



# Social Justice & Advocacy Guidelines

Unity Church Unitarian - Reviewed January 2024 by the Executive Team

## Purpose

To establish guidelines separating members' political activities from that of the church.

## Introduction

Unity Church-Unitarian has a long history of participating in social justice activities at all levels of society. Unitarian Universalist principles encourage the right of conscience and utilizing the democratic process to achieve social justice, equity, and equal opportunity for all individuals in our local, national, and global communities.

Our congregation supports individual and group efforts to bring about a world where no person is denied the right to participate and enjoy the fruits of a just and equitable society.

As a religious organization, however, Unity Church-Unitarian must be cognizant of the legal requirements to maintain our tax-exempt status as a 501 (c) (3) organization as defined by the Internal Revenue Code. Although our country was founded on the principle of the separation of church and state, this does not preclude religious organizations from actively participating in public policy activities without endangering their nonprofit tax-exempt status. There are numerous areas in which our congregation can participate in political actions as permitted under IRS regulations.

**The Community Outreach Ministry Teams (COMT) were created by and for Unity Church members to enable them to advocate for justice issues consistent with our values, vision, mission and Ends Statements.** Therefore, these guidelines are created to assist both the congregation at large, and those involved in the COMT's to discern what degree of advocacy is acceptable within our limitations as a 501 (c) (3) and as a church which practices Congregational Polity.

## Policy

We take direction from Unity Church Unitarian's Policy Governing Policies, which state:

### **II: Executive Leadership Limitations**

#### Policy H: Communication and Counsel to the Board

With respect to providing information and counsel to the Board, the Executive Leadership shall not cause or allow the Board to be uninformed or misinformed.

**Accordingly, the Executive Leadership shall not:** *Make public statements about the*

*official position of the congregation or Board on controversial social, political, and/or congregational issues unless the congregation or Board has formally and explicitly adopted them as positions of record. Nothing in this policy shall be construed to infringe upon the fundamental principle of freedom of the pulpit.*

The Executive Team believes this is an appropriate guide for the COMT's to follow as well. To summarize:

*A minister or congregation member may freely engage in these activities as an individual. However, if the person(s) are identified by or likely to be associated with the congregation, they should state clearly that they are speaking as individuals. Only issues which have been voted on by the congregation, at a congregational meeting, may be publicly identified as affirmed by the entity known as Unity Church-Unitarian.*

## **COMT's and Political Action**

It is the policy of the Unity Church-Unitarian to act within guidelines ***permitted by the IRS code as described below:***

**A. Issue Advocacy:** Without limits on time, effort and expense, members of the congregation, through the COMT's and other approved venues may engage in issue advocacy through activities such as mobilizing congregants and the public as long as it does not involve political campaign intervention (see below).

**B. Lobbying:** This congregation and its representatives may engage in lobbying (advocating for or against legislation) as long as it constitutes less than 5% of this congregation's total activities (money, staff, and volunteer time).

**C. Political campaign intervention:** This congregation and its representatives may not advocates for or against candidates for public office or political parties. (Note: This IRS provision does not restrict free expression on political matters by the minister and other leaders of the congregation **when speaking for themselves as individuals.**)

Below is a list of some of the more common Do's and Don'ts of political activities our congregation must follow to retain tax-exempt status, however, the restrictions on lobbying and political campaign intervention described here apply only to a congregation as a legal entity, or to a person or group speaking in the name of the congregation. *(This list compiled from UUA sources on political activity in churches)*

### **As a Congregation, Do:**

- Advocate for non-partisan positions in the media and to elected officials.

- Educate and mobilize congregants and the general public on issues.
- Work in local coalitions or partnerships on issues of social justice.
- Support or criticize legislators, lobby them, and hold them accountable
- Sponsor and distribute nonpartisan information that is clearly independent and objective such as voter education materials.
- Invite political candidates to speak at congregational functions if they have an equal chance to participate.

**As a Congregation, DON'T**

- Advocate for or against candidates for public office or political parties.
- Issue letters of endorsement or opposition on congregation letterhead
- Distribute campaign literature, display campaign signs, or engage in activities that could be construed as endorsing a candidate. This applies to elections at all levels of government.
- Contribute money or donate space to candidates.
- Make partisan comments in official organization publications or at official functions of the organization.

This is not a definitive list, but addresses some of the most common issues that may be encountered at Unity Church Unitarian. More specific information and guidance relating to political campaign activity, advocacy and lobbying can be obtained in THE REAL RULES – Congregations and the IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections – UUA, Washington Office for Advocacy.

This information is available on the UUA website (UUA.ORG) and as an adopted attachment to this policy:  
([http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/real\\_rules.pdf](http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/real_rules.pdf)).

A church member who has any questions or concerns that a proposed activity meets policy guidelines is encouraged to consult with the Executive (or Executive's representative) prior to initiating political activity of any sort.

*2<sup>nd</sup> draft approved by Executive Team, 1/18/2024*