



Restorative Practices in Congregations and Communities
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"Seeking I-Thou relationships"

Report to Lewiston/Auburn UU Church ME
Feedback from the Circle Process Question:
What do you need to be able to move forward?

This is a report on the feedback from the circle processes done in Feb to address a conflict in the First Universalist Church of Auburn ME (Lewiston/Auburn) resulting from a Warming/Drop In Center approved by the board during COVID. Two circles were held in February, one online on a Friday evening and one in person the following Saturday. The Online session was three and a half hours and the in-person session was six hours. Approximately 65 people attended the two sessions. The same series of questions was asked in both circles:

**What did you think when you first heard about the Drop-In Center?
What do you think about the Drop-In Center now?
How were you impacted by the Drop-In Center's presence at the church?**

What do you think now?

No notes were taken for the first three questions, but feedback was recorded (in writing) related to the last question. I have organized this feedback below for ease and to capture common themes.

It appeared at the close of both circles that people generally felt heard and satisfied with the circle process. There was little conflict or difficulty within the circles.

It is clear to me in doing these circles over the last year that COVID has definitely complicated communication and trust within our congregations. It is my reading of this situation that the Drop-In Center evolved organically from the needs of the community and the will of some members of the congregation. This project expanded quickly and got ahead of the whole body resulting in this conflict. A conflict exacerbated by COVID related communications issues and likely, the fact that the minister was on Sabbatical, complicating communications further. (There is no judgment here on the minister taking sabbatical at this time, only a recognition that communications were very likely impacted by this reality.)

The congregation clearly has an interest in continuing this ministry but there was some consensus to make it "right sized". There were many comments about this, and some good suggestions were offered.

In response to the question: What do you need to be able to move forward?

There was an array of answers and there were some general themes that the board may wish to attend and respond to. The general themes fall under four categories: **Trust Building Needs, Communication Needs, Research/Planning Needs and Pastoral Needs**. These are explained in some detail below and include concrete suggestions for actions the leadership may take to help move the congregation forward. These suggestions came directly from the circle participants and were synthesized from their comments.

General Themes

Trust Building Needs:

It was clear from the circle that trust is fragile in this congregation. Trust is something that will need to be addressed more broadly. Multiple opportunities for people to connect and share their stories with one another beyond the typical silos people have formed will help to rebuild that trust. Having small group ministries, including affinity groups and/or unstructured events, that include a time of opening (like a chalice lighting) and closing (a time for reflection together) will also help to deepen relationships and rebuild trust. People who know each other well are more likely to ask questions, rather than jumping to conclusions.

A review of the covenant that lays out shared expectations in simple and clear ways will go a long way in building the community norms that will hold you when conflict does arise. Commitment to abiding by that covenant is part of the work of the whole. There were many comments about accountability and how to hold people to the covenant. (Having individuals contact the city to complain rather than engaging in direct communication with the leadership is highly problematic and not in covenant with the congregation.) This is something I strongly recommend the board explores. A large circle process asking participants to respond to questions about the covenant, its purpose and ways to ensure cooperation, would bring consensus on how to “enforce” and amplify the role of covenant in the congregation. It might also be useful to seek out congregational workshops on responding to conflict effectively.

Any kind of proactive circles that invite people to get to know each other can create more resilience for when a conflict does arise. Breaking down existing silos and creating circles that rotate membership annually is one way to build deeper and broader relationships across the congregation.

Establishing, formalizing, and publicizing a structure to deal with conflicts and issues will be extremely helpful. Having a regular process that people can rely on will help reduce anxiety in the system and affirm trust in leadership. If that process is tied to covenant it further establishes expectations of how you will be together thus reducing the need for the formal process.

Issues of classism were raised and are important to address as some of the conflict is clearly related to the population being served. If we truly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all, then we need to address our biases and prejudices. A deep dive into what class means in America (or more locally in the Lewiston/Auburn area) and its role in how we perceive and then treat each other is central to our faith as UUs and could prove useful.

Communication Needs:

People want better communication on all levels, and this is a consistent refrain in every congregation I have ever worked with. I recommend enforced policies and strong moderation around communication in social media. This is particularly important given that most social media is a public/outward facing and reflects the health and well-being (or not) of the congregation to those seeking a religious home. Airing congregational conflict on social media is not appealing to potential members or friends. Good moderation would shut down threads that are deemed inconsistent with covenantal agreements. If no moderator can be found, then exploring ways to limit posts by the membership might be useful until trust can be rebuilt.

