Inland Northwest Unitarian Universalist Community

THE NITTY-GRITTY

How We Govern

A complete guide to the Governing Circle and Dynamic Governance at INUUC, for anyone who wants the full picture, not just the summary.

COVERS
Structure, decision-making, scope, history

COMPANION TO
About the Governing Circle

GOVERNANCE MODEL
Sociocracy, adopted June 2022

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SECTION 01

Our Story: How INUUC Got Here

This isn't as foreign to us as it might sound. In our very first year as a congregation, we organized ourselves into circles, and each circle sent representatives to something called the Interim Representative Circle, which acted as our temporary decision-making body while we figured out who we wanted to be. Adopting Sociocracy wasn't a leap into something new so much as a return to, and a formalizing of, an instinct we already had.

During the 2021 to 2022 church year, we ran an intentional experiment. We tried out Dynamic Governance, another name for Sociocracy, with a real commitment to evaluate it honestly. Did it fit us? Did it actually help us be more fair, more transparent, and more consensual in how we made decisions? In the spring of 2022, after a full year of congregational discernment, we said yes. We changed our bylaws and formally adopted Sociocracy that June.

It has been, and still is, a process. Learning any new system takes patience, especially one that asks us to let go of habits like Robert's Rules and majority vote. But we've kept showing up, kept adjusting, and kept coming back to the table together. This past year, the Governing Circle ran its entire Annual Congregational Meeting on Sociocracy alone, no fallback to Robert's Rules, no old habits creeping back in. For those who remember how uncertain those first years felt, that's real proof this way of being together is taking root here.

SECTION 02

What Dynamic Governance Is

Dynamic Governance and Sociocracy are two names for the same thing, and you'll hear both used at INUUC interchangeably. At the most basic level, it places decision-making authority with the people closest to the work, rather than concentrating it at the top or spreading it evenly across every single member. It happens inside small circles, and it depends on a specific way of making decisions together, decisions by consent, which section 04 covers in full.

It helps to know what this whole approach is actually trying to protect, before getting into how it works mechanically. Sociocracy is sometimes described as a starfish organization, because like a starfish, the "DNA" is distributed throughout the whole body rather than concentrated in one place, which makes the whole system more resilient. No single circle, and no single person, holds all the power or all the knowledge. That's a feature, not a gap to fill.

SECTION 03

The Values Behind It

Sociocracy is built around a handful of values. They're worth naming individually, because each one shapes something concrete about how INUUC circles actually operate.

Clarity of Mission

Everyone understands the purpose actually guiding a decision, not just the loudest argument in the room.

Agency

The sense that living out that purpose makes a real difference, that a circle's work actually matters.

Clarity of Process

A system nobody understands quietly favors whoever already has power and knows how to work it. Clear process protects newcomers as much as anyone.

Consent

People should have real choices in service of the mission, not decisions made out of fear, submission, or rebellion.

Mattering, Not Marginality

Every person should feel that what they think and feel actually matters to the group, not just the people who have historically been listened to.

Curiosity

A willingness to see old and new things with fresh eyes, rather than defaulting to "how we've always done it."

Interconnection and Resilience

The strength that comes from belonging to something built on mutual trust, rather than on any one person's indispensability.

A few principles inform those values:

Equivalence. Every person and group affected by a decision gets considered; nobody is disregarded. This is the "starfish" idea again, resilience through distribution.

Mutuality. Approach a situation assuming a mutually beneficial solution exists, rather than treating everything as a contest with a winner and a loser.

Emergent thinking. Let go of the idea that any one person holds the whole truth. The best ideas often come from the margins, not the head of the table.

Separating input from decision-making. Gather input from many people, but let a smaller group actually decide, so we get the benefit of many perspectives without getting stuck trying to get everyone to agree on everything.

SECTION 04

How Decisions Actually Get Made

That last principle, separating input from decision-making, gets at how sociocratic decision-making actually unfolds. It follows a pattern: understand, explore, decide.

1

Understand: picture forming

The group takes time to build a shared understanding of the issue. Sociocracy calls this picture forming, because people often only see one facet of a situation, like looking at a cut jewel from a single angle.

2

Explore: rounds

The group explores possibilities, usually through rounds: going around so that everyone's perspective actually gets heard, not just the first few people who speak up.

3

Decide: consent

The group moves to deciding, usually by choosing an option that falls within everyone's range of tolerance. Not necessarily anyone's favorite choice, but one that's acceptable to everyone in the room.

