

Big Question: Church Council

Should All Souls have a Church Council, and what should it do?

The Board of Trustees, through a Bylaws Review Team, is currently preparing a **comprehensive set of amendments** to All Souls' bylaws to bring them into alignment with current church practices and best practices recommended by the UUA and other experts. This is an important part of preparing for a new minister.

Our bylaws have long stated that we have a "**Church Council**," but the focus of the Council has fluctuated over the years, and the practical existence of the Council has ebbed and flowed. **Large churches** do not often have a Church Council, although **smaller churches** often do. Our Council dates back to when we were smaller.

Structure and Duties under the Bylaws

The Council is led by the Moderator (an elected church officer), and theoretically composed of everyone who leads a committee, group, program, or activity at the church. **On paper**, then, the Council includes **all lay** and **staff leaders**, but even putting together a list of current lay leaders can be difficult in a church of our size.

Under the bylaws, the Council has several **loosely-defined duties**: to "share information," to "coordinate programs," to "advise the Executive Team and the Board," to work with the Leadership Development & Nominating Committee (LDNC) to "identify leadership gaps and recruit new and emerging leaders," and to nominate new members to LDNC.

The Council's duties **overlap** with the duties of the staff in some ways. For instance, the bylaws give the Council the job of "coordinating programs," but the bylaws also give staff the job of working with church groups to "manage the programs" of the church. Staff also perform jobs such as "sharing information" about church programs—by distributing the Weekly Bulletin, for instance—that technically belong to the Council, under the bylaws.

Recent History

While the Council theoretically encompasses all leaders within the church, the Council has struggled to attract leaders to its meetings. During the pandemic, the Moderator (Julia Washburn) and Assistant Secretary (Erika Loke) have worked exceptionally hard to organize regular and effective Church Council meetings, but **attendance** has been **limited**, and attendees have **struggled** with questions about the Council's **purpose**.

In the years prior to that, the Council performed disparate tasks. During the conflict over Rev. Dr. Susan Newman-Moore's departure, the co-Moderators of the Council convened listening sessions where congregants could **voice concerns**. About ten years ago, the Council took on a job typically done by the Board of Trustees—**monitoring** whether All Souls was making progress towards its Church Goals. The Council also has served as a **forum** for lay leaders to get to know one another and talk about what they are working on.

During her ministry, Rev. Kathleen Rolenz encouraged All Souls to evaluate the role of the Council as part of our interim work in “**growing into our size.**” She pointed out some reasons that large churches have typically moved away from having Church/Program Councils. In those churches, Council meetings can become a show and tell, where program leaders must attend Council meetings and talk about what they’re doing, but are unable to effectively coordinate work due to the size and complexity of the church. Also, large churches hire staff to coordinate programs and should thus expect staff to coordinate the diverse programs of a church, share information, and convene meetings to focus church work.

Key Questions

- *Basic Functions:* does All Souls **need** a Church Council and, if so, what is the best, most useful set of responsibilities for the Church Council that does not duplicate the work of the Board and staff?
- *Sharing Information and Coordinating Programs:* in a church of All Souls’ size, we likely cannot expect lay leaders, rather than staff, to take the lead on “**sharing information**” and “coordinating programs.” Since we hire staff to do this work, is there a role for a Council in this work? Should we rely on staff to bring together lay leaders, so they can get to know one another and coordinate their work?
- *Advice:* if a Council is to “advise” the Board and Executive Team, what would they provide **advice** on, and who determines what the topic of advice is? Is having a permanent body, with a large and dynamic membership, the best way for the Board and Executive Team to receive advice from the Congregation?

Join the Bylaws Review Team to discuss this and other questions at 7pm on **November 9** on zoom or on **November 13** in the Church Library, following the service. Or submit comments at <https://forms.gle/UtiQYWfkUPvBhZp46>.