

## CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

### A. Theological Rationale

In the New Testament, disputes and conflicts are accepted as part of normal church life. Harmony is an ideal, but it is not imposed or taken for granted. Some situations of tension and conflict are occasions for learning and growth, but others may become destructive for the congregation and harmful to the individuals involved. How the church works with conflict becomes a test of faithfulness.

Jesus emphasized the spiritual importance of conflict resolution (Matt. 5:23-26) and gave his disciples a model for settling differences (Matt. 18:15-20). Paul expected believers to find creative solutions to their disputes, without resort to the secular court system (I Cor. 6:1-6).

In spite of the intervention of the congregation, we may not be able to resolve some conflicts. We need to be mindful both of our limitations and of God's grace. The church's process in dealing with disputes becomes a concrete illustration of the power of the "gospel of peace" that it proclaims.

### B. Covenant Foundations

Our Covenant call us to "accept responsibility for each other as a community of God's people and commit ourselves to building up the body of Christ."

Our "Understandings" also speak to the need to live "as those whom Christ calls to be peacemakers in all areas of life. We commit ourselves to reconciliation in situations of brokenness and oppression." We also state that our "accountability in fulfilling this covenant involves addressing each other one to one, in the small group and in the congregation."

On this basis, we propose the following guidelines for responding to situations of potentially destructive conflict in the congregation.

### C. Intervention

Responsibility to intervene rests with the following:

1. Individuals involved in or aware of the conflict
2. Small groups
3. Pastoral team
4. Congregational elders

Members from any of these groups who become aware of conflict should initiate contact with persons involved. If further action is necessary, groups closer to the situation should be consulted to clarify what has been, or is being, done. Congregational elders have the final responsibility for seeing that a process of reconciliation is carried out.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>If one has conflict with part or all of the Leadership Group, then the congregational overseer, if needed, has final responsibility for seeing that a process of reconciliation is carried out.

#### D. Congregational Responsibilities

Where there is evidence of destructive conflict between individuals or groups within the congregation, and the parties involved do not, or cannot, settle it themselves, the congregation's responsibility is to:

1. Acknowledge that conflict exists and needs attention;
2. Propose a process to deal with the issues and differences in the conflict;
3. Provide appropriate support and accountability relationships;
4. Provide prayer intercession in behalf of persons involved and the congregation.

#### E. Guiding principles

1. We need to speak the truth with love.
2. The persons involved in the conflict need each to hear the other and to be heard empathetically and kept informed as plans for process are developed.
3. Members may need to be confronted and held accountable for their behavior as Christians and Assembly members whether they express willingness or not.
4. Outside resource persons with a commitment to Assembly understandings may need to be named by and authorized to work on behalf of the elders, with reporting to the elders on their work.
5. Resource persons other than those indicated above may be needed in specific situations.
6. We may need to distinguish between those persons with support functions and those representing the congregation in accountability functions.
7. Understandings on confidentiality and congregational communication as appropriate to the situation need to be clear.
8. Advocates for the parties involved may need to be chosen in consultation with the parties.
9. An issue of unequal power between parties may need to be addressed.
10. Many conflicts have an impact on others besides the principals and also on the community; these effects need to be recognized and addressed.

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