

Hopedale Unitarian Parish

Maintaining Right Relations: Expectations and Remedies

Version 2

Love is the spirit of our church
and service is its law.

This is our great covenant
to dwell together in peace
to seek the truth in love
and to help one another

Introduction

The well-being, strength, and reputation of our church depend on a sense of fellowship among the members, friends, and staff, which thrives in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and cooperation. Within such an atmosphere, differences of opinion and their resolution through compromise or consensus can enhance a sense of community. However, differences or misunderstandings that go unresolved and descend into prolonged conflict can threaten the social fabric of our church. Recognizing that conflict may arise from time to time, its management and resolution are paramount. Such conflict may occur between members, members and staff, members and minister, or staff and minister. This document identifies the steps to be followed in our church should conflicts arise.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we affirm and promote the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and our own church mission and covenant. For example, members are expected to: express sincere appreciation, allow for human fallibility, deal directly with each other, speak gently, be creative in problem solving, maintain a sense of humor, actively listen and clarify what we hear, let others have their say, respect boundaries, respect confidentiality, refrain from harmful talk about others, and speak honestly. In short, we owe each other respectful participation in the life of our church.

Members of this community have an obligation to address concerns which threaten the health of our church. This document is a policy statement about conflict resolution that fits within a set of documents, some of which are still in the development stage. These include:

- Bylaws and Policies of the Hopedale Unitarian Parish

- Membership materials that may include directories, and committee and membership responsibilities
- Covenant of Right Relations (to be determined)

Definitions/Descriptions

Board:

The term "Board" refers exclusively to the elected members of the Hopedale Unitarian Parish Board as defined in the church bylaws.

Conflict Resolution Team (CRT):

- This Team will be a standing committee of two members selected for their trustworthiness and their knowledge of various aspects of church functioning, who serve on an "as needed" basis.
- Working in collaboration the Minister, the Parish Board, and the Committee on Ministry will recruit the two CRT members
- The Team will establish a covenant insuring the privacy and confidentiality of its activities
- Membership tenure will be three years

In future years, the training required for Team members will be an expense identified in the annual budget. Members will excuse themselves from any conflict for which they have an inherent bias based on the individuals or the topics involved. (Additional members may be recruited, if necessary.) The Team will maintain the confidentiality of the parties involved in the conflict. Part of the conflict resolution will involve the conflicting parties coming to an agreement about what information from the resolution is shared with which people within the church (i.e., ministers, staff, or committee heads). The Team will determine a record-keeping format that provides a confidential abstract of events while ensuring privacy.

Consensus Process:

The CRT will operate by consensus.

Conflict Resolution: Guidelines and Suggestions for Success

	First Steps	Actions	Additional Information
Step 1	Individual Reflection	Examine your own role in the conflict. Why is this matter important to you?	Anonymous complaints are not acceptable. Be prepared to take responsibility for your concerns.
	Address the Concern Directly	<p>Talk directly with the person (fellow member, minister, etc.) with whom you have the disagreement.</p> <p>Agree on a mutually acceptable time and place to talk one on one and as soon as possible after the incident.</p>	<p>Use “I” statements in your discussion (“I feel...” not “You did...”); use active listening, reflect back what you’ve heard.</p> <p>If the conflict is less with a person than with how they are performing a job (staff, religious educator, etc.), address the concern to the proper committee.</p> <p>If you feel that safety is an issue, use an appropriate third party or committee to provide a safe environment for the discussion as in step 2 below.</p>
	When to Move to the Next Step	If unresolved, consult with the CRT or the minister for assistance and direction on taking the next appropriate step.	
Step 2	Talk to the CRT or the Minister	In consultation, the parties may agree to reconcile the conflict, either with the minister or the Conflict Resolution Team.	If the conflict involves the minister, the governing body is the Ministerial Liaison Committee, which will follow Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association guidelines.

	First Steps	Actions	Additional Information
Step 3	Contact a Conflict Resolution Team member	If still unresolved, contact any member of the CRT who will call a meeting of the Team within one week.	<p>The CRT is empowered to facilitate the involved parties in agreeing on a set of recommendations, contracts, and expectations.</p> <p>They are not limited to achieving compromises; when they believe that a situation exists where behaviors are harmful to the church, or not expressive of our collective values, they can recommend counseling, limits to participation in church life, or other behavior changing strategies.</p>
	When to Move to the Next Step	Should one or both of the parties refuse to participate in the resolution process, the behavior is unchanged and/or the belief of the Team is that the behavior is a threat to the church, the matter will go to Step 4.	
Step 4	Board Involvement	<p>The Board will consider matters coming from the CRT and take action as they deem appropriate.</p> <p>The Board can endorse the CRT's recommendations or it can set its own recommendations and ask that the parties adhere to said recommendations.</p>	Members will excuse themselves from any conflict for which they have an inherent bias based on the individuals or the topics involved. The Board can solicit assistance from the UUA or other resources.

	First Steps	Actions	Additional Information
	Exclusion or Removal of a Person from Church Activities	<p>The Board can take action to exclude a person from attending church activities for a period of time based on a refusal to honor our church mission and covenant.</p> <p>The Board, given just cause, can exclude a person from the church and the church premises, and remove their name from church membership.</p>	<p>The Board may specify conditions for returning to the Hopedale Unitarian Parish community, and set criteria for evaluation of compliance.</p> <p>Once conditions are met, assent of the Board will be required for return to the Hopedale Unitarian Parish community.</p>
	Information Sharing	The Board may share the final actions with the congregation.	

We hope that most conflicts can and will be resolved by effort on the part of individuals to live our covenant and Principles and approach the individual with whom they are having a conflict directly.

We anticipate that these later steps (3 and 4) will be necessary only when behaviors are seen to be dangerous (i.e., threatening to people or property), disruptive (i.e., interfering with essential church functions), or damaging (i.e., driving people away).

We further anticipate that all who participate in the process will use the Unitarian Universalist Principles to inform their own actions and will treat everyone with compassion and dignity.

Finally, when no resolution is possible, concern for the well-being, openness, safety and stability of the congregation as a whole shall be given priority over the feelings or actions of any individual.

Conclusion

This document is intended to implement a conflict resolution process for Hopedale Unitarian Parish.

NOTE: This document is an adaptation of that used by the Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church, Cedar Park, Texas. It has been revised to accommodate implementation at Hopedale Unitarian Parish.