

SPECIAL MEETING of the BOARD of TRUSTEES
ALL SOULS CHURCH, Unitarian
June 19, 2009 7:00 pm
Sanctuary

Board Members present:

Goldia Hodgdon
Erika Landberg
Mary Rojas
Fred Samuels
Joneis Thomas
Fred Tipson
Elizabeth “Libby” Turpen
Taylar Nuevelle (mostly outside the sanctuary)

Board Members absent:

Josephine Nieves

Council Officers

Jody Feldman (Moderator)
Barry Johnson (Treasurer)
Eliza Klose (Secretary)
David Reynolds (Assistant Treasurer)

Staff

Gabrielle Farrell (Religious Education)
Louise Green (Social Justice)
Rob Hardies (Minister)
Walter Le Flore (Minister)
Shana Lynngood (Minister)
Lenard Stark (Music)
Katie Loughary (Executive Director)
Nikevia Thomas (Religious Education)

Congregation

Over 300 members attended the meeting and 42 people spoke.

Opening

Erika Landberg, president of the Board of Trustees (BOT), welcomed everyone and opened the meeting.

Rev. Rob Hardies and Congregant Dorothy Holmes lit the chalice and offered prayers that the group be stronger and more united after the meeting. Dorothy recalled Mahatma Gandhi’s words that “Unity to be real must stand the severest strain without breaking.”

Agenda and meeting purpose

Erika explained that the meeting would consist of two parts: the first hour would be a presentation of issues by the BOT, Taylar Nuevelle, the Officers, the Committee on Ministry (COM) and the Church Staff. The second hour, which would be facilitated by Richard Speck of the UUA, would have an open agenda to permit everyone who wished to speak to do so for two minutes each. Anyone who wished to speak should sign up with ushers Carol Falk, Henry Guyot and Nancy Simon at the front of the church. Anyone who wished to speak for another two minutes would be accommodated after everyone had had a chance to speak for the first time and if the sense of the congregants was to continue the discussion.

Erika asked for a motion to suspend Roberts Rules of Order for the duration of the meeting. Fred Samuels moved and Goldia Hodgdon seconded the motion. The motion passed.

Joneis Thomas agreed to serve as the timekeeper for the first hour. Erika said the meeting would be taped.

Presentations

Joneis Thomas and Mary Rojas spoke for the Board of Trustees.

Joneis: Opened by sharing the many positive experiences she and her family have had with Taylar Nuevelle. She said this is not an easy issue. No single answer would please all. Issues go beyond one person's membership on the BOT. BOT has tried to maintain an appropriate atmosphere and accountability. After receiving a statement from the staff describing the situation, BOT realized that Taylar's conflictive behavior was seriously affecting the ability of the staff to perform their responsibilities to the rest of the congregation with their full energy and enthusiasm, which raised deep concerns. The BOT, COM, and staff all believe Taylar's continued role in Church leadership would be a serious impediment to effective collaboration on church business and that extraordinary amounts of time and resources have been used dealing with the issue.

Mary: The role of BOT is to listen to the congregation and work cooperatively with them and the staff. The BOT became involved in the Taylar situation in April, 2009, entering a process that had been going on for over a year with Taylar, the staff and the COM and which had involved extensive mediation and therapy sessions. The BOT set up its own process of discovery: listened and gathered information; entered into consultations with Church officers, congregants, staff, and the COM; reviewed its own documents, such as bylaws and policy governance; and examined the approaches of other churches to conflictive situations.

The BOT considered the impact of Taylar's current criminal proceedings including media reference to her position on the BOT. It considered the letter from all of the staff asking for the resignation of Taylar. The BOT finally decided that it was no longer feasible for Taylar to continue on the board and, following the COM recommendation, asked Taylar to resign, which she has chosen not to do. ASC bylaws do not allow for the removal of a member of the Board and Roberts Rules of Order requires a trial, which the BOT deemed inappropriate. "We are at an impasse and decided to share our position with you and hear your thoughts. Thus this meeting."

Grace Garner spoke on behalf of Taylar Nuevelle.

Grace said that for spiritual and emotional reasons, Taylar felt unable to speak herself, but she (Grace) had implored her to let her say something on Taylar's behalf so her silence wouldn't be mistaken for consent. She asked: "Do we want our board members to act on their own or because ministers tell them to? To hide behind the excuse of "privacy?" Calling Taylar impossible to work with is inconsistent with what I know her to be. Her sufferings have made her understand the sorrows of others. The Board has come before you to seek her resignation. Would you come between Taylar and her Church? Would you like others to make such decisions about your life? Talk to Taylar about her personal affairs, but do not fall victim to the board".

