Hotchkiss, his book, Governance and Ministry, and the work of other congregations who have already blazed the trail. By the way, I highly recommend Dan's book. If interested, you can find copies in the FUS Library.

