

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus Policy on Covenantal Relations - May 2026

A. Background and Purpose

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus (First UU) strives to be an inclusive and harmonious community; affirming diverse beliefs, opinions, and life experiences. It is the hope of this congregation that most conflicts can and will be resolved through the efforts of individuals by adherence to our Mission, Vision, and Covenant without the need for formal intervention. This policy as with all policies at First UU exists only to expand on the Vision and Mission of our Congregation and provide supporting actionable processes using a framework for restorative accountability to uphold them. While restorative actions are the primary goal, this policy recognizes and seeks to address that in some cases, concern for the safety and well-being of the congregation as a whole must be given priority over the privileges and inclusion of an individual. To the degree that dangerous or disruptive behavior compromises the health of the congregation, our actions must reflect our commitment to maintaining a physically and spiritually equitable space.

Vision Statement

The vision of First UU is to transform and heal ourselves and our world through reason and love

Mission Statement

With love at the center, the mission of this church is to fulfill its vision by:

- Creating community through caring, nurturing, and celebrating
- Working for justice through learning, reflecting, and doing
- Engaging diversity through welcoming, listening, and empowering

Covenant of Respectful Relations

We build our church community on a foundation of love with the goal of promoting justice and peace. Toward this end, I covenant to do the following:

- Accept responsibility for my own actions.
- Be receptive to connecting with others by listening with care and compassion.
- Speak my truth honestly and directly with care and compassion.
- Honor the confidentiality and private disclosures of others.
- Welcome new members and guests within this religious community.
- Embrace our diversity as a source of communal strength and accept and care for others despite our differences.
- Cherish the well being of the congregation above my personal preferences.
- Remain engaged with compassion and respect when conflict occurs, knowing that truth and sound decisions emerge from an open exchange of ideas.
- Use the Policy on Covenantal Relations.
- Contact a minister, member of the Board of Trustees, or Covenantal Relations Team Member when covenant and beloved community are challenged.

B. Covenantal Relations Team (CRT)

Goal

The CRT will be visible and available to the congregation and staff to listen, advise, and mediate when conflict arises and is not resolved independently. Their goal is to set and project a tone of care and cooperation within the community, to offer support rooted in our Vision and Mission to those who are experiencing interpersonal conflict with another member of the congregation or church staff, and to facilitate accountability and reconciliation.

The CRT will publicize our Covenantal Congregation packet that includes the congregational covenant relations and policies for resolving conflict at least once per quarter. If the CRT believes that the congregation could benefit from education (for example, a town hall or an adult Religious Exploration class), they will notify the Board, Ministers, and Director of Religious Exploration and will seek to support and collaborate in the event planning and execution.

Composition:

Appointed CRT members must have existing skills and understanding with deep listening, impartiality within conflict, confidentiality, personal and professional boundaries, and general mediation abilities. Preferred experience includes: restorative justice/conflict resolution and wide understanding of diverse experiences, including but not limited to, age, LGBTQIA, anti-racism, neurodivergence, and physical ability, among others. Training will be made available through First UU, the UUA Leader Lab, and outside means to enhance existing knowledge and skill in these areas for prospective team members.

The CRT will:

- Be selected and appointed by the Board, with the advice of the Ministers
- Have staggered three (3) year terms that can be held for two (2) consecutive terms
- Be established and in place at all times
- Be comprised of no less than three (3) and no more than five (5) members of the congregation (who are not also staff)
- Have a published and monitored group email address.

Role Expectations

- The CRT will determine meeting frequency as needed.
- Document concerns through the Conflict Processing Worksheet (appended, and also known as the “Oops Ouch Whoa” Form) and ensure that issues are attended to by the CRT and if necessary, escalated to appropriate Ministers, Staff or the Board as needed.
- Work with congregants to determine what constitutes an issue being resolved and guide congregants to ensure issues reach agreed-upon closure.

- Upon request only, provide the Board general insight to the state of the congregation containing no confidential details, i.e., “Four concerns were reported to the CRT. Two were able to resolve their own issues after consulting with our team. One was directed to a Minister for assistance, and is now resolved. One is not resolved, and may require escalation to the Board.”

Role Limitations

- Members of the CRT are not expected to be therapists and are not required to fix problems. They are focused only on providing support with interpersonal conflicts between members or between a member and a staff person.
- Conversations with members of the CRT are confidential, and details will not be shared without the explicit permission of the person(s) involved in the conversation. Exceptions to this confidentiality would be made in cases which might involve criminal activity, including abuse or maltreatment of a child or other vulnerable person.

C. Steps Toward Restoring Covenantal Relations

When a church member approaches a CRT member to ask for support, the CRT member should open a Conflict Processing Worksheet (appended, and also known as the “Oops Ouch Whoa” Form) documenting the situation, and meet with that person within one week.

Next, the following “Pathway Toward Conflict Resolution” should be followed:

SELF REFLECTION: The focus is on self-reflection on the church member’s experience while retaining empathy for others involved. The CRT member should listen to concerns and ask clarifying questions. See The Conflict Processing Worksheet for example questions.

