

POLICY REGARDING DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

Draft as of March, 2010

UU Church of Meadville, PA

Note: If you have comments or suggestions regarding this draft policy, please communicate them either to Deb Lehman, Mission & Outreach Coordinator, or Josh Searle-White, Board President.

This policy was drafted by the Membership Committee, using suggestions offered by the UUA. We do not currently have such a policy, and it seems reasonable that creating a policy proactively (and hoping, of course, that it will never be needed) is much better than trying to create a policy in the aftermath of some kind of event.

The Board welcomes feedback from members of the congregation before it votes on whether or not to adopt this draft as an official policy of the church. The Board vote is scheduled for our April, 2010 meeting.

Here is the draft:

At the Unitarian Universalist Church of Meadville our mission is to offer a welcoming and safe community that reaches out to and receives spiritual seekers. We provide a voice for religious diversity and encourage personal transformation as we strive toward a better world.

Our covenant is to be a loving, joyful community that nurtures spiritual growth and promotes compassion, social responsibility, and service in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

While openness to a wide variety of individuals is one of the prime values held by our congregation and expressed in our denomination's purposes and principles, we affirm the belief that our congregation must maintain a secure atmosphere where such openness can exist. When any person's physical and/or emotional well-being or freedom to express safely his or her beliefs or opinions is threatened, the source of this threat must be addressed firmly and promptly, even if this ultimately requires the expulsion of the offending person or persons.

The following policy shall guide us in actively and promptly addressing situations in which individuals' behavior threatens the emotional and/or physical security of our members and friends. The privacy/anonymity of the allegedly offensive individual will be maintained at all times, except in cases in which he/she poses a threat to others. The fellowship will follow all applicable state laws and reporting procedures for child sexual abuse.

Since it is serious business to file a formal complaint against a fellow member, doing so should never be taken lightly. Every attempt should be made to resolve disruptive situations by addressing them directly, with compassion and concern, before resorting to the use of this policy.

Disruptive behavior of an individual within the church building may lead to concerns about one or more of the following:

- Perceived threats to the safety of any adult or child.
- Disruption of church activities.
- Diminished appeal of the church to its potential and existing membership.

Therefore, the following shall be the policy of the church with regard to disruptive behavior by an individual or individuals.

REPORTING DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

Any person who believes that they have witnessed or experienced disruptive behavior or who has had a disruptive behavior incident reported to them should report it to any of the following:

- The minister
- Any member of the Board
- Any paid member of the church staff

If required by law, ordinance or similar regulation, the minister or a designated member of the church staff will immediately report the incident to the proper authorities.

The church will not retaliate against anyone who brings forward a complaint. All church leaders and staff are required to immediately report any knowledge of disruptive behavior, harassment, abuse or misconduct to the minister or the Board.

While the church cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality, the church will make every reasonable effort to maintain confidentiality by disclosing the identity of the individuals involved only on a "need-to-know" basis and as necessary to investigate and resolve the complaint.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

The minister and/or the leader of the group involved will undertake an immediate response to such behavior. This may include asking the offending person or persons to leave, or suspending the meeting or activity until such time as it can safely be resumed. The police department may be called if further assistance is required. Any time any of these actions is taken, the minister and the President and Vice-President of the Board must be notified. They, in turn, will then consult with at least one additional representative from the Board to determine what steps must be taken before the offending person or persons may be allowed to return to the activities involved. A letter detailing these steps will be sent to the offending party or parties.

MORE DELIBERATE RESPONSE

For ongoing situations and those not requiring an immediate response, the process begins with a written, signed explanation of the disruptive behavior and its impact, from the person or people who witnessed it, to the Minister. The Minister will determine whether he/she wishes to handle the situation privately or request the formation of an ad hoc committee appointed by the Board (which would include the Minister and at least two other members of the congregation) to investigate the matter further. When appropriate and whenever possible, the Minister will inform the person that a complaint has been filed and is being investigated.

The Minister and/or the committee will respond to the situations, using their own judgment, without defining acceptable behavior in advance.

