

A Covenant of Beloved Community

Harrisonburg Unitarian
Universalists

Prepared for the HUU Committee on Ministry
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The Community We Seek

Sacred space is where our journeys intersect, the journeys of our minds and hearts that each day take us on different paths in different directions, yet lead us back again and again to faces we know and lives we are privileged to share.

The community we seek originates in that meeting of minds and hearts, where the questions we ask of life and death command our attention, engage our emotion, and challenge our understanding:

It is a place of welcome,

- ❑ where no one is excluded,
- ❑ where differences of all kinds are respected and affirmed.

It is a place of safety,

- ❑ where views and values can be questioned honestly and without fear,
- ❑ where the free mind of each individual is the ultimate authority.

It is a place of encounter,

- ❑ where new truths can be found in the lives we share,
- ❑ where a dialogue of words and deeds emerges from our deepest experience and our truest selves.

It is a place of relationship,

- ❑ where service to the common good links each to all,
- ❑ where the human family is renewed and enlarged by the talk we walk, the values we embody.

Finally the community we seek is a place of wholeness:

- ❑ here we can acknowledge the full complexity of our lives, our certainties and our uncertainties, our hopes and our fears, our joys and our sorrows;
- ❑ here in fact we can be who we truly are with those we trust to do the same, those we trust to support and respect our honesty, our diversity, our capacity to learn from each other and to change.

In such a community, mutual support must be the prime directive for the conduct of our common life. Important both as end in itself and as a means to an end, mutual support must take precedence over other desirable but clearly more personal values. This is because the things we all prize (like stewardship and justice-making and witness and free expression) are things we may very well rank in value differently, disagreeing in our priorities and conflicting in our commitments. In this way, the priorities we assign to values we all share can actually become the enemy of mutual support and of the community we seek.

Indeed, as our mission reminds us, our various inward journeys to truth may largely or ultimately depend on the mutual support our community provides. To go where we wish to go on whatever path we choose, requires as a starting point the sacred space created by mutual support, the mutual support we offer each other in community.

The Conflict We Experience

Though diversity does not guarantee disagreement, the history of our community demonstrates clearly that different views and values can sometimes result in divisive or even destructive conflict:

- ❑ Usually discord starts on a small scale, between individuals, but if left unresolved grows more serious with other individuals becoming involved, taking sides, defining positions, soliciting support.
- ❑ Groups may then form supporting or opposing a particular action, viewpoint, or person, thus making consensus or compromise more and more difficult.
- ❑ Finally the entire community may be drawn into the controversy with strong language, hurt feelings, and declining membership some of the possible results.

In most instances, our conflicts have seemed very different at least on the surface, with clashes about program or budget as likely as those about personnel or mission. Nonetheless, their underlying sources have often been strikingly similar and regular in their occurrence:

- ❑ a desire to make decisions efficiently even at the expense of consensus,
- ❑ a tendency to put strongly held personal views and values ahead of mutual support,
- ❑ a readiness to see ourselves sometimes more as a financial enterprise or as a political coalition than as a fundamentally religious community.

Striking too has been the way in which several of the same process issues have heightened or contributed to past disputes and controversies:

- ❑ too little or too much communication,
- ❑ unclear ground rules for group decision making,
- ❑ lack of due process for minority views,
- ❑ territoriality by tradition or by default.

To avert the unhappy results that conflict in our community has had, we need to pay close attention to the lessons it has to teach us, lessons both about what works in responding to it as well as lessons about the conditions or events that lead to it in the first place. Indeed, without learning those lessons and translating them into appropriate action, we may very well find ourselves again and again revisiting and reliving the same conflicts we thought we had once put behind us.

To make the beloved community we seek ever more a reality, we need in fact to see our disagreements as an opportunity:

- ❑ a chance to know each other more fully,
- ❑ a chance to speak truth to each other more kindly,
- ❑ a chance to practice the arts of peace among ourselves more generously.

The Covenant We Make

We covenant

first, at all times in work and worship, to place community and the mutual support on which it depends ahead of other more personal values.

We covenant

second, whenever possible, to avoid conflict before it develops, making the health and well-being of the community as a whole and all its members our primary concern.

Specifically we pledge:

- ❑ to strive at all times for consensus in decision-making as required by Article 2 of the HUU Bylaws :

“Members of HUU commit themselves to seek consensus in decision-making whenever possible, to respect divergent opinions when consensus is not possible, to provide due process in the resolution of issues at all times.”

