

# Covenant of Right Relations

## Draft Recommendation

Presented to the BOT of TUCW, December, 2015

### Introduction

The Committee on Ministry (COM) has been meeting regularly over the past several months, clarifying our responsibilities under the Charter spelled out in the church constitution and setting goals for this church year. We are focused on how the COM can support policy governance and fulfill our responsibilities in a positive, caring way, ensuring that we, as a beloved community, continue to keep our church mission top of mind as we pursue each of our many ministries as a church.

During our interim with Rev. Roberta Finkelstein each TUCW governing body and committee developed a Charter spelling out the group's responsibilities and goals. These Charters are the first pillar the COM requires to fulfill its responsibilities. However, we did not complete a Covenant of Right Relations for the congregation. This covenant documents the concepts and ideals that the congregation strives to meet in our relations with each other. Many UU congregations have such a covenant and during our recent ministerial search each ministerial candidate asked about the covenant. This task remains unfinished business.

A Covenant of Right Relations is critical to the congregation's remaining on mission. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to 'Inspire, Connect, Act' in an environment where Right Relations (however they are ultimately defined) are not well known and respected. When there are disagreements, it is necessary to have a common understanding of how we will respect each other and strive for common ground and positive outcomes. Since it is the Charter of the Committee on Ministry to support and safeguard the mission of the Church in all its facets, we have identified the Covenant of Right Relations as a top priority.

In summary, the COM believes that the Covenant of Right Relations is the second pillar we need to fulfill our responsibilities in support of the Church mission. This recommended covenant and the individual Charters developed last year are fundamental to assessing results against our mission and to settling disputes in a positive, caring way.

**The COM has no authority to act, but we can and do recommend actions to the Board of Trustees. We are offering this recommendation to complete the work of a establishing Covenant of Right Relations for our church community.**

### Recommendation to the Board of Trustees

The Committee on Ministry recommends that the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Church in Westport establish a team to complete the task of developing a process and documenting a Covenant of Right Relations, ideally to be finished by the end of this church year. Should an issue arise now we would be hamstrung in our efforts to effectively manage a positive resolution, and the congregation and our ministries would suffer.

Attached is an FAQ about the Covenant of Right Relations and a list of resources to support this recommendation. The COM will provide support to this team and be a sounding board as needed.

## Q & A

### **What is a covenant of Right Relations and why does our congregation – or any congregation – need one?**

The best answer we found to that is a direct quote from the covenant of the Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Seattle, WA: “A covenant of right relations is a set of guidelines to create a welcoming, respectful, safe and vibrant spiritual community. This purpose is served through respectful communication amongst individuals when engaging in congregational activities. Such guidelines are meant to reduce the amount of conflict, misunderstandings and hurt feelings that can occur when people speak passionately about subjects important to them. Right relations are the foundation on which a safe congregation is based.”

### **Wasn't the interim minister supposed to get this covenant done as part of the interim work?**

Yes, helping the congregation put together a Covenant of Right Relations is one of the tasks an Interim Minister hopes to accomplish. It was the last item on Reverend Finkelstein's agenda. The campaign was started in the midst of last winter (when the weather was helping to drive down attendance) and much of it was conducted during Rev. Roberta's furlough. Despite the best efforts of the Transition Team, there was not enough feedback from the congregation to craft a covenant. While it is on an Interim minister's agenda, the Covenant of Right Relations must come from the congregation itself, encouraged from the pulpit, and energized by the lay leadership at all levels.

### **What's wrong with the “great covenant” we say each week in the affirmation?**

Nothing's wrong with it. Our affirmation says we should dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and to help one another. That's very broad and so subject to very broad interpretation. A covenant of right relations specifies actions that we agree are the way we want to treat one another. In some of the examples you see we provided, some congregations covenant to resolve conflicts directly, to refrain from gossip, to forgive imperfections, some even promise to pledge generously! All these things are consistent with James Vila Blake's affirmation, but the specificity that a Covenant of Right Relations, and the fact that it comes directly from our members will make it a very effective tool for our church's ministry and mission.

### **I don't need some document that tells me how to act.**

No individual does (or should, anyway). But as a community, it's very helpful to have our core values in writing, and to have that document to help us call each other to our better natures in times of stress and conflict. Suppose your friend starts complaining to you about another member; a covenant makes it easier for you to say “Come on Bill, we covenanted to deal directly with each other and not triangulate or gossip, if you've got a problem with Joe, let's go talk with him together.” And the covenant is not some top down dictate – it is created by the community, with input from as many people who are willing to participate. So it isn't a document telling you how to act, but rather a promise you have made to others about how you will act.

### **Why can't the Committee on Ministry organize this?**

Bluntly, it's not our job. Our role is to assess the ministries of the church and make recommendations for actions to help the church keep to its mission and further its ministry. We have a lot of work yet to do in that direction. In the process of setting up our policies on conflict resolution, it became very clear to us that the lack of a Covenant of Right Relations would hinder our ability to resolve conflicts, but more importantly, would hinder the congregation's ability to inspire, connect and act, both within the membership and the greater community. We think it is important that a task force whose sole

responsibility is to educate the congregation about covenant making and to guide and encourage the congregation in crafting this covenant is the best way to accomplish this goal. Were the COM to attempt it, we would be diverted from our own mission.

**Although it's not the COM's job to organize this or do this work, we are more than willing to be a resource and aid for the Task Force. We've attached a list of resources that we've already come across in our research for this proposal, we will certainly make ourselves available to help and advise the team as needed.**

## Resources we found to help the Task Force:

### Websites:

Leading a Community in Right Relations (article) -  
<http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165733.shtml>

Writing a Covenant (article) - <http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165735.shtml>

Writing a Covenant (workshop) <http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/workshops/166375.shtml>

CERG Webinar: To Dwell Together in Peace  
<http://www.cerguua.org/component/jevents/icalevent.detail/2015/12/06/374/- .html?Itemid=0&highlight=WyJjb3ZlbnFudHMlXQ==>

### Books:

**Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences** by Gil Rendle

### Sample UU Covenants

Unitarian Society of New Haven <http://www.usnh.org/covenant-of-right-relations>

Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation [http://wsuu.org/covenant\\_of\\_right\\_relations.php](http://wsuu.org/covenant_of_right_relations.php)

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church <http://www.liveoakuu.org/content/covenant-right-relations>

Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists <http://wuu.org/wuu-covenant-of-right-relations/>

James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation <http://www.jruuc.org/covenant-right-relations-0>

Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel <http://www.emersonuuchapel.org/s/Behavioral-Covenant.pdf>