

The Gist of It

Notes from the Governance Task Force

Welcome to the first issue of *The Gist of It*, an occasional leaflet from the Governance Task Force here at Storrs Congregational Church UCC. In this and subsequent editions of *The Gist of It*, we hope to keep the congregation informed about our process of exploring and preparing for governance change. You'll find updates on process and progress, as well as information we hope will help you better understand the major concepts behind what we're developing.

We welcome your input, feedback, questions, and concerns at any time! Please simply **be in touch with any of us**—by phone, email, or in-person contact.

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Where are we in the process?

Pre-pre-history Over our congregation's 277 years, governance functions and leadership-for-ministry have taken many different forms. In 1921, as we incorporate under the new name of Storrs Congregational Church, the dual structures of "ecclesiastical society" and "church congregation" were unified into one. A bicameral system was established with a Board of Trustees having charge of financial and properties matters and a Standing Committee comprising Deacons and a few additional officers having oversight of membership and an advisory function to the minister around program and direction. In the 1940s, this was replaced by a system whereby a grouping of 'officers' was elected which then self-organized into committees and a Council. In 1981, our current basic structure was established, consisting of a series of standing boards with charge over particular areas and a Church Council comprised mainly of representatives from those boards. Some changes have been made since, but the basic structure of 1981 continues to the present.

Pre-history For many years—including throughout the "transitional time" of 2007-2010—concerns, questions, wonderings arise about our congregation's structures for leadership, carrying out ministry, and tending to governance issues. Whether centered around decision-making processes, clarity in terms of power-and-authority, the difficulty of "filling slots" on boards and committees, or a desire for more-intentional engagement with overall visioning, mission-discernment, and strategic planning... many people begin believing there has to be a better way.

2011-2012 Under Pastor Matt's leadership, Church Council begins including an intentional "teaching and leadership development" segment in each month's meeting. In 2011, the Council uses this time to read and discuss the book



(Continued: Where are we in the process?)

Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations by Anthony Robinson. In 2012, focus is given to a series of stories and examples from vital congregations stretching from the earliest churches as told in the New Testament to contemporary stories of transformation. Also in 2012, Council shifts its agenda format to be more worshipful and less focused on hearing reports and micromanagement.

- April 2013* Church Council begins devoting the 'teaching and leadership development' time to reading and discussing the book *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* by the Alban Institute's Dan Hotchkiss.
- October '13* Council finishes its study of *Governance and Ministry* with a strong consensus that Hotchkiss' 'paradigm'—his thinking about issues around governance and structures for ministry leadership, as well as his process for a congregation to explore changing its governance—seems like a very good fit for our congregation.
- Oct—Nov '13* Subcommittees of Council set about determining how best to start bringing a wider segment of the congregation 'up-to-speed' with Council's conversation and Hotchkiss's paradigm. From this work comes the decision to bring Dan Hotchkiss himself to SCC for an all-church educational event.
- Dec '13—Jan '14* Plans are made for educational event with Hotchkiss; individual donors in the congregation respond to their sense of call to fund the event.
- January 2014* Council discerns individuals to comprise a Governance Task Force (an ad-hoc committee appointed by Council) to facilitate the intentional process leading toward governance change.
- February 2014* Council firms up slate for Governance Task Force, and finalizes preparations for event with Dan Hotchkiss.
- Feb 21, 2014* Congregation takes part in all-church education event on governance with Dan Hotchkiss.
- March 2014* Governance Task Force (GTF) is officially established by Council action. GTF begins meeting, reviews each member's concerns about current SCC structures and goals for governance change process; begins drafting a statement expressing our hoped-for "Philosophy of Governance"
- April 2014* GTF presents draft 'Philosophy of Governance' to Church Council for discussion, feedback, further input; GTF further refines and revises 'Philosophy of Governance' statement in preparation for congregational engagement, and disseminates the draft to congregation in preparation for a Town Hall conversation
- May 4, 2014* Town Hall conversation around 'Philosophy of Governance' draft. GTF hears a need to further simplify the language of the statement, and moreover senses an overall continuing need to help the congregation better understand the big picture concepts involved in the model for governance we hope to move toward.
- May 2014* GTF further revises 'Philosophy of Governance' statement (with thanks to Mark Roy for help with simplifying language). GTF discusses ways to better educate congregation, as well as how to begin sketching out concrete examples of what the eventual structures and policies might entail. GTF also begins work on clarifying the intended distribution of power-and-authority between the congregation-as-a-whole and the governance-and-ministry structure, and drafts a possible formal enumeration of this division.
- June 2014* GTF presents draft of its work on the official powers of the congregation-as-a-whole to the Council for discussion, feedback, and further input.

