

4.2. Conflict Resolution Policy

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Conflict Resolution: Expectations and Remedies for Maintaining Right Relations at UUCR

The health, strength, and reputation of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville depend on a sense of fellowship among the members, friends, and staff. Fellowship thrives in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and cooperation. However, differences or misunderstandings that go unresolved and become prolonged conflicts can threaten the social fabric of our congregation. We recognize that conflict is not only healthy but inevitable and that it may occur between members, members and staff, members and minister, or staff and minister. Managing and resolving such conflicts are acts of creativity that, when successfully done, can make our community stronger. This document is intended to identify the steps to be followed in UUCR when conflicts within the church arise.

We preface these suggestions with the common sense wisdom that we all should adhere to the UU Principles and Purposes and our congregational covenant, exhibiting behaviors that enhance the dignity and inherent worth of all participants: expressing sincere appreciation; allowing for human fallibility; dealing directly with each other; speaking softly; being creative in problem solving; maintaining a sense of humor; actively listening and clarifying what we hear; letting others have their say; respecting boundaries that may differ from our own; respecting confidentiality; refraining from harmful gossip about others; speaking honestly; and sharing power. Each person, regardless of his or her role in the congregation—including called staff, board members, administrative staff, etc.—is expected to live to this covenant within the context of their relationship with the congregation.

We all share personal responsibility for UUCR and have an obligation to share concerns about things which threaten the health of our congregation. This should be done by using existing procedures, the appropriate committees, etc. As members of this covenanted community, we each have an obligation to find out what those procedures are, in a conflict or in any other dealing with the church, just as we each have responsibilities to support the church, honor our pledges, fulfill our commitments for committees, and strive to be on time. In short, we owe each other respectful participation in the life of our congregation.

Context

This document is a policy statement of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville and fits within a set of documents that includes: UUCR Bylaws, Covenant of Right Relations, Governing Policies (including Sexual Harassment Policy, Personnel Policy, and Safety Policy for Children and Teens) and Membership Policy.

Conflict Resolution: Guidelines and Suggestions for Success

Step 1

Talk directly with the person (fellow member, Minister, etc.) with whom you have the disagreement.

Examine your own role in the conflict. Why is this matter important to you? Do some soul searching. Try to understand for yourself what you need or what outcome you expect from resolving the conflict. What requests would you want to make of the other party or parties to the conflict? How would you ask them?

At this step, and at all succeeding steps that become necessary, be accountable for your own actions. Everyone has a part in this conflict. Own your issue: anonymous complaints are not acceptable.

Get a reality check from a trusted third party. Compare your perceptions. Did they see it or hear it in the same way? Based on your telling of events and your feelings about it, would they feel the same way?

Agree on a mutually acceptable time and place to talk in private and as soon as possible after the incident.

If a direct conversation is too difficult, consider putting your thoughts into writing. Be available to hear the response.

If you feel that safety is an issue, use an appropriate third party or committee to provide a safe environment for the discussion as in step 2 below.

If the conflict is less with a person than with how they are performing a job (staff, religious educator, etc.), address the concern to the proper supervisor so that individuals are not being "supervised" from all sides.

Step 2

If unresolved, go to the Minister for counseling regarding the issue.

If all parties agree that the Minister is neutral and appropriate, the Minister helps to resolve the conflict.

If the Minister is not the appropriate person, the Minister will direct you to the correct body to resolve the conflict.

Use "I" statements in your discussion ("I feel..." not "You did..."); use active listening (focus on what the other person is saying; try to put yourself in his or her shoes).

If the conflict involves the Senior Minister or Assistant Minister, the responsibility for conflict resolution rests with the Committee on Ministry.

Step 3

If still unresolved, the matter is taken to a member of the Conflict Resolution Team. The Committee on Ministry will call the team into action if step 2 has been unsuccessful. The Conflict Resolution Team will consist of at least three members (appointed by the Minister, Board, and Committee on Ministry) selected for their mediation/facilitation skills and knowledge of various aspects of church functioning, who serve on an "as needed" basis. The team members will receive training, which will be an expense identified in the annual budget. Team members will excuse themselves from any conflict for which they have an inherent bias based on the individuals or the topics involved. (Additional members of the team may be recruited, if necessary.) A single member, the entire team, or any combination of members can be employed in seeking conflict resolution.

If appropriate, the Conflict Resolution Team will consult with the Personnel Committee. The Conflict Resolution Team will have the authority to seek the assistance of the Joseph Priestley District, the Central East Region (CER), the Unitarian Universalist Association, or outside consultants without prior approval of the Board. The team will report in confidence to an executive session of the Board and the Minister on the nature and outcomes of all conflicts for which they are called into service. The team will determine a record-keeping format that provides an abstract of events while allowing for privacy considerations.

The Conflict Resolution Team is empowered to make recommendations, establish behavior contracts and render judgments. They are not limited to achieving compromises; when they believe that a situation exists where behaviors are harmful to the congregation, or not expressive of our collective values, they can recommend counseling (in consultation with the Minister), limits to participation in congregational life, or other behavior changing strategies. Should any of the parties in conflict refuse to participate in the resolution process, or if the behavior is unchanged and the belief of the team is that the behavior is a threat to the congregation, the matter will go to the Board for consideration.

Step 4

If the Conflict Resolution Team deems it necessary to elevate an issue to this step, the Board will consider matters coming from the team and take action as appropriate. The Board can solicit assistance from the Joseph Priestley District, CER or the Unitarian Universalist Association. If the issue threatens to divide the congregation, the Board must solicit such assistance immediately.

The Board can endorse the recommendations of the Conflict Resolution Team or it can set its own recommendations and require the recommended behavior.

The Board can take action to exclude a person from attending for a period of time. Prior to taking this step, the Board will consider whether any less restrictive steps can be implemented. A temporary exclusion should occur only when behaviors are seen to be so seriously dangerous (threatening to people or property) or disruptive (interfering with essential church functions) that they threaten the well-being and safety of the congregation.

The Board, given just cause, by a two-thirds majority can exclude a person from the church and the church premises and remove their name from church membership, only under the same circumstances as above.

The Board may specify conditions for returning as a welcomed member of our community and set criteria for evaluation of compliance. Assent of the Board by a two-thirds majority will be required for return to the community.

If the conflict involves the wider congregation, the Board should call a congregational meeting to address the conflict with the collective compassion and shared wisdom of the entire body.

We hope that most conflicts can and will be resolved by effort on the part of individuals to live our covenant and UU Principles and approach the individual with whom they are having a conflict directly. We further anticipate that all who participate in the process will use the UU Principles and Purposes to inform their own actions and will treat everyone with compassion and dignity. Finally, when no resolution is possible, concern for the well-being, openness, safety and stability of the whole congregation shall be given priority over the feelings or actions of any individual or group of individuals. When the level of stress and antagonism is still high after a formal conflict resolution process, the Board may decide to sponsor a ritual of forgiveness and healing. Our forgiveness of self and others represents a true act of growth and kindness that will allow us to continue seeking our highest self and to focus on the mission of UUCR.