

APPENDIX 15

RECONCILIATION OF UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

This Report was received by the Conference of 2013. The Conference of 2014 directed that it be included as an appendix to the Manual of Laws.

INTRODUCTION

1 Differences of opinion are normal; we experience them in all our relationships, especially with those we consider close. Often they are unspoken, sometimes they lead to arguments or to a breakdown in relationships. When differences are handled and engaged appropriately, they have the potential to bring us closer. In fact, differences are often what provide both substance and intimacy to our relationships.

2 Difference is not necessarily a bad thing. Disputes and divisions can be a part of the life of any community. As long as the Church is comprised of humans, there will be differences of opinion. They can be testing but they also provide opportunities to find creative ways to turn them into a constructive experience for change and growth.

3 Conflict occurs when differences are unresolved and lead to breakdowns in relationships and impair the functioning of the organisation. The Church, like the rest of life, encounters from time to time situations of conflict. However, perhaps due to a desire to 'be nice' to one another, we often ignore or avoid conflict in our churches. Our experience of conflict in a church context is largely negative. Some churches have been plagued with internal division, an 'us' and 'them' mentality, secret meetings and resignations which produce feelings of anger, fear and mistrust. Members have been hurt and have left with a sense of disillusionment. Those who remain can also experience hurt and disillusionment and the church's witness in the wider community has been damaged. The Christian community has a duty of care to ensure that incidents of conflict are not harming the health and wellbeing of its members. Sometimes the real damage results not from the issues in question but from the way in which they are handled or neglected.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

4 There are examples of conflict in the Bible. Jesus was confronted by leaders who posed seemingly innocent questions while plotting to trap him with his answer. The apostles were not immune. An argument broke out among them as to which of them should be thought of as the greatest (Luke 22, 24). In Matthew 18 guidelines are given on a process to address differences. In the early Church the Greek speaking Jews quarrelled with the native Jews because they were unhappy that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of funds. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over the suitability of Mark to undertake another missionary journey (Acts 15, 38 – 39). Paul reminded the church community in Corinth that when there was jealousy and quarrels among them they were living by the standards of this world (1 Cor. 3, 3). He urged the Corinthians to settle personal disputes among themselves (1 Cor. 6, 1). He also opposed Peter to his face in Antioch, and advised the church in Rome not to ignore those who would cause division.

5 The early Church dealt with conflict by recognising differences and facing up to them. It tested issues against its sense of mission. Paul sought to direct the thoughts

of those who were at variance to the higher, common cause of preaching the gospel. They were encouraged to rise above their differences and find harmony in something which was beyond their differences. The principle of restoring understanding between people who are in disagreement should be the goal in seeking to resolve any dispute between Christians. God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5, 18). Issues of conflict should be approached as an opportunity to see God's grace at work as conflicts are resolved and relationships restored.

6 Conflict doesn't go away. The only approach to discord or division in a church is to address it. There is no point in trying to do our best to survive in the situation or hope that it will go away. Conflict tends to recur when core issues are left unaddressed. Situations should not be allowed to fester and develop. The goal must be to restore God's standards to the church for the good of God's name.

7 A basic reason why churches should be interested in conflict resolution is that they would be better off by not being damaged by internal disputes. But much more important is the fact that churches have a mandate from Jesus which should motivate them toward resolution. Jesus said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God,' and 'let your light so shine that others may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.'

8 Being in one accord and united as a church does not mean a church does not have conflict. It means the church is focused on moving forward together even if there are different views on how to move in that direction. Ultimately, it is difficult to know when and how to engage in conflict. The church needs to use discernment and rely on prayer and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how to move into and through conflict.

9 It might be hoped that a church community would be better equipped than other groups to deal with destructive conflict and division, but experience shows that this is not always the case. The resolution of destructive conflict will often require help and professional expertise from elsewhere. However as Christian communities the process which we implement must be primarily informed by Christian principles. As a Christian Church we should aim to be an exemplar of how to engage with conflict with love and compassion. Indeed the mark of a Christian community is not the absence of conflict but how it addresses its conflict.

PREVENTION OF CONFLICT

10 The committee believes that action in a number of areas would help to prevent conflict. To that end it encourages and recommends that:

- Training on conflict transformation be continued with theological students and probationers.
- Continuing Development in Ministry days on 'Conflict' be offered for ministers.
- Training be offered to congregations and Church Councils and facilitated by the Reconciliation Office in Edgehill College.
- Information on conflict transformation be made available for all congregations.
- Training be provided for District Superintendents.
- Implementation of the transition process which Conference has agreed in terms of Circuits and ministers being enabled to address expectations and develop priorities together will be helpful.

WHEN CONFLICT ARISES

11 A first step is to recognise that differences are natural and not necessarily a sign of an unhealthy or divided church. A church that encounters differences can come out of it with greater clarity about its mission and purpose and be better prepared to handle conflict in the future. The issues on which the remainder of this report will focus concern the occasions when conflict becomes unhealthy and disruptive.

12 Because serious conflict in the Church is rare, and because every conflict will have unique features, it is impossible for this report to cover all possibilities. The recommendations should be seen as principles of good practice and may need to be modified to suit individual circumstances.

STAGE 1 EARLY INTERVENTION

13 Where a potentially destructive conflict arises every effort should be made to resolve the matter at local (i.e. the Society) level. The more quickly a problem is recognised, the better the opportunity to:

- Identify the underlying causes.
- Reach a sustainable agreement.
- Resolve the conflict.

14 There are a number of people who, because of the responsibilities they fulfil, are particularly likely to become aware of the signs of conflict or be informed specifically about a matter giving rise to concern. They are:

The Minister,
The Society Steward,
Other members of the Church Council.

