

# Report

## **Unitarian Universalist Association**

To: UUA Board of Trustees  
From: Terasa Cooley, Director, Congregational Life & Kathy Burek, President, District President's Association  
Date: 10/8/2012  
Re: Regionalization of field services & governance structures

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Over the last 50 years that the UUA's district structure has been in place, there have been many attempts to examine its effectiveness and recommend changes<sup>1</sup>. Among the many issues examined have been: the seeming arbitrariness of geographic distribution, the lack of parity of financial resources, the disparity of numbers of congregations and members served, the best usage of volunteers, and the appropriate role of local governance. While there has been widespread acknowledgment that the system is inefficient, inequitable and confusing to say the least, it has been extremely challenging to make changes, given the multiple authority structures involved.

Since 2009, however, there has emerged a new kind of change effort which has allowed each party involved to conduct its own self-differentiated analysis and to suggest changes which may affect the whole, but which try to confine themselves to the realm of authority appropriate to each body.

This report attempts to relate the changes being undertaken by the UUA staff and by District Boards, with awareness of the different purviews of each, and acknowledgment that the changes are interrelated. These changes have import for the UUA Board of Trustees in terms of their impact on structures for linkage, the opportunity for deep conversation about the nature of our covenantal relationships, as well as a potential system-wide embrace of the Ends of the Association.

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<sup>1</sup> See attached "Congregations Come First" Report (2006) and "DR2" report (1982) for information about past attempts at change.

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## Staff Changes

At their summer 2012 retreat, the Regional Lead staff affirmed this statement of the purpose of the regionalization of staff:

“To build a structure that is responsive to congregational changes, economic realities, and technological advances that will connect us to one another, a renewed faith and the world beyond.”

This succinct statement reflects the primary points of impetus that have led the staff to undertake significant structural change. Some key assumptions deserve expansion:

**Congregational Changes:** The nature of congregational life has changed significantly in the last 20 years. The move toward multigenerational, multicultural, multimodal congregational life requires significant breadth of expertise on the part of staff to help support such changes.

**Economic Realities:** The recession that began in 2008 brought the inequities of funding and staffing across districts into stark relief. In the interest of sustainability we had to explore economies of scale and the possible redistribution of assets.

**Technological Advances:** With the development of the internet and various online technologies, new ways of being in relationship and of providing programs and services became possible. Geographic barriers are no longer strict inhibitors for connection.

**Connection to the Larger Whole:** From what had been a system of primary district and local loyalties, we have grown into a new appreciation of the call toward the larger whole, a recognition that we are one faith with a multitude of expressions and our need is even greater than before for covenantal connection with one another, institutionally and spiritually.

**Renewed Faith:** Many of us believe that our culture is now in a phase of a “new awakening” of direct spiritual experience, in which our institutions and structures need to be agile and in service of this experience, rather than focused on self-perpetuation and institutional weight. This has the promise of re-connecting us to our foundational theological imperatives that meet the emerging spiritual desires of the larger culture.

Keeping these assumptions in mind, our field staff structures have evolved in the last few years in these directions:

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**Regional staff structures:** While there are still district specific staff, and direct relationships between staff and district structures, the UUA field staff now work in significant collaboration with one another within our newly specified regional designations: Southern, New England, MidAmerica, Central East (CERG) and Pacific Western.

**Regional Leads:** These regions are now overseen primarily by a Regional Lead staff person, chosen by the Director of Congregational Life, from among the field staff in that region. This Lead role carries primary accountability for the evaluation and support of staff in that region, the development of deep relationship with district and regional governance structures, and overall analysis of the functioning and efficacy of regional structures.

**Congregational Life Consultants:** While there are still some specific executive functions required of those still known as District Executives, there is general recognition that the past distinction between “District Executive” and “Program Consultant” is no longer fully descriptive of staff functioning. All field staff must have deep knowledge in and experience of congregational dynamics, healthy covenantal functioning, and well-developed training and organizational skills. This is sometimes described as a “deep generalist”, but in recognition that this terminology might not be widely understood, we are beginning to call all field staff “Congregational Life Consultants”. In addition to these general skills, particular staff people will develop expertise in certain key areas of congregational life such as faith development, evangelism, leadership development, etc. But we understand these specialties as changeable in accordance with portfolios needed within regions and evolving interests.

**Cultural Flexibility:** Within these regional structures, we have built in ample flexibility for each region to structure itself in accordance with the specific governance structures and cultural needs of its geographic surroundings. There is little desire for a “cookie cutter”, nationalized, universal approach to the work, but instead a desire for the work to grow out of the particular needs and ethos of the area.