— We are now HERE! But, what's ahead...? —

- Summer & Fall* GTF continues work on drafting key 'big picture' policies needed to provide a basic framework. GTF also continues working through questions of what some of the concrete structures—particularly for carrying out day-to-day ministry tasks—might look like, while being careful not to do too much pre-determining of things that should be figured out by the new structure itself.
- GTF continues to engage in a back-and-forth iterative process for working on these various components: drafting a piece, bringing it to Council for open discussion and further input, doing further refinement, engaging the congregation for input on a component via multiple methods, further refining, etc.
- Winter 2015* GTF and Council begin preparing the way for a "trial run" of a possible new structures
- Spring 2015* Likely time that we would be ready to initiate a "trial run": existing structures would take actions to delegate their power, authority, and duties to the new systems; the new form of governing board would begin meeting; the new systems of ministry 'staff' and teams would take over functions
- 2015-16* Ongoing evaluation of the new system, structures, and policies
- Spring 2016* Trial run evaluated for needed adjustments, and (assuming things are o.k.) preparations are made for putting the new systems, structures, and policies into place long-term.

Taking a closer look at our draft 'Philosophy of Governance'

On May 4, the Governance Task Force engaged with members of the congregation in a Town Hall style gathering after church to talk together about a draft of what's referred to as a statement of our "Philosophy of Governance". This captures our understanding of the 'big picture' of how we want governance to work in our congregation when we're all-said-and-done with this process. It functions

a bit like the yard stick against which everything else we will do in this governance change process will be measured (that is, as a piece or component or policy is developed, we can ask "does this fit with the overall philosophy of governance?").

One piece of feedback we heard at the town hall gathering was a need to simplify language. We have done some further editing (thanks to Mark

Roy for his assistance).

At the town hall, the GTF also recognized a need to help the congregation at large better understand some of the key concepts we're trying to aim for.

So, let's take a look again at the "philosophy of governance" statement (our newly simplified version), and pull out some of the major concepts that are key to it:

Philosophy of Governance statement, as revised by GTF on May 12, 2014:

In light of its Congregationalist heritage, membership in the United Church of Christ, and place in the broader Reformed tradition, the **Storrs Congregational Church looks to Jesus Christ as its head. It is governed by its members who seek the mind of Christ** under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Except in the case of **powers explicitly reserved to the congregation, governance is exercised by a governing board** comprised of **church members elected by, and accountable to, the church.**

The governing board has **primary responsibility** for stewarding the mission and purpose to which God calls the church; exercising visionary and fiduciary oversight of church resources; engaging in strategic planning and regular evaluation; and otherwise tending to the long-term well-being of the church.

The governing board, through its policies, **delegates to the ministry staff the authority, power, and resources to carry out the work of the church.** The work of the varied ministries is conducted through a staff structure, headed by the Senior Pastor and comprised of paid staff and ministry volunteers.

The leadership of the governing board and the ministry staff are carried out in consultative, **collegial, and inclusive ways. All leaders practice transparent decision-making, healthy conflict management, and mutual support** in their governance roles.

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#1—The church belongs to Christ and seeks after the mind of Christ : This on one hand seems pretty basic, but it bears saying explicitly. Even in our *Congregational* tradition, the church does not ultimately belong to the congregation and its members, but to Jesus Christ alone. As the congregation and its structures exercise governance authority, we do so only as *stewards*, entrusted to do—as best as we can discern—what Christ, the master, would have us do.

