

# The First Universalist Church of Rochester

## *Policy on Responsible Behavior*

*The well-being, strength, and reputation of our church depend on a sense of fellowship among members, friends, and staff: all of these thrive in an atmosphere of trust, respect, open communication, and cooperation. Within this environment, differences of opinion and their resolution can enhance a sense of community.*

*It is also understood that differences and misunderstandings that go unresolved and descend into prolonged conflict can threaten the social fabric of our church community. When conflict arises, proactive management and resolution are paramount.*

In the spirit of an open, supportive and safe community, it is expected that individuals *directly involved in* disagreements can discuss their issues with civility and reach independent resolution, consistent with the loving spirit of the Covenant of Right Relations.

### **Guidelines that may resolve, or even prevent, conflict:**

- Compassion does not equal permissiveness. It is fair to expect respectful and informed interactions.
- Each individual should take responsibility for their own behavior and the impact it may have on others.

- Each person should take time to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, reactions, and behavior. This may include hearing feedback. Each person should be mindful of the intent of any feedback received and respect input from others.
- Each person should commit to encouraging direct communication with involved participants and resist getting involved in a conflict when not originally directly involved. People who are a part of the process to address conflict need to be involved and are an exception.
- Honoring confidentiality by involved parties is expected, as is respect for differing points of view.
- Empathy and compassion are hallmarks of loving community relationships.
- Conflict isn't itself bad: it can lead to learning opportunities, growth, and change for an individual and an entire congregation.
- Sharing information and perspectives should be undertaken in the spirit of love and growth.
- Attention should be paid not only to words, but also to non-verbal communication (i.e. facial expressions, body language, absences, avoidance, frustration, prolonged silence, or lack of participation).
- Be aware that a conflict or criticism expressed by one or more members could be a "tip of the iceberg" phenomenon which can require deeper exploration. Ask deeper questions, and get curious.

- All members have a responsibility to speak up about their observations and to explore the impact of behavior on an individual or on an entire community.
- It is important to acknowledge and own the different power dynamics present in our interactions including, but not limited to: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, length of time at First Universalist, informal power, and formal power. Be attentive to who has more power in any given situation.

These guidelines add up to a commitment to growth, to learning, and to being an active participant in responsible and rewarding relationships.

### **Behaviors that may be seen as breaking our covenant:**

- *Dangerous – the behavior is a threat or perceived threat to congregants and/or church property*
- *Disruptive – the behavior interferes with church functions and prevents other members of the community from engaging fully with those functions*
- *Alienating – the behavior is likely to drive away, undermine, or insult other members and/or visitors and discourage them from wanting to participate.*

Non-negotiable behavioral offenses may require removal from the congregation. These include physical abuse, sexual abuse, child

endangerment, blatant and/or highly demonstrable acts of racism, sexism, or hatred, or other examples of cruelty.

## Pathways to Conflict Resolution

Whenever a member of the First Universalist community finds themselves in an interpersonal conflict with another member, or with First Universalist staff, they are encouraged to follow the steps on this Pathway toward resolution and reconciliation.

Steps	Title	Description	Tips
Step 1	Personal Reflection	Self-reflection and empathy: The person who is feeling in conflict (Person A) spends time reflecting on the situation -- what is their role in the conflict, what factors could be causing Person B's behavior?	Try writing down what happened and why, to get it clear in your mind. Calmly try to put yourself in Person B's shoes without vilifying them. Be clear about the things you are bringing to the conflict. What does this touch in your own story?
Step 1a	Support with Self-Reflection	Person A may ask a member of the Committee on Ministry (COM) to be a listening ear to help them process their concerns. The COM member will listen calmly, stay neutral and offer guidance.	Sleep on it before jumping into action.

If step 1 has not resolved Person A's sense of conflict / being out of right relations with person B, they may choose to move on to step 2

Step 2	Person A meets with Person B	Address concern directly with other person calmly & clearly.	Calmly convey feelings using "I" statements. Be clear about issues. Listen openly, reflect back what you've heard. Speak from the heart.
Step 2a	Assistance with facilitation of discussion	Person A or B invites a COM member to help facilitate the discussion between the 2 parties and assist each in understanding the issue to reach resolution. They should be open to hearing guidance from COM member.	

If step 2 has not resolved the conflict, or person B refused to participate in step 2, person A may choose to move on to step 3

Step 3	Consult with COM member(s)	If the above steps have not resolved the issue/concern satisfactorily, consult with 1-2 members of the COM regarding next steps. COM may recommend Board involvement.	Be clear with the COM and yourself that you want resolution. Discuss issues/concerns you feel remain unresolved.
Step 3a	Conflict referred to Board	Board conflict resolution process: Two Board members conduct information gathering, bring written report to Board. Board agrees on a plan (usually mediation) but steps could also be taken to limit A or B's participation in the church.	

\* Note: conversations regarding conflict should be in-person, or on the phone, and confidential. Email and public forums are not appropriate venues.

Chart borrowed appreciatively from the Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church:  
<https://northlakeuu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Pathway to Conflict Resolution 1 17.pdf>

## **Suggested Action for Committee on Ministry and for the Board**

- A restorative process could be enacted if the criteria laid out in the “Avenues for healing” section of this policy are met.
- In the event of safety concerns and non-negotiable behaviors, offending individuals may be excluded from the church and/or specific church activities for a limited period of time, with the reasons and conditions of return made clear.
- Note: conversations regarding conflict should be in-person, or on the phone, and confidential. Email and public forums are not appropriate venues.

## **Avenues for healing**

First Universalist is committed to a pathway toward healing after a conflict takes place. Healing is dependent on the willing participation of all parties involved, on taking the time to make space for healing, and on a clear

understanding of the hopes and dreams for such healing processes to take place.

A suggested avenue - Restorative Practice:

- Restorative practice would include one or more group discussions with those directly impacted by the harm, those who have caused the harm, and members of the First Universalist community.
- Following a conflict, all parties are consulted separately to see if a restorative process would be appropriate. Appropriateness can be determined based on whether or not those who have caused harm are willing to offer amends, gain new insights, and make restitution; whether or not those who have been harmed are willing to listen, gain new insight, and share their truth; and what the impact of the conflict has been on the community.
- If a restorative process is appropriate, the Committee on Ministry would assemble a restorative circle.
- In such a circle, each member would get a chance to speak, one at a time, all the way around the circle about their experience of what happened.
- Following everyone's sharing, space can be made for further amends, gaining new insights, discussion, clarification, and understanding.

- To close the circle, agreements are reached about what boundaries are needed in these relationships going forward. It is possible that agreements can be reached in one circle or that multiple circles would be needed for folks to come to some form of clarity about how to move forward.

Another suggested avenue- Listening Circles:

- Listening Circles can be established when that step seems necessary and beneficial. A Listening Circle is a moderated space in which people can offer thoughtful curiosity and the generosity of full attention.
- Listening Circles offer a format where people can practice listening and practice being heard. They give people an opportunity to unburden themselves and to bring awareness to sensitive issues that might be underlying a conflict. They encourage problem-solving and healing.
- Allowing ourselves to be deeply heard can be transformative. When we listen and speak from the heart, we have an opportunity to build and nourish empathy and compassion.

Note: both Restorative Practices and Listening Circles are processes to help address issues and build community. The first could be undertaken when harm has been done. It specifically offers an individual a way to restore their



standing in the community. It requires that all parties (i.e. the “injured” and the “injurer”) be heard and agree with any resolution.

**Eventual goals should always be: “How do we heal? How do we try again?”**