- **ADDRESS THE CONFLICT** : During the following process, the CRT may ask the parties in conflict to temporarily withdraw or limit participation with certain church activities and/or roles. In accordance with the guidelines of the UU Ministers Association (UUMA) and General Assembly documents on Conflict and Covenant, if a person from an oppressed social position is harmed by a person from a privileged social position they are not required to meet in person or with a mediator.
 - a. Direct communication (preferred): All involved parties speak directly with each other. All should address their recollection of the situation or event clearly and calmly, using “I” statements that defuse confrontation and good listening practices.
 - b. A modified or additional step includes a member of CRT accompanying them in this direct conversation. \

- **MEDIATED CONVERSATION:**

- a. If the parties involved do not feel comfortable with the direct communication options or if previous discussions fail to achieve resolution or reconciliation, all parties should seek mediation through the CRT, who will identify a mediator and develop a plan to address the conflict.
- b. If a staff member(s) is a party to the conflict, the chair of the CRT will inform the Personnel Liaison, and they may be part of the mediation process if appropriate.
- c. If the conflict involves important matters of church governance, the chair of the CRT will inform the chair of the Board of Trustees and the Board may be part of the mediation process if appropriate.
- d. If the conflict is between a congregant and a minister or Director of Religious Exploration, the CRT will follow the guidelines of the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) and the UUMA.
- e. If the CRT determines that outside conflict mediation is required, the CRT chair will consult with Central East Region UUA staff or other trusted parties with experience in conflict mediation, who either will serve as or recommend an outside mediator(s). In these and all other cases, the CRT will determine the best means by which to address the conflict in the best interests of the parties involved and the wider church community.
- f. The mediator(s) will keep records of the mediation process that document the conflict while allowing for privacy considerations. The mediator(s) is empowered to set standards and formulate behavior agreements for consideration by the parties in conflict. They are not limited to achieving compromises.
- g. When the mediator(s) believe that a situation exists where behaviors are harmful to our church, or demonstrated behaviors do not express the Mission, Vision and Covenant of our church, the mediator(s) may recommend one or more of the following:
 - i. Counseling for one or more of the parties involved;
 - ii. Specific limitations to the participation in the active life of our church by one or more of the parties involved;
 - iii. Other demonstrable and/or observable behavior-changing strategies for one or more of the parties involved.
- h. If the mediation process delineated above does not resolve the conflict, upon agreement of the parties, the matter may be appealed to the CRT for consideration and resolution. The CRT may consider recommendations coming from the mediator(s) and shall hear appeals from the parties.

- **NEXT STEPS IF MEDIATION FAILS**

If the attempts of the CRT to help the parties resolve their conflict fail, the CRT will refer the situation to the Steering Team (including the Board Chairs, Executive staff, and General Counsel) for further deliberation. In the event of a failed mediation with the CRT or upon recommendation to the Steering Team from the

CRT, the Steering Team may take one or more of the following actions: soliciting assistance from the UUA, taking such other action as is permitted by the church governing documents including a recommendation to remove someone from church membership, or taking no action.

D. Responding to Situations of Safety and/or Disruptive behavior

In all situations in which a conflict between church members or friends has threatened or threatens to compromise the safety of anyone in the church community, the Safety Team under the congregation's Safety Policy should be notified.

The Steering Team has responsibility and authority to attend to the safety of the congregation and is accountable to the Board of Trustees. The Safety Team and the CRT are accountable to the Steering Team.

- 1. Immediate Response.** If an immediate response is required, the person with responsibility for responding is the minister present, along with the Safety Team leader; in the absence of a minister, responsibility falls to the Director of Religious Exploration or Director of Administration, if present and as appropriate; and next to the sponsor or leader of the activity or event.
 - a. The Safety Team leader has the discretion to determine the response but is expected first to attempt to de-escalate the situation.
 - b. The response may include engaging the person in conversation; asking that person to leave; suspending the meeting or activity until such a time as it can safely be resumed; calling the police; or immediately directing evacuation or lockdown, as appropriate.
- 2. Follow-Up.** After a disruptive behavior incident (whether or not there was an immediate response), follow-up is required.
 - a. Incident Report. In the case of an incident where there was an immediate response, the Safety Team leader must submit an incident report in accordance with the Safety Policy. If there was not an immediate response, any person who witnessed the behavior is expected either to submit an incident report or to contact a minister, who will submit an incident report based on information of witnesses.
 - b. Referral of Member Behavior. If the behavior in question was by a member of the First UU community, the Safety Team leader will inform a minister or other member of the Steering Team, who will, in turn, refer the incident to the Safety Team under the Safety Policy for follow-up with the person.
 - i. Exception: If, in the judgment of a minister, the behavior appears to have emerged from an interpersonal conflict, and there does not appear to be an ongoing risk to the safety of others, the minister is authorized to ask the parties to the conflict to work with a member of the CRT to resolve their conflict and seek to return to covenant with one another.
 - ii. If one of the parties refuses to work with the CRT to resolve the conflict, or if resolution is not accomplished, the CRT member must

report the situation to a minister, who will refer the incident to the Response Team.

