

Exploring Governance

The Spiritual Work of Decision-Making



CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL

Created by **Camellia Jahanshahi**
Dismantling Barriers Lead

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Why Governance Matters



Purpose of the Toolkit

Welcome to your toolkit on governance! This is a vast topic, and while the toolkit offers substantial information, there is always more to learn, question, and explore. Governance is not just about compliance, it's about creating structures that allow our Unitarian Universalist communities to practice love, justice, accountability, and shared power in sustainable ways.

Governance determines who has power, how decisions get made, who feels welcome to participate, how conflict is addressed and whether roads for accountability and repair exist. It is highly recommended that this toolkit be used with the toolkit on bylaws, economic justice, and assessment and accountability as they all flow together to help create infrastructures that can support healthy and complex communities.

This governance toolkit is about the spiritual practice of shared power. Governance shapes who has influence, how resources are allocated, and how communities respond to conflict and change. Healthy governance helps congregations and communities live into their values. Ineffective governance can unintentionally create barriers, concentrate power, and undermine trust.

As you move through this tool kit, I encourage you to consider:

- Who makes decisions in your community?
- How are those decisions made?
- Who participates?
- Who feels excluded?
- How do we know if your governance structures are working?
- How does your governance reflect your values?

What is Governance?

➤ Governance is:

- Decision making structures
- Accountability systems
- Distribution of authority
- Processes of oversight
- Methods for addressing conflict
- Stewardship of resources

➤ Governance is NOT:

- Day to day management
- Programming
- Staff supervision (with exceptions for areas where governance intersects)
- Individual leadership styles

Governance

VS

Management

determines what and why,
focuses on long term
direction, board responsibility,
accountability and oversight

determines how, focuses on
implementation, staff and
volunteer responsibilities,
operations and execution

Common Governance Models

Below are a few of the more common models of governance we see in non profit organizations.

They do all have their pros and cons that are much more extensive than the short list here, which shares a few things for you to consider when reflecting on your own governance models and whether or not they serve your values.

As you move through them and explore more on your own (resources at the end for your deep dives), I would encourage you to reflect on how things fit into your values. Some of these models are relationally based and may take more time and patience to use. When we think of healthy congregations and communities, we think of ones that honour our inherent worth and dignity, ones that respect that we move at the speed of trust to make decisions that will impact us all.

Traditional Board Governance

How it works

- Members elect a board
- Board oversees policies, finances, vision.
- Staff and volunteers implement work

Benefits

- Familiar
- Clear accountability
- Works well for legal responsibilities

Challenges

- Can be overly operational
- Risk of micromanagement
- Board burnout
- Potential for centralized power

Shared Leadership Models/ Participatory Governance

How it works

- Leadership responsibilities are intentionally distributed among multiple individuals and teams

Benefits

- Builds leadership capacity
- Prevents concentration of power
- Encourages participation

Challenges

- Requires time for clarity
- Potential for confusion around authority and accountability

Policy Governance

How it works

- Board focuses on vision, goals, accountability
- Staff focuses on operations on how to achieve the goals

Benefits

- Clear distinction between governance and management
- Strategic focus
- Reduces micromanagement

Challenges

- Rigid
- Requires training for board
- Can be difficult in smaller organizations

Consensus Governance

How it works

- Decisions move forward when everyone can support or live with the proposal.
- Gradients of agreement can be used for voting as a practice of consent based frameworks.
- There is still a majority vote for moving forward.

Benefits

- Strong buy in
- Encourages Collaboration
- Reduces “winners and losers” in decision making
- Encourages shared learning

Challenges

- Time consuming
- Vulnerable to informal power dynamics
- Can be blocked by concentrated efforts

Sociocracy

How it works

- Decision making occurs through interconnected circles
- Decisions made through consent rather than majority vote, gradients of agreement are used.
- Authority distributed across teams with clear mandates

