

**Essay Title: Stand Up to Problem People**

**Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 6**

As Unitarian Universalists, we pride ourselves on being inclusive and forgiving. We celebrate diversity and welcome all individuals. But occasionally a person comes to our church door who is bent on causing physical or emotional damage. What do we do then?

Having a specific policy can be helpful in deciding what to do when troubling and possibly dangerous situations develop. Most such policies permit the expulsion of anyone, with due process, who becomes a perceived threat to potential and existing members.

One West Coast church developed a bad behavior policy after a man made inappropriate comments to women. Church leaders confronted him and established guidelines that he had to follow if he wanted to continue to attend the church. For several years he behaved, but then there was a recurrence and a formal complaint was filed with the board and the man was dropped from membership.

There was disagreement among church members about the board's action. They asked themselves "How do we respect this man's worth and dignity *and* the worth and dignity of those with whom he was inappropriate?" The minister said, "They came to the decision that part of respecting peoples' worth and dignity is holding them responsible for what they do."

The board of that West Coast church had no policy on disruptive individuals when this situation began. Members had to create one on the spot. In retrospect the church was fortunate, said the minister, noting, "Inevitably there will be these kinds of crises. It's really important to have thought through these issues before they occur."

Unitarian Universalists have not been willing to confront dysfunctional or dangerous people, says the Rev. Anne Odin Heller, former district executive of the Pacific Northwest District. "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. This kind of conflict which results from toxic personalities happens all the time.”

Heller is the author of *“Churchworks, a Well-Body Book for Congregations.”* Her book has a chapter on disruptive behavior. She notes that bad behavior does not get better by ignoring it. Instead it usually gets worse. Her recommendation: “Deal with the problem sooner, rather than later.”

**First UU Church, of San Diego, California**, has had a policy since 1988 dealing with disruptive behavior. The Rev. Dr. Carolyn Owen-Towle, who was co-minister at the time this article was written said, “The policy is not used often, but it’s there for when people can’t work out their disagreements.” The church also has a six-person ombudsman committee to resolve disruptive situations and other disputes.

The policy was invoked once when a nonmember threatened to disrupt an ordination ceremony because he had a dispute with a church member. In that case two people were delegated to sit near the man and ask him to leave if necessary. When another person frightened preschoolers by his inappropriate, nonsensical behavior, the church got a court order to keep him away. Owen-Towle emphasized that every case is carefully considered and democratic processes are honored.

Another congregation had difficulty with a man who was orally aggressive with people who disagreed with him. He used threats of lawsuits and unnamed calamities that would occur if he didn’t get his way. “People tried to ignore it,” said the minister. “Others left, saying they didn’t come to church for this. I put up with it for awhile, but then when I decided I had to quit discussing church business with him, he engaged people who were more vulnerable and we had to do something.”

The governing board asked the man to leave. He did, angrily, along with several other people who had supported him. The congregation, which had not had a policy on coping with disruptive individuals, has now developed one.

The UUA does not recommend a specific policy on disruptive behavior, but suggests that congregational leaders look at policies from other congregations and pick one that fits their general philosophy.

For more information and resources, go to: *uua.org* and click on *Leaders*

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## **Resources**

Go to: *uua.org/leaders/leaders library* and search for either “/interconnections” or “disruptive.”

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