

## **BOARD POLICY ON TAKING A PUBLIC STAND**

### **Board's Interpretation of the Governing Bylaw**

The Bylaws (Article II, Section I) provide that First Unitarian Church may not take a public stand on a matter of public interest without first taking a congregational vote. The Board of Trustees interprets this to mean that:

- Individual members of First Unitarian Church engaged in social action may identify themselves as a member of First Unitarian Church of Omaha but make no representation that they speak for the church.
- A congregational vote is necessary for public displays on church property, using the church banner in a parade or at a public demonstration, or any time the church, as an institution, wants to engage with the wider community on an issue of public interest.

### **Taking A Congregational Vote**

The Bylaws give the Board of Trustees sole authority to call a special congregational meeting on whether the church should take a public stand. The Board of Trustees retains the authority on its own motion to call such a special congregational meeting and will otherwise follow these procedures when exercising that authority to call a special congregational meeting to take a public stand.

### **Procedures**

1. At least one recognized church team or committee or member must sponsor a proposal to the Board of Trustees asking that the congregation take a public stand on an issue. The sponsors are encouraged to consult with the Minister and the Social Justice Chair early in the process of writing their proposal. The proposal must include:

- A written resolution that reflects the public stand to be voted on by the congregation. For examples of content and style, see [www.uua.org/actions/](http://www.uua.org/actions/);
- An explanation for how the proposal is consistent with Unitarian Universalist principles and will advance the mission of the church;
- An explanation for why engagement of individual members, teams or committees is an insufficient response to the issue and there is a compelling need for the congregation to take a public stand on the issue. For example, the proposal includes the use of the church banner or a public display on church property;
- A plan for educating the congregation about the issue or evidence that the congregation already has a long history of engagement with the issue that makes passage likely;
- A strategic plan for how the congregation's public stand will be acted upon to advance the goals embodied in the resolution; and

- A signature reflecting that the Social Justice Chair, if one has been designated, or the Ministry Team Council has reviewed the proposal and certifies that the proposal includes the above elements.

2. The President will verify and notify the proponents when the proposal is complete and place it on the agenda for timely consideration by the Board of Trustees. Once on the agenda, the Board of Trustees is not limited to taking a yes or no vote on the proposal and may, for example, decide to take no action or postpone action to allow more time for congregational engagement around the issue. The Board of Trustees will consider, along with the merits of the proposal, the following criteria when deciding how to act on the proposal: how central is the issue to the core values of the congregation, how polarizing is the issue and how much education is needed before the issue is ripe for consideration at a special congregational meeting.

3. If a special congregational meeting is called, copies of the proposal will be included in the meeting notice to all members. The purpose of the special congregational meeting is to allow all sides of the issue to be heard, concluding with a YES or NO vote by secret ballot on the proposition: "Should the congregation proceed to a vote by mail on taking the public stand set forth in the proposal". To move forward, a majority of eligible voting members at the meeting must vote yes.

4. Prior to the special congregational meeting, the Board Secretary will prepare a list of eligible voting members in the church. Anyone may attend a special congregational meeting but only eligible voting members may cast a vote. Eligible voting members are those who have been members for three months immediately preceding the special meeting and in whose name a contribution has been made during a period of a year closing thirty days prior to the meeting. (Revised Articles of Incorporation, III)

5. The list of eligible voters will be used at the special congregational meeting to distribute ballots and determine before any vote is taken whether a quorum of twenty percent of eligible voting members is present at the meeting.

6. Upon a majority vote of eligible members at the special congregational meeting the congregation will proceed to conduct a secret vote by mail on the proposition: "Should the congregation take a public stand on the resolution set forth in the proposal". Congregational approval requires at least two-thirds of the ballots returned by mail vote in favor of taking the public stand. (Bylaw, Article II, Section I)

7. To encourage the widest participation among eligible voters, instructions will include an email option identifying an address to which members willing to disclose their identity may send an email vote that clearly identifies a "yes" or "no" for the resolution and the name of the voting member.

## **FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH PUBLIC STANDS**

The church has taken a public stand on the following issues. Members and teams should first advise the Ministry Team Council before speaking or taking action in the name of the church on any of these issues.

1. First Unitarian Church, as a Welcoming Congregation, has taken a public stand in support of GLBT equality.
2. First Unitarian Church has taken a public stand in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement. (Congregational Resolution passed April, 2016.)

**Recommendation By The Committee:**

The Committee recommends that the Board of Trustees facilitate establishment of a Denominational Affairs Team (or a Board Committee) that would educate and engage the congregation on study/action issues being considered at General Assembly. More congregational engagement on those denominational issues could help spark a social justice response in the congregation and ripen into proposals for the First Unitarian Church to take a public stand.