



CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL

The Responsibility Covenant

A tool to support cultural
transformation in Unitarian
Universalist groups that aspire
to be more diverse and
intentionally inclusive.

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Tender enough to feel
Present enough to witness
Humble enough to listen
Courageous enough to act
Accountable enough to change

-Prentis Hemphill-

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The Responsibility Covenant

Introduction

You are invited to use the [Responsibility Covenant](#) with your group. A smaller version is pictured below as a reference. This guide has been written specifically with group and congregational leaders in mind, however you are welcome to share some, or all, of it with groups you are working with if this type of theoretical information would be useful.

Note that the term “Covenant” is used to signify the sacredness of the intent when a person decides to hold themselves accountable in this way. You will read below the process that was undertaken to create this covenant. **This Responsibility Covenant is different from the types of covenants we co-create within our local groups and communities and is meant to supplement a well functioning group covenant.** If you do not yet have a current covenant that has accountability measures in place we recommend reaching out to Joan Carolyn (Western Region) and Linda Thompson (Eastern Region) who have workshops to support you.



Why a Responsibility Covenant?

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and
this will require a qualitative change in our souls
as well as a quantitative change in our lives.*

~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

As people who are committed to radical inclusion, equity, justice, and the inherent worth of all people, Unitarian Universalists (UU) aspire to welcome diversity and be aware of our conscious and unconscious biases. Yet, in reality, we struggle with discomfort when we encounter perspectives that challenge our sense of security, worldview, privileges, traditions, principles, norms, and values. At times, this can bring up unpleasant feelings and we may feel compelled to act out in ways to alleviate our discomfort, which may be harmful.

This Responsibility Covenant is meant to articulate how those of us with relative privilege will be responsible stewards of our internal experience while carefully choosing our actions when uncomfortable feelings and/or thoughts arise. It is not meant to pass value judgment on feelings, and recognizes that all feelings are valid. It is not meant to alleviate discomfort, but we hope it will provide a context for interpreting its source and responding consciously. **Most importantly, it is not meant to silence people who are experiencing oppression or marginalization.** It is intended to create spaces where those perspectives might be more easily expressed and acknowledged because those with relative privilege are managing their discomfort well. When used with this intention in mind, **it's a tool to help people discover equity in taking up space for ourselves and creating space for others.**

Types of Privilege

“Privilege” in a social justice sense is different from ordinary privileges, benefits, or reasons for gratitude. To lack this kind of privilege means to have an aspect of your identity that has at least two of the following effects: you have fewer rights than others, you have differential/restricted access to life, and/or you have to deal with regular discrimination. Some types of privilege intersect or affect others, and sometimes you can lack one kind of privilege more or less than someone else (e.g. being lower class vs. living in abject poverty, or being disabled vs. being so disabled you cannot work to support yourself). In this way [privilege is relative](#). Everyone has some types of privilege, but often we don't recognize our own privilege until someone points it out to us or we do our own research. The following are key types of privilege. How many do you have?

- White privilege (skin tone privilege)
- Cultural/religious privilege (including language barriers, marital status (i.e. divorced) family/relationship structure)
- Ethnic privilege
- Male or male-presenting privilege
- Cis-gender privilege
- Ability/Disability privilege
- Health privilege
- Class privilege (including type and nature of work, housing, transportation, social and business network)
- Education privilege
- Sexuality/Sexual orientation privilege (ace/aro, gay, etc)
- Mononormative privilege (including couple's privilege)
- Parental privilege (growing up with developmental trauma/abuse or without parents, versus having a loving parent)
- Attractiveness privilege
- Age privilege
- Country/citizenship privilege (refugees, people living in unsafe countries for reasons other than this list, immigrants without legal benefits)
- Freedom privilege (including ability to express oneself without harm, ability to make decisions about your body, ability to come and go (i.e. country borders, domestic abuse, prison, child welfare system, human trafficking)
- Positional privilege (i.e. law enforcement, border patrol, politicians, religious leader, celebrities, school teacher, physician etc)

Besides our direct experience with privilege or lack of privilege we also tend to be affected by the privilege level of those around us. For instance your mother dealing with racism, your friend experiencing homophobic taunts, your in-law's high status in the community, and your father's privilege as a male.

Interpreting Discomfort

Cognitive and emotional discomfort are natural parts of the human experience of expansion, not an indication that we are doing something wrong. How we respond to ourselves and others when we notice it bubbling up, determines whether it contributes to divisiveness or connectedness. As Unitarians we strive to be in a Beloved Community, which calls us to seek ways of increasing connectedness through relationships that are conscious of privilege and power. We are called to create [brave spaces](#) and responsive congregational/group cultures where real conversations can take place that will lead to us truly becoming the inclusive communities we aspire to be. It has been said that the temporary discomfort experienced when we are challenged to expand is nothing in comparison to the intensity of discomfort some people feel on a continual basis because some aspect(s) of who they are puts them on the outskirts of society's norms.

White Supremacy Culture

Becoming more conscious of the ways that our shared cultures are set up to privilege white people can help us better understand what we need to decolonize, dismantle, or remove in order for others to feel that all of who they are is welcome and can exist without feeling in constant friction. The following are 9 areas that are commonly understood to be the characteristics of White Supremacy Culture.:

- Fear
- One Right Way
- Either /Or & The Binary
- Denial & Defensiveness
- Right to Comfort & Fear of Conflict
- Individualism
- Progress is More & Quantity over Quality
- Worship of the Written Word
- Urgency

Details of each of these characteristics can be found at [White Supremacy Culture](#) and within this [article](#), written by the site's author. These characteristics influence all aspects of society, not just race related issues, and dismantling them in response to one form of exclusion will help to address other forms of exclusion and discrimination.

