

**TALKING
ABOUT BYLAWS
& BARRIERS TO
INCLUSION**

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CUC DISMANTLING BARRIERS LEAD**



CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL



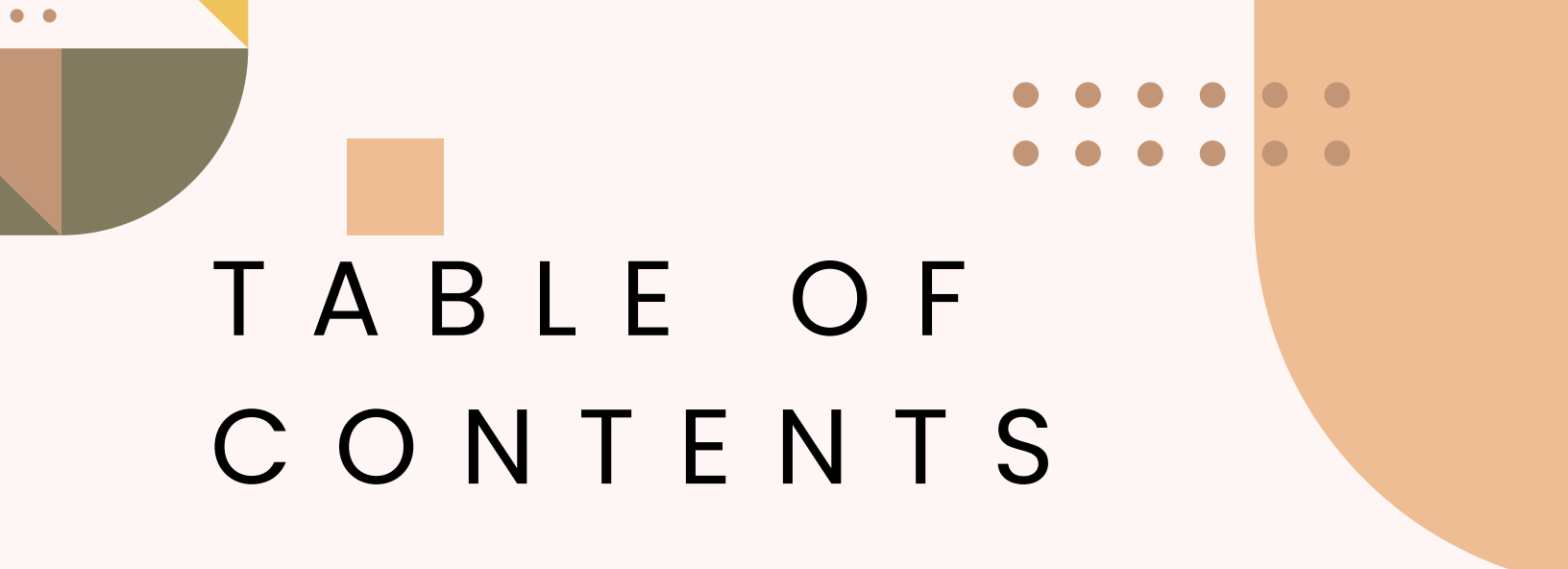


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THE INTRO

This reflection guide invites you to engage critically with bylaws, in this instance we will use the bylaws of the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC). The goal is to deepen our understanding of how colonialism, white supremacy culture, and our commitment to the 8th Principle show up in our governance structures and decision-making processes. By examining these aspects, we aim to ensure that our bylaws support inclusivity, sustainability, and the longevity of our faith communities.

The 8th Principle calls us to accountably dismantle racism and systematic barriers to full inclusion. In order for us to do that, we have to understand how Barriers to inclusion, including racism, shows up as a result of white supremacy culture and colonialism within our governing structures so we can acknowledge it and amend it. This guide will help reflect on how these forces might be embedded in our current bylaws, and how we can shift our systems to be more just, equitable, and inclusive.



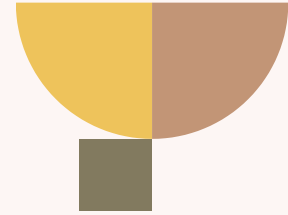
THE INTRO

The creation of bylaws is part of the sacred work of creating and maintaining our congregational structures and ensuring the wellbeing of our staff, stakeholders, members, friends, and place within the larger communities we are a part of. Bylaws, like our covenants, are living documents that should be updated to reflect the growing needs of our faith community. This work can seem tiring, but as people of a covenant this work of reflecting on how we make decisions and structure ourselves is vitally important.

