

Working for Safety and to End Oppression

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Work on congregational safety is linked to work to end oppression. A welcoming and safe congregation is one that encourages all of us to bring our whole selves into religious community. A congregation that practices right relations is one that respects and values the whole person and understands the blessings of differences for our life together.

We are often confronted with stories in which issues of oppression, such as stereotypical attitudes, discriminatory behaviors, and prejudicial values, overlap with issues of safety such as harassment, abuse, and sexual exploitation. So often these stories are tragic.

In our congregations, collisions between safety and oppression may be less traumatic than the stories that make the pages of our newspapers or the nightly news. Even so, they are always harmful to those individuals who experience them and to our collective well-being as Unitarian Universalist congregations. We struggle with ways to be hospitable to new families who may be different from the core membership of the past twenty-five to fifty years. These new families may be gay, lesbian, and transgender families; families of color; or multiracial/multicultural, transracial, or interfaith families. How we welcome the newcomer who is different is an opportunity to live out our UU Principles. How we develop inclusive attitudes and expressions,

practices, and structures to include these newcomers in congregational life—worship, religious education programming, social service and social action, governance, fellowship, and care-giving—is evidence of our attention to health, safety, and wholeness.

Understanding where safety and oppression collide in the lives of our congregations is an essential first step toward shaping an intentionally supportive system where safety and anti-oppression work complement and balance each other. It requires at least two things: experience and information from the standpoint of persons who are part of historically marginalized groups in U.S. culture (and too often in our congregations) and understanding that the experience of safety for Unitarian Universalists who enjoy the privileges of status (as straight, white, able bodied, or male, for example) is mediated by that individual and collective status. Those of us with such privileges face the difficult necessity of discerning the difference between lack of safety and loss of comfort.

Our consultation, conversation, and commentary focused on four questions, which guide the rest of this essay. Thanks to those who contributed to this effort; their insights, observations, and reflections shape our comments and conclusions.

How can we develop a fine-tuned sense of the difference between safety and comfort? One of my consultation colleagues responded to this question

