

Report on Surveys of Other Congregations

Process

A subgroup of the Transition Team (Lida Junghans, Lois Fine, and Kay Snowden) and Tish Miller contacted 12 other mid- to large-sized UU congregations to ask about their staffing structure, recent transitions, governance, conflict resolution process, and covenant. Our Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Regional Staff Hilary Allen supplied a list of comparable congregations, to which a few were added based on other recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Seven of the nine congregations with more than 400 members have a second minister, all of whom are hired (vs. called) except for one much larger congregation with three ministers. While First Parish's overall staffing level is consistent with its peers, First Parish has more staffing in religious education (RE), less in administrative functions, and no paid community engagement position.

Overall, about 1/3 of the congregations we talked to are experiencing significant growth, 1/3 are experiencing moderate growth, and 1/3 are stable or declining in membership size. The vitality of a congregation, energetic ministers, a welcoming culture, and a strong RE program were noted as the driving forces behind growth. Widespread offerings of small groups to foster connectedness are considered a critical practice among growing and larger congregations.

Several with recent transitions endorsed the guidance from the UUA Search Process. Three respondents found their new lead ministers internally. There are also reports of searches which did not yield a match or successful search.

Some ministers talked about the expectation that second/contracted ministers will leave after a new lead minister is called to allow the new minister to establish their own team. Others have second ministers and/or key staff whose tenure predates the incoming minister.

The way First Parish provides pastoral care, involving ministers, well-trained lay ministers and small groups (e.g., covenant groups) is the norm across other congregations as well.

Governing boards of 8-10 members are the norm. While most strive to shift the boards to strategic vs. operational roles, those who have experimented with separate operations councils or shifting responsibility to senior staff are pulling back because the workload is unsustainable.

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All but one of the congregations with whom we spoke have a covenant, and that outlier is actively working on one following creation of a mission statement. The covenants are central to their functioning, and a key element in how the congregation responds to conflict. Several have Right Relations committees or teams to train or help address conflicts.

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Staffing at Other Congregations

All but two of the congregations with more than 400 members have a second minister. [First Parish reported 453 members, as of January 2026. That number has been revised to 417 members in April 2026 after extensive outreach this spring.] About half of the second ministers have a focus on pastoral care and others have a focus on faith formation or lifespan ministry (generally encompassing all ages RE and spiritual development). These second ministers are all hired, with one very large congregation in Colorado having a second called minister as well as a third hired minister. (See attached table of second ministers' roles.)

Among the group of mid-sized smaller congregations (342-400 members), all three have either a co-minister or a director-level position who works in close partnership with the lead minister.

The staffing level for congregations with 417-500 members ranges from 6.25 to 8.0 full-time-equivalents (FTEs), including ministers. First Parish is in the middle, with 6.8 FTEs. Numbers are approximate and may or may not include the effort of paid contractors, who provide services such as custodial, bookkeeping, tech support for streaming, etc. (See attached table of First Parish staffing and chart of staffing levels.)

Relative to our peers, we have more RE staffing and less music and administrative staffing. All other congregations, except for First Parish in Concord and South Church in Portsmouth, have paid staff responsible for community engagement, membership or welcoming. The positions range from .25 FTE to 1.5 FTE and may include some administrative functions, like communications, social media or data management. (See attached list of job titles for key positions.)

Of the five congregations with larger budgets than First Parish, four have an Executive Director in addition to two (or three) ministers. Concord has a Director of Finance and Operations, and Belmont has a Director of Operations. The director-level positions indicate more responsibility and higher salaries than an administrator or office manager, like First Parish currently has. Comments by the ministers interviewed indicate that finding a strong administrator is difficult. Several would like to add more administrative support.

Typically, there is a separate administrative position for communications, data and space use or rentals. Roughly half of the congregations we talked with have a paid position (full time or part time) for a building or facilities manager. Custodial services are contracted out more often than provided by an employee/sexton. As with directors

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of administration, the sexton position – which includes cleaning, maintenance and often weekend hours – is a hard one to fill.

Lead ministers reported having 3-5 direct reports, with most having 4.

Growth

Overall, about 1/3 of the congregations we talked to are experiencing significant growth, 1/3 are experiencing moderate growth, and 1/3 are stable or declining in membership size. [First Parish has been relatively flat since 2013. See attached chart of our membership trend.] Almost all experienced a decline during COVID, especially in their RE programs. Most of the strong-growth congregations are in other parts of the country; Belmont and Newton fall into the moderate growth category.

The vitality of a congregation, energetic ministers, a welcoming culture, and a strong RE program were noted as the driving forces behind growth. Factors cited for declining size were COVID, ministerial transitions (particularly those that are tumultuous), and generally declining church/UU membership across the nation.

Widespread offerings of small groups to foster connectedness was noted by many as a critical practice with growing and larger congregations. One minister noted, “While size may dictate the ways of organizing, it doesn’t dictate the sense of intimacy in a church.”

Many focus on attracting younger families, with their strong RE programs and other family-friendly programs and events (children’s choir, spaghetti dinner). One is offering leadership training directed at millennials to develop the next generation of leadership.