We've chosen to dive into this subject using the CUC's bylaws not because they are perfect, but because we want to show the importance of a living document and the importance of transparency and accountability in incorporating the 8th principle more fully into our lives.



T E R M S



We will be working with the CUC's bylaws as our main examples in this work. Those bylaws and the terms important to them can be found by following this link.

- **Colonialism:** The domination and exploitation of peoples, lands, and cultures, historically and in the present.
- **Capitalism:** An economic system prioritizing profit over collective well-being and sustainability.
- **Anti-Oppressive:** Practices and perspectives that challenge systems of inequality and strive for equity
- **Commodified:** Treating something as a product for sale, often reducing its intrinsic value.
- **Marginalized:** Communities or individuals pushed to the edges of society, denied access to resources and power.
- **Hierarchy:** A system or organization in which people or groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority.

- **White Supremacy Culture:** A set of norms, practices, and systems that prioritize whiteness and Eurocentric values maintaining power structures that benefit white people/ people with proximity to whiteness.

15 Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

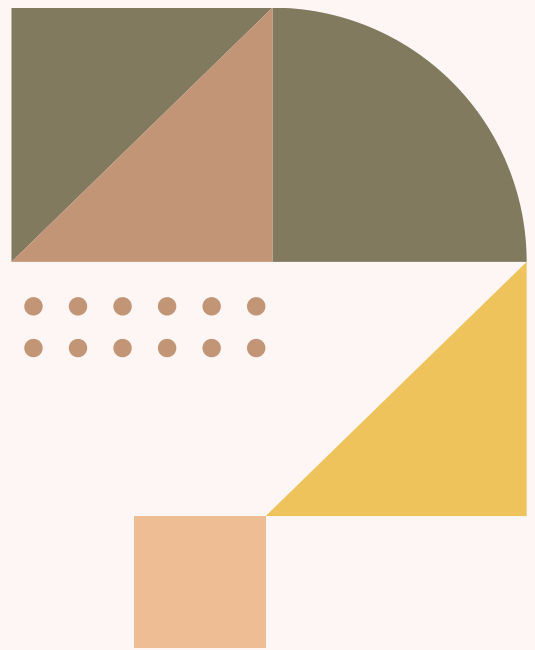
- Perfectionism
- Sense of Urgency
- Defensiveness
- Quantity Over Quality
- Worship of the Written Word
- Only One Right Way
- Paternalism
- Either/Or Thinking
- Power Hoarding
- Fear of Open Conflict
- Individualism
- I'm the Only One
- Progress is Bigger, More
- Objectivity
- Right to Comfort

Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones,
Dismantling Racism Workbook, 2001

Remember that white supremacy culture has set us up in a certain way and our governance is often one of the easiest places for supremacy thinking to come in. The work of dismantling barriers includes bringing nuance, emotion, transparency, and a sense of willingness towards compassionate growth.... When it comes to creating governance models and structures for explaining the who/how/what of things, this can feel tricky. Like all layers of this work, it's important to remember that change is never comfortable, and being uncomfortable is not the same as being unsafe or excluded.



NAVIGATING CONFLICT & REPAIR THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE



WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE?

Transformative Justice is a framework for addressing harm and conflict without relying on punishment or exclusion. It seeks to transform the root causes of harm while prioritizing healing, accountability, and systemic change.

DEFENSIVENESS AND CONFLICT IN COMMUNITIES

When confronted with change, people can often focus on either loss within change or mistakes that call for change—both of those thoughts bring us to a space of fear, frustration, guilt, and defensiveness. Defensiveness is a learned response from white supremacy culture that prioritizes personal comfort over collective accountability.



DEFENSIVENESS AND CONFLICT IN COMMUNITIES

We have been conditioned to value people based on their productivity and where they fit into the hierarchy of White supremacy culture. While our society has been set up this way and we have inherited these conditions, it now becomes our responsibility to undo these things. We must recognize that our discomfort does not make us unsafe, instead it invites us to consider the safety and capacity for joy of those that colonialism and racism deems less than.

