

Working for Safety and to End Oppression

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Work on congregational safety is linked to work to end oppression. A welcoming and safe congregation is one that encourages all of us to bring our whole selves into religious community. A congregation that practices right relations is one that respects and values the whole person and understands the blessings of differences for our life together.

We are often confronted with stories in which issues of oppression, such as stereotypical attitudes, discriminatory behaviors, and prejudicial values, overlap with issues of safety such as harassment, abuse, and sexual exploitation. So often these stories are tragic.

In our congregations, collisions between safety and oppression may be less traumatic than the stories that make the pages of our newspapers or the nightly news. Even so, they are always harmful to those individuals who experience them and to our collective well-being as Unitarian Universalist congregations. We struggle with ways to be hospitable to new families who may be different from the core membership of the past twenty-five to fifty years. These new families may be gay, lesbian, and transgender families; families of color; or multiracial/multicultural, transracial, or interfaith families. How we welcome the newcomer who is different is an opportunity to live out our UU Principles. How we develop inclusive attitudes and expressions,

practices, and structures to include these newcomers in congregational life—worship, religious education programming, social service and social action, governance, fellowship, and care-giving—is evidence of our attention to health, safety, and wholeness.

Understanding where safety and oppression collide in the lives of our congregations is an essential first step toward shaping an intentionally supportive system where safety and anti-oppression work complement and balance each other. It requires at least two things: experience and information from the standpoint of persons who are part of historically marginalized groups in U.S. culture (and too often in our congregations) and understanding that the experience of safety for Unitarian Universalists who enjoy the privileges of status (as straight, white, able bodied, or male, for example) is mediated by that individual and collective status. Those of us with such privileges face the difficult necessity of discerning the difference between lack of safety and loss of comfort.

Our consultation, conversation, and commentary focused on four questions, which guide the rest of this essay. Thanks to those who contributed to this effort; their insights, observations, and reflections shape our comments and conclusions.

How can we develop a fine-tuned sense of the difference between safety and comfort? One of my consultation colleagues responded to this question

simply: If it feels uncomfortable move toward it. If it feels unsafe pay attention. When we confuse safety and comfort—saying we feel unsafe when what we really feel is uncomfortable—we undermine our efforts for change, too often slowing or diverting them until we regain some sense of ease with the way things are. For those of us with the privilege of status, we must learn to allow our lack of comfort to be a sign to pause and take stock: Is this discomfort a sign that we are practicing an unhealthy spiritual discipline that doesn't promote change and transformation?

Whatever the topic or issue in the work of creating safe congregations, asking questions about the links between safety and anti-oppression can help us view the work to which we are called—to create communities that are truly welcoming, inclusive, and safe for all those who want to call Unitarian Universalism home. Asking the question does not imply a quest for or the need for “the perfect” congregation, nor for any of us to have it all figured out. Seeking answers to how safety and anti-oppression serve our vision of the Beloved Community implies a desire to understand the things that matter most, those things that cannot be traded off by persons from historically marginalized communities who are or want to be Unitarian Universalists.

How can we create safe congregations that allow everyone to bring their whole selves to their communal religious life with respect and dignity? What parts of identity do we expect folks to check at the door so they can come in and be like us? What parts of our identities do we protect by ensuring their centrality in the life of the congregation? And at what cost? What parts do we project onto the congregations? And do we lose by doing so? How can we shift from assumptions about “being like us” to understanding what it can mean to “be us”? For ours to be a diverse and inclusive religious community we must attend to the institutional work of how “my identity” is reflected in “our identity” and how we value the blessings of our differences for our life together.

- For some newcomers to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, certain trade-offs may be

requested or implied. Consider these from the perspective of persons from historically marginalized communities:

- I will not trade off around worship. Worship leaders and ministers must deal with issues that affect my life and my community.
- I will not trade off musical style in worship.
- I will not trade off for a church that feels like it belongs to “them” and is not mine or ours.
- I will not trade off for a leadership role in which I am type-cast.
- I will not trade off for a church where my children are treated as show pieces because they are “different” or where youth who are “different” are feared as dangerous.
- I will not trade off common ground for the lowest common denominator.
- I will not trade off doing spiritual work in religious community for trying to do spiritual work in a colorblind religious community.

Our hospitality must go far beyond the friendly greeting at the door; it must be the hospitality of a congregation that is safe enough to enter, safe enough to remain a part of, and safe enough for the diverse and sometimes complex and painful spiritual journeys we bring with us and share. The welcome extended at the door can be dissolved or dismantled by the experiences inside. Safety in an anti-oppressive context can become meaningless and a welcoming invitation can become cold as soon as a visitor moves beyond the front door and past the welcome table.

