

**Congregational Polity**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
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**Congregational Polity© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Congregational Polity: Not the sexiest sermon title I've ever come up with. I'm pleased you're here despite the title. But there's something here I was to say about spiritual practices or spiritual discipline – which are called practices and disciplines because by their nature they can be tedious and repetitive even if the goal we're after is an epiphany, self-knowledge or sublime. Congregational polity – the practice of how we free churches govern ourselves – can feel tedious and repetitive though the goal, of course, is sublime – to reach something greater than ourselves, to do more together than any of us could do alone. To create a beloved community so that we might create the beloved community.

I am a meditator – I do make the time to meditate every day. I also find congregational polity a spiritual practice or discipline. Congregational Polity is the form of church governance based on the local congregation. UU Church of Vancouver is independent and self-supporting, and governed by our own members. It is a spiritual practice and the reason I don't mind shortening the worship service to accommodate a congregational meeting to help you understand our budget because it matters how we conduct our business and run this congregation.

This congregation has voluntarily joined the Unitarian Universalist Association which puts us in relationship with other independent and self-supporting UU congregations. This form of governance came to us from the Cambridge Platform of 1648, and there are others, like Congregationalists, Quaker Friends and Baptists who share this form of governance. Other churches may be governed by an outside body, such as a presbytery of elders, bishops or a supreme leader such as the Pope. Former Catholics will sometimes be surprised that we are not subsidized by the Unitarian Universalist Association. We contribute to the UUA and our gifts come back to us through services they provide. They don't fund us in any way, but in fact we fund them. We are on our own when it comes to buying a building or paying for staff. We are also on our own when it comes to choosing a building or choosing our minister or staff.

I found guest preacher, Rev. Monica's sermon last week compelling with her story from Sylvester Johnson. This scholar of Black history in America talked to her class about freedom as understood by the colonizers, which was a form of cultural supremacy.

"If you understand freedom this way," said Rev. Monica, "the way you know you are free is because there's someone else who is less free who you can point to. This became part of the creation of whiteness as a concept in North America – poor white folks were more free than poor Black folks and poor Indigenous folks. Still less free than rich white folks, who were themselves still less free than European royalty." End quote

And of course, this is not a uniquely American belief system – caste systems exist all over the world. We began this morning with a hymn from South Africa which became an anthem for those resisting apartheid. Apartheid means "apartness" in the Afrikaans language and was a legal system of racial segregation.

Apartheid or apartness is an interesting way to understand this supremacy thinking – as Johnson pointed out to Monica’s seminary class the concept of freedom included being free from relationship and contact with others. It encompassed a social isolation that few of us would relish, though many of us experience, given we live in this culture. Being free and apart from social connection and relationships doesn’t sound very appealing....

Since that definition of freedom leads to pain and estrangement and is premised on a basic misunderstanding of our species as independent and isolated beings when in fact, we are interdependent, Rev. Monica, turned to activist Mia Birdsong for a different definition of freedom. This definition doesn’t encapsulate the individualized supremacy thinking that measures one person’s freedom over and against another’s, but rather the definition of a free person as “joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging.”

Birdsong got that language from David Hackett Fisher - “joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging.” That feels like the definition that applies to our “free faith,” one that we could embrace.

We are joined together by ties of kinship and rights of belonging. We are free in that our faith is a choice, not forced upon us or coerced. We do not preach the threat of hell to get people to act a certain way - that would be a form of coercion. Instead, we recognize that we each have the freedom to choose for ourselves the beliefs and actions that will best constitute our wellbeing and happiness, with the co-equal understanding that our actions affect others who also have a desire for wellbeing and happiness.

We may be on our own when it comes to buying a building or paying for staff and choosing a building or choosing our minister, but we are in relationship with other UU congregations who also do things like buy and sell buildings, call and settle ministers. We learn from the experience of others when we share our learnings. Those relationships help us do those things with the knowledge other congregations have learned – sometimes the hard way – about how to buy buildings or dismiss ministers. Right now there are no fewer than three congregations consulting with us about their minister’s upcoming sabbaticals. Because this congregation successfully provided me with a sabbatical last spring, and not only did the congregation thrive, but I returned – (and to my knowledge there is no grassroots movement as of yet to dismiss me as your minister).

