

## **Relationship Task Force – Final Report**

We understood that our task was to make recommendations to the board regarding policies and procedure to be followed in the event of future conflict between the congregation and its paid staff. It was not our task to review the circumstances surrounding the departure of our most recent minister. We were not charged with examining the complaints received by the committee on ministry, nor were we charged with examining the conduct of either the board or the committee on ministry. It is our understanding that this task force was struck with the feeling that all had functioned with integrity and to the best of their abilities, but within a vacuum in terms of an agreed upon set of guidelines and policies to direct them in advance. We recognize and acknowledge that there were hurt feelings on the part of many players and this work is an attempt to create a structure by which such hurt might be minimized in the future.

As a group we have met on several occasions and have emailed back and forth in between. We have consulted with the Saskatoon Public School Board, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan, the United Church of Canada, the CUC and the UUA, as well as with individuals within our congregation who have taken the time to share with us.

As we gathered and shared information there were a number of significant observations that we made and would like to share. It goes almost without saying that conflict is a part of life. Our ability to deal constructively with conflict varies between individuals, and even in a given individual between one set of circumstances and another. The congregation has taken the time to develop a covenant of right relations. If we embrace such a covenant and put the effort into practicing the tenets espoused within it, we believe that the majority of conflicts within an organization such as ours will be dealt with effectively. This is without doubt the place to begin when conflict arises. Conflict between paid/volunteer staff and congregants is something that exists in many, if not all, denominations. It is not unique to the Unitarian tradition and most certainly is not unique to Saskatoon. If the amount of attention and resources paid to this issue by many of the larger denominations (and non religious organizations such as the school board) is any indication of the magnitude of the problem, it is clear that this issue is both common and at times significant.

When we began to try and bring these realities into some form of recommendations regarding policies and procedures that we might follow there were a few principles that we felt strongly needed to be kept in mind and adhered to. To begin with we felt that, as much as possible, conflict can and should be avoided. Clear and well communicated task definition is a prerequisite to achieving this. Respect for the worth and dignity of all people must be considered. Early attention to issues when they arise is preferred. A resolution to conflict that is respectful to all parties is desired. Restorative justice is the goal. There is no question but that the “office” of minister affords the professional a certain stature in the community not enjoyed by others. This same position comes with an expectation of a certain degree of professionalism. Failure to meet a minimum standard can occur and result in censure by the minister’s professional body. In our case, the professional body concerned is the UUMA and the code of conduct expected is available on their website (<http://www.uuma.org/Documents/guidelines.html>). Complaints of professional misconduct require a process that ensures fairness and equity to both complainant and respondent, the observation of due process and the principles of natural justice. This would translate into a process that:

1. Is easy for a complainant to access.
2. Provides timely response and resolution
3. Ensures a fair opportunity for both sides of an issue to be heard
4. Ensures that there are individuals who are competent and knowledgeable regarding the issues being decided during the deliberations
5. Provides for due diligence in consideration of the issue
6. Ensures that there is transparency in the process
7. Uses consistent treatment of similar cases
8. Is reported on only after deliberations are complete and a decision made

We have a number of paid and non paid leadership positions within our congregation. It behooves us to be aware that these positions also come with a certain stature or office and demand a degree of professionalism commensurate with those positions.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. *That the congregation enters into serious dialogue prior to commencing another search to clarify several important issues surrounding ministry and the hiring of a professional minister.***

We need to have a clear sense of what our “ministry” is, independent of the presence or absence of a minister. We need to establish whether or not we wish to have professional ministry. In this regard we need to clarify, provided we do wish to have a paid minister, if it is a desire for the near future or for some where down the line (and if this is the case if we have a sense of when that might be). If we do have a desire for professional ministry, do we have a consensus on exactly what that means? There seems to be confusion over what the role of a paid minister is, both within ourselves as well as amongst the ranks of ministers. The CUC and UUA refer to ministers being “called” versus “contract” ministers. What these terms mean to us and to potential future ministers needs to be clarified and resolved ahead of the hiring of any future minister. This should preferably be in the written contract (or covenant). Within the contract there should be an agreed upon process for ongoing clarification of roles. The following example has been chosen because we believe it succinctly illustrates the issue at hand. In choosing this example we, as a task group, do not wish to discuss which position is “right” or “wrong”, but would rather focus our attention to the process issue involved. As a congregation we had a concern with regards to the “right” of the minister to perform certain rites of passage. Many members of our congregation felt that they had the “right” to ask whomever they wished to perform their rite of passage, be it the lay chaplain, the minister, or another person. The UUMA guidelines for the conduct of ministry ([www.uuma.org/Documents/guidelines](http://www.uuma.org/Documents/guidelines)) are not clear on their expectation when there is both a lay chaplain and minister, although they do have a comment in the code of professional practice that clearly states that, as a minister one should only perform rites of passage for someone who belongs to another congregation after checking with the minister of the other congregation and obtaining permission. If permission is denied one should decline to perform the rite of passage. We would have benefited greatly from a contract which clearly stated what our position was as a congregation (if we knew and if we could have anticipated this disagreement) and barring something clear in writing at the outset we would have benefited from an agreed upon process in the contract whereby this role definition could have been resolved.