Consider these two examples, which are repeated in the multiple ways we address anti-oppressive issues, initiatives, and projects. A member from an historically marginalized group brings to the attention of the congregation's governing board a request to host a congregational welcoming meeting for families of color, multicultural families, and transracial adoptive families. The proposal includes a request for an educational program to help these families address identity and multiple identity issues as well as family relationship dynamics. The board

listens to this member's request and proposal and votes to accept it with the mandate that the member implement it. What are the challenges and pitfalls of this approach—a member from a marginalized group charged to develop their own inclusion, education, and leadership program? Then consider the strategy used in many congregations of forming identity or affinity groups based on cultural, gender, age, sexual orientation, or religious background to work on identity issues. Stories abound of the various ways these identity groups become separatist groups with no cohesion to one another or to the well-being of the whole congregation.

Being a safe and anti-oppressive faith community is not easy. But if we are to welcome the blessings of difference into our congregations, we must be open and prepared for the challenges and tensions that will come with our vision of right relations.

What does safety look and feel like to persons in our congregations who are from historically marginalized communities? What does safety mean to one of our eldest elders? Someone with a physical disability? What does safety mean to a gay or lesbian person? An African American? A multi-racial person?

Colleagues in the consultation asked themselves questions like these: Do I want to fight to make myself comfortable enough to stay?

- Now what do I do? I thought it was safe and welcoming for me here and I've invested a lot. Now I don't feel safe but rather like some "exotic prize."
- Do I find enough of me reflected here so that I can truly become a part of this community?
- Is this congregation connected to my life, my identity, and my struggles in substantial ways? (For example, one of our congregations had the courage to deal with its own past in connection with the transatlantic slave trade and publicly acknowledge that history.)
- Is this rush to greet me about me or about making them feel better about themselves because I am here?

- Will people simply step out of my way because I use this wheel chair? And if they step aside will they speak to me?

What are the structures of cultural and institutional oppression, as well as the experiences of personal bias that undermine safety? The list of cultural and institutional issues is long:

- Our ability to be inclusive is challenged by identities that are not readily apparent. We assume we know more than we do and treat persons in ways that are inappropriate or harmful.
- We schedule meetings assuming that everyone has ready access to transportation and a reasonable commute.
- We do not offer childcare but encourage families to take part in events and committees.
- We do not offer alternatives to financial pledging, not acknowledging that some of us may be unable to make a monetary commitment. Service as an alternative may not work for our eldest elders.
- Congregational leaders are randomly selected and not given appropriate training in leadership skills. Often our decision-making processes exclude many potentially excellent leaders.
- Often our worship is inaccessible in terms of hearing, speaking, and representing human experience. We need to pay attention to the real lives of persons from historically marginalized communities.

Learning from Our Experience

How are acts of oppression a violation of ethics and safety? What can we take from our considerable knowledge of how sexism and sexual harassment work and their effects that can help us see the links between different forms of oppression, understand them, and transform them? What can we take from our considerable experience with work for civil rights for bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons? What have we learned in our advocacy and witness work for same-gender marriage rights?

Our experience teaches us that oppression is normative in our culture and in our congregations. Engagement in that norm, which may be unconscious, serves a maintenance function by allowing oppression to continue. Raising our awareness of our own complicity in those norms can create discomfort for those of us with the privilege of status. For example, consider this UU “norm”: There is a definition of the Unitarian Universalist “we” that assumes there are no persons of color in Unitarian Universalism, even when persons of color are in the room where this norm is being articulated. Our Principles and growing faith calls us to expand our understanding of justice and of who is included in Beloved Community.

Our culture—individual, family, congregational, and national—has not prepared us for the work of transformation. How can developing anti-oppression competency help us create safer congregations? One way to enter this conversation is to think about the experience of recent immigrants and how we can value, respect, and understand how they live and move in the world so that they might have the choice of seeing themselves as Unitarian Universalists. Another is to simply remember one of the now-standard guidelines offered to groups engaged in dialogue and reflection together: We each speak out of our own experience and listen to the experience of others without labeling or redefining it.

Let us dwell on these questions:

- What if we act as if Unitarian Universalism is for everyone and stop meeting newcomers by assessing whether they “fit” with us?
- What if we see ourselves as bridge builders rather than screeners, helping folks find a way in rather than screening them out?
- What if we see ourselves as “cultural guides,” offering to accompany guests and potential members on an immersion experience into Unitarian Universalism, connecting them to the best we have to offer?