Benefits

- Familiar
- Clear accountability
- Works well for legal responsibilities

Challenges

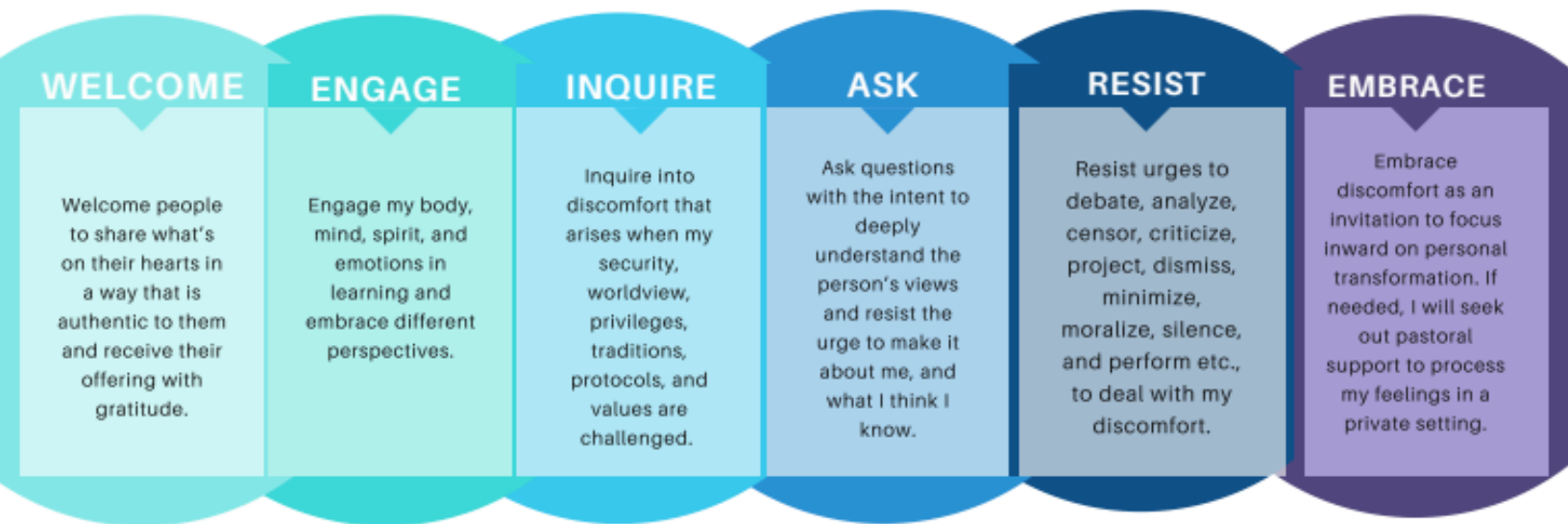
- Can be overly operational
- Risk of micromanagement
- Board burnout
- Potential for centralized power

Grounding Through Governance

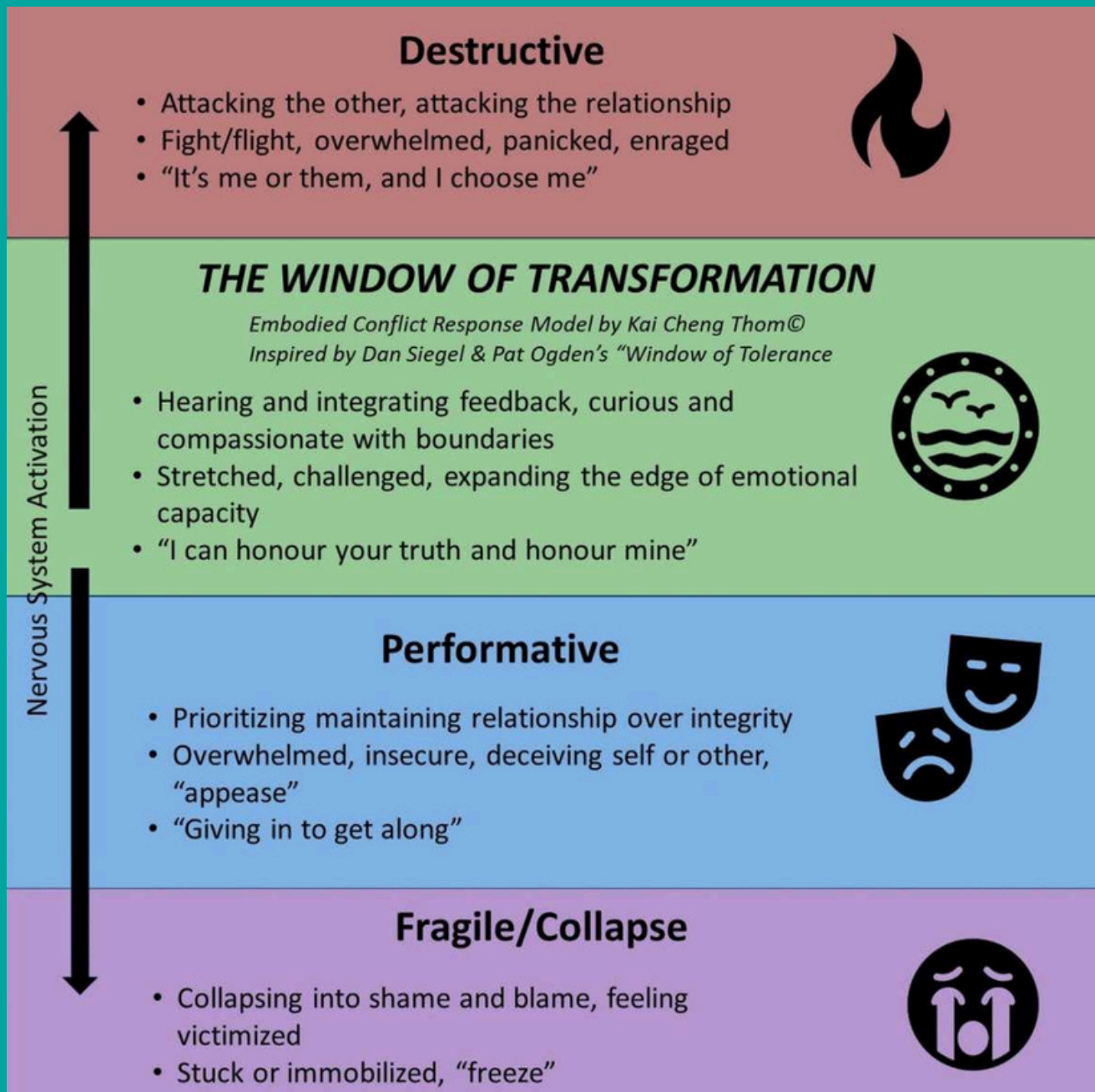
As you move through this tool kit, come back to our Responsibility Covenant as you reflect and consider your roles and positionality in governance structures. What kinds of decisions are you making? Who are they for? What do you gain and what do you miss an opportunity for? Where can you lean into our principles?

