

The Development of a Co-Equal Executive Team at All Souls

During the past few years, All Souls has moved to a structure where a co-equal, collaborative Executive Team leads the staff and operations of the church. This page provides information about the development of that structure, and about what it means in practice.

Governance Background

The All Souls Congregation is responsible for setting the bylaws of the church, and those bylaws establish our governance structure. Under the bylaws, the Board of Trustees (Board) is responsible for proposing Church Goals, establishing policies, and monitoring the implementation of those Goals and the compliance with those policies.

Also under the bylaws, the Executive Team is responsible for coordinating implementation of those Church Goals and policies, in a spirit of shared ministry, and supervising the staff. Under the bylaws, the Board determines the composition of the Executive Team. Over time, that Executive Team typically has included the Senior Minister, Executive Director, and sometimes an Associate Minister.

This means that, in practice, the Executive Team makes many of the day-to-day decisions that most directly impact congregants—what staff to hire, how to maintain the building, what programs to run, what our website looks like, what safety precautions to take, etc. The Board might set policies that guide or limit their decision-making, but the Board itself doesn't make those day-to-day decisions. For example, the Board has a policy that requires that all staff be paid within the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA) salary guidelines, but the Board does not make individual salary decisions about staff.

Changing Structure of the Executive Team

For a long time, the Executive Team operated with a chief-of-staff model, where the Senior Minister was the sole head of the Executive Team. The other members of the Executive Team reported to him. While the Senior Minister collaborated with staff and lay leaders in his decision-making, he also had the final say on all decisions, and he was the only accountability link between the Board and the rest of the church.

During the past five years, there have been recommendations to move away from a chief-of-staff model towards a model in which co-equals head the Executive Team. Some of these recommendations came from the Transformation Team, a temporary Board committee that worked to make recommendations focused on the 8th Principle.

The reasons for these recommendations have included: the desire to model a leadership structure around collaboration, rather than a traditional structure where one person holds sole, top-down authority; allowing the structure of the Executive Team to embody the *Beloved Community* itself, with mutuality embedded within the structure of how authority is shared and decisions reached; and recognizing that the administrative functions of a church as large as All Souls (out of more than 1,000 churches in the UUA, only about a dozen are anywhere near our size) are significantly more complex than the administrative functions of smaller churches.

Beginning in early 2019, the Congregation, Board, and staff began to work into a new model, where the Executive Team operates as a co-equal and collaborative team, without one person being the “head” of it.

First, in church year 2018-19, the Board began to implement a new model, with a Senior Minister, Executive Director, and potentially a second minister in a collaborative relationship, all reporting directly to the Board:

- In the spring of 2019, the Board hired Traci Hughes-Trotter to be the church’s new Executive Director.
 - Under the prior model of leadership, the Executive Director would have been a member of the Executive Team, but she would have been hired by and reported to the Senior Minister.
 - The Board, however, directly hired her, and changed the position of Executive Director so that it reported to and was accountable to the Board, rather than to the Senior Minister.
 - With this new configuration, the position of Executive Director was co-equal to the Senior Minister and shared the executive leadership of the church with the Senior Minister.
- Also in the spring of 2019, the Board formed a Ministerial Search Committee, which included congregants and staff (including the Senior Minister and Executive Director and others) to search for a contract minister to serve as the Minister of Congregational Life.
 - The goal at the time was to find a new minister who would, like the Senior Minister, report directly to the Board, and live into a new model of collaborative ministry.
 - This search did not result in finding a minister. If the Ministerial Search Committee had found a candidate, the church would have had a structure with a three-person Executive Team, where all members of the Team directly reported to the Board.
- The Board presented on these changes at the Annual Meeting in December 2019.

Second, in church year 2019-20, the Board asked the Congregation to make bylaws changes related to a new structure for the Executive Team, and searched for an Interim Minister who could help the church further develop a new model of leadership along with Executive Director Hughes-Trotter.

- In the spring of 2020, the Board formed an Interim Search Committee to look for an Interim Minister.
 - The posting for that vacancy informed applicants: “During the past two years, the church has moved away from having the Senior Minister serve as Chief of Staff. Instead, the Board has created an executive leadership structure headed by an Executive Team that the Board expects to work collaboratively. The team currently includes the Senior Minister and the Executive Director. Their relationship is governed by a covenant that they have developed together. They work collaboratively and share responsibility for the executive leadership of the church. They both report, as a team, to the Board of Trustees. The Senior Minister is not the Executive Director’s superior, nor is the Executive Director the Senior Minister’s superior. They are co-equals. We are looking for a minister who will continue this close collaboration with the Executive Director, and who will also help the church further develop what it means to have a team lead the church, rather than a Chief of Staff.”

