

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church (TUUC) Conflict Resolution Policy

Context

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. What binds us together in our religious community is the commitment to be in right relations. So, when conflict arises, as it naturally does, we value opportunities to resolve the conflict and **Relational Model of Conflict** return to right relations.

We recognize that conflict is a crisis in human interaction that can make people weak and self-absorbed, leading to conflict interactions that are negative, destructive, alienating, and demonizing. Because people inherently desire positive interpersonal relationships with one another, they are uncomfortable in this weakened state and will naturally try to change their situation. We, as a congregation, believe in supporting people to make empowerment and recognition shifts that transform their conflict, making them strong and responsive, with conflict interactions that will gradually become more positive, constructive, connecting, and humanizing.

Self-Directed Responses to Conflict

To support conflict transformation and be our best selves, we believe as a congregation that people should be encouraged to attempt to resolve conflict on their own by talking directly with the person with whom they have a disagreement. If possible, discussions relating to the conflict should remain between only the individuals involved, with the hope that honesty, self-reflection, and active listening will support empowerment and recognition shifts that transform their conflicts.

Conflict Transformation Assistance and Support

If one person does not feel comfortable reaching out to the other, if personal safety is of concern, or if discussions fail to reach an amicable outcome, the Right Relations Team is available to provide assistance and support. Individuals who are made aware of, or are involved in, an unresolved conflict are encouraged to seek conflict resolution support through the Right Relations Team. The Minister, Board Members, and other congregational leaders may also contact the Right Relations Team for support or refer matters to it for possible conflict interventions. Because conflict resolution, in any form, requires the active participation of those involved, the Right Relations Team will not act on anonymous complaints nor have an obligation to keep them confidential.

Conflict Assessments

Upon receiving a referral or a request for conflict resolution support, the Right Relations Team will designate one or more team members to assist with the conflict. Their initial role will be to conduct a conflict assessment by gathering information from everyone directly involved. Based on this assessment, they may then make recommendations about what conflict resolution process might be appropriate in the situation.

Neutrals

After completing an assessment and considering recommendations, the Right Relations Committee may then appoint a mediator or other neutral facilitator/convenor from within or outside its membership to conduct the selected dispute resolution process.

For purposes of this policy, the term “neutral” means a person who intervenes in a conflict situation and supports people in the dispute to determine how to move forward. The neutral does not have a direct stake in the conflict and cannot impose an outcome on those involved. The neutral also cannot compel anyone to participate in, or continue with, a conflict resolution process, as their participation is entirely voluntary.

Processes

Conflict resolution processes that may be conducted by neutrals include but are not limited to circle processes, community conferencing, conciliation, and mediation. These processes follow these basic descriptions:

- **Circle Process:** A neutral facilitator gathers a group together to talk through an issue in a structured way using a talking piece, open-ended questions, storytelling, and reflective listening.
- **Community Conference:** A neutral facilitator brings together everyone affected by an act of harm to hear what happened, discuss how they were personally affected, and to create a plan to repair the harm.
- **Consensus Building:** A neutral facilitator convenes a customized process for a large group of people to make decisions together, often over the course of several meetings that may involve representatives of various stakeholder groups.
- **Conciliation:** A neutral intervenes in a conflict by talking to each person individually, conveying messages, and trying to find a solution that meets everyone’s needs, without bringing everyone together as a group.
- **Mediation:** A trained mediator supports people in conflict to have a conversation, and if appropriate, develop an agreement that meets everyone’s needs.

In all the processes above, participants speak for themselves and make their own decisions, and they may be assisted by friends or other support people.

Role of the Neutral

In any selected process, the neutral will listen and provide support to the participants while maintaining the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all. The neutral is not a decision-maker and cannot force a resolution on the participants nor make awards or advocate on behalf of one side to the other. The neutral may discuss church values and principles with the parties, lead discussions, and help the participants to think through possible solutions.

Confidentiality

The neutral shall maintain confidentiality of all communications by and with the participants, except for credible threats of violence or allegations of abuse of vulnerable individuals, or as needed in response to any a complaint about the neutral. This confidentiality applies to the neutral and not to the participants, who are free to make their own decisions about what communications, if any, they will keep confidential.

Additional Considerations for Convening

If any member of the Right Relations Team is involved or has a vested interest in the conflict, the team member(s) shall recuse themselves from all or part of the deliberations. If the conflict involves important matters of the church, the chair of the Right Relations Team may invite the President of the Board of Trustees, and the Board to be part of the dispute resolution process, if appropriate. If the conflict involves the Director of Religious Education, the Music Director, and/or the Minister, the Right Relations Team will review any applicable guidelines of the Liberal Religious Educators Association, the Association of Unitarian Universalist Musicians, and/or the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. The Right Relations Team may also consult with the UUA Central East Region Primary Contact to determine the best means by which to address the conflict.

Process Clarity and Communications

The neutral is responsible for explaining what conflict resolution process will be used and why, how the process will be conducted, and providing to the participants any standards of practice which may be applicable. If the neutral believes at any time that the conflict may be a detriment to the overall wellbeing of the church, or that the behaviors of one or more parties do not express the Mission, Vision, and Relational Covenant of our church, the neutral may end the process and recommend another approach for handling the situation.

The Right Relations Team, where applicable in its conflict assessments, may prioritize the wellbeing, openness, safety, and stability of the congregation as a whole over the feelings or actions of any one individual.

Closing

The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church community is hopeful that all conflicts, as they arise, will be worked through in a positive, and respectful fashion. As is true with all communities, conflicts will inevitably occur and, if not properly managed, can be damaging and destructive, but if properly managed, can be restorative, transformative, and productive opportunities for spiritual growth and wellbeing.

UUA.org states:

We are people of all ages, people of many backgrounds, and people of many beliefs.

We create spirituality and community beyond boundaries, working for more justice and more love in our own lives and in the world.

Conflict resolution entails communication, self-knowledge, and growth. Let us continue to aspire to be the best that we can be.

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