

Essay Title: Dealing with Difficult People **Audio Essay Series:** Disc 1, Track 8

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Date of Release: June 23, 2005

IS YOUR CONGREGATION BEING HELD HOSTAGE? Is there a troublesome personality who tries to get his or her own way by withholding money, by loud assertive behavior, or by misusing Joys and Concerns?

We like to think of our congregations as being open to all people and that they are a haven for everyone who needs respite from the world. But that can also make us vulnerable to those few people who abuse our open door and our trusting natures.

A couple of examples: A west coast congregation was delighted when a man who had just joined volunteered to take care of the grounds. But then he hacked all of the branches off several small trees. He also forcefully criticized the congregation at a district meeting and began using Joys and Concerns to promote his own interests. He was rude to the minister and to people who challenged him.

At another congregation a man aggressively argued with people who disagreed with him and used threats of lawsuits to get his way. In both cases the congregations put up with this behavior for quite a long time. Finally both congregations banned these people from church.

Here's the lesson to be learned from difficult people. Deal with them sooner than later. These problems seldom go away by themselves. Failing to deal with them usually just makes them worse. The Rev. Anne Odin Heller, former district executive for the UUA's Pacific Northwest District, says Unitarian Universalists are often reluctant to confront dysfunctional or dangerous people. "We're either chicken or softhearted," she says. "We don't like to deal with conflict. But ultimately members have to speak up and boundaries have to be made clear. The kind of conflict which results from toxic personalities happens all the time."

Here's what to do: Before conflict develops, every congregation should create a policy covering disruptive behavior. It's easier to do this before you're actually dealing with a specific situation. There are several sample policies on the UUA website and I'll tell you in a minute where to find them.

Here are other things you can do: Support constructive behavior by creating a congregation-wide expectation that disruptive behavior will not get much mileage in your congregation. Set and articulate standards for behavior, and insist that they be met. When disruptive behavior surfaces, respond with calm and clear thinking.

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When one congregation stood up to a person who was constantly criticizing everyone and forcing the governing board to deal with his concerns, everyone felt better. As one board member put it, “We had a crisis of conscious over whether we could actually kick him out. But our minister convinced us that our covenant to be together was not a suicide pact. We were not required to put up with things that were damaging to us.

We took our church back.”

Here’s where you can go for resources on this issue. Go to UUA.org/InterConnections and do a search for the words “Difficult People.” You’ll find articles there that list a number of resources, including where to find sample copies of policies about disruptive behavior. Your district office can also help with this issue.

Remember, ignoring it won’t make it go away. It will probably make it worse.

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