Responsibility Covenant

My UU Principles call me to be accountable in relationship.
I will...



**A Tool for Inclusive Organizations-
you can learn more about the
creation of this covenant and how to
use it here.**



I also come back to this graphic I’ve shared in multiple tool kits before from Kai Cheng Thom on the window of transformation. This work of understanding governance as a spiritual practice can seem heavy, remember to take care of your nervous systems as you move forward in your learning and unlearning. This is a non-linear process full of nuance, go back to past tool kits for more activities and ideas for grounding support.

Governance and Power

As we move deeper into what governance is and how different models are framed, we have to address the subject of power. Every governance structure distributes power, whether intentionally or not. Governance is not neutral. Structures often reflect the cultural assumptions of the people who created them.

Previous Dismantling Barriers tool kits have explored the difference between power and perceived power. This distinction of the informal, social practices of power can strongly influence how governance systems are played out.

ASK

- Who gets heard?
- Who is ignored?
- Who carries responsibility?
- Who bears risk?
- Who has access to information?
- Who can influence decisions?

Every governance structure distributes power, whether intentionally or not, and where the notion of informal power can weigh heavily.

ASK

- Who is sitting on your board?
- How long have they served?
- What kind of perceived versus tangible power do they hold?
- What do they have control over in an organization?
- How are decisions made?
- What kind of power do staff have?
- How is power distributed amongst your staff?

When we start to ask these kinds of questions, it helps us to consider all the barriers that can exist around governance structures. This doesn't mean only the governance model, but also the practical aspects of how people gather together to make a decision. For example; we can consider practicalities like time, communication, accessibility, financial realities, cultural expectations, and more.



ASK

- When picking a time to gather, is it accessible to parents? Gig workers? Students?
- When communicating, are documents written in accessible language? Multiple languages? Are they easy to find?
- When planning for accessibility, are the materials screen friendly? Are meetings online or in person? Is the space the meetings are in accessible by transit? Is the space itself open to different mobility needs?
- How are decisions really made in your organization? At meetings or in side conversations? Who already knows each other well in the organization? Who is excluded from relationships?
- Are leadership opportunities accessible regardless of income? Are travel and childcare supported?
- Do leadership norms privilege a particular communication style? Are people expected to navigate dominant cultural norms?

All of these questions help to find clarity around the kinds of governance you practice, and the kinds of changes you may or may not want to make based on your values and governance goals.

It may seem overwhelming when we look at it all at once, but remember that governance is also a relational structure and it's ok to take your time to figure out what works and what doesn't.

We have been conditioned and grown accustomed to certain kinds of governance models in Western societies; some of it may work for you and some parts may not. In either case, there is massive unlearning and relearning to do in this work because it calls for us to do the work of trusting each other and being willing to explore new modalities of being.

Governance as a Tool for Liberation

Governance has just as many possibilities for liberation as it does for creating barriers. It can actively reduce the same barriers we considered in the section above, which is a rare and powerful thing.