#2—Clearly-enumerated "Reserve Powers": In churches with congregationalist polity, the ultimate governing authority rests with the congregation-as-a-whole. In practice, though, we know that all but the smallest of congregations delegate at least part of that authority to a board or council or similar subset of members.

This is true, of course, of our current system here at SCC. Most of the governance and ministry work of our church is carried out by the Church Council and our system of standing Boards. But in our current system, the precise assignment of power-and-authority between the congregation itself and the Church Council and other boards is not well-specified. Certain powers that only the congregation may exercise (for example, to call or fire the minister) are specifically named in our bylaws. This is called a "reserve power"—something specifically 'reserved' to the congregation alone for authority and action.

In our current bylaws, the various reserve powers that *are* named are spread out in many different places, without a single clear enumeration of all of them. Furthermore, there is nothing that clearly defines who has the authority to handle everything that falls *outside* the realm of the specific reserve powers.

(Continued: Closer look at the Philosophy of Governance)

(#2 continued...)

Sure, our *de facto* way of handling things generally is that the Church Council has authority on the congregation's behalf between congregational meetings, but there is no explicit global delegation policy to that effect. In fact, our current bylaws even give the very inexact directive that the Council "shall refer all important matters to the Church for decision".

We on the GTF believe—agreeing with Hotchkiss—that *good* governance happens when there are clear assignments of authority and clear lines of responsibility and accountability. Thus, we believe that the aim of *good* governance is best achieved by *clearly and explicitly* enumerating the powers which the Congregation reserves for itself, and *explicitly* delegating all other matters to the governing board.

#3—A single directly-elected governing board, representative of and accountable to the congregation: In our current Church Council, only one-third of its members are directly elected by the congregation to be on the Council (the chair, vice-chair, member-at-large, and clerk). The other two-thirds of Council members are there as delegates from the eight standing boards which head-up various areas of ministry; these delegates are selected by the boards themselves, and in some cases even change from month-to-month.

This system results in Council members having, by default, a conflict-of-interest and lack-of-clarity about their role (am I here to represent the congregation-as-a-whole and discern on behalf of its ultimate mission, or am I here to represent the Board of such-and-so and advocate *its* interests?). It also results in very high turnover rates on Church Council from year-to-year, and in general signifies that Council is only a coordinating and management body.

We believe SCC wants and needs a governing board that is empowered for proactive leadership and critical discernment of mission, vision, and strategic priorities for our congregation's life together. This sort of governing board is *most* possible when the congregation *directly* elects its governing board, and thus is asked to truly consider and discern who it wants to look toward for visionary, strategic, and spiritual leadership. The members of such a governing board then are clear that it is their calling to represent the congregation and to discern Christ's call on behalf of the whole body. Congregants, in turn, know to whom it is they look for leadership and to whom they turn with feedback.

#4—The role of the governing board: The role of a governing board under the model we are working on is to do *governance*, obviously.

As Hotchkiss explains in his book, "governance is sometimes called board work, trusteeship, policymaking, or oversight. ... Governance includes the top-level tasks of articulating the mission, selecting a strategy for getting there, making sure it happens, and ensuring that people and property are protected against harm. ... Governance means owning the congregation, exercising ultimate control of its human and material resources and ensuring that it serves its mission."

#5—How ministry gets done... delegation to a 'staff' structure: "Ministry" is everything else beyond governance that our congregation does: the daily, practical work of the congregation, including the rest of the decisions that must be made about what to do and how.

In the model we're working with, while the governing board is responsible for *oversight* of the ministry of the church, the actual *doing* of the ministry work is accomplished by delegation of that work to a ministry staff structure. The ministry staff structure is flexible and can include the pastor(s), other paid staff, lay volunteer coordinator-type positions, and ministry teams.

The governing board empowers the ministry structure by providing resources (for example, through the budget and through hiring decisions) and setting policies about what can and can't be done... but then gives the ministry structure freedom and latitude within those bounds.

#6—How we work: Through all our structures, we remain committed to open and inclusive processes, healthy communication patterns, and transparency in decision-making.

