

Alongside Ministries Inc

Dealing with conflict in the local church

Introduction

Members of the body of Christ are called by God to live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:10-18 & Eph 4:3). However all Christians have a sinful nature. Christians have different personalities and come from different backgrounds. Satan is at work to bring disharmony between God's people. As a result there will be times when there is conflict or ill-will between members of the body. This may involve church leaders and/or members of the pastoral team. For this reason it is wise to have in place a policy for dealing with such situations so that God's people can continue in fellowship with one another, and God's work can continue unhindered.

Minimising the possibility of conflict

Conflict may arise out of diverse theological understanding. A clear "Basis of Faith" outlining the church's position on major doctrines establishes a clear reference point for discussion of doctrinal issues. All Christians have equality in the sight of God. However Christians have different gifts, different roles and different authority within the body of Christ. In a healthy church Christians accept, respect and celebrate the gifts of others. The possibility of conflict is minimised when the roles, authority and boundaries of different positions (offices) in the church are set out in clearly written position descriptions. No policy or doctrinal document can cover every contingency. Conflict will be minimised when relationships between Christians are marked by love, grace, humility gentleness and patience.

Biblical Principles for dealing with conflict

God's principles for dealing with conflict are set out in passages such as Matthew 18:15-17 and Colossians 3:12-17. Conflict or ill will which arises out of unintentional human failing is to be treated differently to that which arises out of deliberate sin. Colossians 3 encourages us to "bear with each another" when ill will arises out of simple human failing, different ways of doing things etc. Matthew 18 teaches us how to respond when it is clear that we have been sinned against.

Conflict is escalated when an aggrieved person "goes sideways" i.e. they share their grievance with others rather than going directly to the person causing the grievance. Resolution can only begin when the two parties engage in open and honest discussion. Praying together invites God's wisdom and helps put things in perspective. It is only when resolution cannot be achieved in this manner that others should be invited into the mediation process. The attached flow chart seeks to map out God's plan for dealing with conflict between Christians.

The Scope of this Policy

This policy relates to conflict between members of the church family including church leaders and pastors. It sets out procedures to be followed in resolving issues and maintaining unity and harmony within the church family.

This policy relates principally to conflict or ill will which arises out simple human failing, minor theological differences and different views of appropriate church practices. It does not relate to issues such as child abuse, sexual misconduct, theft, fraud etc. Issues such as these have legal implications and must therefore be covered by a separate policy.

General principles of resolving conflict

The first step towards resolving conflict is for the two parties to meet privately together. It may be wise for the meeting to take place in an open/public place. Where there is a major difference in age and/or a difference in gender, the presence of a chaperone may be appropriate.

If resolution cannot be reached through meeting privately it is wise to seek the help of a mediator acceptable to both parties. Below are suggestions for an appropriate mediation process between particular groups of people.

Conflict between members of the Pastoral Team

1. In the first instance the parties should seek to resolve the difference between themselves.
2. If resolution cannot be reached help should be sought from a mediator acceptable to both parties. This could be a member of church leadership team, a denominational leader, or some other mature Christian from outside the Church.

If this step is reached, the leadership should be notified that a dispute exists and informed of the steps being taken to resolve it. This would enable leadership members to support the resolution process in prayer.

Unless both parties agree, it is not necessary to divulge the nature of the dispute at this stage.

3. If resolution still cannot be reached, denominational leaders may be called upon to work with the church leadership to plan a way forward so that the ministry of the Church can move forward in harmony.

Conflict between a member of the Pastoral Team and a Church Leader (or between two Church Leaders).

1. In the first instance the parties should seek to resolve the difference between themselves.
2. If resolution cannot be reached help should be sought from a mediator acceptable to both parties. This could be another member of the church leadership or pastoral team, or a mature Christian from outside the Church e.g. a denominational leader.

If this step is reached the leadership team should be notified that a dispute exists and informed of the steps being taken to resolve it. This would enable leadership members to support the process in prayer.

Unless both parties agree, it is not necessary to divulge the nature of the dispute at this stage.

3. If resolution still cannot be reached, the church leadership should be informed in detail of the situation. The leadership will seek to plan a way forward so that the ministry of the Church can continue in harmony. This may involve seeking the help of Christian mediators from outside the Church.