The White Moderate

Martin Luther King Jr, spoke with great frustration about the biggest challenge not being those that were outright opposed to freedom for a black people but the [White Moderate](#), “who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” While the Responsibility Covenant is not strictly designed to support conversations about racism, the concept of the White Moderate can be applied across other areas of privilege by substituting in other types of privilege in the place of White. It is extremely common for those of us experiencing privilege (regardless of what type) to underestimate, and even dismiss, the need for decisive and meaningful action to be taken to address oppressions, marginalizations and exclusions because it does not feel urgent from our vantage point. We all may find ourselves, at times, picking and choosing issues we want to consider, or trying to control the pace in which other people experience inclusion so we do not become uncomfortable, while still claiming to be in favor of whatever rights are being discussed in our congregations. When a person/segment of our community communicates they are experiencing exclusion, oppression, or marginalization it is the Moderate that will use a variety of tactics that are ultimately meant to preserve their privilege. They would not likely see it that way because they feel “on board” with justice work, especially after a movement has been established in mainstream culture. It is worth noting that the revolutionary Martin Luther King Jr. enjoys rave reviews from the “woke” white folks of today, but during his lifetime white people by and large, found his demands for freedom to be highly threatening as they were disruptive to the status quo of privilege.

As UU's, most of us would agree that we do not want to be the white moderates of today, whether we are white or privileged in other ways, however it is a very real danger that we may become just that if we are not conscious of the many ways our resistance shows up to railroad and disrupt the pace of revolutionary change that threatens our comfortable status quo. The Responsibility Covenant exists to support us in increasing our awareness of the source of our discomfort so we may act consciously to not allow our actions to slow down revolutionary justice of all kinds within our congregations and beyond.

How the Responsibility Covenant was Created

This covenant was created over several months in response to hearing stories from individuals in congregations that some people were not well equipped to engage in conversations that challenged the cultural norms of their group. We began by discussing these scenarios with those involved, or members of their congregation's leadership, with the goal of creating a covenant that those in relative privilege could use to understand and manage personal discomfort that may arise when someone else's truth presses on their norms, worldviews, privileges, values etc. This covenant has gone through many iterations and revisions, and received feedback from various people including members of the Dismantling Racism Taskforce, Widening the Circle of Concern Canadian working group, members of the Polyamory Task Force, and various leaders within congregations. People of Colour within our UU community have been a part of its creation. We are happy for it to evolve over time and hope it will be received in the spirit it was created, and used as a tool to enhance conversations.

What is Firm Compassion?

Responding with firm compassion when we witness each other acting out discomfort is key to creating [brave spaces](#) where people will stay engaged even when doing so feels unpleasant.

Firmness includes:

- Helping each other become conscious of when we are acting out because we are uncomfortable. We can't always see it in ourselves.
- Affirming that our UU principles call us to be inclusive by not entertaining attempts to shut down challenging conversations just because some people are having a hard time managing their discomfort. Sometimes shutting down looks like literally telling someone not to share their perspective or simply ignoring the perspective. It might also look like starting up a distracting conversation to draw attention to something else. It may not be irrelevant to the conversation, but still serves to distract.
- Ensuring that the people sharing perspectives that feel uprooting to listeners are not asked to take on the burden of caretaking, justify their experience, share it in a different way so it is easier for us to hear, or to otherwise censor, minimize, or erase their perspectives.

Compassion includes:

- Recognizing that some people have not had much experience dealing with personal discomfort. This could be for many reasons including that their life choices have put them in circumstances where their experience of the world, perspectives, beliefs, customs, worldviews, protocols, and expectations of privilege, align with, and are even affirmed by, the dominant culture. Therefore, they may not yet have coping strategies for dealing with this unfamiliar terrain. **Compassion might look like taking the time to build skills around tolerating internal discomfort.**
- Reminding ourselves of times when we've felt bewildered, exhausted, scared and disoriented because our worldview was challenged, then empathizing with the fear behind the resistance we witness in others. Transforming and expanding our worldview can feel a bit like pulling a loose thread on a sweater and fearing the whole thing will unravel. This can create a disorienting dilemma, which can be very unsettling and is the first phase of a transformative learning journey (See below for more details on this). **Compassion might look like acknowledging and holding space for their fears, rather than shaming them for having fears.**
- Ensuring that people who are sharing their perspective of feeling marginalized and discriminated against are not being asked to provide caretaking services. **Compassion might look like those who are allied with, but not directly experiencing the marginalization or discrimination, coming alongside those with privilege that are struggling, and providing that support.**
- Asking ourselves, before we speak, if we are sharing from a good and humble place that is prioritizing "right relations" over "being right". **Compassion might look like being silent when we are feeling defensive and/or threatened so our words do not injure.**

- Being aware that some people's unresolved traumas may be activated because of something they are hearing, in which case they may experience the discomfort differently and more urgently than others, and/or may not be able to hear other perspectives without feeling like it is directly threatening their personal safety and security. **Compassion might look like helping a person find a trained professional to support them to better understand the root causes of their feelings, fears, resistance, and other responses. Compassion might also look like giving space for people to participate differently, and in ways that are on pace with their internal capacity to cope.**
- Acknowledging that dismantling old paradigms and replacing them with new paradigms is exciting transformative work that is best done with caring, non-judgemental support. This support can provide the additional emotional security needed to tolerate the mental insecurity that comes with navigating these changes. **Compassion might look like preemptively setting up pastoral care and debriefing support, and role modeling support for it.**

Discussion of Covenant Points

The following contains some commentary about each point as well as reflection questions that can be the starting point for further exploration.