Many, many in the circle requested more opportunities for improved communication. Trust in the congregation to come to consensus needs to be rebuilt. Holding town hall meetings on this and other issues the Board is wrestling with (or things they are considering) can be extremely helpful in understanding where the congregation is on any particular issue. This feedback can provide help in informing board decisions. This

can also be a time to reflect on the health and well-being of the congregation in general. Town Halls around a particular theme (i.e. covenant, trust, theology, social justice or any issue) that is of importance to the congregation could be a practical tool for facilitating better communication generally and getting a sense of where the congregation is. I have used this process in the past and highly recommend it with a clear understanding that *these meetings are not for making decisions*, but to share and integrate information. If you can incorporate small group work into those meetings, even better.

Communicating is a reflection process that helps us to read what is happening in the body of the congregation. It's worth considering having the board communicate any reflection on the town hall meetings, and any changes to their actions/thinking made as a result. This is important for transparency.

Leadership might also consider using the [Fist to Five process](#) for testing out where the congregation is on certain issues and to better build consensus. This process can be used for straw polls and information gathering to help inform the leadership.

Pastoral Needs:

There were both personal and corporate pastoral needs expressed by the congregation. A number of people were seriously negatively impacted by the way members of the congregation communicated their concerns. It seems many felt their sense of belonging was challenged and as a result, people became anxious and defensive. Finding ways to name and unpack that threat to belonging, especially as many may be feeling quite fragile coming out of the worst impacts of COVID, is important.

It might be helpful to understand the trauma that COVID has caused and engage trauma informed practices around this conflict. Consider developing rituals that invite apology, forgiveness and letting go, so the congregation and individuals within the congregation can move forward. Formal ritual can be a powerful tool for moving on.

It is important to note that this letting go is about forgiving and NOT forgetting. It seemed clear to me that this is not a path people wish to repeat. Establishing policy and procedures to reduce the possibility of this happening again won't be perfect, but it does attempt to address the real needs of including the congregation more effectively going forward. It might be helpful to have a corporate ritual that recognizes the harm done all around, that many on all sides of the issue wanted to leave, and that the trust you bear between you is bent, and in some cases, broken. A ritual opportunity for apology; be it written, spoken, public or private, would facilitate healing. Other options might include opportunities for individual or small group ritual as well as any corporate ritual.

Internal work around resentment and anger are part of our faith and personal growth. How do we find ways to reflect on our behavior and take responsibility for our actions? What kind of support exists within the congregation to engage and facilitate the kind of personal reflection necessary to address conflict and concerns as they arise, to prevent the kind of reactionary response that occurred here, in the future. Addressing conflict directly, with love and respect is not something many of us know how to do or do well. There are trainings available for addressing conflict well and with intention. I would recommend contacting Connie Goodbread (cgoodbread@uaa.org) to see if the Hope for Us Team is ready to do this work. I would also suggest CB Beal at Justice and Peace Counseling and the work of Transforming Heart Collective. There are also many excellent books on restorative and transformational practices that would be beneficial to the members to read as a group, to practice and improve skills in addressing conflict directly, lovingly, honestly, and openly.

Research/Planning needs:

I put these last because these are the easiest and most concrete actions the board and congregation can take. I cannot recommend highly enough the use of an MOU*, a Memorandum of Understanding between the parties once final agreement have been made. This document lays out the mutually accepted expectations of all of the parties involved.

It is clear that the congregation would like some kind of plan in place to understand how the Drop-In Center will function and what the boundaries are. The biggest concerns were Sunday morning use of space and “space creep” as in: the project is taking more and more space in the building with no apparent restrictions.

Many people asked: what is the scope of this project? Is there a timeline for how long we will continue this project? How can we find a way to share the space together? What are other social justice issues we wish to address? What is the process for starting or engaging new social action projects? The Board would do well to explore these questions as a leadership body, to then bring their reflections to the congregation in a Town Hall or small group setting to get feedback and then engage in making a recommendation to the congregation or a final decision. The board would then communicate that decision widely. These processes would be extremely helpful in rebuilding trust and guiding decisions going forward. Anytime the leadership can use *Fair Process* described above will help to build trust (an explanation of formal Fair Process is included at the end of this report).

