



## *Power Analysis in a Congregation*

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**Power!** This is a word that makes parishioners nervous. The term means simply the *ability to make something happen*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, for many, it feels unseemly to talk about power in congregational life. Nonetheless, power, its use, mis-use, or abuse, and its distribution are critical both to congregational effectiveness and as a source of conflict among members.

My purpose here is to provide congregational leaders with a structured way to think about how power is held and disbursed in your congregation. It comes in two parts: a) an impersonal, general analysis of who has the right and ability to make things happen; and b) an opportunity for you to actually name those who wield power in varied settings.



**Reputational & Influential Power:** Every congregation has those who, by dint of service or longevity or character, have earned the regard and respect of others in the congregation. Such people may have held or still hold official roles in the congregation. However, their ability to make things happen — or to prevent things from happening — does not depend on an office. Sometimes understood as “elders” or “first among equals,” other members just naturally look to them for guidance about congregational matters. By a word or a look, such persons can bless or curse any leader’s initiative.<sup>2</sup> A wise leader knows the importance of “checking it out” with them before acting. In this instance, power has been earned.

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<sup>1</sup> More formally, the word *power* comes from Anglo-French *poer, pouer*, from *poer* meaning “to be able.” Dictionary definitions include the “control and influence over another entity and its actions, the ability to act or produce an effect, and the ability or capacity to perform or act effectively.”

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps some of our discomfort discussing power comes out of our natural reluctance to let others have influence over us. Likewise, there is a shadow side to power, both in its reputational and nominal forms. Behaving authoritatively is markedly different than acting in an authoritarian manner, a form of power we rightly suspect. *Bullying* is a kind of reputational power that leaves many a leader feeling trapped and resentful. Its most common expression among our congregations is found in “do it my way, or I’ll take my money away.” Wise leaders will recognize that, in our human frailty, the shadow side of power needs to be respected and not tolerated lest it prevail.

**Nominal & Official Power:** Every congregation has power roles assigned by its by-laws, by secular law, and general Unitarian Universalist congregational practice. These consist of elected and appointed positions. Often, the title of the office describes what power an office holder has been given [in contrast to having earned it]: *Treasurer* is straightforward. *Trustee*, by contrast, is less focused. Best practices for congregations suggest each office ought to have a job description that spells out both authorities and responsibilities, including what is and is not allowed. Of course, that can become very tedious and still not cover every eventuality. Thus, particularly when new people take an office, an annual going-over review is desirable as part of a training for the office.

**Norms & Cultural Power:** All human groups over time form understood, seldom spoken rules that determine how a group runs and how individuals may act in the group — no matter their stature or official role. These norms are rooted in a group's identity and are not easily altered. An unwise leader will ignore the power of "the way things are done here" at her/his peril. Norms will permit or thwart intentional policies if they are not dealt with consciously. Wise leaders take time to learn as much as they can about the group's culture before, as it were, s/he steps in or on it.

**General Congregational Power:** By virtue of membership, members and only members can take certain actions. Typically, in Unitarian Universalist congregations these powers include:

- The adoption or revision of all congregational policies, most notably by-laws, constitution, and other articles pertinent to being an organization — often in compliance with the rules of the Unitarian Universalist Association or the secular state.
- The criteria for joining or being removed from membership.
- The election or removal of all officers, including the Minister.
- The election or removal of members for congregational committees, such as Nominating or Ministerial Search.
- The adoption of an annual spending plan, the budget.
- Entering into long-term or large financial obligations — often triggered by a by-laws ceiling on spending authorities granted to a Board.
- The decision to incorporate or to disband.
- The creation of adjunct financial bodies, such as an Endowment Committee.

**Powers of a Board of Trustees & Officers :** Congregational members invest power by entrusting some of their members to act on behalf of the congregation. These powers are held accountable by at least an annual report to the membership and rules regarding elections.

A *Board of Trustees* is the “head” or primary power in a congregation. It acts in broad ways for the “good of the order.” There are some specifics that arise from this giving of trusteeship:

- *Fiduciary responsibilities:* The Board has the power for the receipt, disbursement, and accounting of all monies belonging to the congregation. Often, a *Treasurer*<sup>3</sup> will act as the designated office holder to implement and monitor these responsibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Per se, the Treasurer need not be a member of the Board, although that often is the practice. The primary power is to advise the Board on matters financial, and particularly to ensure the integrity of all accounting.

*Fiduciary* means to hold in trust. Thus, the notion also includes being trusted to see to the congregation's integrity with regard to membership, reputation, legality, physical and emotional safety, and moral action. Trustees are given the right and ability to see that the congregation behaves responsibly and faithfully in its individual and collective actions.

- *President [or Chair]* of the Board [often, also of the Congregation]:<sup>4</sup> At once, the presiding officer does just that: s/he leads meetings of the Board and the Congregation, or delegates that authority to other officers. Leading the board confers the power to set the Board's agenda. Also, a President, as the chief executive officer, is empowered to sign contracts on behalf of the Board/Congregation.
- *Vice-President* and *Secretary/Clerk*: are additional offices whose roles are primarily to aid the Board and the President in carrying out Board business.
- *Trustees*: Generally, these are people elected to rotating offices of fixed terms. As members of the Board team, their powers reside in the collective action of the Board. It is better for Trustees to serve "at large" rather than as representatives of sub-groups within the congregation.<sup>5</sup>
- *Policy Making*: As the head of the congregation, the Board is the group that determines all operational and procedural policies. These often are contained in a Board policy manual which covers things such as who can rent the congregation's facilities, personnel administration, bookkeeping/accounting/spending rules, the writing of contracts, and rules related to membership conduct [alcohol or drug use, presence of weapons, sexual conduct, conflict management, etc.].