Consent, not consensus. Those sound alike, but they're different. Consensus asks: does everyone agree this is the best possible option? Consent asks something more modest: does anyone have a real objection to trying this? We're not searching for everyone's favorite answer, we're looking for something that's good enough for now, and safe enough to try. That shift, from what's preferable to what's acceptable, is what keeps a group from circling the same decision for months.

Four Ways a Decision Can Move

Sociocracy recognizes that not every decision needs the same amount of process.

Policy-making mode

For decisions meant to guide future choices, so a group isn't reinventing the wheel every time a similar situation comes up.

Operational mode

For ordinary day-to-day decisions that don't need much discernment because policy or habit already covers them.

Proposal-shaping mode

For bigger ideas that need more steps: forming a shared picture, brainstorming, shaping a proposal, asking clarifying questions, and eventually approving it.

Election mode

For choosing people to fill roles. Asks a circle to define the role and its qualifications clearly before anyone is nominated, to reduce the influence of bias or popularity.

On Objections

In Sociocracy, an objection is not a veto, and it isn't someone being difficult. It's a tool for making a decision better. An objection means someone sees a real risk to the group's aim, or to the wider mission, that the rest of the group might have missed. A good objection is well-reasoned, relevant to the decision at hand, and offered to improve the proposal, not just to block it. When objections are treated this way, people feel safe enough to actually speak up, because they know they'll be taken seriously rather than overruled or ignored.

SECTION 05

Why This Fits Us as Unitarian Universalists

You can probably already hear why this resonated with us as Unitarian Universalists, since a lot of these values echo our own principles back to us.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person shows up directly in consent decision-making: no one's serious concern gets steamrolled just because it's inconvenient. Justice and equity show up in mattering, not marginality, the commitment that every voice actually counts, not only the ones we're used to hearing. And our respect for the right of conscience shows up in how we treat objections, as something to welcome rather than something to overcome.

> *Sociocracy didn't ask us to set our values aside to adopt a governance model. It asked us to build them into our actual structure, rather than just naming them from the pulpit.*

SECTION 06

The Circle Structure at INUUC

The circle is the basic unit of decision-making at INUUC. Every circle has four things: a clear membership, an aim, a mission, and a domain. Membership defines who can make decisions using consent. Mission is the circle's general purpose. Aims are the specific, measurable steps that accomplish that mission. And domain clearly defines the circle's area of responsibility and authority, with the Governing Circle making sure no two circles' domains overlap or leave a gap between them. Each circle reconfirms its domain and aim with the Governing Circle by October 1 every year, part of keeping that whole map current.

Each circle also fills four roles, and the same person can hold more than one:

Leader

Oversees operations and makes sure the circle works toward its aim.

Facilitator

Moderates the meetings.

Secretary

Takes minutes, keeps documents current, and posts policies and minutes within a week.

Delegate

Represents the circle's voice in a connected circle, creating a two-way link between them. A circle often seats more than one delegate at once, one per connected circle.

Any circle can create, or dissolve, a circle of its own, what our policies call a sub-circle, as long as it gives that new circle a clear domain, aim, and membership, and notifies the Governing Circle in writing. The word describes where a circle originated, not any difference in standing: every circle's voice carries equal weight within its own domain.

Two Central Circles

The Governing Circle

The legal authority for INUUC. Governs by discerning the church's mission and planning for the future, partnering with the minister and staff, and holding leaders, including its own members, accountable.

The Coordinating Circle

Oversees the programs of INUUC. Composed of delegates from the Governing Circle and the program circles, it carries out the mission of the church day to day. As an exception to circles normally choosing their own officers, the Governing Circle appoints the Coordinating Circle's Leader, Facilitator, and Secretary.

Administrative Circles

Connected to the Governing Circle: Coordinating · Finance (together with Fundraising and Endowment) · Leadership Development · Personnel · and the Circle on Ministry, a continuing body whose own members may not also serve as Governing Circle trustees.

Program Circles

Connected to the Coordinating Circle: Membership · Communications · Family Ministry · Pastoral Care · Soul Weavers · Healthy Community (together with Small Group Ministry) · UUA Connections (together with Chalice Lighters) · Social Justice (together with Spokane Alliance, LGBTQ+, and Special Collections). Chalice Lighters and Special Collections each also report to a second circle, Finance and Soul Weavers respectively, a double link that keeps closely related work connected across both.

