



NORTHWOODS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Info Packet on Sociocracy

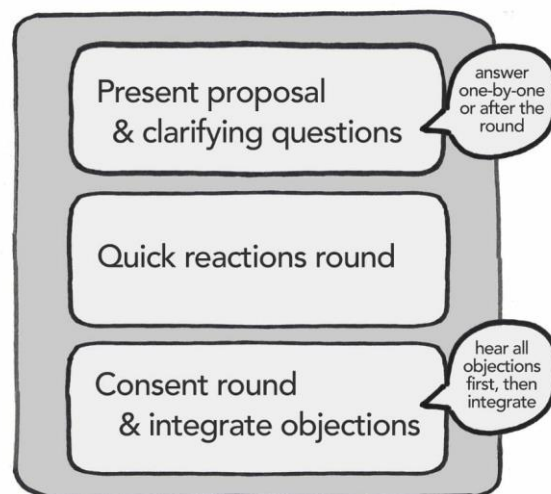
About This Packet

The following pages contain details about what sociocracy is, why we are pursuing it, and what it might mean for Northwoods' daily operation and its long-term success.

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What is sociocracy?

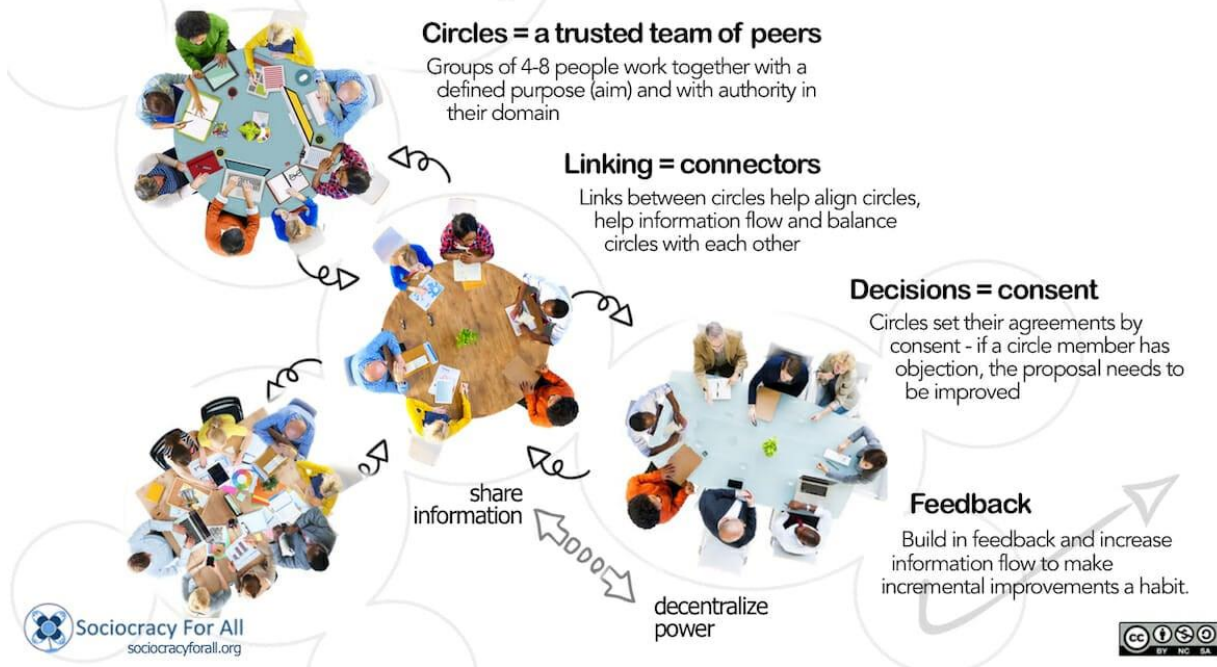
- Sociocracy is a way of governing by consent and sharing leadership
- Groups are organized into circles that link between each other when they are related, which improves cross-functional knowledge (less “silos”)
 - Suggestion is that circles agree on ground rules/covenant of how it will act, circles it often overlaps with, and [roles](#)
 - More on roles (formal sociocracy): The **leader** is aware of the circle in its larger context (over time, in the organization). The **delegate** pays attention to what needs to be communicated to the next-broader circle. The **secretary or note-taker** watches over the records of the circle and their circulation. Focusing on the process during the circle meetings is the **facilitator**’s role.
 - On why there is a **delegate AND a leader**: Hearing more than one voice from a circle in the broader circle supports the flow of information and transparency within an organization. A second voice is particularly useful when there is disagreement within a circle that needs to be represented. (It is possible in some contexts to forgo double-linking if equal voice and transparency are ensured through other means.)
 - Circles don’t have to be permanent
 - Circular structure means more shared ownership
- Decisions are made by consent and each member of the group has a right to and is expected to voice any objection, after which the proposal should be improved – this happens in rounds
 - More info on decisions by consent and [rounds](#):



