



Personal and Sexual Harassment Policy

Statement of Principle

Our Unitarian principles affirm our respect for the dignity and worth of each person. Harassment and abuse are now recognized as serious problems which take their toll on victims and institutions. Our goal is to ensure that our members understand these issues and are protected from all forms of harassment and abuse by adopting a personal and sexual harassment policy.

Personal or sexual harassment most often occur where there is a real or perceived imbalance of power, such as between adults and children, employer and employee, minister and parishioner. It also can occur, however, amongst peers and between members of the same sex.

It is especially important that children and youth feel safe and are able to express their concerns and their feelings to the adults around them. It is the duty of professionals and the responsibility of all of us to report immediately any suspected cases of abuse involving children and youth.

Through the development and dissemination of the attached policy, we hope to contribute to a greater sensitivity within our church community as to what is objectionable behavior as well as greater knowledge of one's rights as a victim of harassment and abuse. We aim to set out appropriate options, one's which are confidential and supportive of both parties, for dealing with problems that arise.

Policy Statement

The North Shore Unitarian Church affirms and promotes the inherent worth of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We are committed to providing a safe environment for all congregational activities free from any behavior which constitutes personal or sexual harassment or abuse of authority. Allegations of harassment within our congregational community will be dealt with in a fair, just and balanced manner.

Harassment policies, like human rights legislation, are generally designed to be avenues of last resort. Individuals who feel that they are the subject of harassment should first make known to the other party that they find the behaviour offensive. If the behavior continues despite their objections, the President, or in certain cases the Vice President, may be approached to initiate conflict resolution or investigation. In certain circumstances where mediation is either not appropriate or unsuccessful, the policy calls for the involvement of a Harassment Resource Team. It would be the duty of the team to investigate complaints, on behalf of the Board, involving either church employees or persons in authority within the congregation.

Different Approaches

Different groups – children and youth, church officials, the minister and staff, congregational peers – may be vulnerable or liable in different ways. It is therefore necessary to develop a variety of processes to deal with circumstances relating to each group.

COMPLAINTS INVOLVING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

It is especially important that children and youth are protected. It is the responsibility of all of us to report immediately any suspected cases of abuse involving children under 19 to the appropriate government authorities. The President should also be notified in such cases. Harassment which is considered to be unacceptable but which may not warrant reporting to outside authorities may be referred to the Harassment Resource Team.

COMPLAINTS BY STAFF

As employees, paid staff are in a particularly vulnerable position should they be subject to harassment. While they have the right to complain to the provincial Human Rights Council, this can lead to a long and complicated process. And as the employer, the church can potentially be held responsible should it fail to properly protect its employees from harassment. For both these reasons, it is advisable to have a policy and procedure to deal with employee complaints. Because of the legal implications, the process for dealing with employee complaints must be fairly formal.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST PERSONS IN AUTHORITY (other than by staff)

It may seem strange to talk about “abuses of authority? In a church where “power” is so widely shared and where members strive to support the principles of respect and equality. But it is nevertheless true that those elected or appointed to positions of responsibility may exercise considerable clout. Where there is a power imbalance, there is the potential for abuse of that power, real or perceived. The policy and procedures would emphasize mediation, but allows for a more formal process, should mediation prove unsuccessful.

COMPLAINTS BETWEEN PEERS

There is not provision in the church by-laws for actions against a member or friend of the congregation who is found to be guilty of harassment. When one adult member of the congregation believes he or she is being harassed by another, education, mediation and counseling should be made available as with any other interpersonal conflict.

COMPLAINTS BY AND AGAINST THE MINISTER

In many respects, ministers are the most vulnerable – both to being harassed and to charges of being a harasser. Ministers are also held to particularly high standards of conduct due to their professional status. Ethical standards for ministers have been established by the UUA Ministers' Association. The ministers also have a Good Offices Person designated to deal with problems between clergy and congregations. (This person advocates for the Minister.) A harassment policy provides another option in complaints of harassment.

Conclusion

Some may argue that a harassment policy conflicts with the principles of freedom and tolerance – or even that it is unnecessary “politically correct overkill”. Certainly, considering our size and the nature of Unitarianism, it seems unlikely that this policy would need to be invoked. Most would agree, however, that whether or not it ever occurs, harassment is a serious affront to a person's dignity, that it does occur in our society and that, as a caring community, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that we make our position clear and that we have concrete procedures in place should such an issue arise. Human rights policies often do infringe on the individual's right to free speech. Human rights policies are designed to promote equality and are a decision by society that, in certain cases, limiting the right to freedom of speech in order to do so is justifiable.