Point 1: Welcome

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

We can become accustomed to people sharing in ways that match the predominant UU culture, and become critical of other ways that people might choose to speak about, conceptualize, explain or otherwise share their perspectives. Out of our comfort, we may prefer them to adapt who they are to be more like us. We have had people share that they felt their very way of speaking, presenting, and dressing was being held under a magnifying glass and being scrutinized more intensely because, what they were offering in their authentic expression, was very different from the expectations that are present in some UU communities about how we should look, think, or be.

Anytime someone chooses to share any aspect of themselves, we have the opportunity to view the exchange as transactional or relational, an entitlement or a privilege, as an intellectual debate or heartfelt exchange. It is up to us to co-create a culture that is conscious of itself, flexible in its expression, and centred around gratitude for diversity.

Questions to consider

- Have we asked people what amount of time they need to authentically share what is on their hearts to share? Have we adapted to meet this need or are we trying to fit them into a time frame that works for us (i.e. the 15-20 minute sermon time)?
- Are we open to them using whatever word choices, metaphors, cadence, accent, dialect works for them, and doing the work to become more adaptable on our end of things?
- Are we expecting people to validate their personal experience with statistics, facts, anecdotes in order to help us better understand their lived context and therefore accept their experience as true for them?
- Are we open to people referencing a variety of ways of knowing (i.e. lived experience, quantitative or qualitative research, analytical reasoning, intuition, mystical, paranormal)? Do we give each way of knowing equal weight or have particular ones we favor?
- Do we have formal or informal expectations about dress that might make a person sharing feel less comfortable in our midst? Consider this not only in terms of whether we welcome people to dress however they would like, but also in the diversity of clothing we wear. Also, consider this through the lenses of ethnicity/culture, gender, and class privileges.

Point 2: Engage

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

A hallmark of a Western way of thinking is to see things in segmented rather than integrated ways, and to prioritize some aspects of ourselves (and corresponding ways of learning) over others. When we invite people to share with us their experience of the world, we ideally want them to feel comfortable to share their experiences on all levels. In Western terminology, and in accordance with the teachings of wholism shared by the Indigenous peoples of this land, this includes physically (their sense of being safe/unsafe, place/no place and belonging/not belonging), spiritually (their worth and value), emotionally (how they feel in response to their experiences), and mentally (how they see themselves and the world). As they share whichever aspects they choose it would be ideal for us to be in a position of using all aspects of ourselves to fully appreciate and integrate all they are sharing. As Unitarian Universalists, mental capacities have been given priority and opening to integrate other aspects of ourselves may feel uncomfortable but is key to experiential awareness of other perspectives.

Questions to consider

- In what ways am I open and/or closed to engaging with and exploring all aspects of my being?
- Currently, how balanced are we in co-creating times of gathering, learning, service and worship that nurture each of these aspects of ourselves? Are we over developing some aspects while neglecting others?
- How are we consciously co-creating a culture where people would truly feel welcome to share in ways that engage their whole selves because they can see we are actively dedicated to restoring/maintaining balance within ourselves?

Point 3: Inquire

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

Upholding this aspect of the covenant requires a level of self-awareness that only comes from conscious and humble self-exploration. Part of being compassionate to ourselves and others is taking the time to do this when we are not feeling threatened so we can have something to refer back to when we feel uncomfortable. Taking the time to speak these aloud to others in our brave community will help co-create a culture where conscious awareness, and the accompanying vulnerability is revered, rather than feared. Understanding our individual and collective internal landscapes can help us to predict in advance the ways we might be prone to acting out to alleviate our discomfort, and what circumstances might provoke it.

The following are examples of instances of how self inquiry can be applied.

Example 1: During Wilma's self inquiry, they realize that an experience they had earlier in life, when a male partner had a relationship with someone else without their consent or knowledge, created sensitivity inside themselves. They find themselves uncomfortable with dynamics where they are asked to trust that others have their best interests in mind, as well as any type of relationship where they perceive there to be an imbalance of power. They can foresee that an upcoming conversation related to Polyamory ("multiple loves") could potentially result in some internal discomfort for them and are beginning to look at that now so they are better able to be present in the conversation in a less-reactive way. They share with a few close friends this self-discovery and ask for support in advance.

Example 2: There is considerable unrest in the congregation about this whole 8th principle addition and Fred is witnessing people lash out at each other in ways he never could have imagined. Some are even threatening to leave. Fred is noticing the personal insecurity that is rising up in him as the place he felt safe in has turned into a conflict zone. Fred wants to be there for Black, Indigenous and other peoples of colour and wants to hold space for conversation to take place about why the 7 principles are not adequately resulting in their inclusion AND he wants his community to just get along.

During Fred's self inquiry in preparation for this event he discovered that he is very open to other people's diverse self expressions and is so grateful to find belonging, safety and acceptance within Unitarianism as an openly gay man. He is immensely proud of the shared UU principles and holds these to be core to who he is as a person. He highly values the local UU community he is a part of and considers them family. Looking ahead to the upcoming meeting to discuss the 8th principle has caused some anxiety in him. Not only is there discussion about adding to the principles but there has also been some side conversations about whether other principles should be modified. Fred knows he considers these principles sacred, feels protective of them, and foresees he could be working through discomfort as they are discussed. As discomfort arises within him during this process he has committed himself to inquiring about where the discomfort is coming from and has asked a close mentor to help him watch out for any acting out that might happen for him. In his self-inquiry work he discovered that he feels resentful when people "drag out conversations" and he will sometimes prematurely start looking for solutions to conflicts in order to resolve his own sense of unease. He also knows he sometimes draws comparisons between queer discrimination and racial discrimination in order to identify himself as someone who "gets it" and is an ally not an adversary. He doesn't want to repeat these patterns here and has done this work in advance in order to be more conscious of his unconscious bias, beliefs, needs, wounds, and fears.

