

Agreeing to Disagree In Love 2020

Agreeing to Disagree In Love. Is this the first time you've heard that phrase? It shouldn't be. We've been using this document for about ten years, the whole time I've been here. It is posted on our website under our Guiding Documents. We've talked about it in the past. It is a part of the commitment you make in Membership. So if you are a member or regularly attend ULV this is hopefully not a new concept. But it still might be. If you are unfamiliar with the tenants of Agreeing to Disagree In Love, there are copies on the back table. Feel free to take one home. It's a handy tool for fair fighting in any setting, not just church.

The title is Agreeing to Disagree. The document is about creating a culture of communication in advance of any conflict that supports a healthy dialog and a thriving spiritual community. At least that was my intention. I spent five years being an ordained minister without a church. I did some consulting and saw the effects of unhealthy dialog and wounded spiritual communities. I worked with a church where the police were called the Sunday before I came. In the ten years of committing to this way of discussion, I hope we have grown spiritually and become comfortable with this as the normal way of communicating, not the exception. I hope we feel this way of communicating supports our Core Values. And I hope this framework supports a culture of Respect, Diversity, Clarity and Accountability. Rather than read the document to you today, line for line, I thought I might explore how the document supports a culture of Respect, Diversity, Clarity and Accountability in alignment with our Core Values. Hopefully this will help us remember **to use** this tool and how beneficial it can be.

We start with what I feel is a myth: *To be spiritual is to always be in agreement. Conflict is negative energy to be avoided.* Let's think about that.

Is it always better to agree? The country of Germany is still struggling with how so many people agreed to the atrocities that happened under the leadership of Hitler. The Unity Movement is still struggling with how long we agreed to the practice of segregation of minorities, especially African-Americans, while we preached the divinity and unity of all. In the Unity Movement it was Jonnie Coleman who finally stood up and said, "No More! I will not comply with segregation. If you enforce it, I leave the ministry."

Conflict is two different opinions occupying the same space at the same time. There is nothing inherently negative about that. It is the seed of change. It is diversity in opinions.

In the document we commit to: Accept Conflict and acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church. We Affirm Hope and know that as God works through us in conflict, we can grow. Spiritual Growth is one of our core values and we define it as “Trusting the wisdom within each one, our paths unfold and lead us to accept a deeper understanding of the powerful love that we are.” Conflict is part of our path and can lead us to a deeper understanding of the love that we are. Our core value of Community says “we honor each part of the greater whole”. Did we expect each part of the greater whole to be exactly like all the other parts? Or do we desire and encourage diversity in our individual parts so that we can be a stronger whole. What if we only knew one song to sing? It would be so boring to keep singing the same song. Yet, imagine the conflict if someone came in and suggested we sing a different song! Let’s pretend each of us only has one skill. Think of a project we’ve done recently that drew us together. If everyone has the same skill, how do we get anything done? It is the diversity that makes us stronger and more capable.

So how do we honor each part of our diversity? How do we create respect in our conversations? There are some guideposts in the document.

Go directly to those with whom we disagree. Go in gentleness, patience and humility. Suspend judgments, avoid labeling, end name calling, discard threats, and act in a non-defensive, non-reactive way. Listen carefully, summarize and check out what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood.

Chances are we’ve heard all these ideas before. And they make perfect sense as we calmly read them now. How many of these go out the window in the heat of different opinions? Which is part of the reasoning to agree to our tenants of Disagreeing **in advance** of any disagreement! Once we’ve agreed, we have something to go back to. We have a framework to learn within. When the conversation heats up, we can take a breath and reflect on the way forward. And the best way forward seems to me to be with clarity. There is some guidance in the document on that too!

I want to focus on this: *Place the problem between us at neither doorstep and own our part in the conflict.* Sometimes the most helpful first step is to figure out what the problem really is. And that requires us to be accountable for our personal inner searching, for our responsibility in spiritual community and owning our emotional baggage that we drag into the discussion. The **problem** is rarely what appears on the surface to be the point of differing opinions.

Let's look at a "problem" commonly arising in churches, including this one, from time to time. The **problem** is some people want to move and some people don't want to move. If we get stuck at the "move or don't move" stage we miss a lot of growth opportunities. And often we don't resolve what is underneath. And if we don't resolve the real issues, guess what, they reappear. So what might be some things we miss if we get stuck?

Is there accountability for a process to evaluate the need for a move and benefits and risks of a move? Do all congregants feel heard in the process? This involves some personal work related to whether or not all congregants accept responsibility to participate and read the evaluation for information beyond their personal bias on outcomes. As an individual, do I feel triggered by someone's personality or by the move issue? Where does that trigger come from and how can I examine my own thoughts beyond the emotions being triggered? We can be triggered by someone's gender, accent, language or a million tiny things that often relate to wounding in our family of origin or some early trauma. Often our reaction has little to do with the person in front of us but a lot to do with the emotions triggered in us. What are the dreams and fears associated with the move? Are these deeper than the move and dreams and fears around the spiritual community in general? A fundamental tension exists around change and stability. We need both. In a move people tend to move to ends of the spectrum of all or nothing. We'll die if we change or we'll die if we don't change. It's really a fear of dying as a community.

ULV has a core value of creativity in which we say, "We are individual expressions of the unlimited life-giving energy of Divine Mind. With infinite possibilities available, we shape our world and our experience." The document asks us to consider: *Identify issues, interests and needs of all. **Generate a variety of options** for meeting the parties' needs and the needs of **the community**. Evaluate options by how they meet the needs and satisfy the interests of all sides and **the community**. Collaborate to create a joint solution. Cooperate with the emerging agreement (accept the possible, not demand your ideal).*

We go into a situation believing we already know the options and the outcome. How creative is that? Infinite possibilities and we have decided, in advance how it will turn out. Is that living the Truth we know in Unity?

I love this line in the document: Be firm in our commitment to seek a mutual solution; be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Spirit; be steadfast in love. No one encourages you to be stubborn! But be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Spirit. This feels like our core values of love and community and creativity and spiritual growth all in one. And mutually satisfying solutions are part of our abundance and that reminds us of our joy.

As we embark on a new year, it's a good time to review our commitment to Agreeing to Disagree In Love. As we embark upon a year in which our nation chooses its leadership and challenges face us no matter where we look, wouldn't it be good to be able to agree to disagree in love? On a global scale it seems harder to facilitate a discussion about what is in the best interest of the **community** and yet, how many planets do we have? Earth is our community for food and clean water and clean air. All people are our family. Though it may seem unlikely, let us be stubborn in entertaining the possibilities of peace, harmony and abundance as we create 2020.