Conflict between two members of the Church Family

1. In the first instance the parties should seek to settle the difference between themselves.
2. If resolution cannot be reached, help should be sought from a mediator acceptable to both parties. This could be a pastor or member of the leadership team.
3. If resolution still cannot be reached the church leadership should be informed of the situation. The leadership shall seek to plan a way forward so that the ministry of the Church can continue in harmony. This may involve seeking the help of Christian mediators from outside the Church.

Complaints against a member of the Pastoral Team or a Church Leader.

Please note: This refers only to complaints of a minor nature **not** those with moral and legal implication.

1. Complaints will normally be made to a member of the pastoral team, or to a member of the leadership team. Whoever receives the complaint should refer the complainant to Matthew 18:15-17 and encourage them to meet with the person about whom they are making the complaint, with a view to settling the difference between themselves.
2. The person receiving the complaint should affirm the complainant's willingness to deal with the issue. However they should not offer an opinion relating to the complaint, even if they agree with the complainant. Their role is not to judge but rather to put in place a process for resolving the dispute.
3. The complainant should be cautioned about the importance of keeping the complaint confidential to avoid rumours and disunity within the fellowship.

4. In the event of a church family member feeling reticent about meeting the pastor or church leader on their own, it is reasonable that they seek to speak with the pastor or leader in the company of another mature Christian.
5. Only in exceptional circumstances should the complainant be allowed to remain anonymous. It is difficult for a pastor/leader to deal with a complaint unless they know the exact nature of the complaint and its source.
6. If the complainant is not satisfied that the complaint or dispute has been adequately dealt with, they should state their complaint to the church leadership, preferably in writing. The leadership will then initiate a process to bring about resolution. The complainant may exercise the right to take his/her complaint to denominational leaders but this right should be exercised only as a last resort.

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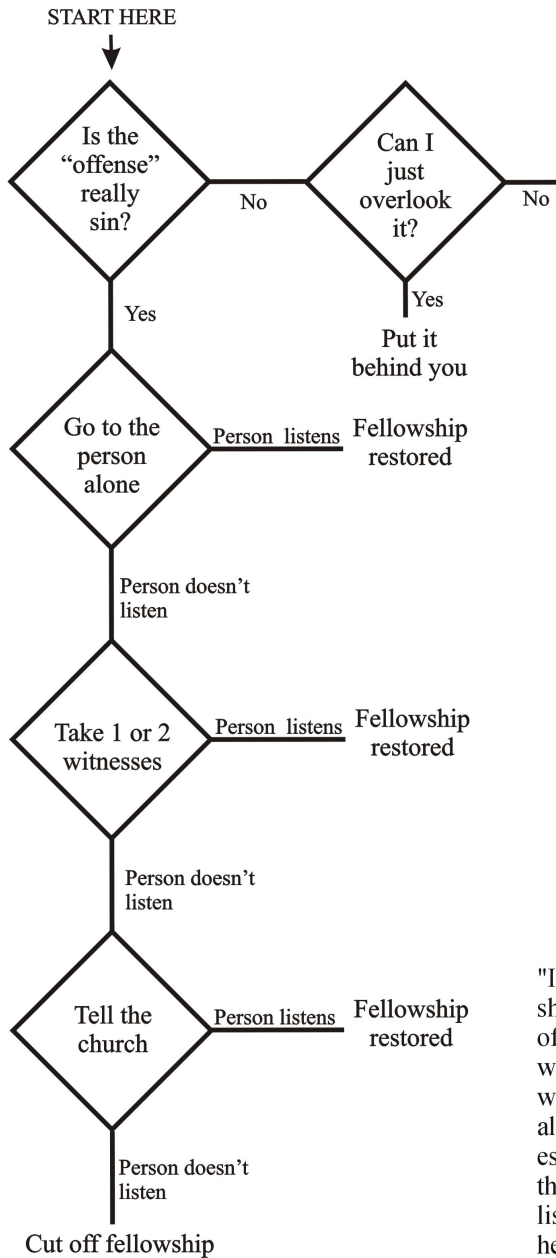
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The attached flowchart may be copied provided it is not altered and provided the copyright statement is retained.



Flowchart for dealing with the offense of a fellow believer



Talk directly to the person showing compassion, humility, kindness gentleness, patience.

Colossians 3:12-13 (NIV)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. {13} Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Matthew 18:15-17 (NIV)

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. {16} But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' {17} If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.