When we engage in this work of decolonizing our minds to confront racist teachings, we are giving ourselves the gift of expansion. Expanding our notions of joy, pleasure, beauty, and love...our discomfort is a sign of limitations of rigidity, but if we can move past that discomfort we open ourselves up to so much more.

Conflict as Opportunity. Healthy conflict can generate new ideas and solutions. Avoiding conflict often reinforces existing power dynamics and prevents growth.

The Importance of Repair. Without repair, communities fracture. Repair work ensures trust, sustainability, and deeper relationships in our movement.





TOOLS FOR MOVING THROUGH CONFLICT & TOWARD REPAIR

- *Somatic Practices*: Deep breathing, grounding exercises, and body scans can help process emotional responses to conflict.
- *Restorative Circles*: Hold community conversations where harm is acknowledged, and repair is facilitated through active listening.
- *Call-In Culture*: Shift from calling out to calling in—bringing people into conversation with compassion rather than shame.
- *Intentional Decision-Making*: Instead of majority rule, use methods that centre collaboration and relational accountability.
- *Regular Reflection & Accountability Practices*: Build in moments to check where bias, exclusion, or harm might be showing up in governance.

By embracing transformative justice, we strengthen our ability to navigate conflicts without replicating punitive systems, ensuring that our movement grows in integrity and inclusivity.

TOOLS FOR MOVING THROUGH CONFLICT & TOWARD REPAIR

Responsibility Covenant

My UU Principles call me to be accountable in relationship.
I will...

WELCOME

Welcome people to share what's on their hearts in a way that is authentic to them and receive their offering with gratitude.

ENGAGE

Engage my body, mind, spirit, and emotions in learning and embrace different perspectives.

INQUIRE

Inquire into discomfort that arises when my security, worldview, privileges, traditions, protocols, and values are challenged.

ASK

Ask questions with the intent to deeply understand the person's views and resist the urge to make it about me, and what I think I know.

RESIST

Resist urges to debate, analyze, censor, criticize, project, dismiss, minimize, moralize, silence, and perform etc., to deal with my discomfort.

EMBRACE

Embrace discomfort as an invitation to focus inward on personal transformation. If needed, I will seek out pastoral support to process my feelings in a private setting.

**A Tool for Inclusive Organizations -
you can learn more about the creation of this
covenant and how to use it here.**





TOOLS FOR MOVING THROUGH CONFLICT & TOWARD REPAIR

Ask Yourself:

- What does my discomfort teach me?
- What do I notice about my conflict style?
- How do I feel when things are out of my control?
- Where can I view discomfort as a chance for expansion?
- What does safety feel like to me?
- How do I react when I'm called out/in?
- How can I stay engaged when I feel defensive?*

Remember, staying engaged doesn't mean responding right away. You can and should take a pause when you notice defensiveness in order to come back to a conversation fully present

REFLECTION TOPIC: MEMBERSHIP

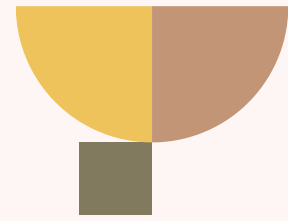
HOW DO WE COUNT MEMBERS?

Many of us are aware of the fluctuating nature of UU-ism and the reality that not everyone who shows up on Sundays is technically a member. It isn't uncommon for people to come to Sunday worship for years and years without ever becoming an official member. It is also a common reality for lots of self identified UU's to not attend any Sunday service, for lots of reasons ranging from logistical issues (no close congregations, other weekend priorities), to the more personal issues (each congregation is different, and it is not one size fits all!). This reality really paints how our membership shows up and as we see in the Statistics Canada surveys, there are way more self identified UU's here in Canada than the ones who show up to our congregations. How does that affect who we serve and how we serve them? What does that mean for the longevity of our faith and the assurance that we are servicing the needs of our communities?

There are lots of avenues for us to talk about membership. The CUC has member-congregations, that is congregations that have agreed to and follow the commitments outlined in section 2 of the CUC bylaws. There is also the question of committees and being nominated for them as a member which can be explored in section 7. Here are some reflection points to consider around the concept of membership and as a result, also around delegates.