It is our ties of kinship and rights of belonging that led the governing board of this church to call a congregational meeting this morning to talk about our budget. The budget is both a practical guide for running an institution and a statement of our collective values. The congregation adopted a budget last year that was stretched to the limit, and not surprisingly the Board wants to be transparent with you, the congregation, about our current financial situation. Especially given that we enter the season of fundraising next week.

I heard there was some little discussion last week following Monica’s sermon about a certain dissatisfaction with the idea that we cannot hold others accountable – that these covenantal relationships are about holding ourselves accountable to a higher aspiration, a higher standard, a higher way of being. To illustrate that point, she told a story about 18-19th century Universalist Hosea Ballou who responded to criticism from a Baptist preacher that without the fear of hell, he could do all manner of evil. Ballou’s response was that a Universalist wouldn’t want to do all that evil. This story brought to mind letters in my family from the Civil War. My great-great uncle, Lemuel Reed, who served in the

United States Christian Commission which is the forerunner of the Red Cross, wrote a letter from Kent, Ohio dated September 3rd 1866 in which he wrote:

“...Uncle William’s health and also his family’s is very good. Mary has joined the Universalists church in town. There came a minister of that denomination here and has kicked up somewhat of a dust by telling people they would be saved and that God is love and cannot punish his creatures and has organized a church, and upon the day of admission of his members he told them that the joining of themselves to his church would not exclude them from the pleasures of the world and what they had been enjoying so long. My opinion is if we live a Christian life and come to judgment and find that the Universalist doctrine is right, why we’re all right anyway, but if we live according to the Universalists doctrine and find out Christianity is right then we are certainly in a backfire. So it is profitable to live a Christian life anyway...”

I love the fact that I have a distant relative, Mary, who joined the Universalists in the 19th century, though I’m really a first generation Unitarian Universalist, given my parents joined this faith in their adulthood. But I digress.

I was talking about some dissatisfaction expressed about the idea that we don’t hold others accountable. “You can’t hold another person accountable” said Mia Mingus, “You can support someone’s accountability, but we hold ourselves accountable.”

Except – with congregational polity, there is some accountability to others. We elect our leaders. This system of accountability may not seem to be working very well on the national political stage at this moment, but I think it can still be made to work in this small denomination and congregation. Members of this church will vote on a budget in June. They will elect a new Board member and someone to the endowment committee and to a group called the leadership discovery and development committee that helps us identify and train new leaders. All those votes matter and can change the direction of the organization. You can even call a vote to dismiss the minister, if you so choose. Just as you elected me, you may also un-elect me.

Here’s one of my favorite stories about congregational polity from the congregation I served before this one. The board had presented a budget to that congregation that had cut money to the American Sign Language interpreters they had each Sunday – the Board rightly observed that there were no people attending regularly who needed the ASL interpretation and in a tight budget year, that seemed like a reasonable cut to make. However, the congregation objected and in the meeting to adopt the budget, a motion was made to keep the interpreters and cut something else. I think some people pledged more money, too. That motion passed and a different budget was adopted. It turned out to be a good decision because by the time I left that congregation, there were regular attendees who relied on that accommodation.

Because our power lies in our membership, we can and do direct the institution. But like with all democracy, we must stay informed and participate for that democracy to work. Again, another reason for today’s congregational meeting.

I hope those of you visiting or who have just been checking us out will remain for this meeting today – just to see how we operate. There will be no vote; this is just information sharing. But I think you’ll find

it interesting. I think we are somewhat unique from many churches who are not as transparent with where their money comes from and goes.

Congregational meetings and congregational polity can be a bit like a meditation practice, boring perhaps, sometimes, tedious, enlightening, empowering. It is the embodiment of our faith – we are self-governing and hold ourselves accountable to a larger vision, a vision in which we are not only connected, but know that we are connected, and treat others in that connection with the respect and dignity we ourselves deserve. We are “joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging.” You are here and I am grateful.