Chuck Wooldridge spoke for the Committee on Ministry.

Chuck introduced the members of the COM who were present, Elizabeth Fox, Carolyn Fowler-Smith and Mike Milano, and those who were not, Lloyd Wright and Paula Cole-Jones. He confirmed that the COM has worked on the issue for several months since asked to do so by Rob and then Taylar. The terms of reference of the COM are to consult, listen, support the Church ministry and raise unresolved issues from congregants to the BOT. The COM meetings are closed and confidential. After listening to all sides and working for months on the issue, the COM made the recommendation that Taylar resign from leadership roles in the Church for two years. The role of a board member requires working well with the ministers, BOT and the congregation, and the COM decided Taylar could not do so. She has proved to be too contentious; nor has she been willing to reconcile, for example, never acknowledging or accepting an explicit apology from Rob.

The Church Officers present spoke individually:

Jody Feldman, Moderator, spoke of the ways in which the BOT had not followed the process laid out in Roberts Rules of Order for removing a BOT member.

Barry Johnson said that the Officers had not been included properly in the discussion on this issue. He felt that changing this meeting to a board meeting when a congregational meeting was deemed impossible by the BOT did not follow proper process.

Eliza Klose said she thought the process was inadequate and needed to be reviewed, but the BOT, COM and staff have been under a gag rule, unable to speak because of both privacy issues and the lawsuit brought by Taylar Nuevelle against the church, so we needed to have the meeting and get the facts out.

David Reynolds said he felt the Church belonged to everyone and we needed the chance to listen to each other, talk things through, and think about the Church.

Louise Green, Gabrielle Farrell and Shana Lynngood spoke for the staff:

Louise said she was sad but relieved that the staff is finally able to speak. She has witnessed several of Taylar's personal attacks, uncontrolled anger, extensive phone calls and emails;

her inability to hear others say her actions hurt them; her belief she is the only victim. Louise's own worst experience came when Taylor attacked her directly, delivering a tirade against her in a public space. She said that the staff realized last October that they could not manage or resolve the situation; that they were spending too much time on one member of the congregation. They sought help from professionals. They agreed that Taylor had reached a time when her ability to perform as a church leader was compromised and untenable. Louise asked that the congregation support the staff in setting this boundary. She wants to work on her social justice ministry, to contribute fully, and not be caught up in a widening circle of blame.

Gabrielle noted that despite her 20 years of experience as a religious professional she needed professional advice in working with Taylor. The staff had exhausted its capacities since 2007 and sought out a therapist and lawyer, keeping pastoral confidences as appropriate, and turned to Rob who, along with Taylor, began working with the COM on the issue. Gabrielle then drafted a letter seeking Taylor's resignation from the BOT, finding it heart-breaking but necessary to say that program staff feels unable to provide a safe and nurturing atmosphere for all members of All Souls Church. All of the program staff then signed the letter. Collectively the program staff has served ASC for 36 years; she is grateful to serve with those whose signatures were beside hers on their letter.

Shana said she has been in the ministry for eight years, and that she's learned that it must be a ministry of the whole, not just of an individual or subgroup. Taylor's staying on the BOT is not in the best interest of the whole. "You called me to the ministry to speak out, not hide the truth. The confrontation has kept returning, until it has brought us to this public meeting and to a lawsuit. We begin again in love. I do the best I can and you must decide. Rarely have you let me down. Our covenant is based on the fact that I am here at your call."

Open Discussion

Richard Speck, UUA District Executive, served as the facilitator for the open discussion. Dori Phelps served as the timekeeper.

Dr. Speck explained the ground rules for the open discussion: everyone would speak for two minutes; they would address the board; no one would speak again until everyone had spoken once, if people had a question the BOT or the appropriate person would have a minute to answer it.

The discussion proceeded in an orderly fashion and was wide-ranging. Forty-two people spoke and their comments ran the gamut from those who supported the BOT, the COM and the staff; to those who supported Taylor Nuevelle; to those who felt the process to remove a trustee from the Board was inadequate or that the BOT had not followed the appropriate process; to those who feared the issue would divide and hurt the ASC.

Some representative comments from the open discussion are the following:

- This meeting became about Taylor, not about the COM or Rob Hardies.

