

## **The Rule of Four – Conflict Management**

### **Amendment II.B. Of the Aiken Unitarian Universalist Church Bylaws**

**Approved April 19, 2003**

Our rule of four, “ours” as in, it’s in our Bylaws, the second Amendment, section B.

What is it? The simple answer – it’s a guideline for dealing with conflict. The more difficult answer – it is one approach among many to conflict resolution. An Internet search on Google three weeks ago yielded slightly over 17 million hits on Conflict Resolution. Yesterday morning, that same search string got back 17.3 million hits!! There are untold numbers of organizations and web based resources working in the arena of Conflict resolution. A few that seemed well-rounded and useful to me were: [crinfo.org](http://crinfo.org); [acresolution.org](http://acresolution.org) and [crnhq.org](http://crnhq.org). Also, I found many ideas and thoughts I heartily agreed with in the book *Never Call them Jerks* by Arthur Paul Boers.

Conflict Resolution in CHURCH? There are many who believe conflict is not allowed in church and they are always surprised when they hear of it. Congregations are above that, this is a place of worship, reflection, and learning. No conflict allowed here! But the reality is we are so much closer to potential conflict here than in many areas of our lives. Our spirit is on the line here. Six days a week we guard our inner spirits fiercely. We build walls to protect ourselves from the onslaught of hurt, confusion, embarrassment, loneliness. On the seventh day, we come to church, to a place of worship. We gather with other like minded individuals; open our hearts and minds to our environment. We hope for enlightenment. Exposed as we are, we willingly make ourselves vulnerable; we are easily hurt, easily conflicted. We also arrive with a full load of life’s baggage; the memories of past hurts and life’s unjust indignities. AND we don’t stop there – we also bring with us a higher standard of expectations for the people and

decisions made under this roof. After all, we are the enlightened ones, aren't we? The question now is "Where am I taking you?"

Conflict resolution is too broad an area to discuss in one service. I want to focus on difficult behavior, or, more accurately, healthy responses to difficult behavior; eustress vs. distress, i.e. promoting health vs. enabling disease during times of conflict. Bad things happen to good people. Our responses to these negative events dictate how deeply we are impacted. We have to learn to recognize conflict, learn to deal with it early on, when solutions are most likely to be available. We also need to trust our ability to resolve conflict before it becomes an ISSUE. Once conflict has escalated to ISSUE status, know that resolution is still possible, it just takes more effort.

Conflict in churches tends to be highly emotional. Once you recognize you are in a conflict situation, you need to be very aware of what you, as an individual brings to the table. What is your contribution to this event? Know your own hot buttons! Most texts I've read so far highly recommend looking to oneself as the first cause and the first source for resolution to conflict. We need to do "family of origin" work. Acknowledge that experience from back when... For me, one of the experiences I had to acknowledge was the time when I was about twelve years old. The assistant pastor of a church I had visited with friends stopped by. I was in my room and he asked my Dad if he could come pray with me. He came to my room, told me he was there to pray with me and then told me before we prayed, he needed to check how well my breasts were developing. Lucky for me, even at twelve, I knew my little boobies were none of his business. As an adult, every time I speak with a church leader, especially the males, I remember my boobs and I remind myself, they've developed alright! I also acknowledge that

the person I'm currently with is not the misguided man in my past and it is not necessary for me to blame this person for the faults of another.

We also need to learn the difference between compromise and enabling behavior; the difference between "giving in" in an effort to avoid the issue aka enabling behavior and working with that person to find an alternative solution that works for both of you aka adaptive behavior. In churches, we often use "Holy Manners". In UU congregations, our version of Holy Manners is the agreement to abide by our behavioral covenants. The stated AUUC covenant is the Golden Rule in both its positive and negative formulations -- "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" and "*Do not do to others what you would not have done to you.*" Sometimes we confuse good behavior with being nice to the point of harming ourselves. We must learn to speak up. We need to give up enabling thoughts and behaviors and remember that we can't control someone else's behavior. It's just not gonna' happen! I'll share with you an observation from John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian and ethicist – "We are afraid in our modern polite pluralism to tell anyone that our communion with them has limits."

Another area that needs our attention – we need to own our own opinions. We need to name it and then claim it. And then separate the emotional rhetoric from the real problem. Differentiate. Make no anonymous statements, make no claims of "well I heard several folks say, blah, blah" or "I know of 3 or 4 others who feel like I do but I can't tell you who they are." Avoid triangulation of people involved. Playing one person against another never gives long term resolution. Learn to be assertive, maintain your sense of "you" or "I" in the face of opposition.

At this time I would like for us to hear the rule of four as stated in our bylaws. Earlier this morning, I handed out separate sheets of paper to four members of the congregation. Please share those with us now. The person with number 1 on their page can start.