- 2. That the committee on ministry's role needs to be more carefully defined.** In the UUMA guidelines for the conduct of ministry there is a section on the committee on ministry which defines the primary purpose as that of “support” and goes on to further define that as, “the purpose of the Committee on Ministry is to strengthen the quality of ministry within the congregation”. We feel that the committee needs to be careful in the execution of its complex mandate not to jeopardize this, its primary mandate. As such we recommend that, in reworking of this committee’s mandate, there should be a separate group of people that function as the support group for the minister. This support group should be an independent group that liaises with the committee on ministry periodically. This is in recognition of the importance of this role as well as the reality that, when there is conflict between congregants and the minister, we feel that the committee on ministry cannot in clear conscience function as both mediator of conflict and support for both parties. The selection of the support group should be acceptable to the minister and be representative of the congregation.
- 3. On issues not clearly defined by the contract the committee on ministry should, in consultation with the concerned parties, define the tasks of the minister and recommend amendments to the job description to the board as required.**
- 4. That a process for conflict resolution be developed for use by the committee on ministry.** It is expected that the committee on ministry will utilize the principles developed within the covenant of right relations in their efforts to navigate conflict. In the event of significant conflict, which the committee is unable to negotiate to the satisfaction of all parties, consideration should be given to seeking outside help rather than putting itself in the position of “judge and jury”. In the event that this becomes necessary it should be done via the board. We feel that early outside assistance to be paramount to successful resolution of a conflict that the committee is unable to resolve internally. The timely resolution of such a conflict and the ultimate integrity of the shared ministry have to take precedence over any perceived shame or guilt over our inability to find resolution. Given that the board is ultimately responsible and has to approve the finances we feel that it is imperative that they be aware of the events leading to such a recommendation and it would be our expectation that, barring exceptional circumstances, the board would approve the recommendation of the committee in this regard. The CUC and UUMA have a defined process that they recommend be followed in this situation. Unfortunately, because of the reality that Unitarianism is small in numbers while Canada is vast in geographic size the support network which is available seems not to be very accessible to us in Saskatchewan. As such we would suggest that the committee be open to utilizing local resources when needed such as the local United Church reconciliation process. In the event that the committee makes use of more local support the appropriate CUC personnel should be kept abreast of the process. In the event of a conflict thought to be serious enough to be considered to be in violation of the code of professional conduct the issue should be brought to the board for their consideration. Depending on the severity of the concern the board should choose to seek outside help in resolving the conflict and may consider restricting the minister’s function in the area of concern, or placing the minister on paid leave pending resolution of the conflict.

5. ***That the reporting processes for the committee on ministry be clarified.*** In recognition of the various roles of this committee there should be different reporting mechanisms for each role and this should be clarified. For instance, the review of shared ministry might be considered a report that is generated every second year with a view to having it published after being received by the board. The performance review might be held in confidence and complaints might be dealt with in a variety of ways depending on the nature of the complaint and how the process unfolds. While a complaint process should be public and transparent the content of information about such conflicts should be handled with confidentiality and respect for dignity and any potentially harmful information should be released on a need-to-know basis and with the awareness of those involved and in accordance with UUMA guidelines.

6. ***That there is adequate support for the committee on ministry.*** New committee members need to be adequately informed of their job. Where possible some form of training should be made available for committee members. The point at which a given committee is unable to successfully navigate conflict between the minister and the congregation will vary and the congregation has to be willing to support the committee when it requests outside help in the resolution of conflict. In the long run this is to the benefit of the entire congregation and should be considered part of “the cost of doing business”.

7. ***That the covenant of right relations be regularly given voice and put into practice such that it becomes embedded into the culture of the Unitarian congregation of Saskatoon.*** If we believe that the covenant of right relations is the starting point in the prevention and resolution of conflict it would behoove us to put time and energy into learning to apply the concepts within that covenant. This takes time, energy and commitment but is well worth our attention as an organization. We need to ask ourselves if what we are doing is in line with what we say we believe.

8. ***That the congregation, via the board, request to the cuc that it urgently develop a Canadian process for dealing with complaints relating to professional ministerial conduct.***

9. ***That the congregation, via the board, request the cuc provide a forum for the exchange of experiences/ideas regarding different options for the hiring of ministerial leadership staff.***

The task force was unclear whether or not to include under the umbrella of the committee on ministry a personnel management role with respect to other paid staff (the DRE and/or office administrator). If not, this role needs to be assigned to another committee. We seek the advice of the board and congregation on this matter.