All of these questions about safety, oppression, trust, and inclusion are lenses through which to

view the Unitarian Universalist community and the safety that those who move through our doors rightfully expect. Let us remember to reach out to one another and tip the justice scale with what poet Bonaro Overstreet calls “the stubborn ounces of our weight” toward respectful inclusion and responsibility in our faith communities.

Working for Safety and to End Oppression

45-MINUTE WORKSHOP

Suggested Participants

- Congregational leaders
- Religious professionals

Goals

- Increase understanding of the intersection between safe congregations work and anti-oppression work
- Explore issues of power disparity, privilege, and oppression in UU congregations
- Pay attention to ways the congregation can become more truly hospitable

Materials

- Copies of "Working for Safety and to End Oppression" for all participants
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Your congregation's covenant and mission statement
- Copies of Handout 16, Privilege and Oppression, for all participants

Preparation

- Appoint workshop facilitator(s).
- Distribute "Working for Safety and to End Oppression" and ask everyone to read it before the session begins.

SESSION PLAN

Gathering and Centering 5 minutes

Light the chalice or candle. Turn to "A Litany of Restoration" by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, reading 576 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, and read responsively.

Focusing 5 minutes

Review the goals of the workshop and the workshop process with the group. Invite participants to discuss and agree upon the group's guidelines for openness and sharing. Say something like,

There is much potential for open sharing throughout this program. On many occasions we will invite participants to share what may be intimate material. Therefore, it is important that people speak only when they are comfortable; it is always okay to pass if people choose not to share. By establishing a norm of respect for each other and our expression within the group, we want to ensure safety and right relations for all participants.

Engage participants in discussing the value of respect and confidentiality in a group and the destructive effects of sarcasm and put-downs. Print your group's guidelines for openness and sharing on newsprint, and post it as a reminder for each session.

Reflecting 10 minutes

In the beginning paragraphs of "Working for Safety and to End Oppression," Tracey Robinson-Harris et al. state that issues of oppression and issues of safety often collide. Ask participants to respond to these questions:

- Where have you experienced this collision in a UU context?
- What were the major elements of this situation?

Exploring 20 minutes

Distribute Handout 16, Privilege and Oppression, and review it with the group. Ask participants to discuss one congregational challenge that relates to the connections between lack of safety and oppression. Pose the following questions:

- What would safety look like and feel like for the various players in this situation?
- What is the difference between *safety* and *comfort* in this situation?
- Reflecting on this situation and congregational culture, what structures of cultural oppression do we need to pay attention to in order to make the congregation safer?

Closing 5 minutes

Read "Stubborn Ounces" by Bonaro Overstreet out loud to the group:

You say the little efforts I make
 Will do no good; they will never prevail
 To tip the hovering scale
 Where Justice hangs in balance.
 I don't think
 I ever thought they would.
 But I am prejudiced beyond debate
 In favor of my right to choose which side
 Shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.

Conclude by saying something like, "May we tend to the justice work of this congregation in our decisions today."

Extinguish the chalice or candle.

2-HOUR WORKSHOP

Suggested Participants

- Congregational leaders
- Religious professionals

Goals

- Gain knowledge and understanding of the intersection between safe congregations work and anti-oppression work
- Explore issues of power disparity, privilege, and oppression in the congregation
- Identify and define cultural competence in various congregational contexts
- Develop strategies for making the congregation truly hospitable

Materials

- Copies of "Working for Safety and to End Oppression" for all participants
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Your congregation's covenant and mission statement
- Copies of Handout 16, Privilege and Oppression, and Handout 17, Five Case Studies, for all participants
- One bowl and one cup for each participant
- Ten pennies for each participant

Preparation

- Distribute the essay and ask everyone to read it before the session begins.

SESSION PLAN

Gathering and Centering 5 minutes

Light the chalice or candle. Turn to "A Litany of Restoration" by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, reading 576 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, and read responsively.

Focusing 5 minutes

Review the goals of the workshop and the workshop process with the group. Invite participants to discuss and agree upon the group's guidelines for openness and sharing. Say something like,

There is much potential for open sharing throughout this program. On many occasions we will invite participants to share what may be intimate material. Therefore, it is important that people speak only when they are comfortable; it is always okay to pass if people choose not to share. By establishing a norm of respect for each other and our expression within the group, we want to ensure safety and right relations for all participants.