When our values come into our scope, governance has the capacity to: Create transparency with open communication, publicly accessible board minutes, and clear decision making protocols. Share power with participatory decision making, distribute authority, and increase leadership development. Increase accessibility by creating systems that support tangible needs (transport, childcare, accessible materials, etc.)

Build accountability through clear expectations, regular evaluations, clear conflict processes, and feedback mechanisms.

Support new leaders through mentorship and rotating opportunities. All those things and more can spark your imagination for a liberatory framework around governance models.

Governance Self Assessment

Rate for your organization, on a scale from **1-5** ...

Clarity

People understand how decisions are made
Roles are clearly defined
Policies are accessible

Participation

Diverse voices participate
New leaders are welcomed
Meetings are accessible

Accountability

Leaders invite feedback.
Decisions are transparent.
Conflict is addressed constructively.

Equity

Barriers are identified and reduced
Leadership reflects community diversity
Accessibility is prioritized

Sustainability

Responsibilities are manageable
Leadership turnover is healthy
Burnout is addressed

If you find yourself ranking 3 or under in multiple areas, or on multiple questions in an area, it's time to reflect on what can shift.

Case Studies

Number 1

A board spends most meetings discussing event logistics.

Questions: is this governance or management? What might shift this situation?

Number 2

The same people have held leadership roles for 10 or more years.

Questions: What barriers may exist? How could leadership be broadened?

Number 3

A congregation wants to become more welcoming to younger adults but has no younger adults in leadership.

Questions: What governance issues may be contributing? What structural changes might help?

Reflection Questions based on Canadian Unitarian Universalist Principles

1st principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person

- How do our governance structures demonstrate respect for every person's contributions?
- Are there barriers that prevent some people from participating in leadership (tangible or interpersonal)?
- How do we respond when people disagree with leadership decisions?
- How do we welcome newcomers?

2nd principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations

- How do we address inequities that emerge in our governance structures?
- Where might policies unintentionally privilege some groups over others?
- How does compassion show up in decision making?
- Whose perspectives and lived realities should be included in the decision-making process?

3rd principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

- How do we respond to mistakes?
- How do we foster belonging across differences?
- How are newcomers and new leaders welcomed and mentored?
- Do we encourage growth and learning or only reward perfection?

4th principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning

- Are people encouraged to ask difficult questions?
- Do people feel safe expressing disagreement?
- How transparent is the decision making process?

5th principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large

- Is participation meaningful or symbolic?
- Who participates regularly and who does not?
- How do we balance majority decisions with care for those who disagree?
- Do our governance structures promote informed participation?

6th principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

- Do our practices reflect our commitment to justice?
- What forms of power are present here? Are absent?
- Are we rooted in collaboration or competition? What would it be like to govern in ways that embody liberation rather than control and domination?

7th principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

- How do our decisions affect future generations?
- How do we consider the wellbeing of the entire community when making decisions?
- What voices are missing?
- How do we understand ourselves in relationship to the wider community?

8th principle: Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic

- barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions
- Who holds power?
- How is leadership selected and who is most likely to be chosen?
- What assumptions about leadership are embedded in our governance practices?
- Are we sharing power and inviting more people into existing power structures?
- What changes would make our governance more inclusive, accessible, and just?

Deeper Dive

- Which principles feel most reflected in our current governance?
- Which principle feels least reflected?
- Where are the gaps between our stated values and current practices?
- What fear arises when we consider changing structures?
- What becomes possible when governance is understood as shared power rather than administration?
- If someone observed our governance without hearing our vision and mission statements, what values would they conclude we hold?

Consider using these questions to help open up channels of communication at your next board meeting or retreat. Remembering that we move at the speed of trust when building systems of care.

Closing

Governance is not neutral. This is about the spiritual practice of shared power. Governance shapes who has influence, how resources are allocated, and how communities respond to conflict and change. Healthy governance helps congregations and communities live into their values. Weak governance practices can unintentionally create barriers, concentrate power, and undermine trust.

Take the time you need to take, but then make sure you are also taking productive and equitable action. Be an active participant in shaping systems that welcome liberatory change. This is how we create spaces that are active in their values. It is political, it is spiritual, it is relational and if you let it, it can also be fun.

Resources

- *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne marée brown
- *All About Love*, Bell Hooks
- *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*, adrienne marée brown
- *The Nonprofit Board Answer Book: A Practical Guide for Board Members and Chief Executives*
- *Reinventing Organizations*, Frederic Laloux
- *Policy Governance Model*, John Carver
- SHIFT Concordia
- *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work for Nonprofit Boards*
- www.sociocracyforall.org/
- www.buildbonding.com