



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The thrill of participatory theology

Clay Nelson © 7 May 2023

When the eight members from diverse backgrounds were appointed to review Article II Bylaws, the first thing they did was consult UU stakeholders. These included, amongst others:-

- Congregational leaders, lay and professional
- Professional Associations
- Philosophical and Theological Groups (e.g. UU Humanists, UU Christians, etc.)
- 8th Principle and 1st Principle advocates
- Past GA attendees
- Former UUs who have left the faith
- Unchurched UUs who still identify as UUs but don't belong to UU
- Members of the 2010 Commission on Appraisal
- UUA staff
- UU seminaries
- UU Issues groups (e.g., UU Earth Justice Ministry, UUs for Justice in the Middle East)

This is participatory theology. Its purpose is to determine and articulate our shared values and theology.

In a [UU World](#) article, [Dan Hotchkiss says it begins with answering the question, "Who owns your congregation?"](#)

Hotchkiss says some congregations believe it is the trustees or board.

"Sometimes when I ask, 'What is the board's job?' someone (often a lawyer or banker) uses an obscure word that speaks rather deeply to the nature of the board's role: 'The board is a fiduciary.' Many people connect this word exclusively with money, but the concept is actually much broader. A fiduciary is anyone whose duty is to act in faithfulness to the interest of another, even at cost or peril to [themselves]. A parent, for example, is a fiduciary for their children and must care for them, no matter how much sacrifice that might require..."

A congregation's board is a fiduciary. Like a for-profit board, it controls property on behalf of its real owner. But who is the owner? Who owns a church? Often board members answer this question too quickly: 'The members are the owners!' And the owners' interest? Satisfactory worship, education, social action, and so on...

A congregation does exist to serve its owner—but the members of a nonprofit corporation do not 'own' it as stockholders own a business. Corporate stockholders can vote to liquidate the corporation's property, pay its debts, and divide the proceeds among themselves. A congregation—or any other nonprofit—that did likewise would be violating several laws. The most fundamental legal principle of nonprofit corporations is to use their resources exclusively for the specific purposes for which the law has chartered them...

Who, then, is the owner of a congregation? Who plays the role of the stockholders in a business? Not the members. Not the board. Not the clergy. All these are fiduciaries whose duty is to serve the owner... The "owner" that the board must serve is the congregation's mission, the covenant the congregation has set its heart to and the piece of the Divine Spirit that belongs to it. Or, to put it differently, the congregation's job is to find the mission it belongs to, the actual owner for whose benefit the leaders hold and deploy resources."

Group discussion 1

What is the mission of this congregation to which we have a fiduciary responsibility? Should it change?

Group discussion 2

How are we doing in fulfilling our duty to our mission?

Group discussion 3

Will the proposed Article 2 changes to the by-laws assist us or make it more difficult to meet our responsibilities?