**Funding Structures:** The increased development of regional structures has made it apparent that the old “formulas” and “treaties” of how district staff were co-resourced are no longer sustainable for either effective administrative processes or equitability across districts. Two proposals are in the works to address this:

- (1) For the UUA to bill each region as a whole entity, assuming an equivalent amount of total investment on the part of each party, but allowing for

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negotiation within the region to make staffing and resource allocation decisions in a transparent and effective manner. Each region (inclusive of district boards) may decide to maintain current formulas or change them as they see fit.

- (2) To remake the APF and district dues system into a unified whole which encourages generosity among UU entities – congregations, districts, regions and UUA.

**Accountability:** In certain districts, staff are still accountable to district boards for executive, fiscal and programmatic functions. Each district or regional body is still encouraged to make these expectations explicit and negotiate with staff and Regional Leads to ensure appropriate accountability.

While there are still four Districts that have not changed their understanding of “co-employment”, it is more fully understood than ever before that those staff that are resourced by the UUA are accountable for the fulfillment of our Ends as an Association, and evaluated and supervised by the Regional Leads as delegated by the Director of Congregational Life.

## Governance Changes

The District Presidents’ Association (DPA) has been engaged for nearly three years in discussions regarding the structure of our Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), especially the role to be played by districts or other “middle” structures. In June 2011, the DPA convened the “Role of Districts” Task Force, and charged it with assessing and exploring the role of districts & regions in the governance of our Association, including how governance relates to service delivery”. The Role of Districts Task Force report will be presented to the DPA for adoption at its November 1-3, 2012 meeting.

We have asked ourselves whether, in the 21st Century, our faith movement is well served by having one national association along with 19 autonomous districts. The challenge we face is whether we could achieve more of our goals if our component parts were more aligned with our national Association and with one another? At the same time, we did not wish to lose what districts have done well over the past half-century. The differences of sub-culture and geography are also important factors in assessing structures, even while technology reduced some of the barriers associated with travel.

Each region has approached regional cooperation at the governance level in its own way. Below is a short summary of each region’s activities and plans.

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Central East Regional Group includes the Joseph Priestley District, the Metropolitan New York District, the Ohio Meadville District, and the St. Lawrence District. Within the region there are about 200 congregations and 34,750 members. In 2006 staff from the four districts met to see if there might be new and improved ways to deliver services to congregations based upon a four district regional model. After several meetings between the four district executives and district presidents, a written plan to work together on programs and operations that focused on the potential for growth in the region was approved by all four districts. The region and the UUA collaborated to create three regional staff positions devoted to growth, leadership development and faith development. The four districts have met 3 times in the past 18 months to further develop regional collaboration. Two of the meetings included board members from all four districts, and both were facilitated.

At the most recent meeting in May 2012 the four districts formed the "CERG Strategic Planning Process Team" and charged it to envision a CERG region and determine the steps to reach it. The Team will examine the following topics: Communications; Finance and Budget; Administrative Support; Governance; Staffing; and the like. The Team expects to work for about 18 months, reporting back to the four boards on a regularly scheduled basis. The Team will meet both in person and on-line; the first meeting will be held on September 29, 2012. Additionally, there will be another 4 board meeting in the spring of 2013.

Mid-America Region includes the Central Midwest District, the Heartland District; and the Prairie Star District. The region includes 183 congregations and 28,222 members. Conversations about regional cooperation began at the district president level in 2010, after the District Presidents' Association Meeting at 2010 GA. The three districts adopted statements of collaboration in spring 2011 and jointly developed and adopted covenants governing district board, staff, and UUA relationships in fall 2011. The executive committees of the three boards held a joint meeting in October 2011 and voted to recommend to each board that a proposal be submitted to all three 2013 business meetings dissolving the districts in favor of a regional organization. All three district boards unanimously approved putting a recommendation to form a regional organization on the agendas at 2013 business meetings.

In the meantime, District leaders have been working to create the new Mid-America Region since November 2011. A steering committee, consisting of the district presidents, has met by phone regularly to develop foundational documents and guide the work. A Transition Team of the district presidents and vice presidents has had

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monthly calls to shape the organization. Treasurers from each of the districts have been working on aligning budgets.

The Boards of three Mid-America districts, lead staff, and the Director of Congregational Life of the UUA met in Rock Island, IL in late August 2012 to approve the outlines of the new organization. Draft bylaws are being prepared, and will be available to member congregations in the late fall. Revisions will be made based on their feedback. A vote on the proposed region is scheduled for each district's annual business meeting in April 2013. If approved, the new organization will "go live" on July 1, 2013.