Creating a welcoming culture and embracing growth requires work with the “congregation, including addressing anxiety about growth, and raising it as “moral imperative.”

Governance

The majority of congregations have governing boards of 8-10 members, with most at nine members, which is the size of First Parish’s Parish Committee. Only two have larger boards. Many referred to Dan Hotchkiss’s model of governance. The general sense is that they are trying to get the board to focus on strategic issues and be less involved in the day-to-day operations. The downside of this is that ministers are feeling that too much of the work under the policy governance approach is put on the minister and staff, and it’s not sustainable. Also, implementation requires the involvement of volunteers/lay leaders so they need to be part of the process.

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Two congregations have two governing bodies, a board of seven members and an operations council. Both are trying to move away from this approach because the amount of effort for the volunteer chair of the operations council is unsustainable, and coordination between the two bodies and decision-making is complex and time-consuming.

The other congregation with a small board of seven is Foothills Unitarian in Colorado. They are considerably larger in size and consider themselves a corporate church with policy governance.

Governance needs change over time! Regarding the process of revising governance, several recommended a slow and careful process, led by a trusted person. At least one congregation had small groups read and discuss the Hotchkiss book, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*.

Ministerial Transitions

Several respondents highly recommended calling every member of the congregation for nominations. “We called every person in the church, to name three people that are trusted, and that is critical.” “It was absolutely incredibly valuable...Huge part of why we were successful.”

Several noted that they followed the UUA search process and found that it worked well for them. Some had high praise for their interim ministers, with one noting “Do what your interim minister asks you to do. Take their word for it, they can see things you can’t see.”

Three congregations called internal candidates in their most recent searches. Some have key staff who pre-dated the current lead minister; others hired ministers after the called position was filled.

We are aware of several congregations in the Boston area whose recent searches were not successful in finding a settled minister. One outside our survey group was unsuccessful in finding a developmental minister; another is looking for a contract-to-call arrangement with the idea of a trial period for both the minister and congregation before calling the minister.

Continuity in Ministry

In three of the congregations surveyed, the current lead minister was called after serving as an assistant minister or intern, ensuring continuity. One minister serving a local congregation noted that when he was serving a very large congregation with

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several ministers, he was happy to have one of the assistant ministers stay on; she later retired.

Some ministers we spoke with indicated that it was expected that the contract ministers would move on. One minister noted that they intentionally train/groom the assistant minister to move on to another congregation; while others prepare the assistant minister to succeed the lead minister. Another provided a strong case for giving a new minister a clean slate:

There have been many instances where a church isn't able to do the hard conversation - or even to see it honestly - that they need the fresh start that a change in lead minister allows. It also can happen that if an assistant was there before an incoming lead arrives, they can retain a kind of power of relationships in the congregation that can - in unhealthy dynamics - result in triangulation - people continue to come to the minister they know, and don't ever really build trust with the new minister.

One of my colleagues says that ideally, all staff understand that when there is a change in lead ministers, they are on a new kind of probationary period - both sides seeing if this is going to continue to be a good fit or not. This is a really tough thing to actually put into practice, because there are real humans involved! But almost always in watching ministers in their first couple of years, nearly all existing staff need to transition away and be replaced before the minister really feels like the team is built for their ministry and style.

...With all that said I'm not sure I've ever seen it explicitly put into a contract.

In other cases, the second minister and/or key staff (Director-level) positions predate the arrival of new lead ministers. Two congregations mentioned that they had restructured positions which involved bringing in different ministers or staff after calling a new lead minister. One changed from two part-time ministers to a full-time Minister of Congregational Care. Another moved from a Director of RE and RE Assistant to a Minister of Lifespan Faith Formation and Youth and RE coordinator. (We did not learn how that change was managed or impacted the staff or congregation.)

Pastoral Care

Across the board, pastoral care is provided by the ministers, a group of trained lay ministers, small groups (covenant groups or chalice circles), and support groups for particular needs (e.g., grief, caretakers). Many also have networks to provide meals, rides and other assistance. The lay ministry programs are an important extension of ministerial pastoral care, and training for lay ministers is emphasized. All indicated that their lay ministry programs are led by a minister.

Covenant

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All but one of the congregations we spoke with have a covenant, and that outlier is actively working on one following creation of a mission statement. Several noted how central it is to their congregation. Some have a Right Relations Committee as well. The process of creating a covenant was typically led by a minister or trusted leader. Referencing the covenant is often the first step in resolving conflicts.

Conflict Management

The following actions were mentioned as ways the congregations address conflicts.

- They rely on the covenant.
- Ministers often play a key role in resolving conflict, and one noted that he tries to be proactive when he senses something brewing.
- Three of the congregations surveyed have a Right Relations team or committee. Two direct an unresolved issue to the Committee on Ministry.
- Also mentioned were use of restorative justice processes or mediators if other approaches don't resolve the conflict.
- Several conduct regular trainings for the congregation, and model ways to reconnect.
- Two congregations said they have a process to remove people from the congregation if necessary; this is rarely necessary.