Suggestions for concrete changes included (in no particular order):

- Starting the Drop-In center at noon, to allow the congregation time in the vestry for coffee hour.
- Sharing the Drop-In center with other congregations, perhaps on a rotation, to reduce the number of Sundays the Vestry is in use. (A conversation with the [local synagogue](#) could be extremely helpful.)
- Opening the Drop-In center only in extremely cold weather
- Are there other spaces for coffee Hour? (Could the internal space be reimaged by an architect to make it more useful? Is this financially feasible? Are grants available?)

In Summary:

- This process used by leadership was helpful.
- The congregation has some concrete questions that can be answered with Fair Process and consensus.
- A clear sense of timeline will be helpful for the congregation to process- It need not be exact, but to give them all a sense of timing will help reduce anxiety. (this spring, over the summer, early fall)
- The congregation has pastoral concerns and issues around trust that can be improved by both personal and congregational work.
- Develop and engage rituals that can help people make amends and allow the congregation to move forward.
- Revisit your covenant and determine together how you will hold each other accountable knowing we will all break covenant as some point.
 - What process will you use to address interpersonal conflict?
 - Congregational conflict?
- Consider hiring someone to provided trainings in responding to conflict in healthy ways to improve

emotional and spiritual competency in this area.

- Creating opportunities for discussion, processing information, and sharing ideas is something that people are seeking.
 - Leadership should engage Fair Process* and transparency wherever possible will help build trust.
 - Consider a formal, regular Town Hall process.
 - Consider using a consensus process for Fist to Five to determine where the congregation is on certain issues, especially those issues that are complex.

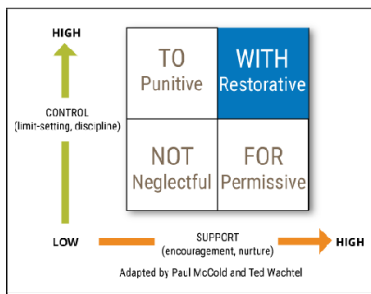
ADDENDUM

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is a document that describes the broad outlines of an agreement that two or more parties have reached. -MOUs communicate the mutually accepted expectations of all of the parties involved in a negotiation. (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/mou.asp>)

I offer these two tools for the leadership as you move forward in this process. The following materials come from the website of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (iirp.org).

4.1. Social Discipline Window (<https://www.iirp.edu/defining-restorative/social-discipline-window>)

The social discipline window (below) is a concept with broad application in many settings. It describes four basic approaches to maintaining social norms and behavioral boundaries. The four are represented as different of high or low control and high or low support. The restorative domain combines both high control and high support and is characterized by doing things with people, rather than to them or for them.



The social discipline window also defines restorative practices as a leadership model for parents in families, teachers in classrooms, administrators and managers in organizations, police and social workers in communities and judges and officials in government. The fundamental unifying hypothesis of restorative practices is that “human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them.” This hypothesis maintains that the punitive and authoritarian to mode and the permissive and paternalistic for mode are not as effective as the restorative, participatory, engaging with mode (Wachtel, 2005).

***4.6. Fair Process** (<https://www.iirp.edu/defining-restorative/fair-process>)

When authorities do things with people, whether reactively—to deal with crisis—or proactively, the results are better. This fundamental thesis was evident in a Harvard Business Review article about the concept of fair process producing effective outcomes in business organizations (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). The central idea of fair process is that “...individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems—whether they themselves win or lose by those systems—when fair process is observed” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

The three principles of fair process are:

- **Engagement** — involving individuals in decisions that affect them by listening to their views and genuinely taking their opinions into account
- **Explanation** — explaining the reasoning behind a decision to everyone who has been involved or who is affected by it
- **Expectation Clarity** — making sure that everyone clearly understands a decision and what is expected of them in the future (Kim & Mauborgne, 1997)

Fair process demonstrates the restorative with domain of the social discipline window. It relates to how leaders handle their authority in all kinds of professions and roles: from parents and teachers to managers and administrators. The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices embodies fair process by asserting that "people are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in behavior when those in authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them."