New England Region includes Massachusetts Bay, Ballou Channing, Clara Barton, and Northern New England. The region consists of 235 congregations and 29,376 members. There is an emerging sense of urgency and possibility around greater collaboration within the region. Regional staff has collaborated on programming in the area of youth and young adult ministry and on the program Leap of Faith. In June 2010 members of the four district boards met with Peter Morales, Ginny Courter and other UUA and district staff to address issues of regional importance. A regional leadership team was then formed, comprised of the regional lead, the district executives, and the presidents of the four districts. This group meets 2-3 times a year to share information, best practices, and envision next steps, including reaching out to a wider circle of board members to help define and initiate opportunities for additional regional collaboration.

In 2010, the Clara Barton and Massachusetts Bay districts entered into a staff sharing agreement, sharing one district executive and adding an additional program staff position focused on leadership development. In 2011, the two district boards began holding all district board meetings together.

In June 2012, the Clara Barton and Mass Bay District Boards committed to reach out to the other two districts in the region to "develop a regional structure that would help promote the next great awakening of liberal religion in New England." The Clara Barton and Mass Bay boards met with each of the other two boards over the summer to discuss this possibility. There is agreement to continue the conversation. The four boards will hold a retreat in the spring of 2013 to discuss possibilities and to begin developing a strategic plan for moving forward.

Pacific Western Region includes Pacific Northwest District, Mountain Desert District, Pacific Central District, and Pacific Southwest District. Geographically, this is over a third of the continental U.S. and, when Alaska and Hawaii are included, well over half of the U.S. PWR is made up of 204 congregations and about 20% of the membership of the

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UUA. As regional collaboration progresses, geography remains a fundamental concern. The Pacific Northwest and Mountain Desert districts have hired two  $\frac{3}{4}$  staff positions that are shared by both districts. This is a step toward sharing staff with distinct talents in a way that could support decently paid full-time positions, rather than a scattering of part-time positions in each district. The districts are also looking into a regional web master and development of a single accounting system.

The Pacific Western Region Districts have appointed two members each to a Regional Task Force. The Task Force held one teleconference before the Phoenix GA and several members met at the Phoenix GA. The Task Force is considering next steps. At this moment, there is no regional budget. Each district has been asked to contribute an initial \$500 toward regional development. The districts have agreed to a PWR regional assembly in San Jose on April 26-28, 2013. The districts have agreed to share expenses equitably in ways to be determined.

Southern Region includes the Southwest Unitarian Universalist Conference (SWUUC), the Southeast District, the Mid-south District, and the Florida District. The region includes approximately 230 congregations and 35,000 members. At GA 2010 SWUUC hosted a meeting for all Southern Region GA attendees designed to introduce people from different districts to each other, to share stories of district work, and to begin to envision ways for the four districts to cooperate. Staff, which had already been cooperating through shared staff for certain programs like Leadership Experience, has moved forcefully toward more collaboration and cooperation. The four district boards met in Orlando in December 2010, joined by Gini Courter, Rev. Harlan Limpert and Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley. The "Orlando Platform" emerged. This groundbreaking document re-affirmed principles articulated in the Cambridge Platform of 1648- the congregations of the Southern Region covenanted to cooperate with and be accountable with one another. The four boards subsequently appointed a regional committee to identify practical next steps in regional collaboration. In addition, district staff has evolved into one regional staff, with a Regional Lead and each staff member assuming responsibility for non-overlapping work portfolios.

Following the meeting in Orlando, a regional committee was formed to identify practical next steps. That committee drafted language which was adopted by all four boards to allow for the steps to be taken in the creation of a regional budget, a major step. All four boards have significantly reduced their size, either through bylaw changes or attrition, and have agreed to explore board consolidation into a region. The four District Presidents have been in regular contact and met in September with the Regional Staff to discuss existing issues and to plan the larger picture. It is anticipated that following

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some preparatory groundwork, there will again be the need to bring the four District Boards together to gain consensus on a course of action. This is done with some trepidation, but also genuine excitement about restructuring the role of District Boards toward possibly serving as Elders/Advisors/Mentors, and thus spending less time in governance and more time in propagating our faith.

To support the additional expenses associated with forming new regional structures, the DPA has applied to the UUA Funding Panel for a grant. This grant will help offset costs of regional meetings, including travel and facilitation.

## Implications

**Linkage:** Given the impending change in the structure of the UUA Board and the evolving district and regional structures, some deliberate attention will need to be given to how to structure conversations with stakeholders and sources of accountability.

**Covenantal Faith:** Changes in our structural relationship offer us an opportunity to examine and explore the covenantal nature of our faith, without automatic reliance upon old structures.

**Cultural Relevance:** The opportunity to develop culturally relevant regional structures allows us to more consciously serve to build a faith that reflects the nature of particular cultural expressions and experiences.

We welcome an opportunity for deeper conversation about these developments at the upcoming Board meeting.