- (1) An individual who becomes aware that he or she has a conflict with another person in our religious community will try first to go to that person to discuss the matter.
- (2) If the individual who notices the conflict feels unable to approach the other person with whom he or she has a conflict initially, that individual should seek out a “safe” other person who will listen carefully to the description of the situation and support that individual in going directly to the person with whom he or she has a conflict.
- (3) If, after discussing the situation with a chosen “safe” person, the individual who has noticed the conflict still feels unable to go alone to speak with the person with whom he or she has a conflict, the “safe” person may accompany the individual during the direct discussion of the conflict to provide silent support.
- (4) If, after presenting the situation to the chosen “safe” person, the individual who first noticed the conflict feels unable to meet the person with whom he or she has a conflict, the “safe” other person may meet with the person to explain the situation and pave the way for a direct meeting to discuss the conflict.

I will read the remaining portion of the Rule:

- (5) If, after using the previous four (4) steps in attempt to manage the situation, or if discussion of the conflict in any of the above steps has not resolved the conflict situation, the matter may be presented to the Executive Committee either in a regular Executive Committee Meeting or in Executive Session.

Interestingly enough, during my research for this service today, I discovered that our Rule of Four appears to have been born of Christian roots. There are many references in many books, Christian and non-christian, that make reference to this method handling conflict in the bible. You can find it in the New Testament, Book of Matthew 18:15-17. The following is quoted from the New International Version:

<sup>15</sup>"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Our rule number one.) <sup>16</sup>But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (Our rule numbers two and three and four.) <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Our rule number five.) Of course our version is slightly modified and a little less hardline and a lot more democratic.

Both versions emphasize frequent attempts to make the relationship work. The real purpose here is reconciliation and restoration of relationships. These rules apply to church conflict scenarios and they fit into the idea of fair-fighting; first, speak directly to the person, second, bring others along to help discuss and witness, and third, if you can't resolve it, tell it to the church; if they refuse to listen even then, let them go. I'm not saying toss out the trouble makers. I'm saying, recognize when the only true solution is to move on. This is very difficult, people most often leave because their needs are ignored. They just stop showing up one day. It's up to us to follow-up, they may have a need we can meet, we just didn't recognize it. If you recall, we've had that happen recently. One of our members stopped attending recently and it took a while for someone to notice. When they did notice and made the effort to make contact we were basically told "If you must know, I'm ill and since it took you this long to care, don't

bother.” Also if a person leaves as part of the only solution to a conflict, accept that and try to talk to them if you can so you can learn from it.

So, where do the healthy responses to conflict come from? They start with your getting to know yourself. You have to figure out your own difficult behavior rather than trying to focus on or figure out someone else’s. Once again, the Gospel of Matthew, 7:3 “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” Now here, I pull heavily from Boers and his discussion on differentiated leadership. He says to be differentiated is to know and act one’s own mind, especially when our position is different from the group’s. It is the ability to state clearly and calmly our position without suggesting with MUST, SHOULD or OUGHT language that others need to have the same position. Once you become differentiated, you choose to take charge of yourself and become the “I” in the face of the pressure to blend into the “we”. When we have problems at home, they often spill over into problems at work and given the opportunity, they will wander out and become problems at church. Unresolved issues in areas of your life become symptoms in other areas until we acknowledge them and deal with them. Getting a grip on our personal baggage is a big job. It will take a long time. It will involve a good deal of work. For many of us, that journey into self has already begun and we are well on our way to defusing our personal mine fields. A major achievement of differentiation is realizing that one’s own happiness or contentment resides in oneself and not in others. A benefit of self-differentiation is that it makes it easier to get to know others. You learn to separate other’s reactions into their component parts – emotion and truth. You’ll be less bothered by someone’s comments or actions, when you realize their origins. We sponsored a breakfast meeting at work; eggs, bacon, sausage, fruits, cereals and biscuits served buffet style for about 350 people. When it came time to do the clean-up there was one secretary

just pitching all the left-overs – scooping up large amounts from the buffet table and throwing the food in the trash. The sausage and biscuits were not very popular that day. Our office manager became extremely upset by this. Knowing both individuals, it was easy to understand where their behavior was coming from. The secretary doing the tossing was dealing with some extreme conflict in her life, her husband had an affair and then later was arrested and jailed for some other infraction. She was interested in getting rid of the crap and baggage in her life. The office manager, had come from a family of hard scrabble farmers and believed in finding new uses for everything, she wanted to save all the left-overs and turn them into breakfast for another day, or lunch, or dog food even. But because both ladies had known each other for a while and were aware of each others circumstances they were able to compromise and save some of the food and toss the rest. Differentiation can also decrease conflict when one party stops pressuring the other. As soon as you realize it's not your job to make them happy, you'll stop pressuring them to be happy. You all get along much better. You need to separate yourself but at the same time stay connected. Do not confuse differentiation with withdrawal. As you learn to differentiate, you may also find yourself confronted with sabotage. This often happens among friends. One friend seems to be growing more than the other, maybe beginning to drift toward a more fulfilling relationship and the friend being left behind may engage in sabotage in an effort to maintain the relationship.