Questions to consider

As a part of your ongoing self-reflection practice consider:

- What could potentially threaten my sense of emotional safety- my ability to show up exactly as I am and express myself fully without fear I will be judged, attacked, or dismissed?

- What could potentially threaten my sense of spiritual safety- my sense of grounding in something greater than myself and to feel like I am a fundamentally good person?
- What could potentially threaten my sense of physical safety- that my body, finances, shelter and place within my community will not be taken from me?
- What could potentially threaten my sense of mental safety- my understanding of how the world works and where I fit into it?
- What is my worldview? How have I developed this worldview? In what ways is it similar and different from a western colonial worldview? Which aspects of my worldview would cause me to feel discomfort (and greater) if they were challenged? For more about [worldviews and contrast between Indigenous and Western worldviews.](#)
- What are all the types of privileges I experience? In what ways do I benefit? In what ways do I feel I have been lacking privilege? Which of these would invoke discomfort in me if challenged? Why?
- Which of my traditions (i.e. ceremonies, celebrations, ways of doing things, observances) do I hold as sacred and therefore would experience discomfort if I challenged, changed, or undermined? Which traditions do I hold as less sacred and therefore would experience less, little or no discomfort if challenged, changed or undermined? Why is this?
- Which protocols do I hold sacred in relationships? In my UU community? To what degree are these protocols explicitly discussed? How often are protocols revisited? What do those protocols represent to me? What meaning have I infused them with? If they are not followed, what meaning do I give to that? In what ways do the protocols I uphold limit people's participation? In what ways do they aid participation? Is it possible that there are different opinions on this? Which protocols, if not upheld and followed, would result in the greatest discomfort within me?
- Which values do I hold as sacred and, if challenged, ignored or dismissed would result in the most discomfort in me? Which values would I be less upset about if they were challenged, ignored or dismissed? Why is this?
- When I feel discomfort because one or more of my securities, worldview, privileges, traditions, protocols, and values are being challenged, how do I typically act out? What does it feel like on the inside? What are the early warning signs? What does it sound like? What does it look like? What do I imagine it feels like to others who witness it?

When discomfort arises consider:

- What is being challenged right now? Security? Worldview? Privileges? Traditions? Protocols? Values?
- What feelings are rising in me? What does it feel like in my body?

- What specific belief is behind the feeling I am having right now?
- What action am I feeling compelled to do to alleviate some or all of this discomfort?
- Is the internal experience of discomfort I am having need to be the focus of our collective experience together, or would it be more appropriate to see pastoral care and/or debriefing support after?
- If I choose to speak right now what would I be hoping to gain from it? Would my voice be adding productively to the conversation or would it be aimed at relieving my personal discomfort?
- If it would add to the quality of the collective experience, how could I speak in a good and humble way?

Point 4: 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.

For those of us who grew up or were enculturated in the West, our cultural training put a lot of emphasis on being heard and less on deep listening. As a result many of us engage in listening in order to respond, instead of listening in order to understand. In other words, we can become overly focussed on understanding how the things being shared relate to us (our views, our principles/values, our rights, our pain, our anger, our grief, our sorrow etc.) as opposed to focusing on deeply understanding the perspective and experiences of the person sharing.

We may do this for a variety of reasons, some conscious, some unconscious, and can include:

- the desire to control the depth and direction of the conversation,
- to prove our intelligence,
- to show we've cared enough to learn,
- to position ourselves as a "good guy" not a "bad guy",
- to show how "woke" we are,
- to save face or hide embarrassment,
- a response to personal trauma,
- protecting our ego.

When we indulge the urge to make someone else's sharing about us, regardless of our motivation, we miss out on the opportunity to be escorted deeper into their experience of the world as we keep them on the surface managing our responses to their reality.

As an alternative, what if our goal is to deeply understand why a person has the perspective they have, what it means to them, and why they would even care to use any of their finite life

energy to share their views with us? Wouldn't it be amazing if we could view every exchange as a sacred invitation to experience a glimpse of what life is like from another perspective? The children's story [Seven Blind Mice](#) nicely illustrates how each is granted only a limited view of our part of humanity, but if we take the time to hear from each other, we can better understand the larger "thing" we are all connected to.

Questions to consider

Ask yourself:

- Why am I feeling compelled to speak instead of listen?
- Is what I think I know really the most important thing to be shared right now?
- What would I be hoping to gain by sharing what I think I know?
- What would we miss out on by me redirecting the conversation to be about me right now?
- Are there any underlying experiences of trauma or hurts from my past that are coming up here?

Questions to ask another person to deepen your understanding of their perspective:

- Are there any parts of your lived experience that you would want to share more about? Why? Why not?
- If you feel comfortable to do so, I would appreciate hearing more about _____ (name the thing they shared about that you want to learn more about).
- What factors came together for you to have this point of view?
- What does it feel like to be a _____ person in this world, in our geographical community, in our congregational community? (note: It would be best not to ask this unless there was a very strong relationship of trust built over time, along with a sincere commitment to act by those who have privilege. Otherwise it could feel like asking marginalised people to share painful experiences for the casual interest of the privileged).
- What would make your experience in this world (and our congregation, if relevant) better for you? What changes would be significant?

