Conflict Resolution and the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee

The materials provided in this section are intended to give you an overview of conflict as it relates to the Church. Reading thoroughly the booklet “Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation: Pastor-Parish Relations” gives you the complete overview of the role and function of the committee. One statement made in defining what is a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee stands out:

“United Methodist congregations give the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee the responsibility for administering the relationship between staff, congregation, and the district superintendent so that the mission of the Church moves forward.” (p.7)

In that role, it is intended that you function as a liaison among pastor and congregation and the various groups that do the ministries of the church. The responsibilities then become how to be alert to ways in which to prevent disagreements from becoming divisive conflict that stands in the way of doing the mission of the church. Disagreements are a natural part of the interactions of human beings – often it is right at the point of the intersections of our divergent ideas that new insights are gained and new directions can begin. Unfortunately our natural responses include avoidance, minimizing, triangulation (bringing others not directly involved into the disagreement), or taking the disagreement personally.

Read the materials that follow in this section to help you understand what conflict is and our biblical mandate to be peacemakers. Below are a few suggestions of how to best prevent a disagreement from escalating:

1. Communication is the key, especially first hand. Do not listen to concerns expressed through another person anonymously. When approached regarding a concern or issue, encourage them to place it in writing, signed, or come before the committee to share their concern. This not only allows the concern to be aired, reducing tension and the need to tell others not involved, but we do a disservice to someone with an issue when they are not given the opportunity to be heard.

2. All positions, whether volunteer or paid, need to have job descriptions, stating not only the actual responsibilities of the position, but also to whom they report. Many disagreements can be avoided when this simple preventative step is taken.

3. Maintaining confidentiality should go without saying. However, a guideline for Pastor-Parish committees is that nothing shared within the meeting should be shared outside of that context, except the final decisions. This allows free exchange of ideas without fear and will also encourage others, including the pastor, to come before the committee knowing that what they say will not be repeated outside of the meeting.
People trust only those whom they believe have listened and understood. Active listening requires that you focus on the speaker and reflect back to them exactly what you have heard so they have the opportunity to correct any misunderstanding of what they meant.

Overview of Conflict

Understanding Conflict: The Experience, Structure, and Dynamics*

The Definition: In our language the word ‘conflict’ comes from the Latin word *confligere*, which literally means to ‘strike together’. It leaves us with an image of flint and stone, sparks, and fire. The Chinese form the symbol for conflict by combining two terms: danger and opportunity. This perception does not see conflict in terms of collusion, force and heat, but as a challenge.

The Structure: Conflict is composed of three elements, people, process and problem.

- People - relational and psychological elements of the conflict (i.e., feelings, emotions, self-esteem, and how individuals look at the problem and others)

- Process - way decisions get made and how people feel about it (i.e., resentment, feeling of being treated unfairly, sense of powerlessness)

- Problems - specific issues and differences people have between them

The Dynamics - Levels of Conflict

Level One - At this level, the conflict is seen as a problem to solve, and the participants are able to focus on the problem. Language is specific and clear.

Level Two - On this level people become more self-protective. The problem now becomes secondary, while the participants protect themselves. Language will be general and often not specifically about the issue.

Level Three - Here people turn from self-protection and take the offensive. They are concerned now with winning, with having their views prevail. They read minds, distort, and talk about perceptions as if they were fact.

Level Four - The objective again changes. No longer are people interested in merely winning; they want to get rid of someone. There has to be a parting of the ways. Language becomes even more distorted.

Level Five - On this level people become religious fanatics about their position, and may even feel called by God to save the church by getting rid of the person who they have identified as the problem.

Problem solving techniques are usually effective for stages one to three, but
outside help is needed when the conflict reaches level four and five.

**Preventive Measures for Conflict***

*Deal with personality issues* - Not all people are alike which calls not only for understanding, but for tolerance and flexibility as well. Those who are antagonists call for patience and understanding but cannot be allowed to do whatever they will. When they continue to stir up the church with rumors, gossip, and speculation they are in violation of the qualifications and responsibilities for church membership.

*Clear up role confusion* - Review official documents of the Conference and the local congregation to see what they say about the roles of the leaders. Think through and talk through the subject until there is a common understanding. And see that staff members have clearly written descriptions of their responsibilities, including to whom each is responsible.

*Improve Communication* - Leaders have the responsibility to communicate with followers. Information about goals and program plans is essential. Information about needs and opportunities is also essential. An informed person is usually an interested person; an informed person is usually challenged to deeper commitment and involvement; an informed person is less inclined to produce conflict.

Use of the following questions will strengthen communication:

*Disarming questions:* Do you feel I can help you solve this question?