- “[Good enough for now, safe enough to try](#)” minimizes analysis paralysis, “we’ve always done it this way and I don’t know if another way would work,” and perfectionism
- You’re allowed to pass in the circle – everyone doesn’t have to speak every time
- The circular round concept promotes equal voices as valuable; it’s not a debate

Sociocracy

a peer governance system based on consent



- Small groups are the basis of everything. Those small groups are called [circles](#).
- Those sociocracy circles have a defined *aim* (= a description of what the circle is doing) and full authority in a [domain](#) (= what the circle has authority over).
- [Circles](#) will define [roles](#), both to run itself smoothly and to “package” operations into meaningful bits. Any member will fill one or more roles.
- [Linking roles](#) connect circles to other related circles. In double-linking, two people from one circle – [the delegate and the leader](#) – are also full members of the parent circle so information can flow between the teams and their decisions align.

Why are we trying to implement it at Northwoods?

The concept came up at a Board of Trustees retreat in 2023; it was proposed by Rev. Sarah as something that might work for us as we were looking at what does and doesn't work with our governance structure. Sara DaSilva was the Board President at that time. Some of the concerns with governance were:

- It was too slow
- It wasn't clear what is a board decision versus a committee decision
- No one knew what decisions were made at any level, unless they combed through the BOT meeting minutes (it was not believed that any other minutes were publicly available besides the BOT's)
- We would make decisions in one group that have an impact on another group, but they don't know until it's been decided
- We were doing lot of things because we have always done them that way (change is hard!)
- Our bylaws didn't reflect the actual structure, and they needed to be revised (per our bylaws!)
- It felt like the Foundational Trustee and Shared Ministry Trustee had way too many committees to keep track of, and it was nearly impossible to cross-pollinate information between all of those groups
- We don't have good online document storage/places where people can go to find out how various committees are operating or what they're working on
- A lot of work seemed to be done by very few people – there was not shared ownership

Sociocracy was proposed as a way to be more inclusive and communicative and promote shared ownership of what happens in the church. Sara DaSilva agreed to champion the change effort.

Benefits and Risks

Benefits	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Alignment with UU values, in particular Pluralism and Equity, which speak to the importance of multiple voices being heard and respecting what each person brings to the table
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Shared ownership of the church itself and the tactical actions needed to serve our community
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Less decision-making pressure to be perfect
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	More alignment/collaboration between groups

Risks	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	May feel slower/too democratic/less efficient to some
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	May not initially see enough people stepping up
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Not the way we're used to doing things
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No "the buck stops here" leader

What it Could Mean for the Future of Northwoods

We would have to modify existing NUUC bylaws, because our bylaws refer to specific committees that must exist and who align hierarchically to various parts of leadership (Board, minister, etc.). The general, summarized proposal on the table as of September 2024 is to remove the mention of committees and state that governance happens through sociocracy, which can be handled in a policy if we decide to do that. The intent is it would be more flexible to our changing needs: i.e., we don't always need a project circle for an outdoor renovation, or maybe we'll go through a period where we don't have OWL, so we won't need a circle for that.

Here are some examples of common “ways of working” and how they would work differently (or not) under a sociocracy model.