Engage participants in discussing the value of respect and confidentiality in a group and the destructive effects of sarcasm and put-downs. Print your group's guidelines for openness and sharing on newsprint, and post it as a reminder for each session.

Reflecting and Exploring 50 minutes

In the beginning paragraphs of "Working for Safety and to End Oppression," Tracey Robinson-Harris et al. state that understanding where safety and oppression collide in the lives of our congregations requires experience and information from the standpoint of persons who are part of historically marginalized groups in U.S. culture and understanding that the experience of safety for Unitarian Universalists who enjoy the privileges of status (as straight, white, able bodied, or male, for example) is mediated by that individual and collective status. Ask the group:

- How do you understand these two things?
- How do you describe the difference between safety and comfort?

Ask participants to reflect on the words *power* and *power disparity* in the context of safety, trust, privilege, and oppression. Ask the group to discuss what these words mean, both in general and in a UU congregation?

Distribute Handout 16, *Privilege and Oppression*, to everyone in the group. Allow time for participants to read and reflect on the handout. Remind participants that no category is absolute. Identity and multiple identities add complexity to the experience of power and vulnerability. Then engage participants in the following exercise (adapted from an activity developed by Joan Olsson of Cultural Bridges).

Give everyone in the group a bowl, a cup, and ten pennies. Begin the exercise by saying something like the following:

In our discussion of the definitions of *privilege* and *oppression*, we noted that most of us are members of at least one

target group and members of at least one dominant group that experiences privilege. If you are female, you have experienced sexism; if you are male, you have experienced male privilege. If you are a person with a disability, you have experienced ableism. If you are able-bodied, you have experienced the privileges of able-bodied people. To illustrate how each of us stands in different relationship to oppression and privilege, I invite you to listen to ten scenarios and to place your pennies in the bowl or in the cup accordingly. To allow you time to think, I will read each scenario twice.

Then read the following list:

- If your parents spoke English as a first language, put a penny in the bowl. If your parents' first language was another language, put a penny in the cup.
- If you had a room of your own with a door when you were a child, put a penny in the bowl. If you had to share a bedroom or sleep in a room that doubled as another room, put a penny in the cup.
- If your home when you were growing up had more than ten children's books and thirty adult books, put a penny in the bowl. If not, put a penny in the cup.
- If police have harassed or disrespected you because of your race, put a penny in the cup. If that has not been your experience, put a penny in the bowl.
- If neither of your parents nor you had to spend any amount of time on public assistance, put a penny in the bowl. If either you or a parent was ever on public assistance, put a penny in the cup.
- If your religious holidays are regularly recognized in the media, in schools, and by employers, put a penny in the bowl. If your religious holidays are not recognized in these institutions, put a penny in the cup.

- If you never have to consider the gender of the pronouns you use to refer to the person you are dating or who is your life partner, put a penny in the bowl. If you have to consider pronouns, put a penny in the cup.
- If you have one or more major credit cards, put a penny in the bowl. If not, put a penny in the cup.
- If you do not have to consider whether a workplace, restaurant, bank, or friend's home is physically accessible to you, put a penny in the bowl. If you do have to consider this, put a penny in the cup.
- If you experience being ignored, discounted, or condescended to because of your age, put a penny in the cup. If this is not your experience, put a penny in the bowl.

Invite participants to count their pennies in their bowls and in their cups and to reflect on what they are discovering and experiencing. Ask them if this exercise held any surprises for them. Talk about the feelings and reflections this exercise elicited.

Integrating 50 minutes

Adapt this activity to fit the size of your group:

- For a group of eight or more participants, ask the group to review all five situations on Handout 17, Five Case Studies, and respond to all discussion questions.
- For small groups of three or four participants, ask the group to review, choose, and discuss one of the situations on Handout 17, Five Case Studies. Each small group needs a person to be a recorder and to take notes on a sheet of newsprint.

Let the groups engage in discussion for 30 minutes. Then return to the whole group and either summarize pertinent cultural competencies or invite summaries from the group recorders.

Using your congregation's covenant, mission statement, and policies and procedures docu-

ments, identify and define your congregation's next steps to increase its cultural competency. Record these on newsprint.

Closing 10 minutes

Invite participants to gather in a closing circle. Light the chalice or candle on the table in the center of the circle. Turn to reading 701 by Sara Moores Campbell in *Singing the Living Tradition* and read it to the group. Then sing together "Spirit of Life," hymn 123.