- ❑ to use the HUU Mission Statement productively
 - provide a religious context for discussion and decision-making by reading the mission at the beginning of meetings
 - assess discussion and decision-making results by checking their alignment with the mission at the end of meetings
- ❑ to practice effective human relations in group settings
 - seek to identify common goals
 - practice patience, taking care not to make premature or unfounded assumptions
 - name behaviors outside group norms without focusing on personalities
 - acknowledge that individuals will not always agree with group decisions but will respect the views of the larger community
- ❑ to practice effective communication
 - create wholeness by speaking directly and positively
 - keep discussions to topics and issues rather than personalities
 - listen without interrupting and question to understand rather than to confront or judge
 - reflect carefully about potential results before speaking

- to maintain appropriate confidentiality
 - discuss issues in person and in private
 - share confidential information on a “need to know” basis
 - use e-mail to supply information but not to take positions or to solicit support for those positions

We covenant

third, when disagreement and discord appear unavoidable, to manage or resolve our conflicts responsibly and respectfully, acknowledging that in beloved community what we owe each other is precisely what we would naturally expect for ourselves.

Specifically we pledge:

- to use consensus alternatives to identify issues and to assure due process
 - “agree to disagree”
 - ”disagree and revisit”
 - “disagree and refer to get information”
(seek advice not allies — more viewpoints not more votes)
 - “disagree and refer to get a decision”
(let others decide — refer up, down, or around)

- to use the three-level HUU Mediation Process to avoid personalizing issues, to avoid unproductive communication about issues, and to achieve resolution of issues
 - level #1: direct communication
 - level #2: informal mediation
 - level #3: formal mediation

HUU Mediation Process

Level 1 – Conflicts To Be Resolved Through Direct Communication

Situation:

Level 1 conflict is problem-oriented, often driven by conflicting needs, goals, and values. Typically conflict at this level involves personal disagreement about specific courses of action or the reasons for or against such action.

Process:

Conflict at Level 1 is initially best addressed by the individuals involved in the conflict situation themselves. These individuals need to:

- ❑ Recognize and name problems as they arise
- ❑ Accept responsibility for seeking solutions themselves
- ❑ Communicate directly with all conflict participants to avoid “triangulating”
- ❑ Listen carefully to other points of view without interrupting
- ❑ Use “I” statements to show they speak only for themselves
- ❑ Find mutually satisfying compromises if possible

Resources:

- ❑ UUA Principles and Purposes
- ❑ HUU Mission Statement
- ❑ HUU Covenant of Beloved Community

Level 2 – Conflicts To Be Resolved Through Informal Mediation

Situation:

Level 2 conflict is conflict that becomes damaging to the life of the whole community.

- ❑ Emotions may have arisen making it difficult to sort out what the real issues are or were.
- ❑ The focus may have shifted to personalities rather than problems.
- ❑ A conscious or unconscious distortion of facts may have occurred as individuals in conflict try to win a position rather than identify what is best for the community.

Process:

Conflict at Level 2 requires informal mediation by concerned members and church leaders not personally involved in the conflict themselves. These members and leaders need to:

- ❑ Identify the conflict carefully and clearly
- ❑ Evaluate the intensity of the conflict and its implications for the community as a whole

- ❑ Approach those perceived in conflict with personal concern and genuine respect
- ❑ Suggest an appropriate resolution process – a process that would include:
 - face-to-face meetings of parties in conflict
 - helping parties involved identify personal and community needs, both where they overlap and where they don't
 - helping parties involved identify common interests, commitments, and values
 - establishing a consensus for action agreeable to all concerned

Resources:

- ❑ Committee Chairs
- ❑ Minister/Lay Ministers
- ❑ Committee on Ministry

Level 3 – Conflicts To Be Resolved Through Formal Mediation

Situation:

Level 3 conflict is conflict that becomes destructive to the life of the community as a whole. At this level the work and worship of the congregation may be jeopardized by

- ❑ Loss of objectivity in discussion and decision-making
- ❑ Focus on abstract principles rather than concrete issues
- ❑ Inability to find common ground or to compromise
- ❑ Rigid thinking and polarized positions
- ❑ Difficulty in dealing with “opponents” face-to-face
- ❑ Use of loaded words
- ❑ Inability to place issues in a religious/spiritual context

Process:

To manage and ultimately to resolve conflict at Level 3, the use of resources from outside the community may well be required. The need for complete objectivity and the need to avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest may well rule out use of even the most qualified of community members for this purpose:

- ❑ A decision to seek professional mediation services would be made by the parties involved or by the Board of Trustees.
- ❑ All interested parties would be invited to participate in the mediation process.
- ❑ The results of the mediation would be shared with the congregation as a whole with confidentiality respected as appropriate.

Resources:

- ❑ Board of Trustees
- ❑ TJ District Conflict Resolution Team
- ❑ Harrisonburg Community Mediation Center