

What transparency looks like

The members of the Open UUA Committee commend the UUA Board of Trustees for their receptiveness to greater transparency in government. Our association has made great progress in taking steps to keep our members informed and engaged. As another step we have tried to picture what transparency looks like.

Electronic communication in all its forms has enabled our committees to function with fewer meetings and allows meetings to go more smoothly, with issues being narrowed down beforehand. However, these technologies also risk taking governance functions out of public view. We must make sure we use them in a way that enhances transparency rather than blocking it.

We cannot explain the need for transparency any better than Peter Morales did in calling transparency in governance absolutely essential. The following two paragraphs summarize his statements on the subject:

The basic rule is that everything is public unless there is a compelling interest to preserve confidentiality. Transparency in governance is about more than not keeping secrets. It means making every effort to share information and, just as important, to invite input and to share the deliberations that lie behind decisions.

Ultimately, transparency is about more than governance. It is about building relationships of trust and honesty. Transparency is essential to personal relationships, to a religious community, and to a religious movement. Secrecy destroys trust and, therefore, erodes community. When trust is lacking, people cannot come together in good faith or commit themselves to a vision of a common future.

The Open UUA Committee has translated this vision into a description of what transparency would look like. We welcome your comments.

Meetings

The openness guidelines explain how notices, minutes and documents can be posted on the web site and ask that the postings be made as early as possible. These guidelines are followed to be sure meetings are advertised and agendas posted. There is always notice of at least a week, but more whenever possible.

Meetings are welcoming to guests. They are provided with a comfortable seating arrangement that permits them to feel included and hear the speakers.

Recordings of board meetings are available on the web site. If it is too expensive to index them, listeners can find the section they want by checking the agenda and fast forwarding. Speakers give their names before speaking so their constituents can determine how they are being represented.

Board, working group, and committee agendas make clear what the times are for open meetings. Periods allocated for check-ins, wrap-ups, and executive sessions are set for the beginnings and ends of meetings, except under special circumstances of an emergency nature.

Time is set aside in all meetings to receive input from guests.

Name tags are used at working group, task force, and committee meetings. They are offered to guests.

Conference call meeting dates and times are publicized and observers are invited to listen.

Records of meetings — such as minutes, notes, and reports — are clear and posted promptly following the meeting. Transparency is aided by including the discussion that led to the decision. Draft minutes are posted within a week of all meetings.

Avoid using acronyms and abbreviations without explaining them.

Executive sessions

Executive sessions include nothing other than personnel, discussions of people, litigation, and negotiations.

For committees, the primary purpose of which is discussing people — such as the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, Nominating Committee and Committee on Committees — the portions devoted to policies and procedures are open.

Electronic communications

UUA-updates is used to provide timely and complete information as soon as news regarding congregations, congregational relationship to the UUA, and institutional matters is available.

There is a monitored email list for discussion of the news.

UU email list managers are subscribed to a news email list and disseminate relevant information on their own lists.

If email is used for discussion of board or committee business, everyone is allowed to subscribe on a read-only basis.

All email lists allow subscribers to see who and how many are on that list. Any individual subscriber can opt out of being listed.

Nominations and appointment process

All committee and task force appointments are made only after openings are announced on the news and other relevant email lists.

Conclusion

While the demands on our time are substantial and must be acknowledged, transparency is a priority. It has a cost, but the cost is worth it. A concern about information overload should not prevent the information from being available to those who want it. It must be easy to find. The question how we can make this transparent should never be answered that we can't. We must keep seeking a solution until we find it.

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