*Notice: The questions are open ended.

Point 5: Resist

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

It is understandable that we would feel driven to take action to relieve discomfort through the above tactics. **It's natural to want to return to states of comfort when feeling unsettled.** However, when we reduce our discomfort by using the above tactics it doesn't mean that the

realities and perspectives that unsettled us cease to exist. It just means that we will not get to hear about them because we are not able to tolerate our discomfort long enough to really listen. **No one will be able to be with us in their full authenticity if we can not tolerate the discomfort of their truth.**

That may not be a problem for those who are content filling their world with people who will continually verify their version of reality. However, as Unitarians, we are aspiring to co-create a more just and inclusive world, communities, nations. We are saying we want diversity to flourish in our communities and so we are holding ourselves to a different standard- one that puts the onus on us to consider how much space we take up in our self expressions, how that has shaped our collective culture, and how flexible we are to make space for our Unitarian culture to be shaped by diversity.

Exploring the use of these tactics and their influence on our congregational/group culture may help us understand how we co-create cultures that exclude and oppress, while meaning to do the exact opposite.

Debating, Analyzing, Criticizing

Each of us have, over years of lived experience, developed tactics for engaging in the world in a way that keeps things that unsettle or harm us, at arm's length. The use of some of these tactics may have served us well in other contexts, and even resulted in rewards and accolades. Debating, analyzing and criticizing (critiquing) are tactics that are often revered in academia and professional life as they are particularly effective when applied to tasks, policy, planning, marketing and other *things*. However, they generally do little to promote *relational* intimacy and connection. When we apply these approaches to engaging relationally it can result in people feeling like the complexity of their experiences and personhood is being reduced to a *thing* to be discussed at a safe and comfortable distance. Something to be picked up when convenient, and put down when not. It can feel like we are interested in mining data from them to better inform our debates, petitions, and causes but not to actually change our ways of being that contribute to their oppression and marginalization. Instead of building *relationships*, it reduces a full human being into a *resource*- an object- a walking, talking encyclopedia. When we respond this way to people who are trying to share with us the depth of their humanity, we dehumanize them. It most likely does not feel that way, but when we deviate from the very human experience of oppression, which is very uncomfortable, and reduce it to a topic to be debated and analyzed from a more comfortable distance, that's exactly what we're doing. It is an act of violence.

Furthermore, it is common in UU congregations to refer to marginalized groups like IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour) and poor people as "them", even when those people are in our congregations and are really "us". When this occurs it is very likely that the culture has been shaped around the perception that "those people who experience oppression" exist (predominantly) outside the group. This is called "othering". Typically we hear this term

used in connection with developing an opinion that the “other” is inferior in some way, however it also happens when we label “others” as marginalized or oppressed, and in need of our help. When we speak like this we are failing to recognize that we are all interconnected and therefore we are part of co-creating the culture that is resulting in their oppression, marginalization or exclusion. The experience of “the other ” then becomes something to be studied, understood, advocated for- all from a safe distance that allows us to feel good about ourselves, even calling ourselves allies, activists, champions of the oppressed, titles that can only exist when we think in duality. Speaking in a way that assumes that all those diverse perspectives are present in our congregations/groups is vital if we are going to co-create cultures where those people might one day feel at home. We need look no farther than most of our congregations/groups to realize, in spite of our aspirations, expressions of diversity are limited.

Censor, Dismiss, Minimize, & Silence

Another group of tactics aims to reduce or eliminate discomfort by protecting ourselves from hearing about things that could unsettle us or removing the unsettling thing so we do not have to interact with it.

Examples include:

- limiting the types of things we will hear
- telling people what they can and can’t say to ensure they stay within our parameters of comfort
- claiming protocols need to be followed, blaming technical delays, creating procedural delays and other similar issues to prevent the issue from being discussed
- Claiming now is not the time
- Supporting the end but not the means
- “Prioritizing the absence of tension over the presence of justice” (Martin Luther King- Letter from Birmingham Jail)
- Editing or deleting recordings of speeches, sermons, letters, media posts etc.
- Trying to control the frequency and duration that contentious issues are discussed to ensure that the environment remains pleasant for those with the most privilege and power
- Assuming that people with life experiences or views that are different from the majority in a group will feel safe to share themselves authentically and fully within the group culture that exists
- Using processes such as majority voting to overrule or silence points of view that differ from the majority
- Tone policing whereby we tell people, “I’ll listen to you if you just say it less angrily (or pessimistic, accusatory, with less generalizations etc.)

It is important to remember that one of the hallmarks of unearned privilege is being able to determine when you want to put attention to the conditions and oppressive circumstances that other people have to deal with on a continual basis.

Moralize & Project

Another group of tactics aims to reduce or eliminate discomfort by making someone else wrong. In the case of **moralizing** we may focus our attention on “rightness” and “wrongness”. This could mean trying to determine absolutes or universal truths, and/or evaluating another in terms of how they measure up to the subset of moral codes we have deemed desirable. Our UU principles and values would be a good example of something that could be used to evaluate another against. The way in which we hold each other accountable is what determines if it is being used to uplift us to a more compassionate and conscious way of living, or as a measure to communicate how someone is not good enough.

In the case of **projecting** we unconsciously take unwanted emotions or traits we don’t like about ourselves and attribute them to someone else. For instance, someone is sharing about their lifestyle choices and their view of themselves as a feminist. You notice in yourself a desire to tell them that they are not in fact being feminist at all in making those lifestyle choices and should not be sharing those views publicly lest they sway other people into believing these choices are a healthy expression of female autonomy. If we are being curious we might ask ourselves if there is something from our life experiences, suppressed desires, past hurts/traumas, self condemnations and/or other unconscious areas of ourselves, that we are projecting onto this other person, making it difficult for us to fully hear and accept this person’s points of view, in full allowance that it may be different than our own views on feminism, and that’s ok.

