

State of First Unitarian Church and Our Mission
Dot Christenson, Board President
Congregational Meeting of January 24, 2010

Want to know what's really going on at First? Read the whole article!

This year the primary goal of the Board of Trustees has been to determine a governance model that will help the congregation address our Mission as members of an urban Unitarian Universalist community. In order to support one another on our spiritual and ethical paths, work for justice, dignity and respect for the web of life, inside and outside these church walls, we have had to update how the Board governs and the church operates. The Board's vision is for us to be a financially independent, vital program church with a diversity of membership, music and programming, which is recognized as a standard bearer of liberal religion in urban Cincinnati. We are making progress.

The Board works for the congregation through a mandate by its members. It is our responsibility to help create an environment for spiritual growth, safety and financial stability. Our church needs to be, and is, a sanctuary, a beloved community, for ourselves, our friends and our visitors. The Board's role is to ensure that our Mission can be carried out in a welcoming, functional setting with a strong, viable organizational structure.

A primary lesson this year is that a church of our size -- just over 300 members -- needs to redefine responsibility and authority to carry out the work that supports our Mission. Our Mission and Strategic Plan were developed by the congregation, which also elects the Board. The Board's job will be to create policy that will direct and authorize staff and volunteers to carry out the shared ministry and administration of the church, rather than micromanage committees and staff at their monthly meetings. One response to church growth has been the creation of a staff of qualified professionals. With this complement of paid staff to support our highly prized senior minister, church operations have been much easier for the Board and committees than in past years.

Rev. Sharon Dittmar, Senior Minister, continues to inspire the congregation. The community at large, especially Avondale, looks to her and First Church for civic leadership. Sharon also oversees the paid staff. It's hard to believe but Sharon -- in her 13th year with us -- is due a short ministerial sabbatical period in Spring 2011.

- Rev. Annie Foerster joined the staff part-time in 2008-09 as Congregational Coordinator/Pastoral Caregiver. Annie brought great organizational skills to our committees, and helped create job descriptions for all volunteer and staff positions. Last summer we raised funds to keep Annie as Assistant Minister this year, and provide much needed assistance to Rev. Sharon Dittmar.
- Tom Sherwood, Director of Music, joined us last year. Tom is a fine performer and has directed a men's quartet for the past 20 years, taught voice lessons and conducted several church choirs. In addition to his part-time position at First Church, he also teaches voice at UC's College Conservatory of Music and in private lessons.

- Meredith Plummer, Director of Religious Education, has hired additional RE assistants to address how to best serve our growing children and youth classes. More than 85 children are enrolled, and dozens of adults assist in various roles.
- John Hines, part-time Financial Secretary, fills a new position we desperately needed for several years as Facilities Manager. In a very short time, John has expanded our wi-fi area, overseen roof repairs and tuck pointing, manages facility use by outside groups, and responds to everything from gas stove pilot light leaks to falling ceiling light fixtures.
- Marlo Troughton, Office Administrator, also doubles as our Newsletter Editor. She has brought strong organizational skills to this central position, helping to maintain the website, coordinate meeting space and post useful information for the congregation.
- LeRoy Nelson, Custodian, makes sure our facility is clean, safe, warm, and functioning for all kinds of activities sponsored by Church groups and also outside renters. His dependability and congeniality carry over to our church's friendly cooperative image.

The roles of the Board and Staff have changed significantly in the past few years. We have made substantial progress to becoming a program church with a focus on the church's Mission, Strategic Plan, Governance and Shared Ministry. We sincerely believe this transition is necessary and positive. To guide us we are using Dan Hotchkiss's book *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*. If you are interested in understanding the philosophy behind the changes being made at First Church, we have made several copies of his book available in our library. Hotchkiss is a Unitarian Universalist Minister and a member of the Alban Institute. His book is readable and easy to understand. Check out a copy soon.

Following the plan for shared governance, the Board has shifted its focus to what I call "real" board work, i.e., policy and planning for long-term viability, such as:

- Working with committees to update our by-laws and constitution.
- Collecting and updating operational policies and creating a Policy Manual to standardize decision-making and delegate authority more efficiently.
- Defining what authority and responsibility will be delegated to staff and committees.
- Implementing employee and committee evaluation procedures to help assure compliance with position descriptions and established policies.

A continuing high priority for the Board is to communicate better. The between-services forums are effective for only a few. With the help of the Advisory Team, we will be expanding "conversations" about governance to a variety of days and times so all who are interested can participate in discussion of important issues.

There is a lot of work still to be done to update our governing documents and to achieve understanding acceptance for our new way of doing business. There are no short cuts to this work if we expect to have everyone on board. We expect the entire process to take about two years.

In the 2011-2012 church year a new Strategic Plan will be on created. Individually and collectively the congregation needs to think about our stewardship to support our Mission.

Hotchkiss calls this process ‘discernment,’ and is the responsibility of volunteers and staff in partnership. To sustain our current vitality, we must step up to support the current staffing at appropriate wage levels, and perhaps to expand staff to cover some of our extensive all-volunteer membership duties. We need to begin (once again) to think about long-term capital improvements to provide new lighting and complete upgrading of the sanctuary, including air conditioning. And we need acceptance of the new organizational/governance model to help us support growth and continue our mission to become better known as a community of justice and a haven for those who seek a non-traditional liberal religious community.

And the work we are doing is, I believe, creating an invigorating and exciting environment for moving us ahead for the next decade. If you are not already involved, we invite you to participate in both our governance and shared ministry tasks. I encourage you to step forward with your ideas and skills. Members of the Board and I would be happy to hear from any of you who have thoughts on how we are doing. You can call or send an email (we’re all listed in the directory), respond to our upcoming survey, and/or attend any of the opportunities we will present for congregational discussion (see “Growth & Governance” article in our February 28 newsletter for dates and times).

Thank you for your continued commitment to our beloved community.

Dot Christenson, President
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati Board of Trustees