Through job descriptions or committee charters, the Board formally delegates the kind of powers others may hold. Such policies give both permission and provide limits to the powers that may be used.

**Ministerial Power & Authority:** In nearly all Unitarian Universalist congregations, the minister sits as a full member of the board without voting privileges [*ex officio*, by right of office]. Her/his power here is limited to consultative participation in the formulation of policies.

A Unitarian Universalist minister, by tradition and polity, also has some very specific powers:

- Unitarian Universalist ministers are expected to serve as "the spiritual leader" of our congregations and to undertake activities that grow people's souls within the Unitarian Universalist tradition.
- Our ministers are presented with a free & untrammelled pulpit. This means our ministers have absolute freedom to preach the truth as they best understand it without fear of censure or censorship. The notion also contains the implied absolute freedom of the pew: no member shall be required to assent to any creedal formulation nor concur with the minister as a condition of membership.
- The minister is authorized law or tradition to conduct all priestly rites — child dedications, confirmations in the faith, weddings, and memorials/funerals.

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<sup>4</sup> Practice varies here. In the Florida District, the Board President is often elected to that role by the congregation; thus, by implication s/he is also the presiding officer of the congregation. Elsewhere, Boards choose their own officers, creating an ambiguity as to whether the Board Chair is also the Congregational head. Either way works so long as the Board's presiding officer has depth experience with the Board prior to election as its leader.

<sup>5</sup> An unfortunate practice sometimes found among Florida District congregations includes electing officers for one year terms apart from the trustees, whose terms are longer. This creates a power conflict among recent-arrivals and those who carry-over from one year to another. Here the power of place and experience can trump authorized power and create an unhappy contest of wills.

- The minister is authorized by tradition to visit with members in their homes or other places as the member may prefer.

As it is often a source of difficulty if not conflict, it is important to say clearly: Beyond the powers just stated, any other powers exerted by the minister on behalf of the congregation are those delegated directly or implicitly to her/him by the Board of Trustees and/or congregational decision. One such power, by way of illustration, is the supervision of all hired staff, a common practice among Unitarian Universalist congregations.<sup>6</sup>

**Other Groups & Persons with Power:** A Board of Trustees and Minister cannot serve every need in a congregation. Thus, power — the ability to make things happen — is delegated by the Board to sub-groups within the congregation. These include, typically:

- *Committees, Task Forces & Instrumentalities:* By job descriptions or “charters,” the Board delegates certain instrumental powers to task groups to aid the Board in fulfilling the congregation’s mission.
- *Affiliate or Adjunct groups:* Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have internal membership groups — e.g., the Women’s Alliance — that have specific programs and their own governing process. Such groups generally have wide latitude to do things insofar as they comply with the Board’s operational regulations and with the practice of Unitarian Universalism.
- *Employed staff:* As small businesses, the congregation needs skilled and accountable people to tend to the daily affairs of the congregation. Staffing varies greatly by congregational size and includes both paid and volunteers. Here job descriptions are essential to grant and limit the staff person’s power.



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<sup>6</sup> Further, general specificity becomes difficult as ministerial authority varies broadly among Unitarian Universalist congregations due to membership size, identity norms and traditions.

**An Exercise in Power Analysis:** Use the form here to assess who has power in your congregation. It is best if this exercise is done by leaders rather than the congregation at large as leaders are the ones who most need to understand how power works in your congregation. Caution: you may not be able to identify anyone for some of these questions.

<b>Reputational Power:</b> List here the actual names of individuals in your congregation who are possess sufficient membership esteem that they can approve <u>or</u> disapprove:	
Changes to the Liturgy or Order of the Worship Service:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the schedule of Sunday worship:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the number of services offered:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the Children's Religious Education curricula:	1. 2. 3.
Whether children may participate in the Sunday worship:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the Adults' Religious Education curricula:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the congregation's name:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the ways financial stewardship campaigns are conducted:	1. 2. 3.
Changes to the congregation's participation in or support to the Florida District or Unitarian Universalist Association:	1. 2. 3.
Whether to engage in identity changing programs such as the Welcoming Congregation, Green Sanctuary, and/or AR/AO/MOC [anti-racism/anti-oppression/multi-cultural] initiatives:	1. 2. 3.
Off-budget spending:	1. 2. 3.

Off-budget fund-raising:	1. 2. 3.
Whether it is time to change Ministers:	1. 2. 3.
Other:	1. 2. 3.

List here those whose names you have listed more than three times:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Now compare this list with other members of the Board. Who has real power outside of an office? What is the consensus? What does this suggest to you?



The next two exercises begin to sort out powers attributable to the office one holds and how those powers relate to other power holders.

**Nominal Power:** List here no more than five powers attributable to each of the named offices. Afterward, be sure to look for overlaps of power. This will provide a next step of negotiating what is truly a shared power and what is discretely owned.

The Congregation:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
The Board of Trustees:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
The President of Board/Congregation:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
The Minister:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
The Treasurer:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Committee Chairs:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Instrumentalities/Adjunct Groups:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Employed Staff [by position]	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Others:	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

