

FAQ – Membership/Volunteer Coordinator

For the May 15, 2011 Congregational Meeting

Is a volunteer/membership coordinator the best way to address retention, our desire for radical hospitality, and sense of community?

Another way of looking at this is asking how do congregations go from good to great?

The UUA calls them “breakthrough congregations” and a UUA trustee shared this with us: “A standard question I ask at every breakthrough congregation presentation at General Assembly: if you could name one thing you did differently with your resources to make the most difference in your growth, what would it be? So far I am somewhere around 7/7 for hiring a membership coordinator.”

Should this position have a different title?

The current title reflects the responsibilities that the person will have. Similar positions in other churches and non-profits have the same or similar titles. For example, earlier this year, the UU Church in Winston-Salem hired a new staff person with the title “Member/Volunteer Coordinator.”

The proposal, as approved for the first of the two votes required by the Financial Assets Management Policy (FAMP) specifically used the title “membership/volunteer coordinator.” Any change to the proposal would require starting this multiple vote process again from scratch.

The senior minister can make changes to this position’s title (or to the title of any staff person, for that matter) in the future if needed. So, if it becomes evident that the current title represents either a grave mistake or could be replaced by something better, the minister can make that change easily.

How will we measure whether or not this has been a good investment?

A church that is serious about its mission has to clearly any movement (or lack thereof) toward stated goals and objectives and regularly report those findings to the Board and congregation. We have begun to develop such criteria and measures as part of our transition to Policy Based Governance (PBG). Under PBG, the board will monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving our mission and ends. This monitoring will cover all progress towards achieving our mission and ends, including the Membership/Volunteer Coordinator’s performance.

Sean Hale, your Executive Director, has begun developing the methodology and criteria that will help demonstrate that progress.

Additionally, he is working with administrators at other large Unitarian Universalist churches on the subject of performance metrics. While several large, flourishing churches have developed in-house metrics that we might borrow or adapt, every church seems to employ different methodologies in their data collection. Hale and a team of other UU administrators seek, in the coming months, to develop a set of performance metrics and methodologies that they can share.

This way, we will be able to have meaningful conversations between churches about what concretely gets results and what doesn't.

Our performance metrics will likely include the core indicators for congregational health identified by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership such as member retention, the change in member pledging, the change in new member pledging, overall membership, and worship attendance. In addition to regularly reporting this information to the board, we expect to make it available to the congregation through such things as the newsletter and/or the packets for the congregational meetings.

What will the hiring process be?

Your Executive Team (Rev. Ed Brock and Sean Hale) have begun moving the hiring process forward with all due haste. Our ministerial candidate, Rev Meg Barnhouse, has indicated that she would like us to hire for this position as soon as possible. If at all possible, we will have a handful of final candidates to review with Meg in late May, following the congregation's vote to call her.

Executive Director Sean Hale will drive the hiring process. He will build the job description based on those from other large, flourishing churches. (The nascent UU Membership Coordinators Association has compiled a wealth of resources online at www.tinyurl.com/mempros).

I want to see a more detailed job description.

Under policy based governance, we trust staff to work out the details (drawing on member input as needed), for details such as a detailed job description for a new position. This task will be guided by a careful consideration of best practices in healthy, thriving congregations most closely resembling our own, and what can help us most fully live our mission and values. We have no desire to, or see any reason for, attempting to re-invent the wheel. The Board will be careful monitor the results of this work.

Consultation with members of the congregation will occur (and has been occurring). However, rather than the congregation reviewing, debating, and word-smithing a job description, the congregation will instead vote on the general concept and funding as described in the original proposal.

Is this a real need?

Yes.

This is a real need. It is normal to lose 10-12% of members every year (or 6-10% in an evangelical church). During the twenty years before our current transition, First UU Church of Austin lost an average of 17% per year.

Dr. Peter Steinke's work with us found that community was our single largest area in need of attention. In our Bridge to the Future sessions last year, the single most common value was "community," as illustrated in the word cloud below. A volunteer/ membership coordinator represents one of the most important things we can do to strengthen community.



When you talk to flagship UU churches, almost all confirm that this sort of position plays a critical role in addressing mission-critical areas like retention, community, and hospitality. Such churches include Unity Church St. Paul, First Universalist in Minneapolis, First UU Church of San Diego, Fox Valley UU Fellowship in Wisconsin, White Bear UU Church in Minnesota, First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, the UU Congregation of Atlanta, All Souls Church in DC, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, All Souls in Tulsa, and First Unitarian Church of Portland.

