

Update to the Board of Trustees  
Unitarian Church in Westport  
February, 2015

Happy Valentine's Day, board members! Winter is well and truly here, and I hope you are all finding some beauty in the snow covered landscapes and not just cursing the icy cold...

With Roberta's leave, we have no Hotchkiss to study this month, and have instead scheduled a short discussion period for "Big Ideas" – to focus on the strategic work that will take up more and more of the board's energy. The idea is to have an exchange of ideas and thoughts without the weight of a vote or a decision. There are a lot of possibilities for "big ideas" to discuss, but for this time please read the blog post <http://vitalleaders.blogs.uua.org/> called "thinking about our thinking", and let's talk about how we see the big picture and recognize our unconscious biases. (a screen print of the blog follows my report in case the link is difficult to navigate)

One of our biggest goals for the year is to support the Ministerial Selection Committee, and this is especially critical now that they have "gone dark". We are all called on to continue modeling calm and confidence in their process, to respect the confidentiality and sensitivity of the work, and to assist in managing congregational expectations as we prepare to meet the best candidate who will, inevitably, be a human being and therefore imperfect in some way.

Another of our big goals for the year is financial stability, so how to best support the YRSC in the canvass, how to encourage creative thinking about fundraising that complements and does not conflict with the canvass, and how to encourage active engaged membership for both existing and new members is on all of our minds. We need to be sensitive as we balance the very real needs for action in these areas with the changing role of the board and the responsibilities of the relevant committees (and reviewing those committee charters will help in this regard).

Please make it a point to reacquaint with our covenant, and be especially sensitive to behaving in covenant as we work through issues that may have different answers now, during our period of transition, than they did in either the "old" way of doing things OR in the "new" policy-based world, and realize that THAT IS OK. We are all focused on the ultimate good of TUCW, and reasonable people can disagree. A couple of good quotes on this topic:

*"The purpose of disagreement is not victory or defeat, it is progress" – Teal Swan*

*"Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress" – Mahatma Gandhi*

*"To disagree, one doesn't have to be disagreeable" - Barry Goldwater*

Michelle

# Thinking about our thinking



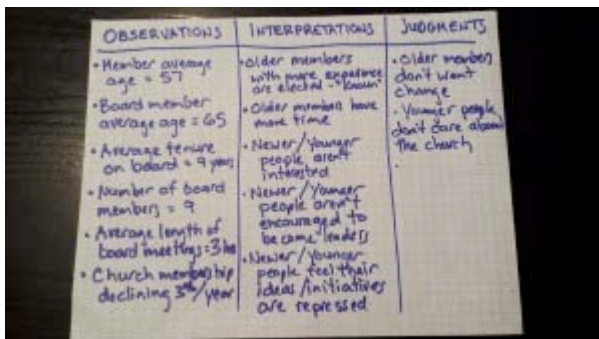
Photo by Brittany H.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/thelivelygirl/>

In dealing with [adaptive challenges](#) (e.g. changing demographics or attitudes toward religious institutions) congregational leaders can learn some wisdom from the old folktale about the [7 Blind Men and the Elephant](#). Each of the men could feel a part of the creature, and each came up with his own interpretation of what he was experiencing: The man touching the tail thought it was a rope, the man touching the ear thought it was a large leaf, the man touching the leg thought it was a tree, and so on.

There is a term in Adaptive Leadership called “getting on the balcony.” It’s a metaphor for the practice of shifting your point of view from the “dance floor” where you can only see what is happening close to you, to a point of view that looks at the whole “dance floor.” In our case, it’s the practice of looking at a congregational system as a whole.

Like the men in the folk tale, congregational leaders need each other to get on the balcony and to help see the big picture and clarify their own thinking. In other words, each member of a leadership team has a line of sight into the congregation and their own personal history that [colors their perception](#). When leaders trust one another, they can ask one another to help check their own biases that might be influencing their perception of an issue.



OBSERVATIONS	INTERPRETATIONS	JUDGMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Member average age = 57</li><li>• Board member average age = 65</li><li>• Average tenure on board = 9 yrs</li><li>• Number of board members = 9</li><li>• Average length of board meetings = 3 hrs</li><li>• Church membership declining 3<sup>rd</sup>/year</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Older members with more experience are elected -&gt; know</li><li>• Older members have more time</li><li>• Newer/younger people aren't interested</li><li>• Newer/younger people aren't encouraged to be come leaders</li><li>• Newer/younger people feel their ideas/initiatives are repressed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Older members don't want change</li><li>• Younger people don't care about the church</li></ul>

One useful tool is this simple exercise that will assist you in taking an adaptive challenge and sort out what are your observations, your interpretations and your judgments. On a sheet of paper or newsprint, create 3 columns, one for each kind of thinking.

## Observations:

These are items of observable fact. This list may include data that you've gathered or compiled, or anecdotal information from surveys, interviews, etc.

In the example I've listed some facts related to a church that is declining in membership.

## Interpretations:

These are different ways to interpret the observations. This is where it is helpful to have a diversity of ages, cultures and other experiences in leadership. If you have only one interpretation or "story" implied by the interpretations, it may be time to bring some new and different kinds of people into leadership.

In the example I list a couple of different interpretations of what might be happening. In a group, I would hope to have many more.

## Judgments:

These include the opinions of how you feel or judge the situation. This will help you to sort out your feelings and biases about different interpretations. How are you judging those involved? Do you see them as good or bad, right or wrong? Does a different interpretation lead to a different judgment?

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When faced by an adaptive challenge, it's often tempting to blame a group of the people involved. It's important to name what our judgments are (and all of us have judgments!) so that we can focus on the interpretations and use them to help design "interventions" to address the adaptive challenge.

-Rev. Renee Ruchotzke, Congregational Life Staff

### Additional resources:

- [\*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and Your World\*](#) by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linsky
- [Workshop 12](#) of Harvest the Power, a free Tapestry of Faith Curriculum
- [Adaptive Leadership](#) free, on-demand webinar
- [Leading Adaptively](#) hybrid/in-person/online course offered in CERG and MidAmerica (audit option is also available)