

4.2. Conflict Resolution Policy

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Conflict Resolution Process: 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, ministers and staff. The Board of Trustees and Committee on Ministry (COM) recognize that differences and misunderstandings do occur, but when these go unresolved, they can become prolonged conflicts that can threaten the social and spiritual fabric of our congregation. The UUCR Covenant of Right Relations outlines principles and expectations designed to resolve conflict at an early stage and promote the smooth functioning of our community. This Conflict Resolution Policy identifies the steps to be followed in UUCR when conflicts within the congregation require a more formal structure for resolution.

The Board and COM expect that all who participate in these processes, regardless of their role in the congregation -- including congregants, called staff, board members, and administrative staff -- will use the UU Principles and the Covenant to inform their own actions and will treat everyone involved with respect, compassion and dignity. This document is intended for all parties in a conflict situation, all members of the Conflict Resolution Team appointed by the Board of Trustees, and ministers engaged in the resolution process. All members and participating friends of the congregation ought to be informed of this resolution process.

This document is divided into two parts: I) the three-step process for addressing conflicts between individuals or a small number of congregants and/or staff, or a personal conflict with a board member, and II) conflicts involving a larger number of members, members and staff, or with the board regarding a policy decision, likely to affect the church community as a whole.

Conflict resolution is a healing process that requires direct contact between parties to minimize misunderstanding. Using electronic media (email, texting, Facebook, etc.) for communication concerning conflicts can increase opportunities for misinterpretation, expand conflict beyond the original parties, and jeopardize confidentiality. Use of electronic media related to conflict resolution should be limited to logistical functions, such as scheduling meetings.

PART I -- SMALLER SCALE CONFLICTS

Summary of three-step conflict resolution process:

Step 1 – Examine your own position for reasonableness. Consult with an impartial friend for confidential conversation and feedback. Then arrange a direct meeting with the other party in the conflict to express your viewpoint. If still unresolved, go to step 2.

Step 2 – If the minister is not a party directly involved in the dispute, the minister will mediate. If still unresolved, go to step 3.

Step 3 – The matter goes to trained members of the Board-approved Conflict Resolution Team activated by the Committee on Ministry. This team makes recommendations, forges compromises and provides confidential judgments, subject to Board approval.

Below are more details on each of these steps.

Conflict Resolution Process:

Step 1

- A. Both parties shall examine and take ownership of their role in the conflict. Why is this matter important to you? Is there a larger underlying issue? What is your expectation and is it reasonable? What are you asking of the other party to the conflict? Is that request reasonable? Is there room for compromise?

Each party should get a reality check in confidence from a trusted person not involved in the conflict. Describe the situation to them as objectively as possible and compare your perceptions. Do they see it or hear it in the same way, or is there room for another interpretation?

- B. Talk directly with the person with whom you have the disagreement.

Agree on a mutually acceptable time and place to talk in person in private and as soon as possible after the conflict becomes apparent. In explaining your point of view, use “I” statements in your discussion (“I feel...” not “You did...”). In listening to the other person’s point of view, try to put yourself in his or her shoes. Avoid communicating about the conflict using electronic media.

If a party feels that a direct conversation may create a safety issue, use an appropriate third party or committee to provide a safe environment for the discussion as in step 2 below. Try to maintain confidentiality and not promote gossip.

If the dispute remains unresolved, go to step 2.

Step 2

If the conflict is specifically about how someone is performing a job (staff, religious educator, etc.), address the concern to the proper supervisor so that individuals are not being “supervised” from all sides.

Go to the Minister for counseling regarding the conflict, unless the conflict is with the Senior Minister or Assistant Minister. In that case, proceed to Step 3.

If all parties agree the Minister is neutral, the Minister will provide space to mediate a resolution. If the conflict remains unresolved, or if there is no agreement on the Minister's neutrality, go to step 3.

Step 3

One or both parties can request the assistance of a Conflict Resolution Team (CRT) through the Committee on Ministry. The CRT is a pool of 5-6 members of the congregation trained in conflict resolution, appointed by the Minister, and approved by the Board and the Committee on Ministry. The purpose of the CRT is specifically to mediate and help resolve conflicts that have not been successfully resolved in Step 1 or Step 2 above. Team members are selected for their mediation/facilitation skills and knowledge of various aspects of congregation functioning, and serve on an "as needed" basis. One or more members of the CRT, including at least one member of the Committee on Ministry, can be assigned to help resolve the conflict. Team members will excuse themselves from any conflict for which they have an inherent bias based on the individuals or the topics involved.

The CRT will consult with the Personnel Committee or other Committees, as appropriate given the nature of the conflict. While the CRT is expected to draw on resources internal to UUCR, it has the authority to seek assistance from outside resources, such as external consultants or other sources with relevant expertise, provided that any needed funding is available.

CRT members will meet with the parties in conflict, attempt to encourage respectful dialog and mutual understanding, and mediate a solution. The CRT is empowered to make recommendations, suggest compromises, establish appropriate conduct contracts and provide judgments. When they believe a situation exists where conduct or 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 set expectations for appropriate conduct.

CRT members will maintain the confidentiality of the parties in conflict. The CRT will report in confidence to an executive session of the Board and the Minister (unless the minister is one of the parties in conflict, in which case the minister will receive separate updates on the process) on the nature and outcomes of all CRT-mediated conflicts. The team will determine a record-keeping format that provides an abstract of events while allowing for privacy considerations.

Should any of the parties in conflict refuse to participate in the resolution process, or if the conduct is unchanged and the team believes the conduct is a threat to the congregation, the matter is referred to the Board, which may take action to exclude one or more persons from attending UUCR for a period of time, as outlined in the membership policy and UUCR by-laws.

When no resolution satisfying both parties 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.

PART II – BROADER OR CONGREGATION-WIDE CONFLICTS

The CRT and the minister will determine when a conflict reaches a level that may affect the congregation as a whole and inform the Board as soon as possible. To guide their handling of this situation, the Board will immediately contact UUA Good Officers -- trained personnel provided by UUA to offer consultative support to ministers and congregations -- and our congregational support person, before wide damage occurs or gossip and misinformation are widely communicated.

Communication involving the wider congregation will be guided by expert counsel on best practice in congregational settings. The Committee on Ministry would continue as the support committee to the ministers and the liaison between congregation and ministers.

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.

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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. This latest revision has been researched and written by the Committee on Ministry.