

Policy Governance and Unitarian Universalist Congregational Polity

Eric Kaminetzky

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“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to leave alone.”<sup>1</sup> In that phrase, Thoreau’s use of the word “rich” has been interpreted as meaning, “having the opportunity for spiritual and intellectual gains,” and the word “afford” as, “...refer [ring] to self-actualization.”<sup>2</sup>

The quote, from the chapter of Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) entitled Economy, reflects the thesis of this paper.

Polity, as a means and mechanism, should serve the ends of congregational life, and though the ends of our congregational lives vary, they ought to foster community within, without, and between congregations. Furthermore, as Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs posits in his paper, *Churches That Count*,<sup>3</sup> the ends of congregational life should engender the experience of the Holy.

If, as proposed in *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, congregational polity is “a covenant [or] a mutual agreement and a commitment to walk together and support one another,”<sup>4</sup> it is reasonable to ask whether policy governance, as one governance model among many, is compatible with our polity and supportive of that covenant.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, (1854)

<sup>2</sup> Ken Kifer, <http://tinyurl.com/pzkwt>

<sup>3</sup> Rob Eller-Isaacs, *Churches That Count*, (2004)

<sup>4</sup> *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997) p.11

That quote from *Interdependence* refers to the covenant between congregations rather than the covenant among members of one congregation. Nonetheless, it raises the idea that we are all in this together and, “the ideal of rugged individualism on the personal [or congregational] level,”<sup>5</sup> is something from which Unitarian Universalists ought to continue to move away.

Reverend John Papandrew described rugged individualism as leading to ultimate disconnection and absence of relationship, which, in his theology, is tantamount to Hell.<sup>6</sup>

Among their many functions, our governance models ought to, at a minimum, support us in avoiding Hell even if, as our Universalist forbears believed, it exists only on Earth.

We use the word covenant in the context of polity, “to explain how a ‘non-creedal’ church can assert its unity of purpose (if not necessarily its unity of belief).”<sup>7</sup>

Our polity, the ideas about the source of our congregational authority, informs the way we govern and run our congregations and reflects a historical posture “that ‘there is no greater Church than a Congregation,’ which consists of visible saints in voluntary agreement and covenant with each other to ‘worship, edify and have fellowship.’”<sup>8</sup> We, then, as individual congregations, as individuals within congregations, as members of congregations that are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as citizens of the world in which our Association has its effect, have direct responsibility for how

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at p.13

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at p.56

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at p.42

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at p.17 quoting Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp.207, 209

our movement unfolds. Given that, the importance of how we run our congregations becomes clear.

In, *Interdependence*, James Luther Adams is quoted as, "...emphasiz[ing] that an authentic covenant is rooted in love, not law."<sup>9</sup> I take this to imply we should not build structures for their own sake. We should build structures that support our covenant.

John Carver's Policy Governance® is one way to support our covenant and run our congregations. There are many commentators, including Carver, who describe what Policy Governance is and is not.

In Policy Governance, "a governing board's primary function is not to make decisions, but rather to define policies to guide decisions throughout the organization."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the role of the governing board moves from one of management of day-to-day decisions to one of being in touch with the congregation and taking the information gleaned from those relational interactions into the process of creating the vision, or ends, of the congregation.

Rev. Margaret Keip describes Policy Governance as, "...a fundamental redesign of the role of a board, emphasizing values, vision, and the empowerment of both board and staff."<sup>11</sup> And she notes that 'staff' includes volunteers who serve in leadership roles.

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<sup>9</sup> *Id. at p.43*

<sup>10</sup> Peter Hand, *What Is Policy Governance, Anyway?* (2002) <http://tinyurl.com/jnom4> [I use the website [www.tinyurl.com](http://www.tinyurl.com) to reduce very long universal resource locator strings like [http://www.uua.org/interconnections/policy/what\\_is\\_policy\\_governance.htm](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/policy/what_is_policy_governance.htm) down to a more manageable size. If you click on the tinyurl link or enter it into your browser you will get to the page that is represented by the longer string]

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Keip, *Basic Principles of Policy Governance*, <http://tinyurl.com/jmkyu>

John Saxon, a Unitarian Universalist seminarian and professor at the North Carolina Institute of State Government, quotes John Carver's vision of governing boards as exercising, "their authority and responsibility for governance through the adoption of policies that articulate the "ends" (purpose, goals, vision) of the organization, that limit the "means" by which these ends will be achieved, that define the relationship between the board and the organization's staff, and that define the processes by which the board will exercise its authority and responsibility. (Carver [1990], 34-39)<sup>12</sup>

Interviewing Margaret Keip by telephone, I described my understanding of congregational authority. I explained that I think members of a congregation have individual authority over their own conscience, and together through duly called meetings of the congregation have ultimate authority for the actions taken on its behalf. They express this authority by voting or engaging other methods for making group decisions.

