

Policy Regarding Conflicts, Violations of Covenant, and Destructive Behavior

The Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, IL

January 25, 2023

We are guided by our covenant, Code of Ethics, mission, and Unitarian Universalist values. Our covenant reminds us that “Love is the spirit of this church and reason is its guide” and that we covenant to “dwell together in peace.” Peace is not the absence of disagreement, but the presence of love and care. This policy addresses situations when love and peace are not practiced or experienced.

Core relevant values:

We value love: Love is the longing for mutual flourishing. This is expressed in empathy, caring words and actions, and respect for self and others. We want each person to grow and thrive.

We value peace: Violence, domination, manipulation, and harassment are not acceptable. People and communities flourish under conditions of safety.

We value healing: When possible, restorative practices should be used to heal relationships, individuals, and communities. This might include making amends, respecting boundaries, actions that repair, spiritual growth, and/or repentance. Restorative practices are our default, and the boundary-setting steps below are to be used when restorative practices are not able to bring healing and health.

We value anti-oppression and belonging: Systems and patterns of oppression, including but not limited to racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ageism, must be noticed, challenged, and subverted. Those who have been pushed the margin should be centered in Beloved Community.

Definitions:

Conflict: Conflict is present when people are unable to “agree to disagree.” When people are in tension over personality differences, a decision or direction, or a matter of opinion, they might be in conflict. Conflict is normal and healthy when addressed with spiritual maturity. We value a diversity of views and perspectives and affirm that “we do not need to think alike to love alike.”

Abuse: Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, mental, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors, including words, that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. Abuse is not acceptable.

Bullying or Harassment: Bullying or Harassment is when abuse continues over time; especially when the person has been told to stop (though this is not required to constitute bullying or harassment). This is an intentional campaign to hurt, demean, or disempower another person.

Destructive Behavior: Destructive Behaviors are actions and words which cause harm to the church, as well as to people and relationships in the congregation. Bullying or Harassment is Destructive Behavior, but so are actions that attack leaders, violate our values, or present the church in ways that are counter to our mission. Generally, but not always, Destructive Behaviors are actions that continue after a request to stop, amend, or alter one's actions.

Staff

The personnel policy supersedes this policy. The abuse, harassment, or bullying of staff members by participants in the congregation is both a moral and legal violation and is not tolerated. The Senior Minister and/or the Board President or Vice President may immediately ban any person from physical or electronic participation or contact, until such time as the Covenant and Safety Team can review the matter, for violation of this provision. As per the personnel policy, the abuse or harassment of a participant by a staff member is prohibited and grounds for employee discipline, including up to immediate termination.

Discernment

If a participant experiences conflict, abuse, harassment, or destructive behavior with another participant in the church, the following steps should be followed.

If all relevant parties agree that it is a situation of conflict, they should employ the principles of the Code of Ethics. That can include a request that the Covenant and Safety Team provide a mediator to seek resolution or acceptance, in accordance with the Code of Ethics process.

If a person isn't sure if an encounter is conflict, abuse, harassment, destructive behavior, or something else, a discernment conversation with one of the ministers, the religious educators, or a member of the Covenant and Safety Team is appropriate.

Reporting Destructive Behavior

Any person who believes that they have witnessed or experienced destructive behavior (including harassment or abuse) or who has had a disruptive behavior incident reported to them should report it to any of the following:

- The minister(s)
- The Religious Educators or Music Director
- Any member of the Covenant and Safety Team

If required by law, ordinance or similar regulation, the senior minister or a designated member of the church staff will immediately report the incident to the proper authorities.

The church will not retaliate against anyone who brings forward a complaint. However, unfounded complaints brought forward with malicious intent are a violation of covenant and may require a pastoral and/or destructive behavior response.

The church will make every reasonable effort to maintain confidentiality by disclosing the identity of the individuals involved only on a “need-to-know” basis and as necessary to investigate and resolve the concern. However, where a pattern of abusive behavior may be present, providing pastoral support, safety, and healing will sometimes require wider disclosure and conversations.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

The minister(s) and/or the leader of the group involved will undertake an immediate response to such destructive behavior. This may include asking the destructive person or persons to leave, or suspending the meeting or activity until such time as it can safely be resumed. Any time any of these actions is taken, the Senior Minister and a member of the Covenant and Safety Team must be notified. They, in turn, will then consult with the whole Covenant and Safety Team to determine what steps must be taken before the offending person or persons may be allowed to return to the activities involved. A letter detailing these steps will be sent to the offending party or parties.

MORE DELIBERATE RESPONSE

Someone will refer the matter to the Covenant and Safety Team. This may be the group leader involved in the initial incident, the person harmed, the person engaging in destructive behavior, or any third party having knowledge of the incident. This will happen regardless of whether or not the situation required an immediate response. The Covenant and Safety Team will respond in terms of its own judgment, observing the following.

- The Covenant and Safety Team will respond to problems as they arise.
- There will be no attempt to define “acceptable’ behavior in advance.
- Persons identified as destructive will be dealt with as individuals; the Covenant and Safety Team shall be expected to display wise cross-cultural understandings and be attentive to the way that culture of origin, generation, race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and other factor shape behavior and conflict.

Any time that the church may have legal exposure, the Board must be informed.