Extinguish the chalice or candle.

Handout 16

Privilege and Oppression

Privilege operates on personal, cultural, and institutional levels to give advantages, favors, and benefits to those who have the greatest access to resources in our society. For persons with privilege, it is characteristically invisible, the advantages it gives are unearned, individuals who have it are unconscious of it, and the advantage it gives is the direct result of the oppression of others.

Oppression exists when one social group knowingly or unconsciously exploits another social group for its own benefit. Social oppression is an interlocking system that involves ideological control as well as domination and control of the social institutions and resources of society,

resulting in a condition of privilege for the dominant social group relative to the disenfranchisement and exploitation of the subordinate social group.

Privilege and oppression and power and vulnerability are relative and contextual. A person has power or is vulnerable in relation to another person in a given context. Power is a measure of one person's or one's group's resources as compared to another person's or group's resources. Those who have greater resources than others have power relative to them; those who have fewer resources are vulnerable relative to them.

	Sources of Power	Sources of Vulnerability
Ability	ability, large physical size, strength	disability, small size, lack of strength
Age	status as adults or middle-aged people	youth or old age
Class	wealth, job skills, credentials	poverty, lack of skills and credentials
Education	knowledge and information	lack of knowledge and information, lack of access to these
Ethnicity/ Race	status as white (Caucasian)	status as people of color (African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American)
Gender/Sex	status as male	status as female
Gender Identity	conformity of gender identity with biological sex characteristics	nonconformity of gender identity with biological sex characteristics
Psychological Resources	life experience, stability	inexperience, lack of coping skills
Role	status as professional, leader, clergy	status as client, congregant, student
Sexual Orientation	status as heterosexual people	status as gay, lesbian, or bisexual people
Social	support, community, contacts	isolation

Handout 17

Five Case Studies

Case Study A

Your congregation's board has voted to create a Welcoming Congregation Committee. The Nominating Committee has submitted a list of names for possible committee membership. The list reflects the diversity of the congregation and is approved. After several meetings, the committee's straight members share that they want the congregation to be welcoming to all people, not as the program implies, to only the BGLT community. "Don't we want to welcome everyone?" they insist. The BGLT committee members say that yes, we want to welcome all but that is not what the Welcoming Congregation program is about. When this discussion is shared in the congregation at large, many of the BGLT members are disappointed and hurt.

Case Study B

You are a member of the Board of Trustees of your large UU congregation. Your African American minister has served the congregation for five years and revitalized the congregation with his inspiring sermons, boundless energy, innovative worship music, public social justice ministry, and witty sense of humor. You have recently received several complaints from members that he is too evangelical, too Christian, and that the music chosen for Sundays is too loud and not what attracted them to the congregation (prior to this minister). They say that this isn't Unitarian Universalism.

Case Study C

You and three others are transgender-identified members of your small suburban UU congregation. The congregation and its leadership expect you to educate the congregation about transgender identity by sharing your personal experiences and stories of what it's like growing up transgender. For you and your three friends to make yourselves vulnerable in this way, particularly when you share experiences that evoke strong emotional memories, makes other members of the congregation feel that you are too fragile or emotional to assume leadership positions. You have become so identified with this one aspect of your identity that the community doesn't see other aspects of your complex human identity. You would like to run for a position on your congregation's Board of Trustees. You take your concerns to your three friends.

Case Study D

You are a member of the board of a mid-sized UU congregation. He is a forty-one-year-old Latino musician who performs in many local venues and has been attending your congregation for only three months. He is very sociable during coffee hour and displays affection effusively, hugging and touching many women. Some people find this behavior amusing, some find it embarrassing, and some say that they will stop attending the congregation if something isn't done.

Case Study E

You are president of the Board of Trustees of your large congregation. Your congregation is in a difficult transition period with the retirement of your beloved minister of thirty years and a dramatic shortfall in the canvas. Many members say you need a second canvas. But you remember your conversations with some older members of your congregation who are living on a fixed income and feel they can no longer participate because they can't afford to pledge annually and/or their physical condition doesn't allow them to perform service as an alternative to financial stewardship.

Questions

- Name the power differences between the persons or groups involved in these situations. What experiences of personal bias or structures of cultural oppression may be present here? What is normative for this congregation?
- What responses are called for? Who needs to be involved? What are the issues that need to be addressed? What resources and/or resource people need to be engaged?
- What congregational structures and strategies—policies and procedures—for safety need to be in place? What role does the UUA or district have in these situations?