Perform

Another tactic we may use to keep discomfort at bay is called performing. This is the tendency to focus attention on performing actions we think will address the injustices we perceive in the world. Instead of sitting with discomfort and allowing ourselves to take it all in, we may seek to perform these actions with urgency and gusto, as though doing so is the thing that will make a tangible difference. In doing so we can sometimes effectively diffuse some, or all, of our discomfort by absolving ourselves through performances of justice. We might notice this at times in some Unitarian Universalist circles when the latest social injustice hits the media and we want to immediately jump to write letters to the government, sign petitions, and other performative actions.

While there is certainly a time for action, challenges can arise when we fall into the trap of believing we must say and do “the right thing instead of becoming the right thing; that showing up is based on performing instead of transforming” (Glennon Doyle, Untamed). When it comes to healing things like discrimination in our societies, we must be able to sit in our discomfort long enough, and consistently enough, to allow the truths we are hearing dismantle in us anything that exists that might be contributing to another person’s experience of exclusion, discrimination and injustice. It requires us to assume that there is work to be done in us, and in our UU communities, as we have been breathing the poisonous air of misogyny, racism, capitalism and colonialism since the day we were born. It is in everything around us, and

impossible to escape. All of us have been affected. All of us are contributing in some way to maintaining the norm. Change, therefore, must be enacted from within ourselves and within our UU communities. We must transform ourselves, not perform justice in the world.

Does this mean that we stop taking thoughtful, well considered action? No. It means that we don't use performing as a substitute for personal and collective transformation. It means we develop the resilience needed to intentionally allow other people's experiences of injustice to affect us so deeply that we are willing to dismantle all unconscious biases, beliefs and unearned privileges in ourselves. As we are transformed, so too will our UU community be transformed, and as our UU communities are transformed, so will our geographical communities.

Questions to consider

- Which of the methods listed above do I use most often to deal with my discomfort?
- Why do I use these methods?
- How does the use of these methods negatively impact my ability to deeply listen?
- How does the use of these methods negatively impact my ability to honor the depth and complexity of people in a relational way?
- What impact do I think my use of these approaches is having on my relationships and how I am able to hold space for other people to be their authentic selves?
- What impact do others think my use of these approaches is having on my relationships and how I am able to hold space for them to be their authentic selves? (Yes, you will need to ask people to discover answers to this question. A bit scary? Yes. Necessary if we are to become more conscious? Definitely).

Point 6: 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.

Dr. David Campt, of the Dialogue Company, asserts that transformation within society can happen when we graciously accept that all of us, without exception, have unconscious biases. If we can accept in ourselves and others that we are contributing to inequalities and oppressions because of our unconscious biases, and yet are inherently good, then we can more easily listen to people's experiences and perspectives without reacting defensively.

As we listen more deeply we can better understand how we have each come to have our perspectives and accept this. Accepting reality for what it is in any given moment is not the same as saying that it is acceptable to us. It simply means we acknowledge that, where we are in each given moment is the sum total of all the choices we, and all those who came before us,

have made. It is an act of radical acceptance that does not seek to assign blame or label anyone villains/heros.

Once we truly accept what is, we can choose to embrace the journey of moving onward together. Beloved Community IS challenging. It's about un-making and re-making ourselves; expansion when we feel we might burst at the seams. It's about unconditional love and radical inclusion. It's NOT about comfort. We can embrace the discomfort that comes with the gift of expansion. In some cases we might focus on understanding our role in creating an oppression we wish to end, and in doing so embrace whatever discomfort this brings. In another case we may want to help our community understand our (or another's) experience of oppression and will need to embrace the internal discomfort that arises in us when we experience people pushing back in various ways, for various reasons. In either case, it is extremely challenging to strive for greater inclusion, while simultaneously embracing our communities exactly where we are.

The vision of an inclusive world starts within ourselves, families and congregations. We don't change the world from the outside, we change the world by transforming ourselves one unconscious belief and pattern at a time. To be afforded the opportunity to do so within Beloved Community is one of life's sweet blessings.

“But the end is reconciliation;
the end is redemption;
the end is the creation of the **beloved community**.
It is this type of spirit and this type of love
that can transform opposers into friends . . .
It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.”
Martin Luther King, 1957

Questions to consider

- What parts of our Beloved Community do I find challenging to accept fully and embrace?
- What parts of myself do I find challenging to accept fully and embrace?
- How would my perspective change if I viewed Beloved Community as it is described above?

Sample Introduction for use with a Speaker or Discussion

We highly recommend showing the Responsibility Covenant and sharing the verbal introduction you use with guests and speakers in advance in order to give them time to process it, make revisions, and to consider if there is anything else they would like addressed in order to feel safe to authentically share their truth. **Sharing in advance helps to prevent someone from feeling put on the spot.**

This Responsibility Covenant has been created by the Canadian Unitarian Council to support our efforts to dismantle racism, colonialism, classism, sexism, and prejudice of all kinds within our congregation/group, and to have a safe space for people to share their experience. [Show graphic to everyone present].

We thank [Name] for joining us today to share his/her/their perspective and his/her/their unique experience. Sharing his/her/their truth with us is a gesture of generosity and vulnerability.

