

Report of the UUA Board Congregational Boundaries Working Group

June 24, 2014

In 2013, *Safety Net*, a social justice ministry of the First UU Church of Nashville, Tennessee, called on leaders of the UUA to assess and improve its response to victims of clergy sexual misconduct (CSM), as well as its support of individuals and congregations recovering from the impact of CSM. The UUA Board of Trustees created a Congregational Boundaries Working Group to review these issues in the near term, and to, in its long term work, address broader issues of misconduct by religious professionals. While the Working Group currently consists only of Board members, they have worked with UUA staff and been advised by recent victim/survivors of clergy sexual misconduct, members of *Safety Net* (FMI: www.uusafety.net), members of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) and others who have served the UUA in promoting sexually healthy congregations. The working group was preceded by two prior related initiatives:

In 2000, the **Safe Congregations Panel**, a staff-appointed group, issued a report "*Restorative Justice for All*," recommending to the association first steps in institutional responsibility and compassionate response to victims/survivors of clergy sexual misconduct.

In 2010, the **Religious Institute**, led by Rev. Debra Haffner, offered a comprehensive plan for building a "*Sexually Healthy and Responsible UUA*." The plan emphasized prevention and broader sexual justice issues, noting key areas yet to be addressed.

The Working Group has learned that, while there are currently no complaints involving misconduct, in the past 20 years there have been 23 formal reports of clergy sexual misconduct that led to an investigation and some level of review by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC). All cases involved adult victim/survivors. Of the 23 cases, 2 were exonerated by the MFC, 11 either removed or resigned from fellowship, and the rest variously received a reprimand or were suspended from service.

The Working Group has also found that, while all ministerial candidates are now required to have training in the area of sexual and ethical boundaries, this training alone is not sufficient to prevent clergy sexual misconduct and the UUA still has work to do to prevent sexual misconduct and to provide support to individuals and congregations impacted by clergy sexual misconduct. The Working Group has found that, while the UUA has taken steps forward in response to the 2000 and 2010 reports named above, many challenges remain and concrete steps are needed to fulfill the goals of strong institutional accountability and compassionate response to victims and congregations.

Since 2000, the following steps have been taken:

The Office of Ethics and Safety in Congregational Life was created in 2002. A Consultant for Ethics in Congregational Life was contracted to work with individuals who filed a complaint and to investigate claims.

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A commitment was made to assign a liaison to individuals who formally filed a complaint, as a counterpart to the Good Officer role for religious professionals. At some point subsequent to 2005, the title for this role was changed to advocate to match the recommendations of the Safe Congregations panel.

Many resources were generated to support safe congregations, and posted under the heading "Safe Congregations" on the UUA website. Trainings in safe congregations were made available on line, through districts and often at General Assembly.

A public apology to victims and survivors was made by the UUA at the Nashville General Assembly in 2000.

More recently, the UUA President began sending a letter of apology to victims when deemed appropriate.

Congregational search committees now receive file summaries to provide greater transparency about the contents of ministerial records.

The MFC added a Sexual Health, Sexual Boundaries, Sexual Justice competency for ministerial candidates.

The UUMA strengthened its ethical code regarding sexual ethics and the MFC is holding ministers responsible for upholding that standard.

The UUA strengthened its inclusion, non-discrimination and sexual harassment policies.

The UUA re-committed and re-invested in keeping Our Whole Lives up to date and vital.

Despite these steps, numerous challenges remain:

In accepting the recommendations of the 2000 Panel, the staff's goal became restorative justice for all. This year the Working Group has heard testimony from victim/survivors of UU CSM who have submitted complaints, and the testimony indicates that many of the steps above were not effective in meeting that goal. The victim/survivors said repeatedly that they have not experienced any restorative justice.

Many victim/survivors have felt that the UUA has not responded to CSM as a form of oppression — of the primary victim/survivors, in particular (some victim/survivors have noted that it sometimes seems that the UUA is more concerned with the impact of CSM on UU institutions than on its impact on the individuals who are the victim/survivors of CSM). CSM has not been addressed through service, education, witness, advocacy, funding, and the empowerment of those marginalized by the oppression (all of these are components of institutionally-based organizing for justice

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in response to oppression). It is critical to develop a more complex understanding of, and a more comprehensive response to, CSM within the UUA — starting with the reframing of our work as not just reconciliation (restoration), but also truth-telling, and by immediately recognizing and addressing the marginalization of victim/survivors of CSM within the UUA.

At least one individual who filed a complaint after 2000 found that the procedures followed by the UUA and the MFC had little grounding in Restorative Justice (the model suggested by the Safe Congregations Panel). In the mid 2000s, this individual reported being subjected to the following:

- Required to own the complaint filed in order for the UUA and MFC to investigate but not given a copy of the ultimate findings of the MFC, nor told in any way the outcome of the case. This lack of disclosure prevented the individual from filing an appeal if the minister was found not guilty of conduct unbecoming, as the individual did not know this was the outcome.
- Told to mask the minister's name when discussing the matter with friends and family
- Not informed or consulted about next steps or process once the complaint had been filed
- Not heard from directly during the investigation of the complaint
- Not treated with compassion by UUA staff

Policies and procedures regarding the handling of complaints may not be transparent or easily accessed. There continues to be greater emphasis on the MFC review process than on pastoral care of the victim and congregation, or on addressing public safety.

Although the President is now issuing apologies to victims of misconduct as the cases are heard, most individuals who filed a complaint since 2000 have not received an apology for the misconduct or for how they were treated during the complaint process.