- Taylar should resign now.
- You had an investigation but no process. My heart is breaking. I intended to do a protest but we need to amend the bylaws.
- We should follow the Moderator's recommendation and follow Roberts Rules of Order.
- Friendship with Taylar has been a very important part of ASC to me.
- We couldn't have averted this crisis. It was inevitable. We're still stuck with an elephant in the room.
- There is no such thing as a simple resolution to this situation. This conflict will require a long time to work out. We need to work on it together.
- I've been involved in the Church in many ways, but can't figure out how the suggested process to remove a Board member is to take place. I defer to the judgment of others.
- Over the years, this church has had both abolitionists and southern sympathizers, weathered McCarthy, HUAC, Rev. Aldrich. It will get through this. It's process that counts.
- We have to have a fair process that gives everyone a fair shake.
- The nominating committee googled Taylar last year. That wasn't right.
- The nominating committee must inquire about people's backgrounds. It is not only their right but their duty.
- One person shouldn't be allowed to control the congregation.
- I don't think the BOT followed process. It breached its responsibilities in calling this meeting.
- I think the BOT handled the situation in a sensitive way. They were willing to listen. I feel sympathetic to them.
- I have had personal experience with Taylar's anger and manipulation. A board member must represent the whole congregation. She cannot do so because she is involved in so many conflicts.
- It is clear we have a gap in our process. Will another investigation work? How can we make the situation change even if we have another process?
- Why didn't the BOT accept the Moderator's suggestions as to process? Are there any reasons we can't immediately amend the by-laws?

- I think the BOT's intention was to serve the church, everyone. Taylor's lawsuit was one person against all the rest.
- You, the Board, should make the decision to remove Taylor or keep working with the Bylaws; we just need to end this situation, which has gone on for too long.
- I'm tired of hearing about Taylor. We need to take care of the ASC, of everyone, not just one person.
- Do whatever it takes to allow the rest of the eight board members to keep running the church.
- I want my ASC, not Taylor's church.
- The staff needs to have the right to act. We don't need to amend the by-laws.
- The staff should not be involved in the decision about who is on the BOT.
- We elected you. We called the ministers. It's your responsibility to deal with this problem.
- We are all human and make mistakes. We need to support those who have done so much to keep this church going.

During the meeting, Fred Tipson, Board member, responded to two issues that arose from some of the comments. The first involved the question of how to remove a member of the Board of Trustees. The BOT consulted the Church attorney because the Bylaws were silent on how we might remove a member of the BOT. The Church counsel said that under the Washington, D.C. Code, the only way was to reverse the process that elected Taylor to the Board, namely through a vote of the congregation. The Moderator disagreed: she felt we should be governed by Roberts Rules of Order and the procedure described for removal of an officer. But the Board felt the trial procedure as required by Roberts Rules was unfair and inappropriate for this community. We tried to proceed in the manner we thought the congregation would want us to proceed in, with concern for the privacy and sensitivities of all concerned and with fairness and deliberation. We did not wish to convict anyone of specific crimes. We didn't think ASC would want us to take this approach. The issue was whether one member's continued presence on the Board was in the overall interests of the Church. We tried to deal with the issue confidentially, and spent a great deal of time trying to do it right. We concluded there was no other more appropriate approach to removal. But we couldn't talk about the situation openly because Taylor had brought a lawsuit against us.

Fred also commented on the two elements in Taylor's letter of complaint to the Board. On the matter of Rob Hardies reference to Taylor as a "liar," the Board concluded that the Committee on Ministry had dealt with that issue satisfactorily and that Rob had made an apology to Taylor for using that characterization. We did not think that any further action was called for by the Board. On the second element in Taylor's letter, she claimed that Rob Hardies had revealed private confidences that could only have been learned in a pastoral counseling session. The Board

interviewed both Rob and the person he had discussed the matter with by phone, We determined that the “confidential” matter referred to must have been a matter that was one already on the public record. This has now been confirmed by the person receiving Rob’s comment, who revealed that he was referring to the protective order issued by the court that barred Taylar from coming to the first ASC Sunday service. In fact, Rob Hardies had not learned of this order from Taylar in confidence, but had learned about it from another member of the Staff, and had asked the Church’s legal counsel to find out about it. We believe that, not only is such a matter not one that must be kept confidential, but that the Church leaders have an affirmative obligation to know that such orders exist and to consider any appropriate steps necessary to protect other members of the congregation, including sharing that information with other Church leaders. Therefore, he did not violate Taylar’s confidence or act in an inappropriate manner and no further action in the matter was necessary or appropriate.

After those who had signed up to speak had spoken once, the congregation decided that it was not interested in a second round of comments.

Erika Landberg ended the meeting:

“We appreciate all of you coming. Please know the pain is shared. The Board has listened carefully. We will ponder, seek discernment and work out next steps. We will begin looking at the bylaws and other governance documents and have the congregation involved in doing something about them”.

Shana Lynngood provided the closing prayer for the meeting.

The meeting Adjourned at 9:50 pm

Respectfully Submitted,
Eliza Klose, Secretary