SECTION 07

The Governing Circle, In Detail

Composition & Elections

The Governing Circle ideally consists of seven trustees, and no fewer than five: a President, a Vice President, a Secretary, and at-large trustees. All must be INUUC members. The congregation elects the trustees themselves at the June Annual Congregational Meeting, with four seats up in odd years and three in even years, so the Circle's makeup turns over gradually rather than all at once; the Trustees then select, from among their own number, who will serve as President, Vice President, and Secretary for the year. Terms run two years, with a maximum of two successive terms (four years), after which a trustee must wait at least one year before serving again. A trustee appointed mid-term to fill a vacancy serves the remainder of that term, which counts as one of the two. The Treasurer, covered below, is appointed separately and is not one of these trustee seats. Trustees may also serve as members of other circles, but bylaws reserve circle leadership to that circle's own members: a sitting trustee does not lead any circle other than the Governing Circle itself.

Officer Duties

PRESIDENT	INUUC's official representative. Presides at Congregational and Governing Circle meetings, sets agendas, and serves as primary financial signatory.

VICE PRESIDENT	Assists the President, presides in their absence, and takes on duties the President assigns.
SECRETARY	Keeps minutes and records for the Governing Circle and Congregational meetings, and ensures documents are accurate and posted promptly.
TREASURER	Keeps financial records, oversees collection and disbursement of funds, and advises on deposits, withdrawals, and investments. Appointed, not elected; may serve up to four consecutive one-year terms, and reports to the Governing Circle.

In Sociocracy's language, a circle also fills a Leader, Facilitator, Secretary, and Delegate role, as section 06 describes. On the Governing Circle, the elected officers generally carry those functions, though exactly how they divide them can shift year to year, worth confirming with current trustees rather than assumed.

> **Trustee or not?** President, Vice President, and Secretary are elected trustees who also hold that title. The Treasurer is different: appointed by the Governing Circle rather than elected, and explicitly not a Trustee, though the role works closely with the Circle and sits on the Finance Circle. Delegate, in turn, isn't a fourth officer alongside Treasurer, it's a function elected trustees carry to link the Governing Circle to Coordinating, Finance, and Leadership Development, so INUUC typically has a few different trustees serving as delegates at the same time, one per connected circle. (One documented exception: the Immediate Past President may serve as the delegate to Leadership Development as a non-voting assistant, rather than as a current trustee.)

Scope of Responsibility

MISSION & COMPLIANCE	Ensures INUUC achieves its mission and complies with the bylaws and covenant; sets an annual Vision of Ministry, Ministry Evaluation, and mutual Governing Circle / minister performance evaluation; reviews the covenant and holds an annual Open Questions conversation; collects annual conflict-of-interest disclosures from trustees; revisits a Strategic Plan every three to five years.
PERSONNEL	Hires, discharges, and supervises staff, including the minister, who also sits on the Governing Circle itself as a non-voting, ex-officio member; negotiates the minister's contract and compensation; appoints a Compensation Circle to review pay and benefits annually.
FINANCES	Approves the annual budget by April; requires at least one authorized signer on any disbursement, and two unrelated authorized approvers on any disbursement of $1,000 or more that isn't part of an existing contract or normal payroll; commissions a professional financial review at least every three years, with an informal review in alternating years.
PROPERTY & RECORDS	Maintains adequate insurance; protects physical and intangible assets, including electronic data; sets written procedures for document retention and destruction.
CIRCLE OVERSIGHT	Ensures every circle's domain is clearly defined and that no two circles' domains overlap or leave a gap; receives each circle's domain reconfirmation by October 1.

SAFETY & CONDUCT	Maintains a written emergency plan; oversees child protection procedures; handles conflict-of-interest disclosures and, when necessary, discipline or removal. Where our bylaws and our internal policy describe this differently, such as the standard for an unexcused-absence vacancy, the bylaws govern.

What the Governing Circle Doesn't Do

It governs rather than operates day to day. It normally leaves running Sunday morning, planning programming, and managing volunteers to the Coordinating Circle, together with INUUC's program circles. The GC governs by policy, meaning it concentrates on direction and shared agreements, while operational work belongs to the circles closest to it. Decisions the Circle makes in executive session, for personnel or membership matters, are still reported and recorded in the open minutes. And it isn't compensated: trustees serve as volunteers and may only be reimbursed for direct expenses.

SECTION 08

A Look at a Real Meeting

It's one thing to describe the structure. It's another to see how it actually feels in the room. A Governing Circle meeting opens with a lit chalice and a round of check-ins, moves through whatever the agenda calls for, and closes with a round of gratitudes before the chalice goes out. Along the way, the questions genuinely range across the whole spectrum of what it means to steward a community.

