The Urantia Book Fellowship:

Case for direct Elections and two-tiered membership

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**Introduction**

The Urantia Book Fellowship (UBF) is a small not-for-profit religious/spiritual organization that traces its history back to the Chicago Forum. It was originally conceived around the idea of local and regional societies, and originally only members of societies were members of the UBF. Over the years, an exception was made for individuals interested in the UBF that were not adjacent to one of the established societies, named members at large (MAL). The number of MAL have grown over time. In the first 2.5 decades of the 21st century, some societies have become inactive, others have diminished, while some continue to have experienced and engaged members.

The society model did not flourish in the way the founders had intended. Instead of hundreds or even thousands of Urantia Book societies around the world, there are only a handful in North America today. While some youth have joined societies, in general the existing societies are aging and in the next 25 years many of the active and experienced members will graduate to the mansion worlds.

The world of 2025 is very different from the world of 1955. We no longer send messages by telegraph instead we have instantaneous video conferencing, artificial intelligence, a vast storehouse of information at our fingertips, and a very different cultural landscape and generational cohorts than the 1950’s. The Gen-Z and Millennial cohorts have a very different set of life experiences, expectations, norms, values, and goals than the aging Baby Boomers. They are less inclined to affiliate with religious/spiritual organizations.

Bottom line, I think clinging to the society model out of comfort, nostalgia, or fear would be a fundamental mistake for the UBF as we move towards the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Urantia Book.

**The SCICR proposal for a revised constitution**

The SCICR committee consisted of men and women who represented society members and MAL and met regularly for three years with lively debates and consideration of many alternatives to create a new proposed constitution. Here are some of the key issues relevant to membership and elections.

1. **The future.** UBF has already adopted some of the provisions outlined in the proposed constitution. To me, the most important step has been to create a strategic plan and develop a task force that will evaluate and update the plan. The importance of the strategic plan is that it focuses the Fellowship on becoming deliberate about charting a clear and integrated pathway to serving the future needs of the revelation.

 The key question is, what is our collective vision for the future of The Urantia Book Fellowship? Psychotherapists often ask their clients to image their “future selves”. My challenge to the Fellowship is the same, what kind of organization do we need to become in the next 5, 10, 20, 50 or 100 years to serve the social, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the students of the Urantia Book? Here are a few thoughts to consider:

* What are the plans of our unseen friends? Did they drop off this book, then take leave, or is there a team in place that is planning the dissemination and adoption of the revelation? If there is an celestial plan, how can we be ready to quickly respond as the plan begins to unfold?
* How long will the Urantia Book remain obscure? Is there a time, sooner or later, when awareness of the book will increase exponentially? Can we be ready for that?
* In envisioning our future selves, will the Fellowship continue to be a very small organization of a few thousand devoted students of the Urantia Book, or should we be prepared to grow into a much larger organization?
* How important is it for us to grow our reach outside of North America? Is our future self a multilingual, multicultural, and multinational coalition of truth seekers? If these are our values, how do we make it happen?

The SCICR committee was acutely aware of these issues around transitioning into the future. While we do not have clear answers to these questions about the future, our goal was to create a working constitution that was flexible, adaptable, and scalable. The current constitution was seen as potentially holding us back when the time comes for the rapid growth in awareness of the Urantia Book. The membership, nomination, and voting structures were developed to allow for rapid growth, adaptation, and change when we arrive at the time when the revelation emerges from its current relative obscurity.

1. **Broad General Membership**. The SCICR proposal is an invitation for any and all who are interested in the revelation to become a member of the Urantia Book Fellowship. We debated whether we should require all new members to affiliate with an existing society and rejected this idea for several reasons.
* Initially, not all individuals may be inclined or ready to promptly affiliate with a group located in a distant city, notwithstanding the opportunity to engage with society members virtually. It seemed unfair to exclude these truth seekers.
* Second, societies may grow large and lose intimacy and community once present.
* Third, one of the UBF goals is to better serve truth seekers outside of North America and forcing these people into North American societies made little sense to us. We settled on the idea of a general membership open to anyone, from anywhere, who is interested in learning, sharing, and living the teachings of the Urantia Book.