Typically, members of the congregation elect board members and officers to act as trustees of that authority, and empower them to govern the congregation by representation. The members may grant some or all of their authority to the board. In return, the board is expected to act on behalf of the members of the congregation, wielding that authority for the good and toward the ends of the congregation.

The board hires staff and empowers them to act on their behalf up to the limit of authority granted. The board, like the congregation, can only give away the authority it has.

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<sup>12</sup> John Saxon, *Should UU Ministers Be CEOs? A Brief Critique of the Application of John Carver's Policy Governance Model to UU Congregations* (2004)

Staff then carries out the day-to-day functions of the congregation, enlisting help from volunteer members and friends.

Rev. Keip said this was an adequate explanation of how authority flows. In Policy Governance the board delegates authority for day-to-day administration of the means by which staff works toward the ends of the congregation while maintaining complete authority for the ends toward which staff works and the limits on the means staff uses to achieve them.

The goal is to free up boards to pay attention to the experience of members and friends of the congregation and the world at large so board members can understand what the congregation seeks and intends. With this understanding of the congregation's mission and vision, the board then empowers and monitors staff and volunteers working toward ends.

When boards set limits on what staff and volunteers can do and grants freedom to perform within them, staff can shift from focusing on courting board permission to utilizing time, talent, and resources toward congregational ends.

Policy Governance can be effective in the private and non-profit sectors. It can also be effective in the church environment, but regardless of its potential, Policy Governance gets muddled up when applied to the church.

In pure Policy Governance scenarios actors know their roles because they are clearly delineated and well separated. In a simple setting there are owners who express ends, boards that articulate ends and set limits, staff who work within those limits, and

customers who are served directly or indirectly by staff working toward those ends. Owners, staff, and customers know their jobs and lines of authority are clear.

In the simple setting, owners hire and fire staff and owners are not customers. In the church setting, roles and lines of authority blur. Unitarian Universalist congregations typically call and dismiss ministers by a vote of the members of the congregation. This is a significant change from the private sector. In addition, ministers and members of the board of trustees exercise concurrent though non-identical power. Both are accountable to the congregation and in many cases, to each other.

In addition, the role of a minister who serves as Chief Executive Officer is compromised in comparison to the Chief Executive Officer of a private sector or non-profit organization. In the church, a minister is in relationship with and beholden to members who are also customers, owners, board members, and volunteers doing much of the work of the congregation.

This confusion, which makes Policy Governance difficult in the church setting, is not unique. Many models of church governance involve role confusion.

For example, in congregations that do not use Policy Governance, and perhaps some that do not use it effectively, the board often gets saddled with both budgetary authority and responsibility for day-to-day spending decisions. Imagine a board that meets to decide which replacement stapler a staff member will be permitted to purchase.

Likewise, staff is often beholden to their boards for authority to carry out day-to-day functions, creating an atmosphere in which relationships between individual board

members and staff feel stilted. Staff members become beholden to members of the board and board members feel entitled to exercise individual authority over staff.

In that environment the board tends to focus on the work of the staff and how that work gets done. Micromanagement becomes the order of the day, board work becomes drudgery, and staff experiences little autonomy, spending energy on getting permission from board members in order to carry out routine functions. It is the members and friends, who are also customers, that get left out of the equation.

Policy Governance has the potential to add value to the Unitarian Universalist congregation because it demands clarification of roles, means, ends, and lines of authority. In addition, Policy Governance removes boards from the important but mundane business of running organizations so they can pay attention to the needs and wants of the congregation. In theory, the board, freed from managing the business of the congregation turns its focus toward the congregation, the experience of members and friends, interactions with other congregations and organizations, and relationships with the district, the association, and the community at large. The board sets ends and limits, speaking with one voice and only when it makes a group decision. At best, the board focuses on how the congregation can engender the experience of the Holy.

An executive team, not populated by board members, takes responsibility for achieving the ends within the limits created by the board. The executive team might include minister(s), staff, and laypeople who run the day-to-day business of the congregation.

In my own large church Policy Governance fantasy, board members attend coffee hour every week, speaking with members and friends they don't already know or live with. The executive team reports to the board on how they and the congregation are working

toward the ends and within the limits set by the board. The members and friends experience genuine service and are moved to live their Unitarian Universalism in service to the world. Ministers get to do more ministry. Board members get wrapped up in moving Unitarian Universalism forward. And staff work and dream, dream and work because they are empowered to take action and set direction within limits and toward ends that are constantly reviewed and refined by a board of trustees that supports them. That board lives its charge to care for the community and serves the ends of Unitarian Universalism as defined by the needs, wants, and goals of the congregation, which they discern by being in continuous conversation with them.