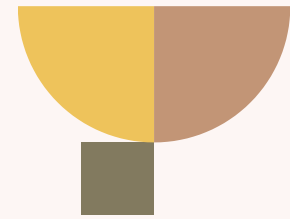
QUESTIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP



- *How are membership criteria defined within your congregation? Are there explicit or implicit barriers that prevent certain groups from being considered members? For example, are there financial or geographic constraints that could exclude marginalized communities or those in underrepresented areas?*
- *What is the relationship between inclusivity and sustainability in your membership practices?*
- *How do financial requirements for membership and participation (e.g., congregational dues, cost of meeting attendance, etc.) reflect the values of accessibility and inclusivity? Are there economic barriers that prevent marginalized people or communities from engaging fully?*
- *In considering who holds voting rights and the eligibility for leadership positions, how can we ensure that all members, regardless of background, have a voice in decisions that affect them?*
- *What does what we learned from UU-expressions and the growth of affinity groups teach us about membership in Canada?*



QUESTIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP



- *How do we take population density, access to a congregation, and other barriers that might affect rural/less populated areas into consideration?*
- *Considering our principled position on a democratic approach and a search for truth and meaning, how is membership tied to our commitment to dismantling colonialism and white supremacy?*
- *When assigning delegates, how does the role being asked limit who can commit to the role? (think: meeting times, travel barriers, length of commitment)*
- *How do we define membership in a way that welcomes more people into our faith?*
- *What if we shifted to considering belonging instead of membership?*
- *How can we recognize non-traditional UU participation as equally valid? What structures might be needed to support independent or covenantal UU communities?*



REFLECTION TOPIC: DECISION MAKING

WHO MAKES DECISIONS? AND HOW? AND WHY?

Power dynamics are present all over, and we might not think about them as actively in church spaces, but they do exist and they do need to be addressed. Power dynamics show up everywhere from worship to finances, from greeters to voting structures, and it's important for us to explore how we make decisions and how we relate to the power dynamics around us.

Section 5 of the CUC bylaws outlines the roles and responsibilities of the officers of the Board. It specifies who holds the leadership positions, their duties, and how they are elected or removed. Section 6 discusses the formation and responsibilities of various committees within the CUC. A section 7 outlines the process by which individuals are nominated and elected to positions within the Council, including Board members and officers. In these sections we can explore the topic of decision making and how we structure our board, committees, and council. These sections include criteria for eligibility and a general framework for meetings and expectations once people or committees are elected. Here are some reflection questions around decision making to consider as you look at these sections and compare them to your own.





QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKING

- *How does the process for nominating CUC Board members encourage (or discourage) inclusive practices? Consider the demographics of past boards and how they may represent (or don't represent) the diversity of our faith communities. Who is missing from the conversation?*
- *How are power and authority distributed in the bylaws? Do we see a concentration of power in a few individuals or a more equitable structure?*
- *Reflect on the Board and officer responsibilities—do they ensure that decisions are made with diverse input, or are they centralized in a way that excludes voices from marginalized communities?*
- *The bylaws mention specific Designated Geographic Areas and nominations. How do these structures support or limit representation for people from underrepresented areas or populations? Consider again the question of membership and the nuances of belonging to our faith community.*





QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKING

- *How can we make sure that leadership and decision-making bodies are more inclusive of Indigenous people, Black people, other racialized groups, and those with diverse abilities, sexualities, and genders? (keep in mind, systematic anti-blackness, discriminatory practices against indigenous people, against people of the global majority, against trans people, against low income people, against single parent house holds, against people with accessibility needs....how do reparations play into leadership decisions?)*
- *How is accountability built into our decision-making processes? Are decisions made in a way that is transparent, inclusive, and open to feedback from all members? When our bylaws say something can be removed, what is the process for that?*
- *Do the officers of the Board and other bodies have mechanisms in place to listen to and incorporate input from a broad spectrum of voices? How might the decision-making process be more democratic and less hierarchical?*



REFLECTION TOPIC: POWER & ACCOUNTABILITY

WHO HAS IT? HOW DO WE HANDLE IT?

As mentioned before, power structures exist in all things and need to be recognized in order to ensure they are handled with respect for all involved. Leadership, and the process of deciding who gets to lead, is an area that requires transparency and trust for healthy communities to flourish. It's the same for accountability, transparency and trust are required parts of the accountability process and it's something we haven't often addressed because the idea of accountability often puts people on edge. Understanding accountability practices allows us to prepare for productive conflict and repair that can deepen our relationships with ourselves and each other.

