

What is Policy Governance, Anyway?

I feel similarly about policy governance (PG) as I do about the computer: my work depends on it; they are great when you need them; but most of us have better things to think about. The topic of policy governance could spawn dozens of articles just as computer books clog bookstore shelves. But since you have better things to think about, here is a nutshell summary: PG states that a governing board's primary function is not to make decisions, but rather to define policies to guide decisions throughout the organization.

"So what?" you may ask. The main importance of this distinction is that it counters a very human tendency for a board to take on jobs it cannot do well. A board's position atop the organizational hierarchy tempts both board members and those they serve to make the board the resting place for controversial, costly or complicated decisions. This is bad because:

- Since there are more things to decide on than trustees have time or energy for, a board can lose focus on the overall mission of the institution. Unless the cycle of ad hoc decision-making is broken, a board cannot attend to an organizational vision that has continuity and scope
- Board meddling can disempower those who know best and care most about an issue or program. Often better decisions and spiritual growth result when those who are closest to an issue make the difficult choices.
- Boards are not close enough to the action nor do they meet frequently enough to be responsive to pressing matters.
- Membership turnover makes boards unsuitable to directly manage projects with long time horizons.

By contrast, a policy-oriented board delegates as much decision-making as possible and focuses on the vision and the identity of the institution. It also captures, in policy, lessons learned, both through the organization's experience and the experience of other institutions like it.

So what does our policy board do here at the church? Primarily:

- Make and change policy.
- Monitor performance against policy and mission objectives.
- Allocate and adjust resources, especially budget and permanent staff positions, to improve that performance.
- Make public witness on behalf of the congregation in between its meetings, e.g. by taking public policy stands consistent with our mission.
- Establish, consult with and monitor standing committees, e.g. the Committee on Ministry and R&R Committee, who oversee matters affecting the whole church and requiring continuity over a long period of time.

Being a trustee is a spiritual discipline of letting go of the temptation to meddle and recognizing when you're crossing that line and what to do instead. When a congregant approaches a trustee about an issue, the trustee's job is to ask first "Who is most directly responsible for addressing this"? If the answer is "nobody", then the next step is to alert the Executive Team (ET) so that they can determine with church leadership what would be an appropriate body, or if necessary create one. The next question a trustee must ask is "has the board provided the relevant policy guidance and resources to decide or act?" If not, then again the trustee's action should be to alert the ET so that they can render (or delegate) a decision in the case at hand, and recommend an appropriate policy for similar cases in future. If a policy exists but is not clear, the board can either interpret it, or resolve to amend it at its next meeting.

PG is exciting because it offers trustees the prospect of making a lasting difference. By adhering to its precepts, the board hopes to model for all church bodies and leaders the practices of codifying important lessons and keeping the mission foremost in all its work. There is much more to learn about what exactly our policies contain; the structural implications of policy governance; how First Unitarian has changed the model to fit our vision of shared ministry; examples of how issues and proposals are handled within the church; and details of board function. Some of this has been described in recent and forthcoming newsletter articles. Watch this space for more. Meanwhile, I urge you to look at the real thing, our policies. Until they are migrated to our own church web site, they are available at http://www.geocities.com/uuoakland_board/

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