

CoSM Proposed PUUC Policy & Protocol for Conflict Transformation

Preamble:

This policy is designed to maintain a healthy and supportive environment in our congregation by addressing conflicts in a manner that upholds our values and fosters healing and growth. This policy is informed by the input of many members of the congregation who came together to share principles, values, and methods, as summarized in the following:

Several strategies are recommended to transform conflict into opportunity. First, utilizing a trained facilitator can guide the process. Direct, in-person meetings are preferred over email to foster better communication. Establishing clear ground rules and defining the issue with set boundaries helps focus the discussion. Active listening, using "I-statements," and owning opinions rather than presenting them as facts are crucial for respectful dialogue. Avoiding triangulation and actively seeking common ground can bridge differences. It's important to accept that not everyone will always get their way and to remain curious about opposing viewpoints. Beginning with trust and recognizing that a difference of opinion is not necessarily a conflict sets a positive tone. Willingness to yield, remaining friendly, and relating issues to shared values can further smooth interactions. Ensuring everyone has a chance to share, seeking first to understand, then to be understood, and being open to methods like a Talking Stick can ensure all voices are heard. Finally, using debriefing and reflections to plan for moving forward helps solidify lessons learned and promotes growth.

Behavioral Expectations

All congregation members are expected to adhere to our Covenant in spirit and action. When that does not happen, we have this protocol.

Types of Behavior Covered

- **Interpersonal Conflict:** Disagreements or disputes between individuals or groups within the congregation.
- **Direct Abuse:** Verbal or physical acts that harm or threaten the well-being of any member of the community.
- **Destructive Behavior:** Actions that disrupt the community's harmony or undermine its mission.

Levels of Inappropriate Behavior

- **Dangerous:** Behavior that poses an immediate threat to safety. 1 of 7

- **Destructive:** Behavior that causes significant harm to individuals or the community.
- **Offensive:** Behavior that is disrespectful or disruptive.

Response to Inappropriate Behavior

- **Initial Response:** Start with a direct and local approach, encouraging respectful communication and seeking resolution at the earliest stage.
- **Formal Response:** If the issue escalates or is not resolved informally, the designated Conflict Transformation Team will intervene to facilitate a resolution process.
- **Restorative Practices:** Whenever possible, the focus will be on restoring relationships and promoting healing and growth within the community.
- **Limited Access Agreements:** In certain situations, restrictions may be placed on an individual's access to or involvement in congregational activities to ensure the safety and well-being of all.
- **Notification and Communication:** The congregation will be informed of any actions taken that impact the community while respecting confidentiality as appropriate.

Special Considerations

- **Issues Involving Staff:** Conflicts involving staff members will be addressed following personnel policies and employment law.
- **Issues Involving Youth:** Situations involving youth will be handled in compliance with youth safety guidelines and relevant laws.
- **Neurodiversity, Mental Health, and Accessibility:** The response to behavioral issues will take into account the diverse needs of all members, including those with neurodiversity, mental health concerns, and accessibility needs.

Legal Compliance

This policy will be reviewed periodically to ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

The Conflict Transformation Team

- The Conflict Transformation Team will be made up of three people, who will be nominated by the minister and approved by the Governing Board.

- They should be people with professional expertise in justice-making, restorative practices, mental health, or similar fields.
- In addition to being responsive to concerns, the Conflict Transformation Team will remind and encourage congregants to keep the covenant, engage in conflict in healthy ways, and practice restorative and healing justice in the church and the world.
- The Conflict Transformation Team will work to improve the congregation's capacity to handle conflict and harm with spiritual maturity and healing skills. ● The Team will be supported by the Governing Board with funds for training and other resources and by CoSM for consultation and support.

Protocols for Conflicts

Conflict isn't always a bad thing. Hopefully, most conflicts can be solved if everyone tries to follow our guidelines and beliefs. This could mean talking directly to the person you're having a conflict with, or talking to a minister or team member to get support. But sometimes, if the behavior is dangerous (like if someone feels unsafe), destructive (like if it's disrupting church activities), or harmful to our reputation (like if it makes it hard to welcome new people), we have to take additional steps.

Sometimes we have to put the safety and well-being of the whole group first. If someone's behavior is causing problems for the group, we have to step in to keep everyone safe and feeling welcome. Disruptive behavior can include anything that makes people—children, adults, staff, members, friends, or even visitors—feel physically or emotionally unsafe. A baby crying during the service isn't dangerous; it's just distracting. But if someone started yelling slurs during the service, that would make people feel unsafe. That's destructive behavior. Destructive behavior can also be anything that disrupts activities or makes it hard for the group to welcome new people or serve existing members. This could happen in a Sunday service, during an event or meeting, or online.

Interpersonal Conflict: Disagreements or disputes between individuals or groups within the congregation should first be addressed directly by the people involved. If one or more of them want help, they may approach the Minister, a member of the Governing Board, or a CoSM member. The Conflict Transformation Team may be consulted and may take on facilitation of the situation to support members of the congregation.

Direct Abuse: Abusive behavior should be reported to the Minister, as a Mandated Reporter, or to law enforcement.