When we are accountable to something or someone we are acknowledging that we are not alone and that everyone in our web deserves our respect. It's also an indicator of the power and importance to "the thing" (in this case Unitarian Universalism) that we are agreeing to partake in together. Understanding our path to accountability allows us to more authentically commit to the work ahead of us knowing that we have a common goal even if our methods are different.






QUESTIONS FOR POWER & ACCOUNTABILITY


- *How does the removal of officers (Section 6.4) reflect accountability in a way that is equitable and free of bias? Are there systems in place to ensure the fair treatment of marginalized people in positions of leadership?*
- *How can we revise policies around the removal or replacement of leadership to prevent racial or cultural biases from influencing these decisions?*
- *How do we define “on good terms”? How do we define “bad terms?”*
- *Is there a process of repair for people on “bad terms”? What does that look like?*
- *What are the factors or criteria for disseminating a committee? For creating one?*





QUESTIONS FOR POWER & ACCOUNTABILITY

- *How transparent are the processes for executing documents or contracts in the Council (Section 10.1)? Are these processes designed to be open, accessible, and equitable for all, especially marginalized groups?*
- *How can we shift from a top-down approach to governance to one that is more participatory and inclusive? What changes to our execution of documents and contract approvals would allow for greater collective involvement and oversight?*
- *“10.2. Parliamentary Authority. Subject to the Council’s articles and this by-law and to any Rules of Procedure adopted at a meeting of members, the parliamentary authority is “Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, as amended.” What barriers to inclusion do the Robert’s Rules of Order provide? How does the structure of this decision making tool influence who gets involved in decision making conversations? Who do Robert’s Rules fail to include and how can we unpack that?*



REFLECTING ON OUR PRINCIPLES

Reflecting on these questions allows us to uncover where colonialism and white supremacy culture may have been woven into our governance structures, and how we can transform our systems to reflect the values of justice, equity, and inclusion. By taking action, we can ensure the long-term sustainability and vitality of the Canadian Unitarian Council, making it a welcoming space for all people. We are a faith guided by 8 beautiful principles that call us to action to be our best selves and to think collectively about the future ahead of us. I ask these questions with a bright, sustainable, beautiful future ahead in mind, they invite us to examine where our bylaws uphold or contradict our principles and identify areas for growth.





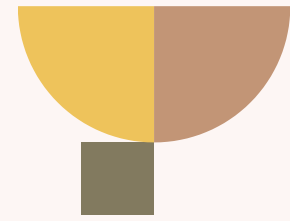
OUR PRINCIPLES

We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, covenant to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part;
8. Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.



PRINCIPLE REFLECTIONS



1st principle:

- *Do our bylaws ensure that all people—regardless of identity, background, or ability—can participate fully in leadership and decision-making?*
- *Where do our bylaws create barriers to full or authentic participation for historically excluded groups (e.g., financial, cultural, procedural)?*

2nd principle:

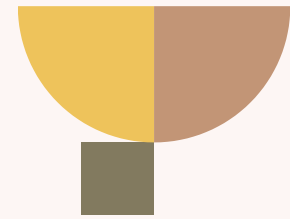
- *Are leadership opportunities and decision-making processes equitable, or do they privilege certain groups?*
- *Do our bylaws support a culture of repair and accountability when harm occurs in leadership or decision-making?*

3rd principle:

- *Do our bylaws reflect the diversity of Unitarian Universalist spiritual practices beyond traditional congregational structures?*
- *Do they create space for new, emerging, or non-traditional UU communities to be recognized and supported?*



PRINCIPLE REFLECTIONS



4th principle:

- *Do our bylaws support innovation and adaptability in how we organize and govern ourselves?*
- *Are there rigid rules that may inhibit the evolution of our faith to meet the needs of new generations?*

5th principle:

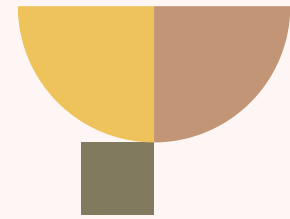
- *Do our election and decision-making processes truly reflect democracy, or do they favor those with access to institutional power?*
- *How can we make our decision-making process more accessible and participatory to a wider range of people?*

6th principle:

- *Do our bylaws promote a vision of interconnected justice rather than just internal governance?*
- *How can we ensure that our governance structures align with global movements for justice and liberation?*



PRINCIPLE REFLECTIONS



7th principle:

- *Do our bylaws prioritize sustainability and long-term community care?*
- *Are we considering the environmental impact of our governance and decision-making practices?*

8th principle:

- *Where do our bylaws reinforce white supremacy culture (e.g., individualism, perfectionism, hierarchy, urgency)?*
- *How can we embed anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and decolonial practices into our governance?*

Use these reflection questions as guiding points for checking to see if your bylaws are helping you take action and set up systems that are aligned with the commitments we make as Unitarian Universalists.





