

Congregational Delegate Selection and Voting Guide

At each General Assembly, Unitarian Universalist congregations are represented by their community's delegates, who are empowered to vote on matters of Association-wide importance. Each congregation is free to create processes for delegate selection and training consistent with their bylaws, common processes, covenant, and values. This guide is designed to help congregations ensure that delegate selection and training processes are democratic, equitable, and transparent, and that chosen delegates authentically represent their congregations.

How are delegates selected? What biases might exist within the process?

Common processes (alone or in combination) that Unitarian Universalist congregations use for choosing delegates to General Assembly include:

- Financially able and willing volunteer(s) offer to represent the community
- A nominating committee identifies and recommends the community's delegates
- The Board of Trustees appoints the community's delegates
- The community as a whole, at a congregational meeting, elects its delegates
- A denominational/associational affairs committee helps recruit, train, and orient the community's delegates

Biases are normal in human lives and are routinely part of human processes. Because of this, it is vital that leaders examine and reflect on their congregation's processes and identify biases and assumptions that may be embedded within them, as well as ways to mitigate them.

Relying on volunteers who are financially able and willing is often the simplest and most fiscally achievable option, but it also includes biases related to wealth, availability of time, and experience/familiarity with national Unitarian Universalist processes. Such a process can be a barrier for many people, such as working parents of young children, disabled and low-income people, youth and young adults, and people who don't have paid time off from work.

As another example, leaders who identify or appoint delegates may be biased in terms of who they think would best represent the congregation, and/or they might choose the same person again and again when others are eager for the experience.

Recommended Leadership/Board-Level Conversation: Talk honestly and frankly about your congregation's current approach to delegate selection. Which voices and perspectives might be privileged or amplified by your current process? Which might not be included at all? (Do youth, working families, and those with less financial resources or who are on fixed incomes, for example, have equal opportunity to represent the community as delegates?)

Ideally, a congregation's delegate selection process should lead to a slate of delegates that authentically represents the totality of your community. There are many pathways that can achieve this; the most important element is intentional conversation to ensure that your process matches your community's values and its diversity. Some strategies that congregations use to mitigate bias include:

- Providing partial or full funding for delegates who need financial support in order to register and/or attend
- Actively recruiting and/or nurturing delegates from marginalized or underrepresented groups, such as youth, people of color, and/or newer members
- Utilizing the UUA's free registration option for delegates attending virtually to support a diverse and representative slate of delegates

How do delegates represent your community? What informs or guides them?

Serving as a delegate is an honor and an act of trust. Ideally, delegates represent the entire community, not just themselves. It is important for congregational leaders to consider how delegates can authentically represent the overall perspective and views of the congregation. Delegates commonly ground their vote in one or more of the following ways:

- Personal perspective and individual conscience
- Educational sessions within the congregation, in advance of General Assembly, that help gauge the range of opinions and needs on a given topic
- Congregational straw polls or straw votes that help inform how delegates might vote
- Guidance or instructions from the Board of Trustees
- Guidance or instructions from a congregational meeting

Many congregations allow delegates to vote however they choose, guided only by personal perspective and individual conscience. While this option may seem simplest, what happens if an important and nuanced matter comes up for a vote? Will the personal perspective and individual conscience of any one delegate do justice in representing the likely wide range of views that might exist in your community? In addition, how do we account for relationality, even as we honor individual conscience, given that congregational delegates represent the entirety of their communities?

Recommended Leadership/Board-Level Conversation: Discuss how your congregation's delegates are responsible to the community as a whole. Are they aware of the variety of perspectives within the congregation on a wide variety of concerns, from particular items on the General Assembly agenda to polity and governance to social justice issues? Are they provided with direction about their choices when their personal opinion on a matter before the Assembly is not consistent with the majority of the congregation? How can you help create opportunities for conversation, dialogue, and input to explore these questions?

Some congregations hold one or more community-wide events to discuss candidates for election, business items up for a vote, and resolutions and study/action issues on the General Assembly agenda. When creating such opportunities, you may want to consider how to include as many segments of the community as possible—for example, creating separate or parallel ways to invite the perspective of youth, historically marginalized groups, working families, elders, those who can't leave home, and others who might not be able to attend a gathering.

Some congregations use input-driven processes to clarify what their community's perspectives are on a particularly complex issue, and then instruct or invite their delegates to vote in a proportional manner, in order to represent the community as accurately and as fairly as possible. (For example, if a community has six delegates, and the community is leaning "pro" but not definitively so, four delegates might vote "pro" and two might vote "con.") On particularly complex or tough issues, such a process can allow for a more accurate representation of the community.

Last but not least, consider how your congregation can create flexibility to allow delegates to respond to amendments and changes to proposals at General Assembly. Dialogue that leads to a deeper understanding of the underlying values that your community holds about a particular issue or vote can support delegates in responding to evolving proposals in real time.

By the time votes at a UUA General Assembly occur, members of your congregation should feel confident that your community's chosen delegates have sufficient guidance or instruction to represent your congregation, as a whole, accurately and well.

This informational guide was prepared by the Sofia Betancourt for UUA President campaign, in support of healthy and transparent democratic governance in the selection and voting of congregational delegates to the UUA General Assembly. An online version is available at sofiabetancourt.com/congregational-delegate-selection-and-voting-guide.