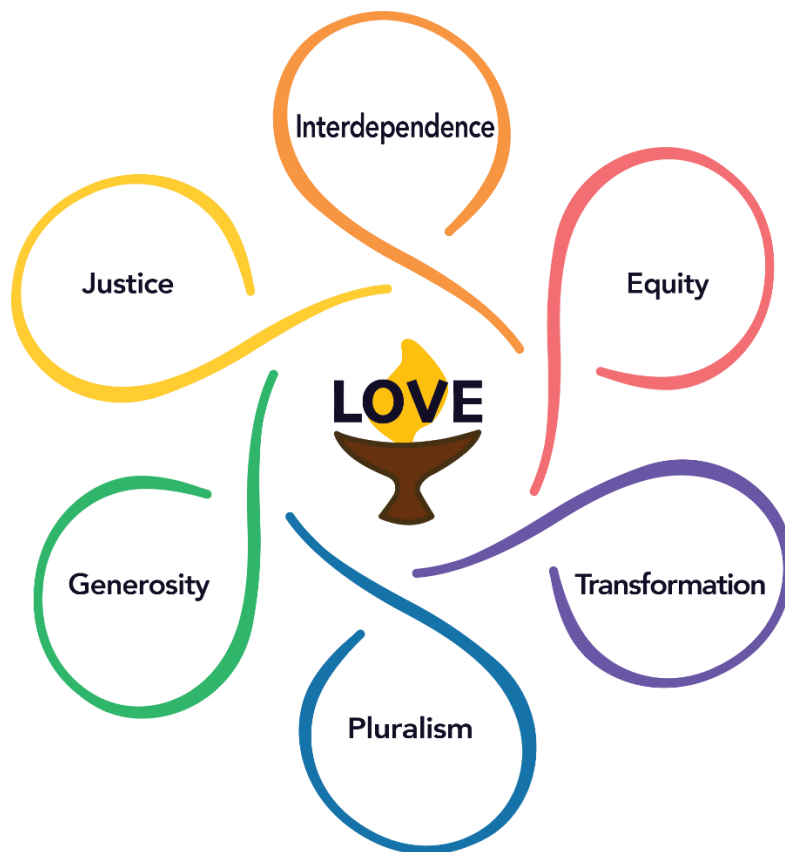
Current	Proposed
Board approves changes of committee leaders	Circles have agreed upon roles and who fills the roles can rotate
Committee information flow goes upward, e.g. to Foundational Ministry on BoT	Information is shared freely especially between circles that overlap
The Board is in charge of Northwoods	The Board sets a strategy and thinks longer-term; everyone in a circle owns Northwoods
Committee chairs feel like they can't leave their position if they need a break (or even ask for help)	Leadership is shared among multiple people in the circle, allowing flexibility and playing to individual strengths
Leaders can get “stuck” or “pigeonholed” in something they're good at, because there's no one else to take on the work	Individuals could participate in a greater number of circles and not be expected to lead them all; it's easier to step away when there is more support in a circle vs. one leader
Large expenses are approved by the board	Same – large expenses are approved by the board per bylaws
Board members are separated from committees	Two of the board positions are Coordinating Circle members, one of those being a static person from the Board and the other being a flexible member of the Coordinating Circle (whomever the Coordinating Circle chooses to be its delegate to the Board)

How and why it could work for your group:

How: Suggestion is to follow what Stewardship did and just jump in. Take a stab at it – you can request some help from a facilitator at first. Even try doing it for a portion of your meeting on one decision you want to make – just try the rounds.

Why:

- It will ease the burden of “leading”
- It ensures all voices are equal
- People are on a volunteer committee for a reason: they care about what the outcomes are and believe it’s important to the broader organization – any of these people could fill one of the agreed-upon roles
- There is a greater sense of ownership in the circle and in the church as a whole when you have an equal opportunity to have a say in what we do
- There are more checks and balances than having a single leader
- It speaks to our UU values, in particular *equity, pluralism, and justice*.