*Bridge-building question:* I’d like to help you. Why don’t we try to solve this question together?

*Questions that foster understanding:* I’m sure you have many good reasons for thinking the way you do. But since I don’t see it your way, why don’t you share them with me?

*Truth-revealing questions:* You seem better informed than I. Where and when did you get this information?

*Tolerance-producing questions:* I see another side to this. May I share my thoughts on this with you?

*Questions that may point up your opponent’s weaknesses and disadvantages:* Do you see any dangers that could arise if we followed your suggestions?

*Questions that put your opponents in your shoes:* What would you do if you were in my position?

*Questions that create an atmosphere for compromise:* What, as you see it, are the alternatives? Could we ask someone else for an opinion?
Questions that beg for time: If what you say is correct we will have to take the time to re-examine our policy (or attitude or position). Let me study your findings so that we can get together soon to explore various solutions.

*Resources Used*
Lederach, John Paul, “Understanding Conflict”
Leas, Speed, “When Conflict Erupts in Your Church”
Schuller, Robert, “Seminar on Church Leadership”
Observations on Conflict in the Bible

The response to anger, disagreement, and conflict in Christian settings is often that conflict is not a “Christian” activity. It may be seen as a sin to disagree, and that the disagreement shows a lack of love. Yet a church that invites open expression of disagreement will have less conflict. In the Bible are numerous passages on conflict resolution – the concern is not whether or not there will be conflict. It is assumed that conflict will exist. The concern of the passages is how to deal with that conflict.

The Bible is full of diversity and conflict, always a reality in the life of God’s people. Conflict is often an opportunity to learn something new about God and ourselves. Reconciliation is God’s gift to us. The church’s role is not to make the reconciliation happen (God does that) but to create an environment where God’s reconciliation has a better chance of happening. People in conflict often behave like enemies – and Scripture calls us to find ways of loving them.

Here are a few examples from Scripture:

*Leviticus 19: 17, 18*

This passage advocates the settling of differences rather than avoiding conflict. It suggests in verse 17 that it can be a sin if you don’t resolve the differences. If not resolving differences leads to hard feelings, revenge or hate, it is sin. The conflict itself is not the sin. By settling the differences, you show you love your neighbor as you love yourself.

*Matthew 5:23-25a*

Matthew says if you have a dispute with your brother or sister you should settle it; if it is not settled, it comes between God and you and that is the sin. Conflict should be settled on a personal basis between individuals.

*Matthew 18:15-20*

The Gospel according to Matthew gives a description of successive steps to take in dealing with a conflict that has resulted in sin. God intends for us to live in peace and peacemaking begins with our brothers and sisters. Conflict is inevitable and normal; the question is not if we have conflict, but how we respond to it. Direct communication is the best and creates the opportunity for reconciliation. Triangling needs to be avoided (bringing others into our disagreement). Taking the steps ensures working through the conflict in the most direct way possible. Remember in looking at these steps how Jesus would have treated the “tax collector and Gentile”. Whenever conflict occurs it affects the whole church. God is present for the purpose of helping people resolve their differences.
**Acts 6:1-7**

Conflict is a normal part of church life. It may indicate that people are out of touch with one another or the group or it may point out an injustice or structural problem within the church that needs changing. The best way to resolve conflict is to come together and honestly share those differences and draw on the gifts of those in tune with the Spirit to discern the resolution from God. Conflict, when handled appropriately, can improve relationships in the church as disagreements are aired and tensions are reduced.

**Acts 15:1-35**

Resolution can only begin by acknowledging that a problem exists. Only then can a forum be found to address the problem and hear all viewpoints. Learn to listen, not only to speak – seek discernment through each other’s voices what God is telling the church. Conflict can be a means of God’s revelation of new directions for mission and ministry. Through the disagreement in Acts 15, the mission and message of Jesus went to new directions and places.

**II Corinthians 5:11-20**

We are called to be peacemakers – agents in God’s work to bring about the transformation of conflict. Being in Christ we are a new creation, called to be part of his ministry of reconciliation, just as he himself reconciled us to God, not counting our trespasses against us.

**Conflict Resolution in the Early Church**

Steps to Resolve Conflict

- **Negotiation** – Matthew 5:23-24 (Matthew 18:15)
- **Mediation** – Philippians 4:23-24 (Matthew 18:16)
- **Arbitration** – I Corinthians 6:1-6 (Matthew 18:17)
Opening Up Lines of Communication

It is not unusual for the first signs of conflict to be a breakdown in communications (sometimes it happens the other way round, too). The conflict begins well before communication stops, but it isn’t always recognizable in the early stages. When a member of the congregation approaches a member of the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee and seeks to have that person do their bidding for them warning flags should go up! There is a right and a wrong way to approach this situation. It is very easy to be pulled into an unhealthy triangle. Healthy relationships begin and end with direct and forthright communication.