- People and situations will be dealt with individually.
- Stereotypes or stereotyping will be avoided.
- The Minister or the committee will collect any additional information required to obtain a complete picture of the situation and research any applicable laws.
- Note: Unitarian Universalists have a long history of public engagement with issues of individual freedom and social justice. Therefore, acts of conscience or civil disobedience which may have resulted in criminal charges or convictions will receive distinct consideration and careful attention under this policy.

To aid in evaluating the problem, the following points will be considered:

- DANGEROUS—is the individual the source of a threat or perceived threat to persons or property?
- DISRUPTIVE—how much interference with church functions is occurring?
- OFFENSIVE—how likely is it that prospective or existing members will be driven away by the disruptive behavior?

To determine the necessary response, the following points will be considered:

- CAUSES—why is the disruption occurring? Is it a conflict between the individual and others in the church? Is it due to a professionally diagnosed condition or mental illness?
- HISTORY—what is the frequency and degree of disruption in the past?
- PROBABILITY OF CHANGE—how likely is it that the problem behavior will diminish in the future?

The committee will respond on a case-by-case basis. Mediation by a neutral party is also a possibility. The following levels of response are options the Minister or the committee can implement:

NO ACTION: It may be determined that the complaint is not warranted, and the minister will explain and discuss this with the person who filed the complaint.

LEVEL ONE—The Minister or a member of the committee will meet with the person or persons and other related parties and will communicate their concern about the disruptive behavior. If the behavior cannot be resolved, it would proceed to level two and the full Board will intervene. Additionally the behavior will be referred directly to the Board:

- If the individual has been in significant resolutions before, then the committee will infer that repeated visits have not worked.
- If the issue affects the larger congregation.

LEVEL TWO— If, the Level One conflict management process does not resolve the situation and the disruptive behavior continues, the full Board of Trustees will become involved.

It may be determined that the offending individual(s) needs to be excluded from the church and/or specific church activities for a limited period of time, with the reasons for such action and the conditions of return made clear in a written notification.

LEVEL THREE— The Board of Trustees, after careful consideration, may determine that the offending individual(s) be removed from membership and, if appropriate, excluded from the church premises and all church activities. Notification of such a decision will be made in writing, and will explain the individual's right and possible recourse.

The removal of an individual from membership in the church will be announced in the church newsletter with the statement: In accordance with the Disruptive Behavior Policy a member has been removed from membership. Any church member who wishes to know the identity of the removed member may ask the minister or a member of the board of trustees.

APPEAL OF LEVEL THREE ACTION

Any action taken under Level Three may be appealed, in writing, to the Board of Trustees within thirty days of the letter of notification. An ad hoc appeal committee shall be formed by the Board of Trustees in the event that the action taken under Level Three is appealed. The appeal committee shall be composed of two members of the Board of Trustees, two members selected by the Board who are not members of the Board, and a fifth church member being an active member of the church, chosen by the removed person. In a case where the individual does not have a member to propose, the fifth member would be selected by the other four members of this appeal committee. The majority decision of the appeal committee shall be final and not subject to further appeal.

POSSIBLE REINSTATEMENT OF REMOVED INDIVIDUAL

Any request for reinstatement must be made by the member who was removed from membership. The request must contain information concerning the rationale for the reinstatement: 1) a statement of understanding of the reasons for which s/he was removed

from membership and 2) an explanation in detail how circumstances and conditions have changed, such that a reinstatement would be justified. The request shall go to the Board. The Board will review the request and respond within sixty days as to whether or not to reinstate the removed member. The decision of the board shall be final and not subject to further appeal. A reinstatement request may be made no sooner than six months following the removal. In the event that a reinstatement request is not granted, any subsequent reinstatement requests may be made no sooner than one year following the member being informed of a negative decision on the previous request.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Meadville strives to be an inclusive community, affirming our differences in beliefs, opinions and life experiences. However concern for the safety and well-being of the congregation as a whole must be given priority over the privileges and inclusion of the individual. To the degree the disruptive behavior compromises the health of this congregation, our actions as people of faith must reflect this emphasis on security.