

Responding to Conflict

Protocol for responding to calls from church members with concerns:

1. Two elder rule: If calls from two different elders (including the clerk of session) are made to the general presbyter, stated clerk, or chair of COM, then the general presbyter will start a file and will call the pastor, without identifying those who called. The general presbyter, stated clerk, and chair of COM will need to keep one another informed about such calls.
2. If callers are not on the session, then the advice will be for the caller to go to the session or to a couple of session members.

Intervention in a Conflicted Church

When the presbytery is called to “[promote] the peace and harmony of congregations and [inquire] into the sources of congregational discord” (G.3.031c; c.f. also G.3.0303d), COM shall seek to nurture the peace, unity, and purity of the church in accordance with the Book of Order and this policy. Ordinarily, the COM becomes aware of a potential problem through calls, letters, and/or personal visits to the Presbytery Pastor, Stated Clerk, and/or a member of COM. Whether the communication comes from pastor(s), elders, or church members, COM should encourage discussion with a congregation’s leadership upon learning of a potential problem at a given church. Ordinarily, the initial conversation will be with the pastor/moderator. When necessary, COM may initiate and/or compel action but always in accordance with the Book of Order and the guidelines set forth below.

Expressed concerns are categorized by this policy into three, distinct types: (1) Ordinary Conflict, (2) Serious Complaint, and (3) Gross Misconduct. Each distinct type has its own definition that requires a unique response by the presbytery.

Ordinary Conflict

Ordinary conflict includes all of kinds of issues common to organizations, especially churches (e.g. communication, decision-making, power dynamics, etc.). Caution is beneficial when receiving reports of ordinary conflict. In a time of strong cultural, political, and ecclesial conflict, nearly every congregation will experience some form of conflict. Further, in a time when the long-term health of congregations may require significant *adaptive* and *technical* change, there will be predictable conflict that attends such significant change.

Family systems thinkers report the target of an organization’s anxiety is usually focused on the most powerful and/or most vulnerable person in the system. The pastor is often both the most powerful (e.g. power of the pulpit, role as moderator) and the most vulnerable (e.g. paid staff, personal and family provider) person in the church system. The pastor, therefore, becomes both the object of praise and anxiety, often exceeding what she or he is actually responsible for. Congregational conflict is often directed to the person in the pastoral role regardless of their actions. Though saying this does not relieve the pastor from responsibility in church conflict,

cognizance of these ordinary, family system dynamics will go far to help the presbytery support healthy responses by all concerned within a congregation.

Responding to the Ordinary: If the concern has not yet risen to the level of being a serious complaint, Presbytery staff and COM should encourage direct conversation whenever possible and inquire if the person expressing the concern has spoken to the person about whom the concern is being made (e.g. to the pastor, Session, music director, etc.). If the parties have not yet spoken directly to each other, they should be encouraged to do so and counseled about potential strategies for good communication toward a positive outcome for all.

If the concern has been discussed directly with another and no mutually agreed upon outcome achieved, presbytery staff or COM member shall inquire of the person expressing the concern if they prefer (a) that no further action be taken, or (b) that the pastor and clerk of Session be made aware of the concern with the person's name attached to the concern? Under no circumstance shall an ordinary concern be conveyed forward to the pastor or clerk anonymously. If the person expressing the concern chooses to have her or his thoughts conveyed to church leadership, both pastor and clerk of Session shall be made aware of the concern and encouraged to engage their member(s) in further conversation. No further action is required by staff or COM member.

Serious Complaint

What distinguishes a serious complaint from an ordinary conflict is a matter of judgment. If professional or appointed COM leadership suspects that a concern or set of concerns brought forward about a congregation, its members, or its leadership might rise to the level that requires a more structured COM inquiry, a consultation will be scheduled with an appropriate executive team to discuss. This team may include the Presbytery Pastor, Stated Clerk, Chair of COM, professional consultants such as a psychologist or other counsel if appropriate, and the Pastor and/or Clerk of Session of the congregation if invited by the COM Chair. This group will consider whether complaints being considered are verifiable and if verified might lead to destructive conflict in the congregation (recognizing differences among contexts in congregations). The group may also consider whether individuals bringing complaints are themselves participants in or sources of unhealthy discord and might benefit from counsel from the Presbytery, or if congregational leadership might benefit from counsel as they respond. Complaints will not be discussed that are brought anonymously or about which anonymity is requested.

Responding to serious complaints: If this team determines the complaint(s) rises above what is ordinary conflict, and the complaints do not involve allegations of gross misconduct, the following steps shall be taken:

1. The Presbytery Pastor and COM liaison shall initiate a meeting with the pastor and the clerk of Session to communicate the concerns / complaints that have been brought to COM attention and to hear their initial reactions, listen to their perspectives, and seek to build

an awareness of the background to the issue. It is important to carefully separate questions of verifiable fact, narratives without context, perspectival bias, and subjective opinions when interpreting concerns.

2. Following the meeting in step 1, and with consideration for the pastor/moderator's and clerks' perspectives on the situation, both the COM and Session shall be made aware of the complaint(s) and requested to provide preliminary feedback to one another, with an attempt made to sort through the above questions of verifiable fact, narratives without context, perspectival bias, and subjective opinions listed in number 1 above.
3. Following the receipt of feedback from Session and COM, if one or both parties believe there is sufficient merit to the complaint(s) to require a formal response, a meeting shall be scheduled to create a plan for responding. This meeting shall include at least two elders from Session, two members of COM, the pastor/moderator, and may include the Presbytery Pastor and/or Stated Clerk. The action plan to be created may include any or all of the following:
 - a. Will there be work done with Session, committees of the church, the congregation? Who will do it?
 - b. Is there need for counseling or outside help? For whom, how long will it last? How and to whom will reports be issued?
 - c. What are specific things recommended pertaining to the pastor?
 - d. How can the appropriate role and effective leadership of the pastor/moderator and/or Session be supported?
 - e. What time parameters need to be put in place for "the plan"?
 - f. What are the special needs of the situation?
 - g. Is an Administrative Review or Commission appropriate?
4. After the time agreed upon for "the plan" to work (see item 3.e above), if the problem(s) still exists and does not seem to be improving as assessed by the congregation, the church session, pastor and COM representatives, the COM will debate a motion to ask the presbytery to appoint an Administrative Review Committee as outlined in The Book of Order. If affirmed, this motion would be brought to the floor of the presbytery for a vote.
5. If an Administrative Review Committee is approved and appointed, work should commence within one month after it is constituted. The process used for their work will be formulated by the AR committee in conjunction with the Stated Clerk, and the group is responsible to the presbytery through its reporting process.
6. If an Administrative Review Committee is not approved and appointed the COM shall, through its Pastor Parish Relations Team, continue working with the church and the

situation in whatever creative and constructive ways it is possible for them to agree upon, if it is deemed necessary by majority vote of a quorum of the COM.

Gross Misconduct

Gross misconduct includes those accusations that rise to the level of disciplinary action (e.g. allegations of sexual boundary violations, fiduciary irresponsibility, or physical or emotional violence). Reports of gross misconduct require immediate response. If a member of presbytery staff or the COM, becomes aware of an alleged incident of gross misconduct, said staff shall listen attentively and document the specifics of the accusation. Reports of gross misconduct shall be written and forwarded to the Stated Clerk. An investigative process shall be initiated as outlined in the Book of Order's Rules of Discipline.