

The Reconciliation of Conflicts within a Congregation

The synod bishop and his staff are always available for counsel during a conflict within a congregation; but prior to seeking the synod's direct intervention, congregations and their members first seek to resolve disagreements among themselves. Clearly, parking lot meetings, gossip, complaining to other members, personal attacks, and quiet withdrawal are *ineffective and inappropriate* methods for dealing with grievances. Instead, all Christians should prayerfully consider the reconciliation procedure provided to the church by St. Matthew the Evangelist.

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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." *New Revised Standard Version*

Following St. Matthew's counsel, persons with disagreements first take them directly to the person with whom they are having a difficulty. They complain not to others but rather go directly to the other congregation member, the pastor, or the member of the congregation's staff with whom they are having a difficulty. Their goal is reconciliation, the restoration of the relationship between two or more parties. If reconciliation cannot be achieved, the person takes one or two other persons with them—i.e., a wise, dispassionate, unbiased person—again for the sake of reconciliation. If this, too, fails, then the aggrieved person follows the procedures established by the congregation to resolve conflicts. If no local procedures have been adopted, utilize the following:

1. If the conflict does not directly involve the pastor, make an appointment with the pastor and seek guidance. Conflicts involving the pastor should proceed to the next step, assuming St. Matthew's counsel (above) has been followed.
2. Secret meetings among members without involving the congregation's leadership, or by the congregation council without the pastor, should not be

held. All parties should actively and openly participate in the process of seeking reconciliation.

3. Most congregational constitutions provide for a Mutual Ministry Committee. Its assistance may be sought by contacting the chairperson of the Committee.
4. If there is no Mutual Ministry Committee, or if this, too, fails to accomplish reconciliation, the aggrieved person should approach the president of the congregation council for seeking the council's assistance in mediating the grievance for the sake of reconciliation.
5. If this, too, fails, the pastor or the council president with the knowledge but not necessarily the permission of the other, should contact the bishop and/or the synod's reconciliation team for advice, referral to resources, or direct intervention.
6. If neither the pastor nor the congregation council president agrees to bring the matter to the attention of the bishop after having been requested to do so, the aggrieved party or parties may bring the matter directly to the bishop after informing the pastor and council president of their intention.

Throughout this process, it is incumbent upon all Christians to remember that they are called by Christ to be God's church and to show God's love and forgiveness. Jesus' directive to us is to "love one another even as I have loved you." At all times as we deal with differences, we need to seek God's guidance in prayer, asking that the Holy Spirit would guide us and that our actions would further God's purposes and not necessarily our own.

Allegations of Misconduct

Persons *accusing* a pastor or other rostered leader of *serious misconduct* should contact the office of the bishop directly. Matters of misconduct are handled differently than the procedure described herein. All allegations of misconduct that could lead to official discipline or legal action are taken seriously and investigated immediately. For information regarding the misconduct process, please contact the synod office or refer to the synod's website (www.uss-elca.org).

Allegations of serious misconduct by officers of a congregation (e.g. embezzlement) also should be reported immediately to the office of the bishop.

The Intervention of the Upper Susquehanna Synod for the Sake of Reconciliation

1. While the bishop is always available to meet with councils, congregation members, and rostered persons, he will ask if other avenues have been explored to address the conflict. If they have not, he will refer them to the procedure outlined above.
2. If they have done everything possible to address the conflict without success, the bishop, a member of his staff, or the synod's reconciliation team will meet with the pastor and the council to consider and recommend a process to be used to help address the grievance(s).
3. The synod bishop or a member of his staff typically does not meet with a congregation's leadership more than two or three times. If further work is required, the congregation will be instructed to utilize the synod's reconciliation team or an extra-synodical consultation service to assist them in addressing differences. This is typically at the expense of the congregation, but synodical assistance may be provided if available and advisable.
4. The Synod's Reconciliation Team, a team of trained persons, is available to assist the bishop and the congregations of this synod to address conflicts that have been intractable within the congregations' own context.
5. The goal of the synod's intervention shall be to assist congregations and pastors in discerning what seems to be best for the sake of the whole church and the subsequent reconciliation of the parties involved. If, after completion of the agreed-upon process, reconciliation seems impossible, other recommendations may be made.

Guidelines for the Synod's Reconciliation Process

1. The reconciliation team summarizes the situation and makes recommendations to the pastor and congregation council. The congregation council, including the pastor, decides what to do with such recommendations --accept, amend, reject; and thus, all parties own the decision and the outcome of the process.
2. Before any final recommendations are made, the bishop and all the parties directly involved will have the opportunity to review the team's tentative recommendations and to provide their input to the team regarding any of the specifics contained therein.
3. If the team, with the bishop's consent, recommends the termination of the pastor's call, the congregation council would have to vote upon such a recommendation, and the pastor/rostered leader would have to be in agreement with the outcome. A severance arrangement would be considered by the bishop's office and the parties, and then would need to be approved by all involved.

4. If the pastor/rostered leader refuses to accept a recommendation to leave the congregation despite the recommendation of the bishop, the synod's reconciliation team, and the congregation council, one of the remaining recourses for those still aggrieved is available:

The matter may be referred to the Synod's Consultation Committee. The Synod's Consultation Committee consists of at least six persons and not more than 12 persons, of whom half shall be ordained ministers and half shall be lay persons, who shall each be elected by the Synod Assembly for a term of six years without consecutive reelection. The functions of the Consultation Committee are set forth in Chapter 20 of the Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in Chapter 17 of this synod's constitution.

If the Consultation Committee of the synod fails to resolve the issue(s), the matter shall be referred to the Synod Council, whose decision shall be final. **S17.11 of the Synod's Constitution.*

OR

The aggrieved party or parties may appeal to the synodical bishop and the Executive Committee of the Synod Council for a consultation.

If this consultation fails to resolve the issue, a petition may be addressed by the parties to the Synod Council requesting it to arbitrate the issue. The decision of the Synod Council shall be final. **S17.03 of the Synod's Constitution.*

What is the Synod's Reconciliation Team and What Does It Do?

1. It is a resource team available to congregations who face situations of conflict which have not been reconciled. The team does not impose solutions, but rather accompanies aggrieved parties in seeking reconciliation. The team may provide advice, referral to other resources, or direct intervention.
2. The team consists of 10-12 members, including a chairperson, all of whom are appointed by the bishop with the consent of the Synod Council.
3. Team members receive training in the process of church consultation, such as systems theory, conflict resolution, managing change, and grief.
4. The team meets regularly (perhaps monthly) for case study review, skill development/continuing education, and support.

5. Congregations in conflict may seek the assistance of the reconciliation team on their own, or may be referred to the team by the synod staff.
6. Two or three members of the reconciliation team are assigned by the chairperson to work with a specific congregation as their coaches.
7. Coaches work with a congregation to develop a covenant of mutual expectations for their consultation. Congregations are expected to agree to compensate coaches for their mileage to and from meetings with the aggrieved parties and for any materials used in coaching.
8. The congregation is responsible for providing a copy of their coaches' covenant and their final report for the congregation's file in the synod office.
9. The reconciliation team is responsible for determining who will follow up with the congregation after a final report is presented, and in what time frame.
10. The bishop or his representative will participate in discussions of case studies with the reconciliation team, but may not be present for other portions of their meetings.

Approved by the Synod Council on March 26, 2009