

Board Meeting Minutes

Monthly Board Meeting, May 20, 2025.

Attendees: Beth Cliff, Mark Corcoran, Stapley Emberling, Jon Gage, Anita Pfluger, Ravi Sankar, Rev. Alan Taylor. **Absent:** Felicia Keeton, Alexa Marshall. **Observers:** Angi Haen, Sari Bodi, Dayle Brownstein, and Julyen Norman

Beth Cliff opened the meeting at 7:01. Brian Lasher lit the chalice with a reading from Thich Nhat Hanh, and the group checked in with each other.

The group unanimously approved the minutes from the April 27th member meeting, the April board meeting, and the May 15th Zoom board meeting, with a small spelling fix needed in the April Board meeting minutes.

Separate motions. The Board also approved two separate motions unanimously:

- **1. Resolution on Ed Thompson's housing.** The group discussed and approved a resolution regarding Ed Thompson's housing, with Mark providing clarification on the IRS rules and the appropriate partner to grant the permission.

Be it resolved that the Board Resolution passed November 21, 2023 regarding Rev Edward Thompson Housing Allowance shall be modified as follows: The amount of the Ministerial Housing Allowance, for Rev Dr Edward Thompson, Minister Emeritus, an ordained minister, who on December 31, 2024, retired from The Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Westport, shall be \$30,000 per annum, effective January 1, 2025. This allocation shall remain in place in subsequent years unless the Board of Trustees modifies it.

- **2. Line of credit refresh.** The group discussed and approved a resolution to approve the ask of the line of credit. They noted that this was a routine update that the Board approves every couple of years, and with bank requiring Board approval periodically.

The Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Westport hereby approves extending, for an additional two years, the Congregation short-term-loan line of credit at Fairfield County Bank and authorizes Jonathan Gage as Treasurer to sign loan-extension documents on behalf of the Congregation.

Updates on Ongoing Work. The Board moved into quick topline overviews of ongoing work in the congregation. They are summarized briefly here:

- **Minister's Report.** Alan acknowledged that he had submitted his monthly report, and that most of it did not require further discussion at this time, with the exception of his thoughts about the Operations Council. It was agreed those would be addressed later in the meeting, if time permitted. Alan also introduced the request from Angi Haen to hire a youth coordinator, which came to us mid-afternoon that day. Beth asked that that discussion be tabled for June since it a) had no financial implication to the proposed budget and b) should involve a conversation about increasing staff and Faith Formation intentions. Alan agreed.
- **Survey.** Brian Lasher provided a high-level update on the Congregational Survey, noting that an initial scan revealed that the two most important factors for congregants were the minister and the service on Sunday mornings. The concerns about our financial sustainability were also high on the list. Alexa will provide a more detailed summary at the June meeting or at the retreat in the fall.
- **Floor colors.** Mark Corcoran shared an update on the challenges in getting floor color samples and options for the construction colors, noting that we may need to proceed with a more limited set of physical samples than we had hoped: the manufacturer simply can't provide them and we can't wait any longer. Voting will take place shortly both online and in person, and close at the annual meeting.
- **BWB.** Anita Pfluger reported on the Bagels With Board gatherings, with over 50 people attending throughout the course of the year. There will be one Sunday June 1, likely a shared time with a Financial Sustainability/Budget discussion.
- **Delegates for General Assembly.** Stapley Emberling led a quick discussion on the delegates for the Upcoming General Assembly. Four people have indicated interest and there is room for four more. The Board approved delegates Cheryl Dixon, Brian Lasher, Kathy Roberts, and Ken Vernon.
- **Website update.** Beth Cliff noted that she had had a brief conversation with Chris Campbell earlier in the week on where we are with the website. He shared that the planned launch at the end of April or mid-May as mentioned in the April meeting has been delayed; some new developments just came up. Beth said at this late notice, the Board will revisit the topic in June. One of the topics to consider: exploring a more comprehensive platform solution.
- **Operations Council Update.** The group reviewed the document Lyn Kobsa shared, including the individuals who have been identified as being interested in serving on the Council. A unanimous Board vote approved Ben Chan, Jim Cooper, Scott Seo and Randy Burnham should they be willing and available. After some discussion, the Board asked

to have Lyn and the team provide more clarity on the Council's scope and responsibilities at the June meeting; some pieces have moved around since the original February presentation, and it would like more understanding of key roles and the expected interplay between the Board, the Council, the Minister and Staff. This is some of the areas that Rev. Alan outlined in his report and in June we will cover this ground to make sure everyone is aligned.

