

West University United Methodist Church Policy for Resolving Conflicts

Because conflict often involves some combination of obstacles that merit special attention, it's often defined as a problem. While we may think that conflict poses difficulty, it's not necessarily negative. There may be some level of "work" required in conflict situations, which does indeed lead to very positive outcomes. Without conflict and without ever having to exert any effort to manage difficult differences we would discover ourselves:

- Not being challenged to think critically about our ideas
- Limited in our creativity
- Ineffective in solving problems
- Limiting our intellectual and emotional resources
- Missing interesting and important new experiences in life
- Learning very little about other people
- Not understanding what is really important to us
- Finding no reason to build community with others*

Wherever two or three or more are gathered, the potential for misunderstanding, disappointment, and conflict is always present. Jesus assures his followers in Matthew 18, however, that "Where two or three are gathered in my name 'I am there among them.'" Scriptural (and Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee) goals related to problem-solving and conflict resolutions include, but are not limited to:

1. Reconciliation between offended parties
2. Building a strong mutual ministry
3. Growth for all parties
4. Learning how to live in Christian community, where the people who comprise that community are diverse and imperfect.

Here are the words of Jesus on the matter of resolving conflicts (Matthew 18: 15-20)

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if

two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Reconciliation and problem-solving are not always easy, but the following process and suggested helps are a Scriptural basis of achieving the goal of restored relationships. By handling conflict in the following way, the church sets a Christian example for people to use in their families, work place, and community relationships.

These helps are intended to be guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. The main objective is to bring about reconciliation by involving as few people as necessary in the problem-solving process. This enables reconciliation without the escalation of the conflicted circumstances and issues.

Jesus' Strategy for Conflict Resolution

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

If an offended person is unable to let a hurt go, he/she speaks privately, in love, with the one who has offended. Jesus knew that the potential for resolution increases when fewer, rather than more, people are involved. Jesus invited people to avoid "building an army" at the outset by involving more than the immediate parties into the conversation. His words are an encouragement to avoid triangulation, which happens when the offended person wishes to remain anonymous and recruits someone else to do the difficult work of confrontation for them.

But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If the problem is not solved by the first step, the offended person brings a witness with him/her. In United Methodist churches, Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee (S/PPRC) members are elected to be reconciling agents and interpreters. The offended person may ask for an S/PPRC member to go with him/her to assist with the conversation or ask another person. Before matters come before the S/PPRC as a whole, however, the offended member should include an S/PPRC member in a two-(or three)-to-one conversation.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;

At this point the S/PPRC as a whole (representing the church) is involved. The offended party needs to be present at the meeting with the one who has offended long enough to state the concern and summarize the efforts made to resolve the problem on his/her own. To do otherwise the S/PPRC risks triangulation with committee members attempting to speak on behalf of the offended party and often second-guessing what the real issues may be. In the event there is more than one offended party, each may meet for a time with the S/PPRC in the presence of the one who has offended, one by one. The goals for all involved at this point still remains reconciliation, building up the church, personal growth, and learning to live with less than perfect co-workers in Christian community.

If the pastor is involved in the conflict, the next step is to broaden the base of those who help the offender hear the concern by including a denominational representative – the District Superintendent. The DS can arrange to visit with the S/PPRC and parties involved. Goals of the reconciliation process remain the same.

And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Someone who does not know about the life and teachings of Christ may assume that letting someone be “as a Gentile and a tax collector” means ending a relationship. Christians know, however, that this is precisely the person Jesus was most intentional about seeking. What this verse suggests is that there may come a time when the offending party needs a clear statement from the church that certain behaviors cannot be tolerated and that they may need to remove themselves from the gathered community until their behavior is in greater compliance with Christian community values.

Helpful Hints for Problem-Solving

- Be yourself
- Speak only for yourself and use “I” statements in a manner that does not belittle people who hold a different position or attitude
- Be honest
- Speak the truth in love without blame or judgment
- Address behaviors, not the person
- Let the other finish his/her thought before you speak

- Remember that conflicts are problems to be solved, not contests to be won
- Remember that a person is usually part of the problem if that person is not a part of the solution
- Remember that no one is perfect and that we're all doing the best we can with what we have been given

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Philippians 2: 14-16

Respectful Communication Guidelines

By Eric Law

- R** Take *responsibility* for what you say and feel without blaming others
- E** Use *empathetic* listening (put oneself in the other's shoes)
- S** Be *sensitive* to difference in communication styles
- P** *Ponder* on what you hear and feel before you speak
- E** *Examine* your own assumptions and perceptions
- C** Keep *confidentiality*
- T** *Trust/tolerate* ambiguity because we are **not** here to debate who is right or wrong

The Predicament of Triangulation

Triangulation is a destructive pattern of relating to others in which a person identifies with one of three roles and invites others to play the other two. There are multiple payoffs for playing any one of the roles, but the main one for each is avoidance of one's own issues. We have all unknowingly played each part at one time or another, although one role may feel most comfortable to us. A mature person in Christ, however, is able to identify when he/she is playing one of these

roles and take ownership and control of the issues that rightly belong to him/herself and no one else.

The *victim* in triangulation is seen by self and/or others to be weak, injured, or suffering injustice. The *savior* is seen by self and/or others as the “hero” who intervenes to rescue the “victim” from the real or imagined problem. The *persecutor* is the one seen by self and/or others to be the “the heavy,” harassing or oppressing the “victim” with real or perceived ill treatment. These three roles work together to sustain any predicament of triangulation.

Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committees are often enlisted as “saviors” by church folk who see themselves as powerless (unable to confront or be honest with a staff member) or by pastors and staff who see themselves as victimized by supervisors or unreasonable people around them. The response of the S/PPRC to such situations is to encourage and expect the “persecutor” and the “victim” to deal face-to-face with each other, participating in the direct resolution of their issues, and thereby ending triangulation.

Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committees sometimes play the role of “victim” by asking their District Superintendent (“savior”) to intervene in conflict before they have worked through the process described in Matthew 18. The DS is willing to help counsel the S/PPRC about conflict management if called upon, but will ask what steps have already been taken in the local church by the parties involved.

Things for the Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee to Remember

- Reconciliation cannot happen when the offender does not know the identity of the one who has been offended. Second or third-hand remarks or anonymous communications on the whole should be treated as gossip and disregarded by the S/PPRC
- It is not the practice or polity of United Methodists to hold all-church meetings for problem-solving, nor to pass petitions for the support of a particular cause
- The S/PPRC cannot meet without the pastor’s or District Superintendent’s knowledge
- S/PPRC meetings are closed for discussion around personnel issues. They may be opened long enough for an individual with a concern or complaint to be heard by the group

- The District Superintendent is always available to the S/PPRC to answer questions and offer guidance. It is expected, however, that efforts have already been made to follow the steps identified in Matthew 18 prior to inviting the DS to attend an S/PPRC meeting to address conflict.

Additional Resources

The 2008 Book of Discipline – descriptions of the purpose, function, and responsibilities of the Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee in the local church

Guidelines for Pastor Parish Relations Committees – available from Cokesbury @ 1-800-672-1789 or www.Cokesbury.com

“Agreeing and Disagreeing In Love,” The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center @ 630-627-0507 or www.LMPeaceCenter.org

The Center for Clergy Excellence, Texas Annual Conference @ 713-521-9383

Adapted from the Virginia Annual Conference, “Problem-solving and Conflict Resolution”

*Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference, Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007