- Reverend Kathleen Rolenz was hired as part of this search, and the Executive Director was part of the committee that found her.
- In June 2020, the Board asked the Congregation to make two bylaws changes related to the changing role of the Executive Director.
 - First, the Board asked the Congregation to change the bylaws to make the Executive Director an ex officio member of the Board. The Congregation approved this change, and All Souls is one of the only churches in the UUA to include the Executive Director as an ex officio member of the Board.
 - Second, the Board asked the Congregation to change the bylaws to state that “the executive leadership of the Church shall act as a team, and shall annually develop and affirm a covenant to guide their collaboration.” The Congregation also approved this change, and now the Executive Team is required to act as a team, with a covenant.

Third, in church year 2020-21, working with Reverend Rolenz and Executive Director Hughes-Trotter, the Board began to live into this new model in a variety of ways.

- Throughout the year, Reverend Rolenz and Executive Director Hughes-Trotter worked to form a covenant, which the bylaws now require.
- The Board worked to change its own policy governance rules to adapt them to include a new structure with a co-equal Executive Team.
- The Board worked to receive monitoring reports from the Executive Team.
- Since the UUA does not include a pay band for Executive Directors, the Board worked with the UUA and looked at salary levels for local nonprofits to assess the appropriate salary level for an Executive Director who is a co-equal to a Senior Minister. The Board ultimately included both the Senior Minister and Executive Director positions within the UUA’s pay band for Senior Ministers because the church expects the Executive Director to co-equally share the ultimate executive function of the church.
- The Congregation approved a budget in June 2021 that included both the Senior Minister and Executive Director within this pay band.

Church year 2021-22 has not seen significant changes in this model of leadership, although we continue to live into it. Key actions included:

- The church’s bylaws and policy governance rules have shifted to a model where the Executive Team leads as a collaborative team, without a chief of staff.
- In addition to those structural changes, the church’s day-to-day practice continues to shift towards this new governance model. Because it is a new model, it will take time to fully live into.
- The Ministerial Search Committee that formed in the spring of 2022 to find the church’s next called minister(s) includes the Executive Director as an ex officio member of the Committee.
- This role on the Ministerial Search Committee is more limited than the Executive Director’s role on the search committees for the Interim Minister and Minister of Congregational Life, partly because it would be too difficult to balance the Executive Director portfolio and the demanding job of being a full member of a Ministerial Search Committee.

Practical Effects of Co-Equal Leadership

At All Souls, the Executive Team has the responsibility for supervising staff and implementing Church Goals, in a spirit of shared ministry with the Congregation. In practice, the change in the model of the Executive Team means that decisions that might have previously been made by one person are now collaboratively made by two.

The Board holds the Executive Team as a whole, rather than as individuals, responsible for doing a good job with respect to staffing and programmatic decisions. The Board requires the Executive Team to report to the Board as a team, and the Board holds the Executive Team accountable for decisions within the church. The Board expects the Executive Team to be in covenant with each other.

As a result of the change to a co-equal model, the Executive Team now collaborates and decides how they will make decisions. As part of their covenant, they might decide that they will reach some decisions jointly, and some decisions separately. The process for how they make decisions is up to them, as a team, to determine. The Board does not dictate how they reach decisions and does not dictate what areas they may pick as their focus areas.

The Board also does not ask “whose” decision something is. That’s because the Executive Team, as a unit working in shared leadership, reports to the Board and is responsible for the staffing and programmatic decisions of the church. Although the Executive Team might decide that it is the Senior Minister’s job to make a judgment call about what kind of Adult Spiritual Development classes to have, it is the Team’s responsibility to have appropriate classes for the church, and the Board would hold the Team responsible for any issues with those classes. Similarly, although the Executive Team might decide that it is the Executive Director’s job for the church to have good financial practices, it is the Team’s responsibility to have appropriate financial practices for the church, and the Board would hold the Team responsible for any issues with those practices.

The work of exploring and refining this new model is not done, and the Church will continue to refine this model during our interim period and as the church begins a new settled ministry.