There are so many ways to be Unitarian Universalists, so many ways to be a part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, so many ways to serve. There are worthy roles to play and endless ways to play them.

Huston Smith, in reflecting on India said,

“We differ in what we want, in the stage of life we have attained, in the kind of person we are. And finally, we differ in the way we approach God. Affective persons draw near to him by loving him, reflective persons by knowing him, active persons by serving him, and contemplative types by meditating. All four of these yogas, ways to union, reach the same summit. Which you follow depends on your spiritual temperament, the side of the mountain from which you start climbing.” *India and the Infinite: The Soul of a People* by Huston Smith (2005)



None of those yogas seems to have much to do with line items in a budget, but it is those line items that support Unitarian Universalists in seeking the Holy together, regardless of the words they use to describe it.

We are called to move our organizations in directions that support us in becoming our highest and best selves. Our polity gives us the authority to do so without seeking permission from sources other than our traditions, our history, and the group will of the members of a congregation.

When congregations function at higher levels of integrity and vision they will live out their calling relationally with other UU and non-UU congregations, organizations and communities that could be served by Unitarian Universalists acting on their covenant.

If Policy Governance is a form of congregational governance in harmony with congregational polity, and if it can support congregations in focusing on their actual work, we ought to be encouraging congregations to try it. If successful, perhaps the day will come when our movement will become the most dangerous church in America.<sup>13</sup>

In the meantime, even if the world of Unitarian Universalists decides that Policy Governance is the way to go, it will require slow, patient processing to move through the discussions, education, and decisions necessary to start implementing it.

One roadblock to choosing Policy Governance is a lack of agreement among Unitarian Universalists about whether it is an appropriate model of governance for the church.

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<sup>13</sup> Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson, *The Most Dangerous Church In America?* (2002)  
<http://tinyurl.com/evotw>

Some of our largest congregations use Policy Governance successfully. Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, who serves a church using Policy Governance, argues that it "liberates ministers from the oppression of attempting to be all things to all people. And more importantly it frees the laity to focus primarily on the most important aspects of church life."<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Professor John Saxon, who instructs non-profits in the uses of Policy Governance, thinks the Carver model may not be appropriate for our congregations, in part, because he thinks the role of Chief Executive Officer is incompatible with the role of minister.

In a paper entitled, *Should UU Ministers Be CEOs? A Brief Critique of the Application of John Carver's Policy Governance Model to UU Congregations* (2004), Professor Saxon states,

A CEO is first and foremost, if not only, a manager and administrator. A minister is first and foremost, a minister—a preacher, teacher, pastor, and spiritual leader. And while the scope of ministry is broad—and certainly broad enough to include some aspects of church administration—there seems to be a tension between the roles of a manager or administrator on the one hand and the role of a pastor and spiritual leader on the other. The Rev. Richard Gilbert asks: "Can a prophet chair the board?" Similarly, we might ask: "Can (or should) a pastor manage the entire work of the church?" or "Can a manager provide pastoral care to those he or she manages?" And even if it is possible to reconcile these two roles, there is still the possibility that a minister's assuming the role of CEO may

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Eller-Isaacs, *Churches That Count*, (2004)

adversely affect his or her ministry by requiring an inordinate amount of his or her time, energy, and attention.

Another roadblock is that Policy Governance may not work well for small or even medium sized congregations because there aren't enough people in the organization to fill all of the roles effectively.

In conclusion and by way of revealing my own bias toward the potential of Policy Governance, I will share that the large Unitarian Universalist congregation has been my home since 1993. In my roles as friend, member, lay leader, trustee, vice-president, president, staff member working as a paid, full-time Coordinator of Shared Ministry of one congregation, and later as the Summer Minister of another, I have seen the challenges of making the large congregation serve.

Our polity empowers us to work together within, without, and among congregations and the world to be Unitarian Universalists and to move Unitarian Universalism forward.

Policy Governance provides one way to move toward supporting members and friends in concentrating on the reasons they actually come to church. It does so by empowering staff and interested volunteers to fully administer the congregation towards ends it creates and supports. Policy Governance also has the potential to support board members in moving from their status as something akin to clerks in counting houses to keepers of the flame of liberal religion.

If we, as friends, members and lay leaders in Unitarian Universalist congregations can be freed to engender experiences of the holy, we might just become rich in the way Thoreau intended.

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Eric Kaminetzky is a student in the Meadville Lombard Theological School Modified Residency Program. He is earning a Masters of Divinity Degree and he has achieved Candidate Status with the Unitarian Universalist Association. If you have questions, comments or observations about this work please reassemble the email address and contact him electronically at: policygovernance at symbol earthlink dot net.