



Congregational E-Mail as a Blessing, not a Curse

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Electronic Communications are becoming the way of modern congregational life. When used well, this technology is a great boon to Unitarian Universalist ministry. However, sad experience shows it can turn an innocent remark into hurtful strife, or exacerbate disagreements and engender larger conflicts, and/or generally stir anxiety and leave everyone feeling less safe in their congregation. So, for your consideration, I offer these tips for using E-mail well in your congregation:

1. In your congregation, think of E-mail **as a business memo**, not as a letter to a buddy:
 - a. Be personal, but keep it short, to the point.
 - b. Be relevant: Say clearly what you want the reader to do.
 - i. If you want a direct reply, say so.
 - ii. Be polite, reply promptly to any E-mail you receive.
 - (1) Be judicious in “reply to all.” Typically, it is not necessary to reply to anyone but the writer.
 - (2) Similarly, do not forward notes on without the awareness of the sender.
 - (3) When replying, delete the accumulating thread-responses, keeping only the last one or only the specific item upon which you are commenting
 - (a) Example” “Should we should paint the nursery this Spring?” “Yes, I agree.”
 - c. Keep your note free of fancy formatting — save your time.
 - d. Be sure it is spell & grammar-checked — don’t embarrass yourself.
 - e. Remember: if this is church business, it ought to reflect well on Unitarian Universalism, on you, and on your fellow congregants.
2. Remember, it is **writing**, not speaking.
 - a. Watch your tone, the reader has no visual or acoustic cues by which to detect nuance or intensity.
 - i. Adding cute emoticons [e.g. (:-<, or (:->] . . .
 - ii. Or, worse, smiley-faces [that pass on spy-ware] really do not change this.
 - b. Avoid jargon, computer short-speak [e.g., “btw” = by the way].
 - c. Spare the reader YOUR INDIGNATION by shouting in CAPS.
3. Generally, you **may use E-mail** to:
 - a. Pass on good news.
 - b. Make appointments or scheduling meetings.
 - c. Share general information [e.g., copies of minutes, agenda].
 - d. Express thanks or appreciations.
 - e. Share jokes [be judicious, however].
4. You **should**:

- a. **Never** use E-mail that in any way is contrary to our Unitarian Universalist principles of respect for the dignity of persons and being truthful.
 - i. There simply is no excuse for vendettas, personal attacks, defamatory or abusive language, racist, sexist, or obscene remarks.
 - ii. Similarly, E-mail ought not to be a place for put-downs, mind reading, accusations of motive, or slander.
 - b. **Never** use E-mail to negotiate anything more important than an appointment.
 - i. Negotiation is an interaction, a back and forth dialogue best done in person.
 - (1) Exception: you may use E-mail when working out emotionally neutral text language to an agreement or something like by-laws revisions.
 - c. **Never** use E-mail to work our disagreements, to complain, or to criticize.
 - i. Ours is a people to people enterprise, so be in the same room when dealing with any emotional upset.
 - d. **Never** use E-mail for any conflict over any sensitive issue.
 - i. The impersonal nature of E-mail tempts upset folks to write injudiciously, often further fanning the flames of ill-will and deepening divisions.
 - ii. E-mail makes it easy to hide, creating disingenuousness contrary to being in a beloved community.
 - iii. The “send” button does not have an “oops, bring it back” option.
 - e. **Never** use E-mail to gossip or to triangle others onto your side.
 - f. **Never** use E-mail to discuss anything confidential.
 - i. E-mail is a public, not a private medium.
 - ii. You lose all control of information’s ultimate use once you hit the “send” button.
 - iii. Thus, never assume your words won’t end up where you would not want them to go.
 - iv. As a practical matter, congregations are potentially liable for the public remarks of their leaders.
 - g. **Never** use E-mail to spam your congregation.
 - i. Don’t send pictures of your new puppy to the entire congregation.
 - ii. Don’t advertise your personal business or pass on chain mails.
5. Odds and ends:
- a. **E-mail discussion groups** or chat-lines can be a source of rich engagement, particularly as it allows slow and thoughtful back and forth conversations.
 - i. Thus, for topics of a philosophical nature, “arguing” one’s point of view in E-mail is ok.
 - (1) Caveat: political topics can be exciting, but often rapidly go “hot.”
 - (2) Thus, such discussions still ought to have a “host” to enforce the above rules.
 - b. **Attachments.** For better or worse, Microsoft *Word* and *Excel* are the dominant document formats.
 - i. Thus, convert to them if you prefer another format.
 - ii. Note: older versions of *Word* often do not open. If in doubt, use the cut-and-paste plain text method and append the information at the bottom of your E-mail.
6. **Congregational Policies:** In an ideal world, it would not be necessary ever to spell out norms for decent behavior. Even among Unitarian Universalists, however, unreason or passion sometimes overwhelms our better judgment. Thus, I recommend every congregation craft and publish a “*Covenant of Right E-Mail Relations*” that spells out, as above, what is ok and what is not. Absent such a policy, congregations are open to abuse by bullies or the immature and the dangers noted here.

Please send me whatever you craft so I may share it with others. Thanks. Blessings,

Rev Kenn