As a member of SPRC, the first question you ask of this person is “Have you ever been to talk with ‘B’ about this matter?” Assuming the response is “No,” the second question is “Do you feel comfortable going to talk with ‘B’?” Assuming the response continues to be “no,” the next question is “Would you like me to go with you to talk with ‘B’?” If the response continues to be “no”, then the next question is “Do I have your permission to go to “B” to take your concerns?” If the response again is “no,” then the final question is “Are you aware then that I cannot help you?”

Throughout all of this process, the goal is to get the two persons in direct conversation. Even if you, as a member of SPRC, become involved, you are not taking the place of the person who feels aggrieved. Your role is to bring the two of them together in face-to-face dialogue. The reestablishment of a right relationship is your goal. As a member of the SPRC you cannot solve or eliminate conflict. Through the use of healthy processes, you can assist individuals to deal with and resolve conflict.

The Path of Five chart on page 5-10 graphically displays the process outlined above. Use it. It works!
CONFIDENTIALITY vs. ANONYMITY

Basic Operating Procedure

Confidentiality: S/PPRC teams will often deal in matters pertaining to the ministry or work of staff members that is “confidential.” This means that the information may be of a sensitive nature that should be kept within the confines of the Committee itself.

Anonymity: From time to time S/PPRC members may be approached by a member of the congregation with a “complaint.” This will sometimes relate to the behavior or performance of a pastor or staff member. Occasionally, someone will ask you to bring this up at S/PPRC meeting, but “not tell” who told you. This is not a healthy approach to your committee work because then the pastor or staff member is unable to know who it is with whom he/she must work to correct the problem. Therefore, when anonymity is requested you could:

1. Let the person know that you will keep it just between you and that person;
2. Offer to go with the complainant to the pastor or staff member, thus encouraging them with your presence;
3. Invite them to come to the S/PPRC themselves and offer the feedback;
4. Urge them to go to the pastor or staff member themselves and promise to follow up with the pastor/staff member yourself to make sure that the concern was heard.

Keeping Secrets

1. “Happy” or “O.K.” Secrets: Examples - surprise parties, certain disagreements between persons when the disagreement is being successfully worked on;
2. “Toxic” Secrets: Example - John was offended by a comment made at a Board meeting by the pastor. He got very angry but never told the pastor about the offense or John’s feelings of anger. The anger seethed inside of John and poisoned his attitude toward worship, the sermons, the pastor’s teachings and finally John decided that the church just wouldn’t “be right” again until the pastor left. “Toxic secrets” turn inward on us.
3. “Dangerous” Secrets: Examples - sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse; harassment, neglect...the keeping secret of any behavior or information that could affect someone’s well being.

S/PPRC MEMBERS MUST BE WILLING to handle confidences and “secrets” courageously and with Christian integrity. We must resist the temptation to be loose with information that should be kept within the group, and we must also resist the temptation to be “too nice” when the ministry of the church and/pr the well-being of church members, staff, ministers and/or the public is at stake.
Formats for Feedback

Three Quick Questions

What went well?

What did you learn?

What could be improved?

Using “I” Statements

When you . . .
   Describe the specific behavior without judgment.

I feel . . .
   Tell how the behavior affects you.

Because I . . .
   Say why you are affected.

Pause for discussion. Let the other person respond.

I would like . . .
   Describe the change you want considered.

Because . . .
   Tell why you think the change will ease the problem.

What do you think?
   Listen to the other person’s response.
Path of Five

1. Have you ever been to “B”
   NO   YES

2. Do you feel comfortable going to “B”?
   NO   YES

3. Would you like me to go with you to talk to “B”?
   NO   YES

4. Do I have your permission to go to “B” to take your concerns?
   NO

5. Are you aware then that I cannot help you?

Context for Right Relationships:
- Not to speak of the faults of others
- Not to create discord in the community
- Not to raise myself up by putting others down
Resources for Resolving
Conflict / Staff Relations / Team Building

Robert Hoeft, 22375 Sunrise Drive, Deerwood, MN 56444, 218-546-5731, bhoeft@email.com

John Mueller Nowell, 2764 Boulder Drive, Burnsville, MN 55337, 952-890-7375, cell 612-991-4932, nowell@sacredquest.org

Kay Roberts, 9662 Woodlawn Place North, Champlin, MN 55316, home, 736-576-0325, cell 612-518-0333, kayroberts@gmail.com

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