

FAQ on Changing Board Size

1. *What is the proposal to change the size of the Board?*

The Board is proposing to reduce the number of Board members from 12 to 9.

2. *How did the Board decide to propose this change?*

The Governance Committee periodically reviews the church's governance structure. In 2019, it began researching current best practices in church governance and one of the areas it reviewed was how boards are functioning in other large churches.

The committee read the current research on board size that had been done by organizations (UUA, Alban Institute) and spoke with experts (UUA-Christine Robinson, Susan Beaumont) focused on board effectiveness. The committee also researched the sizes of the boards of other large churches in the UUA that had recently reduced the size of their boards to understand their experience and learn what had worked and what they would do differently.

Finally, the Board held a workshop facilitated by Susan Beaumont, a large church consultant, to explore the pros and cons of reducing the size of our Board. Other needs and processes such as the pandemic and the ministerial search took precedence and the Board tabled the board size discussion until 2023.

3. *What are the current recommended best practices in board size?*

There are two key questions in determining board size. First, the appropriate size for a board is determined by its fundamental work. Congregational boards generally have three types of work: **fiduciary** (stewardship of tangible assets), **strategic** (working with the congregation to set priorities and ensuring that its resources are supporting those priorities), and **generative** (understanding the changes in the environment and framing the questions or challenges the church is facing). In smaller churches with few professional staff, boards tend to focus on fiduciary tasks and on managing the church. Boards always maintain responsibility for the fiduciary oversight of the church, but as congregations grow and staff become more key in the management of the church, boards shift their focus to strategic and generative work.

Second, the size of a group impacts the effectiveness of its communications and its ability to have substantive discussions. In smaller groups there are fewer lines of communication, which increases the likelihood of all members being "in the loop." Smaller groups also tend to have more productive discussions that result in sound decisions (you can research communication and decision-making theory for more information on why this is). Thus, as the work of a board changes from managing the church to focusing on strategic and generative work, a smaller board is more nimble and more effective.

4. *What are other large UU churches doing?*

The Board surveyed 26 UU churches with 500 or more members and found that the majority have transitioned to boards of 8-10 members.

5. *How can a smaller board represent all the areas of the church?*

The deeper question is how can we best promote or protect what is most important to us. A larger board does not necessarily result in better representation. Often, a few active members are the most engaged with the work of the board while other members hear “reports” of the work that has been done. This can result in some members being marginalized and their voices not fully heard. We have experienced this problem over the years with concerns that the Board Officers Committee is by default framing the work of the Board and driving its focus. Research on board size has shown that, in fact, large boards often undermine representation rather than promote it.

One way to increase the number of voices and points of view is to expand congregant representation on the Board Committees and Task Forces that do the groundwork on the questions, initiatives, and projects the Board is working on. The Board’s Finance Committee has always had congregant members who actively participate in its work, research, and discussions. This year, congregants have joined the Communications Committee and the Governance Committee.

6. *What is the summary rationale for making this change?*

- A smaller Board has fewer lines of communication among members and is more effective at making timely, informed decisions.
- A smaller Board is more representative than a large Board as all Board members are responsible for the good of the entire congregation, not for individual programs.
- The addition of congregants to Board Committees and Task Forces increases congregant participation and transparency.
- A Board of 7-9 members is the best practice in governance for a church of our size.

7. *What is the process for reducing the size of the Board?*

The Governance Committee will send a proposal to the Board to amend our bylaws to change the number of Board members from twelve to nine. After the Board approves the proposed amendment, it will be added to the annual ballot in the spring for members to vote on.