Part of getting to know yourself is learning to take a NAP. When we are confronted with difficult behavior and our own difficult reaction to it, we have the option of taking a NAP. That's N A P and it stands for Non-Anxious Presence. Anxiety tends to promote more anxiety. The more anxious we are, the less clearly we think. Problems become magnified. Our bodies see this as a stressful situation and react chemically. Our body's auto-response system kicks in

and tells our brain its time for fight or flight. Our brain takes over and says OK, no time for thinking, its time to react. These physical responses can have behavioral consequences: Impulsiveness overwhelms intention, instinct overrules imagination, reflexes rule out reflection, defensiveness dominates, and options appear limited. “In periods of intense anxiety, what is most needed is what is most unavailable—the capacity to be imaginative.” So, TAKE A NAP. Step back from the situation, take a deep breath, leave the room if you have to but you have to come back, and then address it with calm. To be non-anxious is having the capacity to respond appropriately and not react. A calm atmosphere is crucial for healthy work on conflict. Speed Leas, who is often quoted when talking about this subject, and is also quoted in Boers book as providing these practical elements to being a non-anxious presence: Make statements of assurance that this can be handled; use a calm, relaxed demeanor and voice; put forth a clear description of what is happening and what it means; create an understandable plan to put into effect to deal with the situation.

Another aspect of a healthy response to difficult behavior is learning to dispense with enabling behaviors. Replace those behaviors with new skills. Learn to listen, learn to speak directly and to be a good critic and above all, learn to take criticism well. Being a good critic is a challenge. Some important things to keep in mind when criticizing: focus on actions, not character; be affirming and respectful; be specific; offer solutions and focus on things that can be changed; be present, face to face meeting; be calm and non-anxious; be sensitive; be open to feedback; close with praise and a plan . When its your turn to receive criticism, first, listen to others attentively, without interrupting and without using the time to formulate your response. Second, paraphrase what you hear; this not only clarifies the situation, but helps the other feel

heard. Third, graciously ask for specific details. And fourth, find something together about which you can agree. This must be practiced. Practice this every day.

All of this said, you have to remember that when you are in a conflict situation, you are the only one you can make happy. You are the only one for whom you can effect change. You are the only one you can control. When you think you may want to appease someone just to make the behavior stop, don't. Remember that enabling difficult behavior does not make it go away, it only offers temporary respite because the behavior will return and it may even evolve into a whole new variety of the same old stuff!

The last aspect of a healthy response to difficult behavior I want to address today is the idea I mentioned earlier of knowing your own opinions. Own your opinions, name them and then claim them. Become comfortable with making I statements. Become comfortable with your own beliefs and work from them when you encounter difficult situations. Staying true to your self will go a long way in solving many conflict situations and even to avoiding some. Worrying about how someone else will react when they find out how you really feel about something is not worth your time. Trust that where ever you go, there is likely someone who will disagree with you. They may have valid reasons for disagreeing with you based on their belief system and that's just fine. Or maybe they just spent an hour in the grocery store only to get to the counter and discover they forgot their wallet. Now their upset and taking it out on the next person available and its your lucky day. Not claiming your beliefs and opinions makes you "wishy-washy" and will quickly earn you the moniker of difficult!

Of course there is more, there is much more that could be said. But this is a beginning. I want to share with you some guidelines for "fair fighting". 1. Share control of the conflict process with others. (Dirty fighting struggles for control over others.) 2. Seek the common

good over the interests of particular parties. (Dirty fighting seeks the good of the few at the expense of the many.) 3. Act assertively in ways that respect self and others. (Dirty fighting involves aggressive, disrespectful, or manipulative behavior.) 4. Act in ways that are accountable to the group and the authorities. (Dirty fighting involves deception of others.)

In closing, I would like to say to you, work toward conflict prevention; pay attention to yourself and others, act with intention; know your own feelings; know what buttons you have and how people can push them; think before you leap; TAKE A NAP. Become a non-anxious presence on the scene. Be assertive. Make your own choices, the choices that are right for you. Do not enable difficult behavior in others. Be not afraid, there is a huge difference in having fears and being fearful. The real problem of difficult behavior is that as long as we choose to join with other people problems will come up. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author, writes “As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them. There are two things people can do about the pain of disunion with other people. They can love or they can hate.”

I asked the question in the beginning, where am I taking you? I like to think we have traversed a section of the infamous “Yellow Brick Road”. When we traveled this road with Dorothy, didn’t we get to see that the lion really did have a heart? The wizard couldn’t give him one; it wasn’t his to give – the lion had to discover it for himself.

Notes for Talk-back session

1. The book *Never call them Jerks* by Arthur Paul Boers. Available through UUA bookstore.
2. As pres-elect, I want to work on the bylaws and consider removing the rule of four from the bylaws and making them procedures and adding grievance processes and some guidelines for fair fighting, etc. they really don't belong in a legal document. They limit us to those options.
3. History of our actual rule of four – first found in minutes of meeting in 2001 with a UUA district executive. One day training when the church was just forming. The ones quoted there were very simple, very direct and there were only four.
4. Eustress – positive or curative stress. In sports it is referred to as optimum performance level. Relatively new word, does not exist in my 70's version of the unabridged dictionary.