

How We Govern Ourselves

All Unitarian Universalist churches have **congregational polity**, which simply means that the church governs itself. The church has no higher governing authority beyond its own members, such as a pope, bishop, or synod.

All Souls' bylaws vest the Board of Trustees with the responsibility for the church's self-government. The board is elected by the congregation to govern as a fiduciary on behalf of the congregation and in its best interests.

All Souls' board has the fiduciary responsibility to ensure that the church is properly managed. Because our board has fairly rapid turnover and because All Souls' ministry and operations are large and complex, trustees do not have the time, necessary skills, or institutional knowledge to manage the church's day-to-day operations. To effectively govern the church under these constraints, the board has adopted the system of **policy-based governance**. Policy-based governance is recommended by the Unitarian Universalist Association and used by almost all large- and medium-sized Unitarian Universalist churches. Policy-based governance is wholly consistent with congregational polity, congregational democracy, and our Unitarian Universalist values.

Policy-based governance can be summarized in one word: **accountability**. Under policy-based governance, the board holds itself accountable to the congregation to ensure that the church's mission stems from the congregation's aspirations. The board also holds itself accountable to ensure that the church is achieving its mission, which the board does by clear delegation to and concrete board oversight of the senior minister.

Under policy-based governance, the board fulfills its fiduciary responsibilities through three practices: **linkage, written policies, and oversight**:

1. The board holds itself accountable to advance the congregation's vision and to understand the congregation's concerns through intentional ongoing communication, which is called **linkage**. Linkage takes place through scheduled board listening circles and board dialogues, through trustees being available to speak with congregants at church functions, and through the board's email. A major challenge of linkage work is to hear all the voices in the congregation, not only those who proactively approach the board. Trustees must understand the congregation's diversity, aspirations, and concerns in order to make decisions in the best interests of the congregation as a whole.
2. **Written policies** are the board's primary means of outward communication. Written policies are the clearest way that nine trustees speak with one voice. There are four types of written policies, and these correspond to the four sections of the church's **Governing Policies** manual.
 - i. **Ends Policies** (sometimes called strategic goals or valued outcomes) are the benefits the church will achieve for the intended recipients at an acceptable cost. These benefits fall into three categories: **within** the congregation as individuals, **among** one another within our congregation, and **beyond** our

- congregation in the larger world. Ends policies evolve directly from the board's ongoing linkage with the congregation.
- ii. **Governance Policies** clarify how the board does its own work. Key internal board practices include recognition that board service is a spiritual practice, that trustees owe a duty of first loyalty to the congregation as a whole, that the board always speaks with one voice, that trustees must disclose and eliminate conflicts of interest, and that trustees must honor confidentiality.
 - iii. **Board – Senior Minister Relationship Policies** define the board's delegation to the senior minister of the **means** by which to achieve the ends, including how the board evaluates the senior minister's progress in advancing the ends and compliance with the limitations. The board empowers the senior minister to manage the staff (thereby precluding board-staff triangulation) and to direct the work of the congregation (thereby precluding board micromanagement).
 - iv. **Senior Minister Limitation Policies** specify what the senior minister may not do or may not neglect. These policies prohibit actions that are illegal, immoral, unethical, financially irresponsible, or unacceptable to the board. The board refines each limitation to the degree where the board would be comfortable with any reasonable interpretation of the limitation. By proscribing what is not acceptable, the board gives the senior minister the greatest professional latitude to achieve the ends, while the board still retains ultimate accountability for the means. The board is *always* clear about the amount of authority that has been delegated, and therefore the board does not "give away too much authority" under policy-based governance.
3. The board exercises **oversight** by regular monitoring of the senior minister's progress in advancing the ends and of the senior minister's compliance with the limitations. The board uses a monitoring calendar that clarifies the data, surveys, and reports that it uses to fulfill its fiduciary responsibilities. The board requests reports from the senior minister about progress toward the ends within the limitations in the major areas of church work throughout the year. The board will respond by asking for adjustments or altering the articulation of the ends and limitations when such actions are warranted.

Without the structure of policy-based governance, board work tends to be reactive and unfocused. With policy-based governance, our board work has become proactive, comprehensive, transparent, accountable, and focused on the future. Policy-based governance also gives the congregation clarity about visionary responsibilities of the board and the operational responsibilities of the staff. Policy-based governance makes it clear to whom congregants should turn with questions and ideas. Please talk with a trustee about the church's mission, long-term vision, and policy. Please talk with a staff member about worship, church programming, pastoral care, staff management, and facilities. This clarity about roles and responsibilities ensures that issues will be directed to the people empowered to address them.

Service on the board is an enriching spiritual practice. It is also challenging work! If it interests you, consider attending board meetings or suggesting yourself to the Nominating Committee as a future trustee.