

## **Responding to Hurtful Remarks**

by Richard Duda, UUCPA Conflict Resolution Team

At one time or another it is likely that all of us have made or received hurtful remarks, or have witnessed hurtful comments directed at others. Such words undermine our first principle – to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To build and maintain the kind of community we want UUCPA to be, we all need to be allies of each other, which means speaking up when hurtful speech occurs.

Hurtful remarks can be intentional or unintentional. In uncomfortable situations, everyone has experienced making a quick comment without realizing how it will be received by the other person. But how should we respond if we are the recipient of words that hurt?

There is no single answer to this question, but here are some suggestions.

First, let go of feeling a need to respond quickly. Hurtful remarks are often the result of ignorance. Knowing that we cannot change another person's understanding with one or two sentences frees us from feeling defensive and helpless. Second, people who make hurtful remarks almost always respond best to correction if they feel they are respected and not under attack (even if they are not demonstrating their best selves at the time). The sarcastic replies that are funny in sitcoms are not likely to be effective in reality.

A training course on cultural sensitivity recommends the following general principles:

1. Be direct. Speak to the person who hurt you, not to others.
2. Be specific. Try to say exactly what it was that troubled you.
3. Be timely. Memories fade and perceptions change with the passage of time.
4. State how the remarks affect you. Use "I statements" and avoid derogatory labels.
5. State what change you want the person to make.
6. Acknowledge subsequent changes.

But what if you were the person who inadvertently made the hurtful remarks? Even if the person you offended responds with considerable grace, you may now be the one that feels defensive, frustrated, and even angry. This same course suggests the following principles for receiving correction:

1. Listen carefully
2. Restate what you think you heard
3. Ask questions if necessary to understand the other person's concerns
4. Gather additional information by observing your behavior
5. Without overreacting to the feedback, modify your behavior and evaluate outcomes

It's hard to talk about hurtful remarks, and often we avoid it or do it poorly. Using these ideas can make a difference, and even turn lose-lose situations into win-win situations.

*The UUCPA Conflict Resolution Team was formed to help our congregation to deal with disagreements among members. If you would like help with a church-related issue, please send an e-mail to [conflict@uucpa.org](mailto:conflict@uucpa.org) or speak to a member of the team. The current team members are Joe Chee, Richard Duda, Susan Owicki, and John Pierce.*