- c. Referral of Non-Member Behavior. If the behavior was by a person not a member of the First UU community, the Safety Team leader must refer the incident to the Steering Team for review of the incident and determination of appropriate follow-up.

E. Principles for Evaluating Behavior

This policy does not attempt to define either “disruptive” or “acceptable” behavior in advance. Members and friends are expected to honor the Covenant of Respectful Relations.

Inherent in honoring the respect everyone deserves is the responsibility to be aware of real and perceived privilege differences.

- The Safety Team leader, the Safety Team, the CRT, and the Steering Team are to treat the individual whose behavior was disruptive with respect.
- The following questions are part of the evaluation of the incident.
 1. Dangerousness: Is the person the source of a threat or perceived threat to persons or property?
 2. Disruptiveness: How much interference with church functions has occurred or is likely to be ongoing?
 3. Offensiveness: How likely is it that prospective or existing members will be driven away?
 4. Anti-oppression & Antiracism: How does this behavior affect BIPOC+ and other people with marginalized identities in our congregation? How does this behavior play into White Supremacy Culture and other forms of oppression? How can our response faithfully dismantle oppression and build beloved community?
 5. Causes: Why is the disruption occurring? Is it a conflict between an individual and others in the church? Is it likely due to a physical condition or mental illness?
 6. History: Is there a recurring history of disruptive behavior?
 7. Probability of change: How likely is it that the disruptive behavior will diminish in the future?

F. Recordkeeping

1. To preserve institutional memory and ensure consistent application of this policy over time, the staff is required to maintain a record of all incident reports filed under this policy, kept in a locked file in the First UU office.
2. The record is confidential and access is limited to individuals who have the authority to share this information as required to carry out their responsibilities.
3. The record should include the initial incident report, the identity of those involved in the conflict, all written communications between the individuals and church representatives relating to the incident, supporting documentation, and a statement

summarizing the follow-up actions taken and any determination or resolution regarding the incident.

G. Other Resources

1. **Child and Youth Safety Policy:** <https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Child-and-Youth-Safety-Policy-2019.03.27.pdf>
2. **Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes:** <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe>
3. **Covenant of Respectful Relations:** <https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Covenant-of-Respectful-Relations-Jan-2019.pdf>
4. **Governance Policy:** <https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Governance-Policy-v3-June2019.pdf>
5. **Mission, Vision and Covenant:** <https://firstuucolumbus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Mission-and-Vision-2018.pdf>
6. **Board of Trustees:** <https://firstuucolumbus.org/about-us/our-elected-leaders/>
7. **Incident Report:** Forms available in the church volunteer work room, or from the Director of Administration and/or the Safety Team
8. **LREDA:** Liberal Religious Educators Association, <https://www.lreda.org>
9. **CER** Central East Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/central-east>
10. **UUMA:** Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, <https://www.uuma.org>
11. **First UU CRT Contact Information:** healthy-relations@firstuucolumbus.org

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus
Covenantal Relations Team

CONFLICT PROCESSING WORKSHEET
A.K.A. “Oops Ouch Whoa” Form

Think of a conflict you are in, or have been in.

Briefly describe the situation:

1. What is your relationship to the people involved?
2. What are your feelings?
3. In what way does the conflict affect you personally?
4. In what ways does the conflict affect the broader situation?
5. Are these relationships you care about?
6. Will the situation matter a month from now?
7. In what ways do you have agency/can you change the situation?

SUMMARY:

- If you don't have strong feelings about the relationships involved or if it is not an important situation: *You may want to consider letting go, moving on.*
- If you do have strong feelings or the situation impacts important issues: *You might want to consider some ways of resolving the issue.*

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

1. How have you tried to deal with this conflict?
2. What common ground do you have with the other person(s)? Is there another way to achieve common goals?
3. What experiences or situations from the past remind you of the situation?
4. What will happen if the situation doesn't get resolved?
5. Are you willing at this point to make these statements?
 - a. I can make this conflict situation better: Yes or No
 - b. I want to make it better: Yes or No
 - c. I am willing to try something new: Yes or No

SUMMARY:

- If you answered NO to the statements in question 5, you might want to take some more time to think about the situation.
- If you answered YES to the statements in question 5, you might want to explore some possible solutions.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

What would it look like if the situation were better? List some things you could do to make it better:

- 1.
- 2.

3.

Of the things you could try, what are the ones you are most willing to do?

New Possible Questions: *A Thread*

1. What is the core value that you think is being questioned?
2. How important are these relationships to you?
3. How much does this matter to you?
4. Do you feel understood (yet)?
5. What else might I need to know about the other person/people involved?
6. How personally are you taking this conflict?