It has been argued that allowing people to belong to the UBF who are not members of societies is a bad idea. Some of the arguments include:

* Societies, because they are small local groups, know the people they admit as members. Having a pathway of MAL to join the organization would create an administrative burden because it is more difficult to know who these people are because they may not have relationships with existing society members. It would be even more of a burden to allow these people to vote.
	+ Abolishing MAL membership, in my opinion, would be disastrous for the UBF. Both the president and the vice president of the organization are MAL. We might lose half of our members if the possibility of belonging to the organization while not being part of a local society is implemented.
	+ If societies expand to absorb the MAL and new members through virtual rather than local membership, the administrative burden is shifted from an organization with full-time and part-time staff to a handful of entirely volunteer groups. Lack of capacity would likely lead many people to be turned away by local societies because they are unable to verify who they are.
	+ There are truth seekers outside of Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City, etc. who are sincerely interested in learning more about the Urantia Book. It makes no sense to turn away people in other American Cities, people in Canada, Mexico, Latin America, Europe, Africa, or anywhere else because we are clinging to the original idea that the Fellowship must be organized into local and regional societies. As Jesus said, “166:3:7 (1829.4) *Nevertheless, to all who are honest of heart and sincere in faith, it remains eternally true: “Behold, I stand at the doors of men’s hearts and knock, and if any man will open to me, I will come in and sup with him and will feed him with the bread of life; we shall be one in spirit and purpose, and so shall we ever be brethren in the long and fruitful service of the search for the Paradise Father.”* We should emulate Jesus and welcome any and all truth seekers into our spiritual community.
	+ Allowing individual members who are not willing to join a team undermines the Fellowship’s core values. The revised constitution provides multiple avenues for members not affiliated with existing societies to participate in learning, sharing, and living the teachings of the Urantia Book. I don’t buy the argument that accepting individual members violates the Fellowship’s core values in any way.
1. **Voting Members**. General members, after a period of time, can apply to become voting members of the Fellowship. The current proposed language for voting membership in the proposed constitution is:

***Section 1.3. Voting Members:*** *UBF members, who have been members for 1 year or more, may apply to become voting members by completing a voting membership application. Voting Members shall be entitled to elect the Governing Board, as provided herein, but shall only have such other rights to control or direct the conduct or actions of UBF as expressly provided herein or otherwise determined by the Governing Board.*

***Section 1.3.1*** *To be eligible, the applicant must meet* ***three of these four*** *criteria:*

***Section 1.3.1.1*** *Attests to having read or listened to The Urantia Book in its entirety.*

***Section 1.3.1.2*** *Provides evidence of service to the Revelation.*

***Section 1.3.1.3*** *Submits recommendations from at least 2 voting members.*

***Section 1.3.1.4*** *Documents participation in a Urantia Book Study Group.*

***1.3.2. Application Review****: The Governing Board will establish a process for soliciting, reviewing, and accepting or rejecting voting member applications and this process will be documented in the Operations Manual.*

***1.3.3 Final Authority:*** *The Governing Board has the final authority to accept or reject a member’s application to become a voting member.*

The advantages of having voting members involved in electing the Governing Board include:

* Fostering a diverse membership with varied experiences, cultural backgrounds, and approaches to learning, sharing and living the teachings of the Urantia Book.
* Allowing the more experienced voting members to have direct involvement in the governance of the UBF.
* Preventing the governance of the UBF from being dominated by a small group of individuals should we retain the society TDA Governing Board election model.
* Encourage candidates for the Governing Board to actively make their positions known to the voting membership creating the possibility for extended debate and a wider range of candidate platforms.
* Make it possible for individuals previously unknown to the TDA delegates to better make their case for becoming a leader.
* One person, one vote gives equal weight to every voting member of the UBF. Forcing people to enroll in societies, then giving each society a single delegate to the TDA to select the governing board would give higher weight to members of smaller societies.

The two-level membership structure was debated, carefully considered, and adopted by the SCICR committee. It was considered better than forcing all members to join a society, and better than maintaining the current two category membership model of society members, and members at large. It was considered easier to administer since there would be a single centrally managed database of membership with two categories, regular member and voting member. It would eliminate the need to obtain membership lists from each society in order to keep track of the UBF member roster. It was also judged not to interfere with the local autonomy of UBF societies.