The Covenant and Safety Team will collect all necessary information. To aid in evaluating the problem, the following points will be considered:

- DANGEROUS—is the individual the source of a current threat or perceived threat to persons or property?
- DESTRUCTIVE—how much damage to the church mission and identity is occurring?
- OFFENSIVE—how likely is it that prospective or existing members will be driven away by the destructive behavior? The Team will be especially aware of the way that folks who have been marginalized might be further marginalized by the behavior.

To determine the necessary response, the following points will be considered:

- CAUSES—why is the behavior occurring?
- HISTORY—what is the frequency and degree of destructive behavior in the past? Have they been asked to stop, and failed to do so?
- COMMITMENT TO REPAIR—has the person engaging in destructive behavior sought restoration and healing of the relationship? Are they eager to be back in covenant?

The Covenant and Safety Team will decide on the necessary response on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, the Team will conclude that this is conflict, and not a matter of destructive behavior, and invite the parties into mediation and healing. When it is determined that destructive behavior is happening, however, the following levels of response will be followed:

LEVEL ONE—The Covenant and Safety Team will meet with the person or persons and other related parties to implement this policy. The Team will communicate their concern about the behavior. Whenever possible, restorative principles should be used here. The goal is to set appropriate boundaries, make amends, create healing and safety, and build community. If, however, the behavior cannot be resolved, it would proceed to level two and the full Board will intervene. Additionally, the behavior will be referred directly to the Board if the individual has been in significant resolutions before, in which case the Team will infer that repeated visits have not worked.

LEVEL TWO—It may be determined that the offending individual(s) actions need to be referred to the full Board of Trustees. In making this referral, the Covenant and Safety Team shall make a recommendation for action, which the Board may accept or amend. It may be determined that person who caused harm needs to be excluded from the church and/or specific church activities for a limited period of time, with the reasons for such action and the conditions of return made clear in a written notification.

LEVEL THREE— The Board of Trustees, after careful consideration, may determine that person who caused harm may be removed from membership and, if appropriate, excluded from the church premises and some or all church activities. Notification of such a decision will be made in writing and will explain the individual's right and possible recourse.

Any action taken under Level Three may be appealed, in writing, to the Board of Trustees within thirty days of the letter of notification. An ad hoc appeal committee shall be formed by the Board of Trustees in the event that the action taken under level three is appealed. The appeal committee shall be composed of two members of the Board of Trustees, two members selected by the Covenant and Safety Team who are not members of the Covenant and Safety Team nor members of the Board of Trustees, and a fifth church member, being an active member of the church, chosen by the removed person. In a case where the individual does not have a member to propose, the fifth member would be selected by the other four members of this appeal committee. The majority decision of the appeal committee shall be final and not subject to further appeal.

The removal of an individual from membership in the church will be announced in the church newsletter Kairos with the statement: In accordance with the Destructive Behavior Policy, a member has been removed from membership. Any church member who wishes to know the identity of the removed member may ask the minister or any member of the Board of Trustees. The individual will be listed in the annual report with any previous members who have been removed from church membership during the past church year.

POSSIBLE REINSTATEMENT OF REMOVED INDIVIDUAL

Any request for reinstatement must be made by the member who was removed from membership. The request must contain information concerning the rationale for the reinstatement: 1) a statement of understanding of the reasons for which they were removed from membership and 2) an explanation in detail of how circumstances and conditions have changed, such that reinstatement would be justified. This should include a plan for repair and healing for those harmed. The request shall go to the Board of Trustees. The Board may consider the behavior of the former member in the intervening period. The Board will review the request and respond within sixty days as to whether or not to reinstate the removed member. The decision of the board shall be final and not subject to further appeal. A reinstatement request may be made no sooner than one year following the removal. In the event that a reinstatement request is not granted, any subsequent reinstatement requests may be made no sooner than one year following the member being informed of a negative decision on the previous request.

HEALING THOSE HARMED

In addition to providing pastoral support to those harmed by destructive behavior, the persons most affected or targeted by this behavior shall be consulted and informed about any and all decisions about boundaries, participation, and appeal and reinstatement. A person who has experienced this kind of injury should never be surprised by the presence of the person who hurt them.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The harassment or abuse of children and youth is especially serious, and covered by the Child and Youth Protection policy.

Regional Staff as Resource

The ministers, Covenant and Safety Team, and Board of Trustees are welcome and encouraged to consult with UUA MidAmerica Staff, including our Primary Contact and/or the Safety point person, for best practices, resources, and, if necessary, to be an outside evaluator of this process.

The Covenant and Safety Team

The Covenant and Safety Team will be made up of three people, with one person elected at the annual meeting each year for a three-year term. They should be people with professional expertise in justice-making, restorative practices, mental health, or similar fields. The Nominating Panel shall nominate a person each year for this Team,

and appoint persons to fill any vacancies. In addition to being responsive to concerns, the Covenant and Safety Team is charged with reminding and encouraging the congregation to keep the covenant, engage conflict in healthy ways, and practice restorative and healing justice in the church and in the world. Growing the congregation's capacity to handle both conflict and harm with spiritual maturity and healing skills is part of their charge. *Existing members of the Conflict Management Panel and the Safe Congregation Response Team (both of which will be eliminated and their functions placed with the Covenant and Safety Team) will be polled to make up the new team, and appointed by the Board to respective 1, 2, and 3-year terms.*