

Congregational Covenant

Setauket Presbyterian Church

In 2008, the SPC Session adopted “12 Rules for Working Through Conflict,” a document that established guidelines for conversations in the church. In July 2021, a group of members representing the various committees of the church gathered to write a new covenant for conversations, drawing upon the 2008 document as well as various other models. This covenant is intended to help shape our whole life together.

In our journey as a church family we walk through life’s joys and sorrows together. Our everyday meetings, conversations, and discussions offer opportunities to deepen our relationships, our understanding of one another, and our ministry together as a community of faith. We also know that as we try to be faithful, it is likely that disagreements and conflicts will arise. Conflict can be harmful and even destructive, causing individual pain and communal damage. At the same time, conflict can be an opportunity for new insights, learning, and individual and corporate growth-- and the successful resolution of conflict can bind people together in a powerful way. God promises to be with us both in times of unity and in times of disagreement and calls us to reconciliation, trust, love and forgiveness. (Adapted from language adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (USA))

As in Scripture, a covenant is not just words but an active commitment: it is meant to be lived and practiced. We urge SPC members to read, reference, and remember this covenant in every meeting and conversation so that it might become part of our DNA at SPC. We encourage changes to it as we learn from it. We believe that creating “brave space” for conversation is critical to our identity as a Matthew 25 church and to our antiracism work. We invite leaders of committees, educational programs, small groups, and other gatherings to model this covenant. We know that we will discover many ways that this covenant, and our practice of it, is deficient; we intend for it to help us grow and learn together.

Ephesians 4:15 calls us to speak the truth in love. In every conversation at SPC, we covenant to:

1. Work intentionally to build trust and relationships; for example, taking opportunities at the beginning of meetings to check in, connect, and get to know one another better and deeper.
2. Treat each other respectfully, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus Christ.
3. Listen to learn and understand, not to respond immediately, with a genuine interest in hearing the viewpoints of others.
4. Ensure that everyone’s voice is heard, step back to share speaking time, and speak up when conversations need to be more equitable.
5. When there is a topic of disagreement, learn about the various positions, share personal experiences, and ask questions without intimidation or judgment. Share openly where we agree and disagree with other viewpoints. Seek areas of consensus.

6. Take responsibility for our own words and feelings, using “I” statements. Work to be self-aware about how our own feelings, needs, and experiences shape our views and reactions.

7. Lean into discomfort and address it. Ask for a time out, call for clarity, or dialogue when sensing or feeling tension.

8. Speak directly to someone with whom we have an issue in a spirit of love. Challenge behaviors and ideas, not motives or integrity, Be open to forgive and be forgiven.

9. When a vote is taken in a committee, the Session or the congregation, be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who disagree and acknowledge their rights of conscience. At the same time, respect and abide by the decision of the majority and maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

10. Recognize how advantages of privilege and power can create inequity, lack of awareness, and harm. Work actively to remove blind spots that keep us from a fuller, more compassionate, more understanding, and ultimately more loving view of another or another’s perspective. Speak up calmly and directly when we witness someone else being harmed.

11. Add to the end of each meeting agenda the item “We speak the truth in love,” providing intentional space for any unspoken questions, concerns, frustrations, disagreement, or hurt to be expressed with the group, rather than discussed outside of the meeting.

12. Pray with and for one another in times of sorrow, joy, and disagreement, seeking God’s grace, guidance and peace.

This document draws language from: Setauket Presbyterian Church, *12 Rules for Working Through Conflict (2008)*; Center for Nonviolent Communications & Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication Skills*; AWARE-LA, *Communications Guidelines for a Brave Space*; PC(USA), *Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement*; Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship congregation, Bayside, CA, *Congregational Covenant*