Some of it is mission-level: coordinating a new lease for shared space, welcoming a new minister into the community, deciding how to staff and structure the year ahead. Some of it is quietly practical: assigning new check signers, moving the meeting schedule to better fit everyone's calendars, deciding how minutes should be kept (recording outcomes and decisions, not a blow-by-blow of the discussion). And some of it is small in scale but large in what it says about who we are.

> *When the Governing Circle set up a scholarship fund for kids heading to summer camp this past year, the real conversation wasn't about the dollar amount. It was about whether requiring a thank-you note or a presentation from a recipient would be performative, or even stressful, for a child. The Circle decided against any such requirement, offering instead a low-pressure, optional way for kids to share their experience if they wanted to. Small decision. Real values, applied.*

Or take something as simple as how to handle dishes at a congregational brunch. Choosing reusable plates over disposable ones, and organizing volunteers for cleanup instead, isn't a headline decision. But it's the kind of small, consistent choice that keeps a congregation's stated environmental values from staying just stated.

And sometimes the moment is simply this: this year, for the first time, the Governing Circle ran its entire Annual Congregational Meeting on consent from start to finish, with no fallback to Robert's Rules. That's worth pausing on. It means a room full of ordinary members, most without any parliamentary background, ran one of the congregation's most important meetings entirely through picture forming, rounds, and

consent. It worked because the system doesn't depend on anyone being an expert. It depends on everyone being willing to listen.

SECTION 09

The Annual Rhythm

TWICE MONTHLY	The Governing Circle meets in the evening. Meetings are open to all members except during executive session, reserved for personnel or membership matters.
JANUARY & MAY	All circle leaders across INUUC file semiannual written reports on their progress against the year's priorities.
APRIL	The Finance Circle presents the proposed annual budget to the Governing Circle, built from the Annual Vision of Ministry and input from every circle.
JUNE	The Annual Congregational Meeting: budget adoption, Governing Circle elections, and the presentation of the year's Vision of Ministry. (The Leadership Development Circle accepts nominations and expressions of interest year-round, not only around this meeting.)
OCTOBER 1	Each circle reconfirms its domain and aim with the Governing Circle, keeping the whole map of responsibilities current.
ONGOING	An annual Ministry Evaluation, a mutual performance evaluation between the minister and the Governing Circle, a covenant and Open Questions review, and conflict-of-interest disclosures from trustees.
EVERY 3 YEARS (MIN.)	A professional financial review or audit, with an informal ad hoc review in alternating years; a Triennial Evaluation of the minister's broader pastoral role.
EVERY 3 TO 5 YEARS	The Strategic Plan is revisited and updated.

SECTION 10

No Special Skills Required, Structurally Speaking

This isn't just an encouraging thing to say, it's a design feature. Sociocracy was built, on purpose, to spread leadership out rather than concentrate it in a few experienced hands. A few structural reasons why that actually holds up in practice:

- **Roles are defined, not accumulated.** Leader, facilitator, secretary, delegate, each is a specific, bounded job, not an open-ended expectation to know everything.
- **Decisions run on consent, not credentials.** A concern from the newest trustee in the room carries exactly as much weight as one from the most experienced. The process doesn't ask who you are, it asks whether you have an objection.
- **Clarity of process protects newcomers specifically.** One of Sociocracy's core values exists precisely because unclear process quietly favors whoever already knows how to work it. A clear process is a newcomer's best ally.
- **New trustees are supported, not left to figure it out alone.** A growing GC handbook and orientation help new trustees find their footing, and sitting trustees remember being new themselves.
- **The system is resilient by design.** The "starfish" idea again: authority is distributed enough that the Circle doesn't depend on any one person's expertise to function well.

SECTION 11

Getting Involved & Further Reading

If you're considering serving, the simplest next step is a conversation: with any current Governing Circle trustee, or with the Leadership Development Circle at leadershipdevelopment@inuuc.org, which welcomes nominations and expressions of interest year-round, not only each spring. Ready to serve now? Email the Governing Circle directly at gc@inuuc.org.

If you'd like to go deeper on your own first, these resources go further into Dynamic Governance and Sociocracy:

- Rev. Renee Ruchotzke, *Dynamic Governance for UU Congregations*
- Ted Rau, *Sociocracy: A Brief Introduction*
- Rev. Renee Ruchotzke, *Shared Leadership with Circles* (UUA website)
- Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry* (2016), the framework INUUC's own policies draw from
- The Sociocracy For All website, and Rev. Renee Ruchotzke's video series on the UUA website

Ask any Governing Circle member, and they'll point you to the rest.