How it works in the Stewardship Circle:

To get started:

- We spent a couple of meetings deciding our goals and covenant
- We identified the roles we thought were necessary for our circle each time we met: meeting facilitator, note-taker, and liaison to the Board of Trustees. Sometimes we have a timekeeper.
- For these, we operated in rounds and each person spoke until we were satisfied with what we captured
- We have a shared Google Drive folder where we can collaborate on documents

In our meetings:

1. We pre-agree on who will be the facilitator for the next meeting and we all contribute agenda items. This is usually done at the end of the last meeting.
2. If there are any action items that people agreed to take on, we address the status of those at the beginning of the meeting. A reminder (sent by that meeting's facilitator) of those items a few days ahead of the meeting is helpful.
3. The note-taker takes notes live and usually the other circle members have the notes up on their own screen to be able to add something if the note-taker missed it (not necessary, but helpful)
4. Some portion of the meeting is catching up on what was done since last month, and then if there is decision making to be done, anyone can propose something and then we follow the rounds.

An example:

1. Jeff: "I propose we lead four adult forum sessions over the next 12 months. Does anyone have any clarifying questions/want to know more?"
2. Sarah P, Brenda, Sara, and Sarah H each take turns asking questions that would help them get to consenting that this is a good proposal, e.g.
 - "What are we trying to get out of this?"
 - "Would anyone come to that/would it be a good use of our time?"
3. Jeff responds with his answers to the clarifying questions the best he can.
4. In the quick reactions round, people might say:
 - "It would be a lot of work"
 - "How do we make it so that we aren't saying the same thing 4 times"
 - "I love this idea, I want stewardship to be a year-round concept"
 - "Pass"

Remember that you are working toward consent, so consider what you need answered so you do not have an objection.

5. The group feedback in the reaction round helps refine the original proposal, and it is restated with improvements. Jeff might say:
 - "I heard what Sarah H and Sara D were concerned about. My new proposal is that we lead 2 adult forums in the next 6 months with themes

that align with our circle's goals, and then we revisit the idea at the 6 month mark. Do you consent?"

Then each person in the circle clearly says whether they consent or object. This is very fast. If you do not have consent, go back to the drawing board. This rarely happens, though, because people have had the chance to be heard.

- As we close the meeting, we decide on roles for the next meeting, pick a date, and develop an agenda. We also check in with how we feel the meeting went. We stick to an ending time to be respectful of everyone's time.
- We have different facilitators and note-takers each time, but we have typically kept the same leader/delegate as two people were already at the BOT meetings.
- As we identify more circle overlaps, we will be more intentional about the leader and delegate roles.

The Uncomfortable Zone: A Shift in Thinking

Change is hard! There will be bumps on this road, and we should resist the urge to strive for perfection. Our congregation is not what it was a year ago, five years ago, or twenty-five years ago. It is constantly evolving as new faces come through the door and our environment changes around us.

The power shift must be acknowledged. In decentralizing power by giving teams more autonomy, power shifts from those who have traditionally held a lot of power to those who now need to step up and take on more responsibility. Those in power may worry that others won't step up. If we agree to move to this model, we must plan for this shift. Here are some examples of how we could address concerns about sociocracy as a governance model:

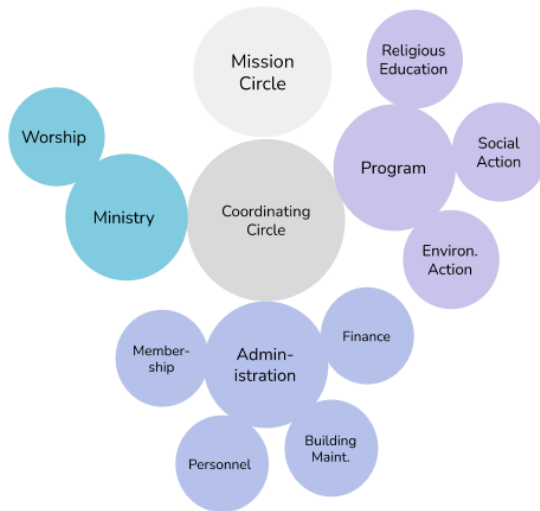
Embedded Thought	Open-Minded Approach	How to Get There
I've run this committee for a long time, it runs well, and I don't want to take the time to explain that to anyone else.	I might decide I want to do something else one day or take on a smaller role.	Consider that you can spend less time in a role, still have the impact you desire, and that others are valued and can be trusted.
Writing things down takes too much time and/or I'm not good at it.	Someone in the circle might be great at it and would prefer that role over others. Writing things down creates transparency.	It's okay to accept help and acknowledge all of us aren't great at everything.
This church process runs well because we don't discuss it. It doesn't need more input, that will muddy the waters.	Blending old and new elements will provide stability but allow for growth.	Have faith in the democratic process; it is one of our core values.
We don't have enough people to be in all these circles.	We might not need as many circles. We have 160+ members who care enough about our church to contribute financially—they are who owns our church and therefore should have a say in how it runs.	Leaders can ask who's interested in being a part of your circle. Folks could all be part of at least one circle.
It's less efficient to overlap with other circles.	Efficiency is important, and so are diverse contributions. Also, efficiency can mean that we keep doing things one way because it's gotten easier. Easier does not always mean better.	Efficiency and getting more opinions don't have to be diametrically opposed if done in a quick, clear process. It can be positive to disrupt long-standing processes.
Too many meetings will slow us down.	There are many ways of communicating between and within circles: it doesn't have to be a meeting.	Continue with the existing meetings you have and adopt discernment rounds for decision making. If you don't have meetings, consider a quarterly meeting.

