

Policy Title: Conflict as an Opportunity Policy
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Cross Reference to Other Policies: Respect & Dignity Policy Safe Congregations Policy Staff Complaints Policy
Cross Reference to Other Documents: Destructive Behaviour Guidelines Glossary of Terms

POLICY

It is the intent of Neighbourhood Unitarian Universalist Congregation to treat all members, employees, volunteers and visitors in a fair and equitable manner, and to seek constructive solutions to problems which may arise within the congregation. It is also NUUC’s intent that all disputes/issues/concerns will be resolved as speedily as possible.

This policy deals specifically with **CONFLICTS or DISAGREEMENTS**. When *conflicts* or *disagreements* are dealt with early enough, resolution can often be achieved. If conflict is not dealt with in a timely manner, it can sometimes lead to behaviours deemed *as maltreatment, misconduct or harassment*. If this becomes the case, the **Respect & Dignity Policy** will need to be reviewed and adhered to, as it may lead to a “complaint”.

CONNECTING THROUGH CONFLICT - Recognizing the opportunity of conflict

“We need not think alike to love alike.” Francis David

Conflict is present in all communities. It is not the presence of absence of conflict that demonstrates the health of a community but the way that conflict is managed. As Unitarian Universalists, we embrace and celebrate diversity of ideas and opinions. No one person knows everything. By engaging in debate, even argument, we create what Emerson called “a thoroughfare of ideas” from which truth can emerge.

Conflicts arise because engagement can trigger negative feelings. These feelings get in the way of being in right relationship and accomplishing shared goals. Generally, people don't set out to cause conflict. But sometimes anger or hurt feelings arise as a result of what we say or do.

People in conflict may have many reasons for their reactions - past history including family trauma, intergenerational trauma, social/cultural sensitivities, real or perceived threats, the list goes on. Facing conflict is an art in itself where every person needs to understand their personal scripts and lenses. Either way, unresolved conflict can affect us all.

There is a long mystical tradition that recognizes that spiritual union happens more from listening than from speaking, more through experiencing than formulating and more through surrender than control. Our hope is to follow in that tradition when dealing with conflict.

COVENANT OF GOOD RELATIONS:

The best way to mitigate the negative effects of conflict is to learn new skills that empower us to manage conflict with awareness and grace.

It is important that in managing our differences and conflicts we consider:

Our Mission Statement, which informs the basis for **our Conflict as an Opportunity Policy**: Our mission is to empower spiritual growth and shared action for the care of our world.

We must also follow our Eight Principles:

As a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, we affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.
- The goal of community with peace, liberty and justice for all.
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
- Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

PROCEDURE

CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS

Again, conflict occurs in **every community**. Since it is such a typical part of human interaction, our community has a policy as a first step on how we can deal with it. Conflict occurs when two or more people disagree and cannot resolve the disagreement. The disagreement is usually based on an idea but it often becomes personal when we are out of practice in how to argue respectfully. Once the argument becomes personal, feelings get hurt and grudges are kept.

Trust erodes and more conflict with, or avoidance of, the person is likely to occur in future interactions.

It is important we learn how to deal with conflict before trust erodes and negative personal feelings become entrenched. This makes it critical to intervene by introducing Conflict as an Opportunity strategies in the early stages of a conflict. “Conflict as an Opportunity” offers two people an intervention strategy when they realize they are in conflict.

1. FACE-TO-FACE MEETING

The first step of conflict resolution is a meeting between the two parties involved. This is the ideal that we as Unitarian Universalists aspire to in order to grow to be our higher selves. We promote a culture where staff, congregants, friends and visitors are empowered to speak up, from a place of strength and engage in healthy, respectful dialogue. At times, this may be a step out of one’s comfort zone.

Avoid the temptation to immediately express yourself to a third person (triangulate). Own your feelings and your role in the conflict. Do not be afraid to ask for what you want or need.

Critical steps in a face-to-face meeting include:

- Ask the other person to meet at an agreed-upon time and an agreed-upon location. This helps give a feeling of safety and support for both parties and gives an opportunity for privacy. Tell the person you wish the last conversation could have ended better and you are hoping you can resolve a disagreement or hurt feelings with another meeting. (They can say “no,” or “let me think about it,” so give them some time.)
- Use “I” statements in your meeting (I felt very angry, I was disappointed, etc.” but avoid blame and labelling.
- Use non-inflammatory language and be aware of your tone of voice and body language.
- Practice active listening in letting the other party express their experience of the conflict. Do not interrupt the other person. However, if you did not understand a specific statement, ask for clarity.

Note: If either party does not feel “safe” for any reason to have a face-to-face meeting, then the conduct or concerns that makes them feel unsafe needs to be explained so that the other person has the opportunity to adjust their behaviour. This would be particularly important if there is a power differential or if someone from a “vulnerable population” is involved. If change does not occur in behaviour, then you can proceed to step two and meet with a designated third party. This is the exception, not the norm. This person can be someone from the Healthy Congregation Committee who will be trained in mediation as a Peace Ambassador and who is acceptable to both parties. If both parties cannot agree upon a third person, the minister can suggest one. If the conflict involves the Minister, then the Healthy Congregation Committee will suggest a third person.

2. INVOLVING A THIRD PARTY

The first meeting with the third party will center around these 3 principles:

1. **No surprises:** the meeting must have an agreed-upon format and process. It is completely legitimate for either or both parties to express themselves in a written statement if this makes them feel more comfortable.
2. **Confidentiality:** what happens in this meeting is not to be shared with those outside the process without the consent of all.
3. **Equity:** all aspects of this process are to be conducted in an atmosphere of fairness and respect. Both sides are to be given the opportunity to express themselves and to listen so they can understand themselves and the other person. Theologian Martin Buber thought seeing the other person not as someone to manipulate or control (a thing), but a human being just like you (thou), helped us understand each other.

3. GOING TO COMMITTEE

In the *rare and extreme cases* where a conflict cannot be solved by face-to-face meetings or through the third-party process, either or both participants can request that their conflict go before the full Healthy Congregation Committee. It is absolutely imperative that the parties understand that going before the full Healthy Congregation Committee *is a last resort*. If necessary, the matter will be escalated to the procedures outlined in the R&D policy. Decisions of the Healthy Congregation Committee can only be appealed to the Board of Directors in the form of a letter.

CONSIDERATIONS:

We call this process Conflict as an Opportunity because when conflict is resolved, there is opportunity for growth, for trust to be restored, fears lessened, and perceptions clarified.

Taking Personal Responsibility -The Power of Apology and Forgiveness:

Forgiveness and apologies are difficult to offer in conflict situations. Yet they are very powerful.

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Congregation

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