

REPORT FROM DISTRICT PRESIDENTS ASSOCIATION MEETING
November 5-7, 2009

The District Presidents Association (DPA) met in Boston November 5-7, 2009. Seventeen district presidents were present; Southwestern Conference and Central Midwest District were not represented. Also in attendance for much of the meeting were Moderator Gini Courter; Trustees Nancy Bartlett, John Blevins, Linda Laskowski, and Eva Marx; and Harlan Limpert, Vice President of Ministries and Congregational Support. UUA President Peter Morales met with the group on Friday afternoon. As one of the district presidents observed, “This was a DPA meeting like none other!”

ENDS Discussion. On Thursday evening, John Blevins reviewed the history of the UUA Board of Trustees’ journey into Policy Governance. After listing Our Sources of Authority and Accountability, he asked whether there was anything or anyone else to whom district boards were accountable. Most district presidents identified congregations as their primary Source with congregation presidents and ministers as their contacts. Additional suggestions for Sources included “the world made whole” and “those not seated at the table—the unseen and the unknown.” There was discussion about the difference between stakeholders and sources, who represents congregations, and the question of how we are accountable.

After reviewing Association Ends, John asked district presidents what substantially different Ends, if any, their districts had. They identified 1) extension, i.e., establishing new congregations; 2) ministry to children and youth; and 3) anti-racism/anti-oppression. Otherwise they agreed that their Ends were similar or the same.

District Governance discussion. The Friday morning agenda was designed to build on the recognition that the Ends articulated by the UUA Board resonated with the district presidents. DPs met in regional groups facilitated by a UUA Trustee and addressed the following questions:

- What led you to accept the call to be a district president or UUA Trustee? By whom or what are you called?
- What is your leadership role in relationship to the board you chair? Facilitator? Persuader? Director? Something else?
- What do you need to take governance in your district to the next level?

District models varied. Districts that were not in policy governance saw their role as partners or assistants to district executives and staff. Others described their roles as consensus builders, synthesizers, framers of conversations, posing probing questions, or process observers. Moving to the next level would require generative thinking, making time to have deeper conversations, and continuous practice.

Discussion of Trustee’s Role. In setting the stage for the next set of questions, Gini described the UUA Trustee’s role as vision development, performance assessment, and linkage to Sources of Authority. She pointed out that the additional demands of serving as District Trustee have made it impossible for some talented, potential candidates to

serve as UUA Trustee. She asked DPs to consider the impact of UUA trustees not attending district board meetings because they needed to perform other linkage work. In addition, because UUA Trustees under policy government do not direct staff, staff co-employment presents a conflict for UUA Trustees serving on district boards. She concluded by reminding DPs that Friday night's discussion revealed little difference between district and UUA Ends.

Regional groups then reconvened and discussed the following:

- What are the barriers to your district affirming the UUA Ends for the purposes of evaluating co-employed staff? What help would you need to address or remove those barriers?
- What functions does the UUA Trustee perform on your district board? How could the functions currently performed by the Trustee be fulfilled in another way?
- What activities or functions of your district board would benefit from collaboration with the other DPs and/or district boards in your regional group?

The regional breakout groups observed that UUA District Trustees provide guidance and reinforce connections to the UUA. However, district boards could experience similar UUA connections by being involved in other ways. Although geography is a barrier to regional meetings, strategies might include leadership summits where district boards, staff, and UUA trustees could discuss ways to share resources and issues of importance to strengthening Unitarian Universalism.

Conversation with President Morales. President Morales reviewed his priorities, asking “What will ministry in our faith look like 20 years from now? How will we get there?” He described changes in organizational structure and staffing and the rationale for doing so; his focus on growing our movement by building the capacities of our congregations through the application of what we learn from congregations that have grown and partnerships with those congregations that have the greatest potential for growth; and how Standing on the Side of Love aims to more effectively engage our congregations in public witness. President Morales also stressed the importance of modernizing the UUA website and making it more accessible. He expects a new home page to be on line by the end of January. He also reported that he is asking every department to cut its budget by 25%, letting go of the least effective things they do, and then identifying priorities.

In response to the question of how the DPA might partner with the President, he responded that district leaders can help to reinforce a sense of urgency about what we are and what we can be. Energies need to be focused where they will make a positive difference. Our vision needs to be aligned with the reality of what is already happening, i.e., the organic emergence of regionalization tailored to the needs of the region. This movement will enable districts to draw on the targeted skills of an array of specialists rather than expecting individual District Executives to have the skills to do everything. District Presidents agreed that proactively going out and building healthy congregations, instead of reacting to problems in congregations was a more effective use of staff.

Co-employment is another issue that districts and the Association need to address. Monitoring and evaluation need to be worked out. The strength of our movement is our agreement on Ends. Concerns are about the dangers of centralization and the perception that culture, power, and tradition reside at 25 Beacon.

District presidents were not concerned about any conflict with the administration's direction or Association Ends but asked "Where are the opportunities for those who are looking to make a difference outside their congregations? Where can we add value? How can we structure ourselves to benefit our congregations?" President Morales described an effective system as one that has a clear common vision, empowered staff, and staff that doesn't do all the work. District presidents agreed that district board members have the potential to apply their energies more effectively. One suggestion was an advisory council at the regional level, freeing up other leaders to promote healthy congregations.

