

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church

Maintaining Right Relations: Expectations and Remedies

Version 1.2

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 UU Principles and Purposes 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.

Responsible 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
- Process Manual
- Child and Youth Protection Policy
- Personnel Policies
- Membership materials that may include directories, and committee and membership responsibilities
- Membership covenant
- Covenant of Right Relations

Definitions/Descriptions

Board:

The term "Board" refers exclusively to the elected officers and trustees of Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church.

Conflict Resolution Team (CRT):

This Team will be a standing committee of six members selected for their facilitation skills and knowledge of various aspects of church functioning, who serve on an "as needed" basis.

- The Ministers will appoint two people.
- The Steering Committee will appoint two people.
- The Nominating Committee will appoint two people.

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.) At least two people will be deployed in situations deemed to need conflict resolution. The Team will maintain the confidentiality of the parties involved in the conflict, reporting to the CRT Leader on the nature and outcomes of all conflicts for which they are called into service. Part of the 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 an abstract of events while allowing for privacy considerations.

Consensus Process:

The process whereby a group attempts to make decisions by unanimous agreement. If ¾ of the group decides that an immediate decision must be made, the group may revert to voting. A ¾ majority is then necessary for any action.

Both the CRT and the Board 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.
	Discuss with a Trusted Third Party	Check your perceptions with a trusted third party. Did they see it or hear it in the same way? Based on your telling of events and your feelings about it, would a neutral person feel the same way?	
	Address the Concern Directly	Talk directly with the person (fellow member, minister, etc.) with whom you have the disagreement. Agree on a mutually acceptable time and place to talk one on one and as soon as possible after the incident.	Use “I” statements in your discussion (“I feel...” not “You did...”); use active listening, reflect back what you’ve heard. 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. 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.
	When to Move to the Next Step	If unresolved, consult with a minister for assistance and direction on taking the next appropriate step.	
Step 2	Talk to a Minister	In consultation with a minister, the parties may agree to resolve the conflict either with the Ministerial Liaison	If the conflict involves the minister, the governing body is the Ministerial Liaison

		reconcile the conflict, either with a minister or a Conflict Resolution Team (“CRT”) member.	the Ministerial Liaison Committee, which will follow UUMA guidelines.
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.	The CRT is empowered to facilitate the involved parties in agreeing on a set of recommendations, behavior contracts, and expectations. 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.
	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	The Board will consider matters coming from the CRT and take action as they deem appropriate. The Board can endorse the CRT’s recommendations or it can set its own recommendations and ask that the parties adhere to said recommendations.	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.
	Exclusion or Removal of a Person from Church Activities	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. The Board, given just cause, can exclude a person from the church and the church premises, and remove their name from church membership.	The Board may specify conditions for returning to the Live Oak community, and set criteria for evaluation of compliance. Once conditions are met, assent of the Board will be required for return to the Live Oak community.
	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 and Purposes 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 Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church from the June Steering Committee meeting through at least the September, 2005 Steering Committee meeting. During this time, the Right Relations/Conflict Resolution Team will work on creating permanent documents to succeed the interim document presented here.