As people who are committed to equity, justice, and radical inclusion we aspire to welcome diversity and be aware of our conscious and unconscious biases. Yet, in reality, we struggle with discomfort when we encounter perspectives that challenge our sense of security, worldview, privileges, and values. At times, this can bring up unpleasant feelings and we may feel compelled to act in ways to alleviate our discomfort which may be harmful, especially to those sharing.

Today, we commit to be open and curious, and to listen without projecting judgment. We commit to watch for any behaviours in ourselves that might result in [Name] feeling like his/her/their truth is being debated, discredited, censored, minimized, silenced, or erased. We will turn to the appointed leaders for support in processing our discomfort rather than bringing it to the group in a way that might derail learning or undermine our relationship with (Name). When we see others struggling, we commit to hold a separate space for them to process that upholds our UU principles which include the inherent worth and dignity of every person, our intent to live compassionately, and our commitment to justice for all.

For those present, will you agree to uphold this Responsibility Covenant? [Ask for response]

[Name], we have (name the people- show them to the audience) here to support our members through the processing that comes up so you will not have to take on that burden. Is there anything additional you need from us in order to feel good moving forward today? (room for response)

*NOTE: The guest should see this in advance and modifications made to ensure they are comfortable with it.

Q & A

Q. Is the Responsibility Covenant meant to silence people experiencing oppression in our congregations by telling them to get comfortable with their discomfort?

A. No. The Responsibility Covenant is asking each of us, in every situation, to assess what privileges we have in relation to the group we are with and the issue being lived/addressed/discussed. It is meant to help those with relative privilege mindfully witness their internal experience so that they create space for other people's authentic truths to be shared without being met by resistance.

Q. Why do some people show a lot of resistance to hearing perspectives that differ from their own, and other people don't? How can I support them?

A. Jack Mezirow spoke about the [10 Phases of Transformative Learning](#) people go through when they encounter ideas that do not fit into their pre-existing schema (ways of understanding the world). Sometimes when we feel resistance in ourselves, or see it in others, it can be connected to a sense of disorientation in our own mind/lives, and fear associated with that. Imagine your mind contains ideas that are scaffolded; organized to build upward like a window washer might use to scale the side of a building. Every experience since childhood has contributed in some way to the mental structures we have in place. Some views are foundational to our sense of mental security and we tend to build up from them. When we encounter a new idea we determine how to integrate the new idea into our preexisting scaffolding. If we can find a place for it that doesn't jumble our thinking too much we can carry on with our foundational worldviews and beliefs intact. If, however, we encounter something- say a new idea or observation- that does not easily fit into our internal scaffolding (schemata) then we have to make a choice to either discard the new information by ignoring or discounting it OR we decide to put attention to re-ordering the scaffolding of our mind in order for things to make sense to us again. There are times when our "sense making" results in us disassembling our scaffolds right down to our foundational beliefs. The closer we get to those types of beliefs the more intense the disorienting dilemma will feel because disassembling has resulted in some concepts and ideas no longer having a clear place to belong in our mind.

Here are the 10 phases as listed on the site linked above:

- A disorienting dilemma
- A self examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning a course of action

- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- Provision trying of new roles
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

In the context of a culture shift within a group/organization a disorienting dilemma might result from someone asserting that the organization is racist or someone other way that the person does not have a framework to understand. If someone hears the word racist and has come to see that as synonymous with "bad" they have a strong reaction because to believe this might mean to them that they are no longer a "good" person, or a part of a "good" movement. This can become particularly challenging for people within organizations that have a social justice focus and have absorbed aspect of this into their individual and collective identities.

Q. Why is culture shift work so slow and what can I do to speed things up?

- A. The [Innovation Adoption Curve](#) is used to explain how new ideas and technologies become adopted within society. The basic principles can be illuminating when applied to the adoption of new ideas within congregations and movements like Unitarianism. Understanding this sequence can help those championing new ideas to expend their energy more strategically by focusing on the people that are the next most likely to adopt the new idea, rather than getting discouraged by the resistance of groups that are not likely to adopt the new idea until later in the process. The explanations below have been adapted to consider the goals of Unitarians introducing ideas with the intent of shifting the group culture in order to realize greater diversity and inclusivity. The percentages come from the Innovation Adoption Curve.

Innovators (2.5%)- A small percentage will be leading the movement for change. These people tend to be inspiring and persuasive. They are willing to take risks and typically are not concerned about conforming to the group norm. When it comes to ideas that promote greater diversity and inclusivity they tend to be those that either have direct experience with an unjust social condition, or have close connections with those that do. To be most effective Innovators should focus all their energy on finding and influencing the Early Adopters. They should not focus any energy on dealing with those in direct opposition as their focus needs to be solely on reaching the **Tipping Point**, which is the point at which there is enough energy in support of the new idea that it begins to create its own momentum (typically when 15-18% of the group/population/society are on board).

Early Adopters (13.5%)- This group will be quick to adopt the new idea because their previous life experiences and resulting perspectives of life makes it easy for them to see the benefits for themselves and the group if the new idea becomes a cultural norm. They will happily use their large social capital and group status to influence others. The most effective use of this

group's energy is to focus on influencing those that are hesitant but not completely in opposition as they will become the Early Majority.

Early Majority (34%)- This group tends to watch and listen for a while, perhaps seeking the answers to questions they have in order to feel comfortable moving forward with the new idea. You will recognize these people by their desire to understand how the new idea would work and their openness to consider it as a possibility. Listening closely to these people's questions and answering them well is what Innovators and Early Adopters can focus on to help the new idea become more quickly embraced by the group as a whole. These group can be very helpful in shaping the idea and identifying things that, if addressed, would make it easier for others to come on board.