Destructive Behavior:

1. If something happens that needs immediate action, the Minister or the leader of whatever group is involved will step in. They might ask the person causing the problem to leave or stop the activity until it's safe to continue. If things get serious, they may call the police or try another way to deal with the situation. If the Minister isn't around for any of this, they and the Governing Board need to be told as soon as possible. The Conflict Transformation Team will handle any follow-up.
2. The Conflict Transformation Team will look into the situation using this protocol as a guide. This team will always be ready to go, and everyone in the congregation will have their names and phone numbers. If there's a conflict of interest for a particular team member, that team member will be replaced by someone else. The team will know this policy inside and out and will be familiar with resources to help adults, young people, and kids. Their job is to offer confidential support, advice, and guidance to keep everyone safe.
3. Anyone who is acting out will be treated with respect.
4. Before anything is done, the Conflict Transformation Team will gather information about what happened from the people involved and keep a record of it.
5. The Conflict Transformation Team will meet to figure out what to do next, using the four response levels below to guide them.
 - a. **Level One:** Someone from the Conflict Transformation Team will contact the person who's causing problems and let them know what the issue is. They'll listen to the person's side of the story, make sure they feel heard, and take notes. Then, they'll decide what to do.
 - b. **Level Two:** If the team thinks the concerns are valid, they'll let the person know and work out a plan with them to change their behavior. This plan will be written down.
 - c. **Level Three:** If the person refuses to make a plan, doesn't follow the plan, or is doing something really serious, they might be asked to leave the congregation for a while. They'll be told why and what they need to do to come back. All of this will be written down.
 - d. **Level Four:** The person is asked to leave the congregation and church property permanently, and the congregation will take steps to make sure that happens.

6. If the Conflict Transformation Team thinks someone needs to be excluded or expelled, they'll talk to the Minister and the Governing Board before doing anything.
7. The Conflict Transformation Team can use those four response levels in whatever order they think is best, but beginning with the lowest responsible level should be standard practice.
8. The Conflict Transformation Team might suggest that the person get professional help, like counseling or anger management.
9. Everything written down during the process will be kept confidential. The Governing Board will decide who can see these records and secure them.
10. To figure out how serious the problem is and what to do about it, the team will consider things like:
 - a. If the person is a danger to others;
 - b. How much does the behavior interfere with the church's purpose and activities?
 - c. Is the behavior making people feel unsafe or unwelcome (especially marginalized people)?
 - d. Why is the person acting out?
 - e. Is the person's behavior likely to change (this might suggest a behavioral contract)?
 - f. Has the person had similar problems in the past?

Wanting to come back? (Possible Reinstatement)

If you were removed and want to rejoin, you'll have to ask. In your request, you'll need to explain why you think you should be allowed back.

First, you'll need to show that you understand why you were removed.

Second, you'll have to explain in detail how things have changed enough that it makes sense to let you back in.

Your request will go to the Board. They'll look it over and get back to you within 60 days with their decision. Their decision is final, and you can't appeal it.

You can't ask to be reinstated until at least a year after you were removed. If your request isn't granted, you'll have to wait another year after being notified before you can ask again.

Resources

Many resources were consulted, including documents from other UU Congregations and the UUA, academic resources, and those from other nonprofit organizations. PUUC CoSM Workshop on Decision-Making and Conflict Transformation

34 Participants, Sunday, June 2, 2024: Input Summary for Conflict Transformation

How do we change conflict to opportunity?

- Have a trained facilitator
- Meet in person, don't use email
- Set ground rules for discussion
- Define what's at issue and stick to that, set boundaries
- Practice Active Listening
- Use I-Statements
- Own and explain your opinion, don't state an opinion as a fact
- Don't triangulate
- Where there are differences, try to find common ground
- Accept that you won't always get your way
- Remain curious about opposing opinions
- Begin with trust
- A difference of opinion is not conflict, and it's not a competition
- Be willing to yield
- Remain Amigos
- Relate issues to shared values
- Make sure everyone has a chance to share
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- Be open to the use of a Talking Stick or other means of making sure everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard
- Use debriefing and reflections to describe moving forward

Conflict Transformation Methods - Summary

The collective wisdom emphasizes the importance of transforming conflict into opportunity by encouraging open communication and collaboration. • **Seek first to understand, then to be understood:** This fosters empathy and ensures all perspectives are considered.

- **Use I-Statements:** This encourages ownership of opinions and avoids blaming others.
- **Where there are differences, try to find common ground:** This emphasizes the search for shared values and goals to facilitate compromise.
- **Begin with trust:** This sets a foundation for respectful dialogue and encourages open communication.
- **A difference of opinion is not a conflict, and it's not a competition:** This helps to reframe disagreements as opportunities for learning and growth.
- **Be willing to yield:** This encourages flexibility and a willingness to compromise.
- **Relate issues to shared values:** This fosters a sense of unity and encourages collaboration towards common goals.
- **Make sure everyone has a chance to share:** This ensures that all voices are heard and that no perspective is marginalized.
- **Use debriefing and reflections to describe moving forward:** This allows for post conflict analysis and helps to identify areas for improvement in future discussions.