PRACTICE SCENARIOS

Scenario 1: Economic Gatekeeping in Membership

A congregation requires members to pay annual dues but offers financial hardship waivers only if people prove their income level. Some members feel this is stigmatizing and exclusionary.

Reflection:

- How does this policy uphold or contradict our principles?
- How can we ensure financial accessibility without reinforcing classism?

Suggestion: Allow members to self-select their contribution level without requiring disclosure of financial hardship.





PRACTICE SCENARIOS

Scenario 2: Leadership Barriers

A leadership role requires members to have been in the congregation for five years before running. This excludes newcomers, young adults, and IBPOC individuals.

Reflection:

- How does this policy reinforce power hoarding?
- What alternative models would allow for more diverse leadership?

Suggestion: Shorten the eligibility requirement to one year or allow alternative leadership paths.





PRACTICE SCENARIOS

Scenario 3: Decision-Making & Power Hoarding

Only a small inner circle of leaders is allowed to make key decisions, and votes rarely involve the broader community.

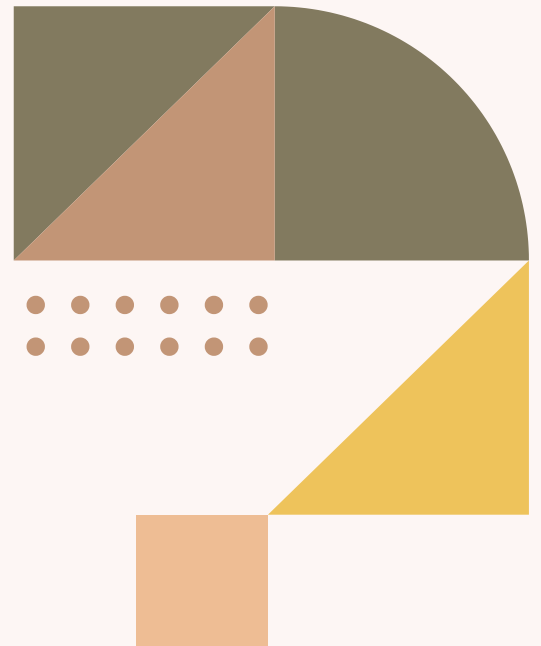
Reflection:

- Who holds power in our current governance model?
- How can we create more transparent, accountable decision-making?

Suggestion: Expand participatory decision-making and ensure diverse voices are included at every level.



A CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING BYLAWS THROUGH THE LENS OF INCLUSION



A quick yes/no checklist to help engage in reflection as you consider your own bylaws.

Do these bylaws....

- ...allow for broad participation across race, class, disability, and geography?
- ...recognize multiple forms of UU membership, including non-traditional congregations?
- ...ensure decision-making isn't limited to those with institutional power?
- ...center accountability and repair when harm occurs?
- ...make room for youth and young adult leadership?





FAITH IN ACTION

A living document means a document that is open for revision in response to the needs of whoever it is serving.

Just like our covenants and our principles, our bylaws are open to reimagining and that should be an invitation for growth and expansion as our faith grows as well.

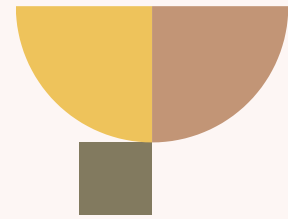
Unitarian Universalism is a faith primed for action, for a commitment to growth.

Below are a collection of suggestions to consider as you review your bylaws and wonder “what else can we do?”.

Our principles are a gift, with them in mind we can ensure that we truly embody the values we hold dear—creating a faith that is welcoming, just, and sustainable for future generations.