Why don't the responsibilities include more direct responsibility for generating income? Shouldn't this be called a "financial activities coordinator" or something like that?

We will certainly have our eyes on financial data like pledging rates of new and old members. We anticipate that this new staff person, together with other changes like a new senior minister and new Interim Director of Religious Education, will have a strong, though indirect, impact on income.

However, though we expect this position to generate more than enough increased income to pay for itself, neither the responsibilities nor the activities include direct fundraising. The experience of large, flourishing UU churches is that this position pays for itself because of the stronger connection, sense of community, and sense of purpose that its members feel. When people feel that, they tend to give more generously than those who experience only Sunday services.

What about the long-term funding?

Your board has recommended to the congregation that it approve funding from savings that should cover 100% of the first year, 50% of the second year, and 25% of the third year for the position from the date a person is hired. We anticipate that we will have an experience similar to the churches who have introduced this elsewhere, and that it will pay for itself before those funds run out.

All activities, whether they are new initiatives or involve just continuing the same ways we have always done things, have an inherent risk. This represents a reasonable, relatively low, risk investment based on the actual experience of many other churches, not a roll of the dice based on wild speculation or irrational hope.

However, it is possible that we will fail or that circumstances beyond our control will interfere, preventing the same success that so many other churches have had. Should that come to pass, then, just as in any difficult financial circumstance, we will have to make cuts. Funding day-to-day operations with savings is simply not sustainable in the long-term.

Shouldn't we wait until we can afford this?

Like education, funding a Volunteer/Membership Coordinator represents an investment in the future. We spend the money now in order to get the benefit in the future.

In this way it resembles a chicken and egg proposition to wait until we can "afford" it. We won't have enough money to fund the position until the person has been on the job for a couple of years and if we don't fund the position for a couple of years, then we won't have enough money to fund it.

Who will this person report to?

As with all other paid staff, your Volunteer/Membership Coordinator will report to the senior minister. Our next senior minister may have this person report directly to her or indirectly through another senior staff person such as the executive director.

How will the Memorial Savings Fund be made whole again? What is the plan to pay back this money?

The Memorial Savings Fund (MSF) is somewhat analogous to the family savings account.¹ This makes it different from taking a loan out from the bank. When a family spends part of its savings, repayment is optional while repaying a bank loan is not optional. If, for example, your family uses part of its savings to fund a family member's education, it may or may not pursue a strategy to repay that money. Likewise, the congregation may choose whether or not repayment is desired.

So the congregation, ultimately, sets the priorities of the church. Should having the MSF at a certain minimum balance represent a top or mission-critical priority, it has several options at its disposal after the last of the funds described in the proposal get spent in 2014. Options include diverting a portion of pledge income, beginning in 2015, from operations to savings. The fourth line of the motion, as amended in January, will lead us to put this sort of option in front of the congregation.

Can't our wonderful volunteers take care of this, just as they always have?

¹ The MSF has one important difference from a family savings account, though. While most families can immediately access their savings, the congregation of this church has imposed restrictions on its ability to spend it. In order for the congregation to approve itself to spend its savings, two-thirds of members at both the spring and fall meetings must vote in favor. Thus, access to the funds can take anywhere from six to twelve months.

We do have wonderful volunteers. We couldn't do what we do without them and the volunteer hours of our members and friends will always represent the life blood of this congregation. Paid staff can never effectively replace volunteers, only support, enhance, and otherwise strengthen what the volunteers do.

Your volunteer/membership coordinator's main responsibilities include recruiting and training fresh volunteers as well as supporting current volunteers. This will engage and deepen the engagement and commitment of all members - new members and those longer-term members who have had only peripheral involvement, as well as "veteran" volunteers. It will also allow the dear people who have always said yes when we've asked them to give even more of their time, to take a rest and recharge their batteries as needed. Part of a volunteer coordinator's role is to be mindful of the possibility of "burnout" in our wonderful volunteers; we want to be the beloved community, not the exhausted community. Not so long ago, your church grew too large to sustainably recruit, train, and retain volunteers without professional support.

Many of our committed volunteers have given their time at sacrificial levels during the last two years of transition; we have a pressing need to expand and diversify our volunteer base.

More questions, comments, or concerns?

Your board would like to hear from you. Please direct questions, comments, or concerns to your President, Eric Stimmel (president@austinuu.org).