Concern has also been expressed about the sincerity of the Executive Vice President's apology at General Assembly 2000 and the President's current letters of apology, as these apologies have not been followed with action. Victim/survivors have said that, over the years following, the apology made the experience worse. They trusted the UUA based on the apology and then their trust was broken again. They said the words felt empty — it is the acts that matter. One victim/survivor who received a letter from the president said it sounded like the UUA was only trying to reduce the likelihood of litigation. It did not help her with restorative justice.

Victim/survivors have expressed that the Consultant for Ethics in Congregational Life Advocates are currently assigned only to individuals who officially file a complaint, after the complaint has been filed. Victim/survivors said waiting until the complaint

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was official was too late (e.g. some were further victimized by their congregations for considering submitting a complaint). It has been suggested that the UUA offer an advocate to anyone who is considering filing a complaint, regardless of whether or not the individual proceeds with a formal filing.

No training of advocates has been held since 2000 and no list of current advocates is available to staff.

When ministers self-report instances of misconduct there is no investigation called for in MFC policies. Decisions on the misconduct are based on the minister's report.

There is an appearance of conflict of interest at times because the MFC (and staff supporting it) has a role in both ministerial formation and disciplinary proceedings.

Victim/survivors are rarely invited into positions of authority or influence within formal decision-making processes that relate to the response to clergy sexual misconduct, and are never involved in the MFC's establishment of policies related to clergy sexual misconduct. In 1998, a victim/survivor who had filed a complaint was asked to join the Safe Congregations Panel. That is the only time a victim/survivor has been included in this work until now. She testified that she believes the recommendations of the Panel were largely ignored; she said that asking for input and then ignoring it was worse than not asking. She (and she believe others) have repeatedly requested that they be into asked into positions of authority within formal decision-making processes that relate to the response to CSM — in particular policy reviews of the MFC Process as it relates to CSM. To do this work without including those most oppressed by it lacks integrity and in the long term has proved ineffective.

There is currently no national conversation about the issue among the congregations of the UUA.

District staff would benefit from more training in how to be helpful to victims of misconduct. UUA staff and the MFC would benefit from greater training in sexual ethics, boundaries and legal standards.

Models are needed for the healing of congregations in the wake of misconduct.

Congregations need encouragement and accountability to have Safe Congregations policies and procedures in place, and to understand the ethical standards of ministry.

To advance the successes and address the challenges named, the Congregational Boundaries Working Group, the UUA Moderator and the UUA Director of Ministries and Faith Development, are working with *Safety Net* on a set of recommended actions, a timeline has been established, and implementation is underway. These preliminary plans include actions that can be implemented immediately, as well as longer range actions that will require additional planning, recruitment and financial resources.

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People interested in assisting in this work, should contact Susan Weaver, incoming convener of the Congregational Boundaries Working Group, or Sarah Lammert, Director of Ministries and Faith Development. While opportunities that are available at the national level may not be a good fit for all, or may not offer the opportunity to integrate all prospective volunteers, willingness to help is greatly appreciated.

People interested in getting involved with *Safety Net* should contact them directly via www.uusafety.net or ministry@uusafety.net.

The Board encourages congregations, and their lay and called leaders, to review and use the resources provided under the heading of “Safe Congregations” on the UUA website, to participate in the “Safe and Sexually Healthy Congregations” program when it is offered, and to seek assistance when needed.

Research shows us that ¼ of girls and 1 out of every 6 boys is sexually assaulted in childhood. Research also shows that 1/3 of these assaults are perpetrated by other children. Studies show that bullying is common from childhood through older adulthood, from educational experiences to workplace experiences, and that 1/3 of all adults have experienced family or intimate partner violence. Definitions of assault vary across culture and personal experience. We may not all share the same legal and socialized definitions, or moral and ethical interpretations of actions that would be considered assault and reactions that would be appropriate. What we do share as participants in the UUA’s General Assembly or the member congregations of the UUA is our collective and individual responsibility to honor the community covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles, a covenant outlined in the UUA bylaws. The board encourages congregants and congregations to acknowledge the prevalence of violence, including sexual assault, coercion, and harassment, both overt and nuanced, experienced by people of all ages in this community and beyond. The board especially thanks UUA congregations and their members for your willingness to exercise care and compassion when discussing issues of sexual misconduct and violence in your own personal public and private encounters; for your willingness to be a support, and a shield from accusations and challenges to the legitimacy of experience, for people who express that they have been harmed. Our appreciation also goes out to clergy and congregants who have been a comfort to those who need it and to groups and individuals like the right relations team at GA, religious educators, and the many volunteers who serve in groups like Safe Congregations Committees and social justice committees like *Safety Net*, for providing resources to those who wish to comfort others. The Congregational Boundaries Working Group thanks the individuals, organizations, UU parish and community ministers and religious professionals, and UUA staff, who came forward to share their experiences with clergy sexual misconduct, and to provide recommendations and offer their assistance.

Last, the UUA Board apologizes to all those who have been harmed by the misconduct of religious professionals within the UUA and its member congregations. Jim Key, moderator, offers the following words, on his own, and the Board’s, behalf:

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“I want to express my deepest apologies to those of you who have been victims of clergy sexual misconduct, whether you have come forward to file a complaint or not. I want you to know we are sorry for the suffering caused by one of our Unitarian Universalist ministers. The Board and I grieve with you over this breach of sacred trust and professional ethics. It is unacceptable that a minister has taken advantage of you sexually and emotionally. It was not your fault. Exacerbating your pain, some people in your own communities added to your trauma by challenging your need to come forward with your complaint.”

The UUA board hopes that the board, the staff and the member congregations of the UUA can be a resource to you moving forward. For those who have lost UU community, lost their connection to, and faith in, UUism, UU community or the UUA, we hope that we can help restore that connection and your faith.