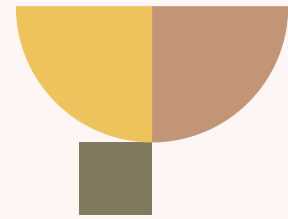
SUGGESTIONS



- *Replace hierarchical decision-making models with collective, consensus-based governance where possible.*
- *Require racial justice and anti-oppression training for all elected leaders and committee members.*
- *Implement mutual aid models and ensure financial policies align with environmental and social justice goals.*
- *Create a justice review process for all policies and bylaws, ensuring they reflect anti-racism, decolonization, and accessibility.*
- *Require that at least one Board or Nominating Committee member has expertise in equity and justice work.*
- *Shift to a ranked-choice or online voting system for broader participation.*
- *Ensure voting is accessible (including digital access, language translation, and accommodations for disabled members).*



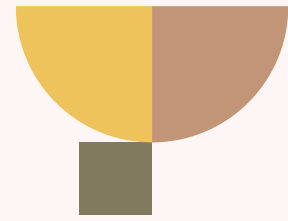
SUGGESTIONS



- *Allow for governance models that include input from youth, non-traditional congregations, and online communities.*
- *Implement a regular review cycle for bylaws (e.g., every 5 years) to ensure they continue serving a changing UU landscape.*
- *Update definitions of "membership" to include covenantal communities, online UU groups, and spiritual cooperatives.*
- *Remove language that assumes a congregation-based model as the only valid form of UU belonging.*
- *Establish a conflict resolution process rooted in restorative justice, rather than punitive measures.*
- *Engage an HR policy that involves a non-board, non-congregant, non-staff to help ensure safe work spaces and conflict styles.*
- *Ensure the Nominating Committee actively recruits diverse leadership (racial, economic, ability, and gender diversity).*



SUGGESTIONS



- *Expand membership definitions to include individuals who do not belong to traditional congregations.*
- *Allow for tiered membership models where people can engage at different levels of participation.*
- *Create clear accessibility policies (e.g., financial assistance for participation, ASL interpretation, hybrid meetings).*
- *Encourage more oral traditions in meetings (not just written reports).*
- *Shift from strict rules to flexible, culturally inclusive processes (e.g., incorporating consensus-building, storytelling, and shared leadership models)*

Remember, you're allowed to just try things out. Experiment with intention. Nothing is perfect the first time and that isn't our goal. Our goal is to dismantle as many barriers to inclusion as we can, and we can only do that by trying to see what works. Be bold. Be brave. Try something different! Try something more expansive.



CONFLICT NAVIGATION QUICK GUIDE



Using Transformative Justice to Move Through Conflict & Towards Repair

1. Pause & Ground

Before responding, check in with yourself. Conflict can trigger defensiveness and emotional overwhelm.

- Take three deep breaths or use a grounding tool (touch something textured, plant your feet, etc.).
- Ask: What emotions are coming up for me? How do I want to show up in this moment?

2. Shift from Blame to Curiosity

Assume complexity. Conflict often has more than one truth.

- Instead of: “You’re wrong and need to fix this.”
- Try: “I want to understand where you're coming from.”
- Ask: What might I be missing? What do I need to clarify before assuming?



3. Acknowledge Harm & Impact

Intention \neq Impact. Even if harm wasn't intended, it still matters.

- If you caused harm: "I see how my words/actions impacted you. I'm sorry. How can I do better?"
- If you were harmed: "I need you to understand how this affected me. Are you open to listening?"

4. Move from Reacting to Responding

Use 'I' statements and name the specific issue.

- Instead of: "You always dismiss my ideas."
- Try: "I feel unheard when my suggestions aren't acknowledged. Can we talk about this?"

5. Find a Path Toward Repair

Accountability means committing to change.

- Ask: What would meaningful repair look like? What support do we need?
- Offer: "Would a follow-up conversation help? What agreements can we set for the future?"



6. Regulate & Reset (Somatic Practices for Moving Through Conflict)

Conflict lives in the body—here are ways to move through it:

- Box breathing (4-4-4-4): Inhale 4 sec → Hold 4 sec → Exhale 4 sec → Hold 4 sec.
- Shake it out: Release tension by physically shaking your hands, arms, or whole body.
- Place a hand on your heart: This simple action signals safety to your nervous system.

7. Transform, Don't Just Resolve

Conflict can lead to better systems, deeper trust, and real growth. Instead of just “fixing” an issue, ask:

- What structural changes would prevent this from happening again?
- How can our community normalize repair and learning from mistakes?



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