Late Majority (34%)- This group tends to adopt a new idea after the majority of the group already has, and even then they may do so with skepticism. Initially, however, they will protest "seven ways to Sunday", and no amount of reasoning is likely to make a meaningful impact. They are likely to restate their own ideas over (and over) again rather than demonstrate a willingness to consider new perspectives. When it comes to leading social change this is not a group to invest too much time in during the early stages. They may find others like them to discuss their shared points of view but they typically will not budge on their stance until much later on in the process. However, as the new idea gathers momentum in the group it may be helpful to frame the movement in such a way that allows this group to understand that the shift has already happened, adopting the new idea has been a positive experience for those already involved, and they are welcome to join.

Laggards (16%)- This group is the last to adopt a new idea, and even then, may do so reluctantly, if at all. They tend to place a lot of value on tradition and have been described as having an aversion to change agents who threaten the comfort of their reality by introducing unsettling ideas. Focussing on this group during the early stages of an adoption process is definitely not a good use of energy for the Innovators and Early Adopters. In the end, if this group is still reluctant to adopt the new idea it may be necessary to inform them that _____ has become the new norm and state particular expectations that go along with this. This does not mean kicking a person out of the group, however it may mean the group clearly communicating the new cultural norm so the person can decide if they would like to stay or leave to find others that share ideals that are a closer match to theirs.

In the case of a closed group, such as a congregation, it would be beneficial for the Innovators and/or Early Adopters to work together to identify which people are most likely to make up the next layer to be reached, which is the Early Majority. Reaching this group is key in determining whether an idea will reach its Tipping Point and make its way

into the mainstream thinking of the group. If it does, the gained momentum will make the shift much less labour intensive. Therefore focusing energy on engaging them is key. Expect resistance from other layers of the group but do not allow it to redirect energy that should be dedicated to finding and connecting with those that would meet the description of the Early Majority.

Q. Besides introducing a discussion with the Responsibility Covenant what types of things would be good to have on a group covenant generated by those participating?

A. Here are some sample covenants groups are using:

Sample #1

We will:

- speak from our own experiences and perspectives
- listen generously to the experiences and perspectives of others, creating supportive space for each person to learn.
- Actively resist making assumptions about one another.
- Refrain from fixing, saving, advising, or correcting each other.
- Be mindful of "taking space and making space" to ensure everyone has opportunities to speak and to listen.
- Expect and accept non-closure, because the work of disrupting racism is ongoing.
- Be willing to be challenged to disrupt racist patterns, both by the activities and discussions by other participants
- Respect the confidentiality of personal information and stories shared here.

Sample #2

We will:

- Share what we learned, but not what we heard (Confidentiality)
- Use only "I" statements – sharing personal experience and perspective.
- Listen with attention, openness, compassion and curiosity. Be aware that we learn through the sharing of our story and witnessing the story of others.
- Respect each others' perspective and refrain from advice giving, rescuing, crosstalk and/or interruptions.
- We will act in such a way that honors the idea that we all arrive whole and do not require fixing
- Give space for people to be where they are at, and to move to their own point of light
- Declare the right to pass or sit in silence.
- Share time equitably.
- Speak with intention.
- Contribute to the well-being of the group.
- Protect the identity and personal stories within the group.
- We choose to be uncomfortable, and to respond to our discomfort with understanding that we don't change other people, places or things.

For more support on the process of Covenanting please reach out to Joan@cuc.ca (Western Region) and Linda@cuc.ca (Eastern Region). They have a workshop and resources to guide you through the process.

Q. It seems as Unitarians we have good principles but we have no mechanisms for holding each other accountable. How can we move toward that? What would it look like?

- A. This article, [Dreaming Accountability](#), asserts that accountability does not need to be something we fear but a skill we can build and practice.

Q. What does “White Moderate” mean?

- A. This is a reference that Martin Luther King Jr. made when describing the things that are in the way of freedom for black skinned people. It is used in the Responsibility Covenant resource because of its applicability to Unitarian Universalism in Canada which consists largely of white skinned people, many of whom enjoy many layers of privilege. As Unitarians, we need to be aware of our relative privileges and the sense of comfort that affords us and be highly aware of when we behave in the ways King describes. As we consider how conversation of adding the 8th Principle has been handled, and the plethora of resistance that has arisen, it would be wise for all of us to ask if we are behaving as a White Moderate.

“ I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Martin Luther King Jr., [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)

Q. What does “Relative Privilege” mean?

- A. This term implies that privilege isn't an all or nothing phenomenon, but rather something that is experienced on a spectrum and in relation to what is being considered. We might look at ourselves and others and notice that we have some privileges but not others, and that some people have many more privileges than others. Specific circumstances may highlight specific privileges. For instance, a well educated, white cis-gendered woman who uses a wheel chair would be lacking privilege from her disability and her gender, but

she would still have education privilege, white privilege and cis-gender privilege. If the circumstance was focused on anti-black racism she might notice internal biases and privileges resulting from her “whiteness”. If, however, the topic was related to the physical accessibility of a building she would definitely notice that she does not experience privilege in this regard because it's her daily lived experience. In general we tend to notice when we are lacking privilege and not notice when we have privilege because we have become accustomed to moving about the world with the liberties and conveniences it affords us. It can be hard for us to imagine what it would be like and feel to lack certain privileges, but this is exactly what we must try to do to become more compassionate and responsive to one another.

To learn more about how to assess your own privilege there is a wonderful write up and exercise created by D.L. Plummer and Associates called [“Diversity Petal”](#)

To learn more about [intersectionality and privilege](#)