I don't like working in groups.	Other viewpoints and ideas don't mean mine are invalid.	Try working with one or two partners at first. Listen to others assuming good intent.
No one is in charge.	There is a designated leader (and a delegate) in every circle. Those leaders are accountable to each other (for the large circles, as part of the coordinating circle; for the smaller circles, to their tangential circle(s)).	Having one leader in the past has at times slowed us down and created a power dynamic that may not have best served us.
I don't want to be in a circle; I don't want to do any work. I like coming to church and I don't have time for more.	I share my time with Northwoods at least several hours a month to come to service; I want to spend additional time making sure this place I love continues to exist.	Commit to one hour per month in one circle. See how it feels, and then re-evaluate your position.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does the Board do if we drive decision-making closer to people who do the work?

The Board becomes a guiding force for Northwoods and shifts focus to strategic planning versus tactical firefighting. It has more time to plan long-term initiatives and share them with the Coordinating Circle, as the Coordinating Circle will also be expected to share ideas with the Board.



Example – Not Northwoods’ proposed structure

Is the Board still elected? If so, why?

Yes. The Board is elected as the guiding “mission circle,” so it’s important to elect individuals who will excel at that work.

Who approves things?

Some things that “require Board approval” today will change. Examples of decisions that can be made at a lower level include how to spend a budget allocated to a circle,

What happens to our bylaws?

The structural descriptions of the committees changes in the new version of the Bylaws. Circles (former committees) are free to set up their own processes, covenant, meeting schedules, etc. and self-govern. Many sections of the Bylaws do not change as they are fundamental to church solvency.

What do “authority” and “responsibility” mean in sociocratic settings?

Sociocracy requires us to be accountable to each other, but also allows work to be done with less red tape. Perhaps the word “empowerment” replaces “authority” and “accountability” replaces “responsibility.” The Coordinating Circle may decide, for example, that the Membership Circle is *empowered* to set up a new mechanism for new member onboarding. The Membership Circle is then *accountable* to the Coordinating Circle to share

what they've come up with, but they don't need to seek permission from the Coordinating Circle.

Can this be used with the youth?

Yes. In fact, it could be a great way to share ownership in decision-making and introduce democratic process early on.

Is anyone in charge?

It depends what we mean by "in charge." Sociocracy doesn't favor a "the buck stops here" approach. At a meeting or when making decisions, it's helpful to have a facilitator, but action items that come out of a meeting should be shared and the facilitator can ask who will own each item. In a church setting, the Board still exists to set general direction and strategic priorities, so in one sense, the Board is still "in charge." But, ownership of all church process (and success) is shared among more people.

How do we protect from stepping on each other's feet when no one person is in charge?

When we agree to own an action to move a circle forward, complete the action or ask for help. Only take on what you can do. That may be taking notes at a meeting or being the delegate to another circle. All of us have unique strengths and things we can improve on, and there is room for everyone to take on ownership.

Digital Question Box QR Code:

