

Ad Astra Per Aspera

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

First Church In Boston

January 29, 2023

The front of your Order of Service features a comet called C 2022 C3 (ZTF) which has fascinated me and also fascinates Noel and Gigi. That's why they have built the music of this service around this celestial visitor. Halley's Comet comes by earth every 75 years, but the last earthly residents to have seen this new comet would have been in the Stone Age, 50,000 years ago. It's even older than First Church!

Now I am in favor of celebrating celestial visitors but I wondered just how that would fit in with a sermon on governance, which is how power is distributed in a church. Then I remembered this old Latin phrase, "Ad astra per aspera," "to the stars through adversity." It seems to fit because while we are considering what parts of our system of governance we like and what we don't we should keep in mind that we and all churches have been through some tough times, some adversity, which has little to do with the rules.

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Robert Burns, whose birthday we celebrated a couple of days ago, once wrote “Oh wad the power the giffie gie us/To see ourselves as others see us.” One of the most useful things that an interim minister can do is help a congregation in search for a new settled minister to see itself from the perspective of ministers who might want to put themselves forward as candidates for the settled position. And I am aided in this by the experience of this last month when I have had the opportunity to talk to several people in our candidate pool. The content of these conversations is confidential, but I can say that every one of the ministers I talked to were keenly interested in our governance structure and whether the people in the congregation were willing to consider changing it or were they circling the wagons to defend it. And yet the congregational survey revealed only five people who even mentioned governance reform as an issue, and those were afraid that it would prove “contentious.”

I sensed that an irresistible force was drawing near to an immovable object, and, after checking with a wise person at the UUA, decided that I had a role to play in suggesting that we need to be more

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open to change. I have carried that message to the Standing Committee, and we had a lively discussion for ten minutes and we are still all friends.

This morning I want to preach it to two audiences. Primarily to the Search Committee, whom I expect has been discussing it already, for they will be the first representatives of First Church to actually engage with the would-be candidates. But behind them is the congregation, who are going to be asked at the end of the process to approve the Search Committee's selection.

Many churches are conflict-averse, and maybe this is one of them. My philosophy is that conflict can be positive, can be a midwife to much-needed change. I am not here this morning to propose solutions, I'm here to point out problems.

I'm going to touch on three basic topics here: (1) the role of the minister; (2) the role of the trustees vis a vis our fifth principle; and (3) the role of the Standing Committee and particularly the term of the chair.

As to the minister, many church bylaws make the minister the CEO or head of staff. All staff reports to him or her and there may be a sole

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power to hire and terminate staff. First Church by-laws, by contrast, make the Chair of the Standing Committee the CEO.

In the early part of my ministry career there was a special form of governance called Carver Policy Government. It made the minister the CEO and restricted the Board to making policy and setting goals. The executive group, the minister and her close co-workers, were tasked with deciding how they were going to hit the goals set by the Board. This was supposed to free the Board from the little stuff, to get them to see the forest instead of the trees. Though the UUA pushed policy governance, it soon fell out of favor at the congregational and national levels when people realized that, however well it may work in business or non-profits, it was ill-suited to small churches.

In the time I have been here, a claim had been made that the structure of governance here is a matrix. I don't think I understand the term well, but it seems to be a graded relationship in more than one dimension at once. So a person may be Treasurer among the officers of the society but also serve as director of Broadcasting because someone

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else quit and a fill-in was needed. He or she would have one set of connections from one role and other connections for another role. I don't see how the concept advances our understanding of the role.

It is startling to read in the 2005 by-laws how few times the minister is mentioned. When I was taught congregational polity in seminary, I was taught that one of its most important features is the power to call any minister the congregation wishes, without seeking permission from a Bishop or Pope as in other, more hierarchical denominations. This really originated right in this church, explained by John Cotton, the first teaching elder.

Because the calling of a minister is so important, when you look into the by-laws of most UU congregations, you immediately see a big block of black text which concerns the procedure for calling a meeting to call a minister. Typically it will specify the form of notice to be given and who is eligible to attend and who is eligible to vote, and the most important question, what is the percentage of "yes" votes needed to effect the call. Another block of text will deal with the power of a congregation to dismiss

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a minister, to bring the ministry to an end.

It's amazing to me that the by-laws of First Church are silent on these most important questions. The most important power that a UU congregation has is simply passed over.

Now the late Howard Fuguet, lawyer and Trustee, wrote a paper in about 2016 called Congregational handbook, and he explained the absence of any procedure for calling or dismissing a minister by saying those details were covered in the UUA rules and First Church followed those rules voluntarily. That may have been true in 2016, but now the Settlement Handbook of the UUA says to abide by the local congregation's rules, Seems to be a hot potato.

Now in any real-life governance setup there are the rules, set forth in by-laws, charter, handbooks or regulations, and then there are the ways people actually operate. The very few mentions of the minister in the governing documents of this church means that the minister is forced to resort to what is called "soft power," trying to persuade decision-makers that a certain course of action is the right one.

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From the stories I hear of them, both Rhys Williams and Stephen Kendrick were masters of using “soft power,” and maybe that is the secret of their longevity. But I want to urge here that you would make this place appear more welcoming to incoming ministers if you put some language in giving them more explicit roles to play.

I am conscious of several instances in my year and a half tenure here where I was expecting to play a role in a decision and I was not consulted. There are not many, and in general I felt that most people asked my opinion and often followed it. But the times that I was not consulted stick in memory.

The Search Committee did a grand and largely accurate job of summarizing First Church for our applicants and they referred to some tension in these words:

“The experience of our current interim minister and office staff, with some difficulties in communication, indicates the need for clearer definition and greater transparency in our operating structures.”

There have certainly been times of high anxiety and conflict, some of

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which might be laid at the door of Covid disruption, and some of which may relate to the governance structure and ambiguous boundaries. I would be glad to work with anyone on transparency.

Trust is also an issue, and sometimes we draft an email in the heat of passion and push “send” prematurely, which if we had waited we might have avoided a day’s worth of unfortunate consequences. I plead guilty to sending emails myself which should have been sent to trash.

We have lost members and we have lost staff and we may never know the reason why they left, but rather than beat ourselves up about their reasons, we can concentrate on being the friendliest and kindest we can be. We need to be asking ourselves what we can do to make this a more friendly place to work and hang out together.

I am a lawyer, and one might think I am therefore overly fond of rules. But experienced lawyers know that often the best decisions are not made by following the rules. But if you have big holes in your rules structure, you are going to leave a lot of people confused as to what to do to resolve issues.

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We say the path to the stars runs through adversity. We have all felt a lot of adversity in this church, largely through Covid. No one wants to get Covid, and I had escaped it until late last month. During the course of our response to Covid, we have all evolved new ways of dealing with each other. As volunteer labor dried up, staff was forced to take over more and more of the activities which keep a church running. We are coming back, though not as fast as most of us would like. The Committee structure has taken a big hit, as the congregational record shows, and some of us have put in many extra hours trying to make up for the lost functions of committees. There is a certain role redefinition happening, and there are both good and bad aspects to this. But we are bound to bump up against each other as we find new ways to keep the ship sailing.

I don't have a prescription for what rules in the setup need to be changed or in what direction. My point here, as it was at the Standing Committee last month, is that we need to be open to discussing the system and considering change.

We've talked about the role of the ministers; now let's talk about the

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trustees. If you look in your hymnal at the principles and purposes about 5 pages in from the title page, you find that by our Fifth principle we covenant to affirm and promote “the Right of Conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Is it consistent with democratic processes for some ten or twelve million dollars of this church’s assets to be controlled by a committee of five people which has been historically self-perpetuating?

For some of you, that last sentence may have brought about a rise in your blood pressure, so let me hasten to add that the individuals who are serving us now as trustees are a fine lot, engaged energetically in many aspects of the church and completely worthy of our trust as far as I know. Many of them go well above and beyond their duties as trustees to devote more time to other aspects of the church. It feels like volunteer energy in the last three months has risen by about 50%.

From all I can tell, the trustees love this church as much as anyone involved loves it. We would be in much worse shape than we are if we did not have their talents applied to various problems we are facing.

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But let's talk about church financing.: Originally, ministers and churches were simply paid as part of the government. Even after the Revolution, there were churches supported by states and municipalities out of tax revenue until the 1830s. When tax support dried up, the churches were forced to fund their operations from among their members, and this took the form of assessments on the pews. This was a way of adding up the total amount that it cost of running the church, and apportioning it among the members by which pew they sat in.

The pew system was still in effect here as late as 1922, for that was when a deed of trust was executed giving something to the "proprietors of the pews." It is unclear to me what those proprietors got in exchange for their pews, and the deed itself is not included in Leo Collins' fine history book, so I can't figure out how it happened. Better minds than mine have looked at this, and everyone seems to accept that the Trustees have for a hundred years held in trust the real and financial assets of the church except for what is received and spent for day-to-day operations.

So we have had for a hundred years this body of five people, who

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elect their own successors and are not accountable to the congregation, making all the big financial decisions. We found this out this past year with the sale of the parsonage on Beacon Hill. The Trustees did a fine job of telling the members after the fact that the place had been sold, but they did not ask for anyone's input or consent because they believed they did not have to. Whether this was right as a matter of the rules, it left a bad taste in some people's mouths. I had sympathy for both sides, for an old building is sometimes an albatross for a church, but here there were many happy memories associated with the parsonage.

Is there, 100 years after the deed of trust, any justification for having an unelected committee holding virtually all of the financial assets of the church? We can say that this has so far prevented anyone from draining the financial resources by dishonest means. But is that a real threat? Maybe. We have an example close to hand: the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem on Beacon Hill owns the 18-story apartment next door to the church. In 2013 one of the church's staff, who claimed to be part of Whitey Bulger's gang, was charged with scheming to take

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control of its assets. I think he was charged and convicted before he got away with anything, but it is a cautionary tale for any church whose assets have appreciated in value, as ours have.

Very few of our assets are the kind a thief can shoplift; they are invested in funds controlled by the committee and they are somewhere in the digital cloud. It is unclear to me that you need the kind of tight control that we have here in order to keep the assets safe from embezzlement.

What is more disturbing to me is that, because the funds are so closely controlled, the general congregation does not have an appreciation of what all we have and how they are invested. In sitting in trustee meetings for the past year and a half, I have heard few policy disagreements on the Board of Trustees.

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of this Paul Rudolph sanctuary, and we retold the story of how this church was challenged to go out of existence and give all its money away for the benefit of the poor of this neighborhood. My sermon on that occasion ended with the hope that we had answered both needs, since we rebuilt the church with facilities for

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community access, and we had established Hale House as a small but well-functioning residence for seniors regardless of wealth or income.

Now I haven't kept up with the funds the Trustees hold, but my general sense is that if you added them all up it would be north of Ten Million dollars. Most of this is tied up in individual bequests which can only be spent for purposes consistent with the original gifts. I have suggested to the Trustees that they take a good look at going to court for some of these funds which are so restricted they are not doing anyone any good.

What would happen if the elections for the Trustees were subject to a vote in the congregation? Might we have a contest or at least a more active consideration of what to do with the money?

Maybe it would produce enough interest that someone would be motivated to design a well-thought-out proactive program of charitable giving. It's a subset of the general mission question if anyone wanted to pursue it. The general question is, "what are we doing here," and the specific questions are "what are we doing with this money, and what could we be doing with it?"

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Now let me briefly shift to the other side of the operation, the Society and its Standing Committee and chair. Stephen Kendrick said that the one-year term for chair is entirely too short, and I agree. In a year, a person is just getting the hang of the controls. That is confirmed by the fact that the last two chairs have figured out ways to serve more than a year. When people consistently break the rules, it might be an indication that the rules need to be changed.

We need a well-thought out training program for lay leadership. The UUA used to offer these in more prosperous times, but we don't have those resources – or do we? We have a lot of ministers and consultants in Boston with a lot of knowledge and experience. Why wouldn't we put on our own leadership training program and invite our UU neighbors to join with us?

We don't do rules for rules sake. We change rules to adapt to new circumstances. Darwin taught us that when there is a change in the environment, species living there must adapt to the new change, move to another environment, or die. We have been through, and are still going

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through, a plague different from any we have encountered before. It would be a peculiar circumstance if we *didn't* need some basic changes in the way we do business.

There are many more aspects of this we could discuss, but we are about out of time.

I have been critical this morning, and I have not liked to, but I have done it because I believe this church has the stuff of a rebound. I believe with a new good energetic and wise minister, if you collaborate with him or her and use his or her guidance, you can have a bright future.

I also want to say that there is plenty of information about church governance available on the web. The UUA is running one for which I have signed up; it is free and it is on Zoom. I am just getting into a book by a colleague named Dan Hotchkiss and I understand that Ken Reeves, who preached in this pulpit three weeks ago, also has a book about church governance, and I expect he is available to consult, for a fee.

The basic issue we need to ask ourselves is, "are we looking to recreate the past or move boldly into an uncertain future?" Someone at

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the Transitions office in the UUA is fond of using the phrase “toxic nostalgia.” That indicates that a worship of the past, an attempt to reenact the way it was, is not only doomed to failure but distracts us from making the changes we will need to make to attract people in the younger generations.

I have a great deal of respect for a member of this church I never met, Howard Fuguet. Howard undertook to understand the peculiar governance of this institution and to explain it both in his handbook and in a video that he made a few years before he died. I don't know what Mr. Fuguet himself would be advocating as far as sticking with the system we have or making changes, but I have had the pleasure of working with his widow Darcy on the Standing Committee, and when we talked about all the possibilities for change that we are facing here, she said something that will stick with me for a long time: “we need to honor the roots that hold us close, but that is not as important as cultivating the wings that set us free.”

Darcy was referring, of course, to the beloved hymn, “Spirit of Life,”

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which encompasses both past and future. We need both roots and wings,
my friends. Roots, hold me close, wings set me free. Ad astra per aspera.
Amen.

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