- **Contract search team update.** Brian Lasher updated the Board on the contract search team's work, noting that they are very close to finalizing an outstanding candidate. More details will be forthcoming shortly.
- **April/May budget and financial performance.** Jon Gage as Treasurer indicated that given all the work on the FY26 Budget and Financial Sustainability work, the Finance Committee does not yet have a formal monthly report of where we are since April. He reiterated that we were "on track" as expected at this time of year, and that there were not surprises. Beth Cliff asked Jon to share the May numbers to the Board for the record as soon as they were available.
- **Stewardship.** Beth Cliff and Alan Taylor covered briefly on Stewardship. Beth shared an analysis which showed that we are 7% above where we were last year, reaching almost \$530K in pledges. We had over \$35K more in pledges, but with 5 fewer pledgers. Canvassing seemed to help and Alan thanked Beth Cliff for running that part of the work this year, with Board members and others taking time to reach people. The Board complemented Rev. Alan for being open and honest about the situation with the congregation in his letters and from the pulpit - this has not always happened in the past.
Still, there is still work to be done: the median gift is \$2000, but the cost per pledge unit to run the congregation annually is nearly \$3000. Most of the increases over the past years have come from regular givers giving more - we have lost some people, and while we've gained new people, they tend to give lower amounts to start off. The Board agreed that stewardship - and fundraising - needs renewed attention next year.

2026 Budget and Financial Sustainability Plan

- The Board then reviewed the budget approved during the May 15 Zoom meeting. They briefly discussed whether the Scouller-Nelson Fund, part of the Endowment, could be used to support the Family Faith Formation budget—allowing the “Children Are Our Future” funds to be preserved for the following year. The Finance Committee was asked to explore this possibility.
- The Board then engaged in a detailed discussion of the Financial Sustainability Plan (FSP), reaffirming its commitment to fully fund staff and personnel costs through pledges

within a defined timeframe. Brian reviewed the plan previously presented on May 15, and the Board weighed the strengths and challenges of its various components.

- The discussion led to the following actions: The Board began with a general discussion of the plan and agreed to separate the pledging strategy from the proposal to hire a development consultant or manager. As a result, the discussion and subsequent votes were divided into three distinct parts:

1. The Board discussed whether to commit to a three- or four-year timeline for covering staff and personnel costs through pledges. Brian supported a three-year plan to maintain momentum, while Stapley raised concerns that a rigid deadline conflicted with the congregation's values and staff support. Beth emphasized that Endowment required a clear plan to justify releasing unrestricted funds, noting they had already rejected an informal \$190K request due to the lack of one. She also stressed the importance of setting a realistic goal, given the proposed 10% annual pledge increase—a target not met in recent years—and recommended extending the timeline to four years. The Board unanimously approved the following motion:

a. The Board commits that for the budget for FY 29, total staff and personnel costs not including contracted services must be fully covered by annual Pledges, discounted by 8%.

2. The Board discussed hiring a 1099 development consultant for one year to support fundraising and prepare for the incoming contract minister. Discussion included whether a consultant was necessary—some felt the issue was volunteer engagement, not strategy—and raised questions about the consultant's scope, responsibilities, reporting structure, and potential for a longer-term role. It was agreed that the contract minister and Operations Council would define the scope, and Endowment would be asked to fund the position up to \$30,000. The Board approved by a 6:1 vote the following motion:

a. The Board authorizes the hiring of a 1099 Development Consultant next year to support fundraising momentum and organizational readiness for the incoming settled minister. The exact scope of work will be determined by the Contract Minister and Ops Council. The Board further requests that the Endowment fund this Consultant position in an amount not to exceed \$30,000.

- b. An amendment to increase funding to \$50,000 failed in a 3–3 tie with one abstention.

3. Brian Lasher brought forth a proposal around staffing which would require ministers to submit written recommendations to the Board for approval before making staffing changes. While some supported the idea for clarity and oversight, others noted it conflicted with the policy-based governance model, which gives settled ministers the responsibility to make staffing decisions within the approved budget. The idea is that they should, out of courtesy and collegiality, share plans with the Board, but the ultimate decision is the Settled Minister's to make. The Board acknowledged that this dynamic differs with a Contract minister, who reports directly to the Board and so the minister would need to seek approval for major decisions anyway. Ultimately, Brian put forth the motion, but it was not seconded, and the matter was closed, with thanks to Brian for allowing us to discuss an important governance issue.

Wrap up and thank you's. Anita, as process observer, noted that it seemed everyone was able to speak comfortably and be heard. There is always an issue of things running long, but she acknowledged that the meeting touched on a lot of important topics that needed good discussions.

Beth Cliff as President acknowledged and thanked the Board members who are rolling off this year - Stapley Emberling, Brian Lasher and Anita Pfluger. She and Ravi and others outlined their contributions and highlights of their time with us. The Board gave them each a floral bouquet, and a sheet cake with "Thank you S, B &A" was enjoyed by all -

Next Steps. Before closing for the evening, the group agreed that Beth as communications person would ghostwrite an announcement to the congregation about our next minister as soon as that was ready to be announced. Other next steps included:

- Finalize budget details and set up meetings with congregation. One thing TBD: whether to use Scouller/Nelson Funds to cover some of Family Faith Formation line items
- Continue developing Ops Council structure and roles. Invite Governance to June meeting for further discussion
- Pursue hiring of development consultant (provided it passes Endowment and Congregational Meeting)
- Finalize construction color options and survey.
- Await discussion on website and survey.
- Prepare for Congregational meeting on June 8

Adjournment. The meeting was adjourned at 9:59 p.m.