1. **Nominating Commission.** Many arguments have been made about the value of the TDA model in which a small number of select individuals meet in person to pick the best candidates for vacant Governing Board seats. These include:
* **Security.** All decisions of board composition are made by a small group of people in an in-person meeting avoiding any problems with online voting security. This argument assumes that a secure online voting system is not possible. SCICR discussions included the idea of hiring an experienced third-party company that would administer the election using state of the art technology and report the results as a neutral third party.
* **Confidence.** Members of the UBF will be more confident if their leaders are chosen by a small group during a TDA meeting. This argument assumes that direct online elections cannot be implemented fairly and transparently. A third-party company that routinely runs elections for not-for-profit corporations has a vested interest in complete fairness and transparency.
* **The best results.** The argument is that a small group of delegates, meeting face-to-face, debating candidates confidentially, sharing their accumulated experience and wisdom will result in the selection of the best leaders for the UBF. This is highly dependent on who is appointed to the TDA. There is no guarantee that this will lead to better choices than a one-person, one-vote election in which candidates actively make their positions and agenda known to the electorate. In addition, a small, select group of individuals may have biases that operate without transparency in a closed-door, confidential selection process.
* **Prevents external threats.** Some argue that direct membership voting is a system that could be highjacked by a hostile, external entity by flooding the Fellowship with membership applications, nominating their candidates, and electing people whose agenda is to destroy the Fellowship. The criteria for voting membership, however, would make this very difficult to accomplish with the one-year waiting period and the extra criteria for voting membership.

The proposed SCICR constitution includes a Nominating Commission that will screen potential candidates and from the pool of recommended or volunteer candidates, create a slate that would be voted on by the membership. This would be a small group of UBF leaders with experience, perspective, wisdom, who value the best interests of the fellowship. This is the intended safeguard against hostile external forces, inexperienced and uniformed candidates, and candidates who do not subscribe to the purpose, vision, and mission of the UBF. The nominating commission provides many of the benefits of the TDA model, while still leaving the final choice of Governing Board members to be elected by the voting members.

1. **Online, digital voting.** There are dozens of companies that offer online, mail-in, and/or hybrid voting services for not-for-profit organizations. Some advantages include:
* **Data security.** These firms offer end-to-end encryption, audit trails, ISO or SOC2 security certification. A reputable vendor will be transparent about its security protocols.
* **Voter anonymity.** The vendor can implement procedures that allow each eligible voter to vote only once, while guaranteeing the anonymity of each voter’s ballot.
* **Privacy protection.** A reputable vendor will guarantee the privacy of member lists and contact information and will not sell or share these data with any other organization.
* **Conflict of interest.** The use of a third-party vendor reduces the possibility that organization members might taint the results of an election due to hidden agenda or conflicts of interest. Essentially, a neutral third party whose reputation depends on security, fairness, and transparency is a safe way to collect and count votes.
* **Methods for increasing voter participation.** Many companies have built in or optional procedures for maximizing voter participation that may be more sophisticated than what we could manage on our own.
* **Knowledge of not-for-profit laws.** Experienced and reputable vendors will be up to date on the laws that regulate not-for-profit membership voting and will ensure that the UBF is compliant with relevant laws.

The potential downsides of using an external vendor to run elections for the UBF include:

* **Cost.** These companies are in business to make money, so their services may be expensive relative to setting up an in-house voting system.
* **Security.** Some may feel the UBF data is not secure, despite the policies and procedures of the company.
* **Control.** Turning voting over to a third party may be perceived by some as giving up control over the election process.
* **Technical glitches.** There are always possibilities for technical glitches that would lead to member frustration. However, these are probably more likely if a home-grown voting system were used instead.

**Summary**

The membership and voting structure in the new constitution proposed by the SCICR committee was debated, revised, deliberated, and modified over a three-year intensive process. I have tried to convey that behind this work was a sincere desire to transform the Urantia Book Fellowship into an organization that is ready to expand, adapt, and perform as future circumstances around the revelation change. The current proposal was designed with safeguards to protect from hostile outside forces, and with the core value that we should be a democratically governed organization. I believe our best bet for the future is to adopt the two-tiered individual membership model, implement a nominations commission led by experienced leaders, and open the slate of candidates to voting for open Governing Board positions using a one-member-one vote model of democracy.