President Morales continued by saying that, given that UUs constitute less than 0.1% of the population, we have amazing impact. The next major debate will be about immigration. Because we are too small to lead, we need to form partnerships.. Our churches are places to empower people, e.g., MIT doesn't build bridges--it trains people to build bridges. We can be a similar resource--moving from mysticism to politics, we need to understand what goes into "building bridges" and teach others. Designing this will be a cumulative process that will require continuous tweaking.

Discussion of Linkage. Trustee Nancy Bartlett presented the Linkage Power Point that the Board of Trustees viewed at its October meeting and asked how the DPA and the Board of Trustees could collaborate in this work. Not surprisingly, a number of questions emerged during discussion. People wondered how we avoid congregations feeling "used," i.e., answering questions but not perceiving that they are receiving anything in return. Gini responded that this is the same conversation as stewardship. It will require cultural change, educating people about what it means to be "owners" and compassionate participants in a democratic process

DPs wanted to know whether and how they would be informed about the linkage process and whether there was a role for them. They requested a written description to include in their newsletters to promote the fact that this is happening. A number of districts are already in policy governance and are doing their own linkage. They wondered whether there was a difference between what districts would ask and what the UUA would ask, given that our Ends are the same. They also asked whether Trustees could invite DPs to accompany them, participate in the conversation, and learn from one another. There was a question about who would be surveyed and who speaks for the congregation—those who are called or elected and thus given authority by their congregations, e.g., ministers, directors of religious education, congregation presidents. They also asked whether there would be opportunities for collaboration on the other Sources and thought that this holds the prospect for developing a common language.

Next steps. In reviewing outcomes from Friday's discussions, the district presidents agreed that they had arrived at a place where they were ready to talk about a way to align

their vision across the continent to realize their shared intention to 1) empower our UUA President by clarifying co-employed reporting relationships and evaluation processes, 2) allow our Association to do more with the resources we have and use them more wisely and effectively, and 3) look at new roles for regional and district leadership to support new forms of governance.

They agreed to hold a meeting in each region that would bring together district presidents, district boards, district staff, and UUA Trustees with the participation of the UUA Moderator and the UUA President. Attendees will be invited to go through the same discovery process as the DPA experienced at this meeting. They observed that the election of Peter Morales demonstrated support for a sense of urgency for change and that these meetings will provide space for a conversation about what is possible.

Invitations to the district boards will come from the district presidents. The DPA Executive Committee will develop a package to help DPs share the outcome of this meeting with their boards. Gini will be asked to invite the Trustees. Harlan will speak with staff at the BCM in December.

DPs agreed to ask their districts to hold regional rather than district gatherings at GA. These are scheduled for 6:45 pm, Wednesday, June 23.

Journey Toward Wholeness. Michael Sallwasser presented findings of the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee's survey of a sampling of districts. These included examples of districts' success in their AR/AO/MC work, programming and support gaps that inhibit AR/AO/MC work in the district, and suggestions for how efforts could be improved. In a facilitated discussion, breakout groups identified their district's effective practices, their most troublesome gaps, and suggestions for greater effectiveness in the districts and the Association. Suggestions for follow-up activities with district boards included a similar assessment activity; developing strategies for addressing leadership, structure, and methodology; and reporting back at the next DPA meeting. They later agreed to table these follow-up discussions in order to provide space for planning their regional meetings.

Annual Program Fund Report. Dick Jacke, Annual Program Fund (APF) liaison, reported on the APF Committee's fall meeting. At the end of October contributions were about 11.5% lower than last year at that time but only 0.9% below the lower goal set for 2010 to accommodate the economic downturn. An APF Formula Task Force has been established to address "What are the criteria for fairness?" and review the APF formula and assessment, issues that would have been reviewed by the UUA Board before its shift to policy governance. Dick also pointed out that, with the movement toward regional services, four districts (JPD, St. Lawrence, OMD, and Metro New York) have a unified "ask" instead of separate district and Association "asks",

Report from Harlan Limpert. Harlan Limpert reported on Association activities. He spoke about the appointment of a regional staff lead in each of the five regions that have organically emerged as a result of district staff collaboration. He described changes in

General Assembly programming for 2010, saying that there will be no UU University this year but it is likely to be reinstated in 2011. He distributed a preview of proposed website changes, saying that the UUA is aiming to design a website that is friendlier to visitors and more useful to congregations. An organizational chart will be posted on the web that will link to functions, including a picture of each staff person who has responsibility for that area. Funds received for the Association Sunday targeting lay theological education have been used to produce the 2010 UU University DVD; other uses will be announced in a couple of months. Staff work will be congregation-focused with emphasis on congregations with growth potential learning from growing congregations, such as the 20 Breakthrough Congregations, which have a growth rate six times that of others. The 25% challenge described by President Morales is intended to stimulate creative thinking and ensure that resource allocation is mission-based. A task force will be formed at the BCM to identify innovative ways to use resources more effectively, which might include different configurations of district and regional staff.

Conclusion. In closing the DPA voted to request that the districts in each region jointly hold a regional meeting before GA 2010, which would include district boards, UUA Trustees, and co-employed district staffs. The purpose of these meetings is to explore how the districts and regions could align our governance structures with the UUA Board and the President of the Association.

The next DPA meeting is tentatively scheduled to start at 2:00 pm, Tuesday, June 22 to allow time to process the outcomes of the regional meetings.

Submitted by Eva Marx, Trustee from the Ballou Channing District, substituting for Joan Lund, Board Liaison to the DPA