Each member who fulfils any of these roles should be aware of the symptoms of conflict which include:

- Motivation – fewer people volunteer to take on tasks and there is little membership input at meetings.
- Behaviour – people start to make derogatory remarks towards each other, points of view become distinctly polarised or people begin to form themselves into unofficial groups over issues.
- Productivity – the level of achievement within groups reduces.
- Absence – members are uncharacteristically absent from church events.
- Response – members indicate general or specific dissatisfaction.

15 Where the Minister, Society Steward or a member of the Church Council have become aware of a situation of conflict, the Minister and Society Steward shall consult together and agree as to whom and in what way the initial steps outlined below shall be taken to deal with the situation.

16 The person or persons who have been requested to deal with the situation should:

- Have a quiet word. Often giving a person the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns can help to clear the air.
- If the matter remains unresolved the Minister or Society Steward must be advised of the matter and an informal investigation conducted. Establish the facts. Speak separately to those involved. The objective is to clarify facts, remove misunderstandings and reach an amicable way forward.
- If the matter involves an issue affecting the use of church resources, church property or activities then the Church Council must be involved in determining the matter.

STAGE 2 CIRCUIT ACTION

17 If the matter remains unresolved and appears to have the potential to cause a rift within the congregation or involves the Minister, he/she and the Society Steward, separately, must inform the Circuit Superintendent in writing of the matter and send a copy of the correspondence to the District Superintendent. They may also, jointly or separately, meet the District Superintendent to discuss the matter and the written notifications.

18 The Circuit Superintendent shall:

- arrange for a suitable person or persons to investigate the matter and report to him/her, or
- commission a mediation process (Appendix 2).

19 The committee recommends that Conference identifies a number of suitably qualified and experienced mediators, who do not have to be members of the Methodist Church, who may be available to assist. The contact details of the mediators will be available in the Conference Office for use when needed.

STAGE 3 DISTRICT ACTION

20 If the Circuit Superintendent is unable to resolve the situation, he/she shall advise the District Superintendent in writing. The District Superintendent should not become directly involved in the matter until he/she has received the report of the Circuit Superintendent, the investigator or the mediator.

21 When the District Superintendent (DS)

- (a) is informed by the Circuit Superintendent (or another minister appointed in lieu of the Circuit Superintendent if the latter is a party to the conflict), or
- (b) comes to his/her own conclusion that resolution is unlikely to be achieved, he/she takes charge of the process and calls upon the Connexional Advisory Panel.

The Connexional Advisory Panel (CAP)

22 The committee recommends that Conference creates a new group to be called the Connexional Advisory Panel (CAP).

23 The CAP shall be appointed by Conference to resolve or transform the conflict. It shall consist of people who have expertise and experience in conflict transformation, human resource management and employment law, and one or more ministers with relevant skills and experience.

24 A group of members of the CAP will be selected by the Secretary of Conference, in consultation with the DS, for a particular situation. None of the members shall have any connection with the circuit in which the conflict has occurred or the people involved.

25 After an initial meeting at which the District Superintendent defines the problem, the group meets without the District Superintendent. The group listens to all parties. It may then,

- (a) recommend to the District Superintendent how the conflict may be resolved;
- (b) implement a mediation process. The group would become the “commissioning body” for that process and the group to which the mediator reports;
- (c) implement the Dignity in the Church policy.

26 After it has completed its work, the group reports to the District Superintendent that,

- (a) the conflict is resolved;
 - (b) the conflict is not resolved but no further action is needed;
 - (c) the conflict is not resolved and action is needed.
- 27 The DS must monitor the implementation of any agreement that has been reached and ensure that it is implemented in its entirety.

STAGE 4 FURTHER ACTION

28 If the CAP group, in a situation in which a minister is directly involved, considers that the minister may have committed a disciplinary offence, the District Superintendent refers him/her to the disciplinary process as set out in the Manual of Laws, Chapter 5. The Committee, however, recommends that Chapter 5 be reviewed to consider if it is fit for purpose.

29 If the CAP group considers that relations between the minister and congregation have broken down, it may recommend that the minister be transferred to a different appointment. In this case, the District Superintendent informs the District Stationer. If the minister is transferred, he/she must also be given any counselling, retraining or supervision that the CAP recommends. Immediate removal from duty of the minister can be considered if appropriate.

30 The District Superintendent must ensure that, at all stages and within the constraints of confidentiality and the requirements of justice and due process, the minister and congregation are kept fully informed on the process and its outcome. The District Superintendent should do this personally at key stages of the process. The District Superintendent shall also advise the President and Secretary of Conference of the action which has been taken and the outcome.

When the Minister in Conflict is the Circuit or District Superintendent.

31 It has been assumed that the process outlined above is designed for a conflict situation which arises in a multi-point circuit where more than one minister is stationed. If the conflict involves the Superintendent of such a circuit, the DS shall appoint another Superintendent Minister to undertake the process. However, a number of circuits have only one minister stationed who is both minister of the congregation and Superintendent of the Circuit. For the process described in this report the District Superintendent shall appoint the Superintendent of another circuit within the District to undertake the process. Further, the situation of conflict may involve the District Superintendent either as the minister of a congregation, as Circuit Superintendent or in her/his duties as District Superintendent. In this case the Secretary of Conference, in consultation with the President of Conference, shall appoint another District Superintendent to take over the process.

STAGE 5 POST CONFLICT

32 When the process is completed, a healing process for the congregation must be implemented. The congregation must be fully informed of what has happened and have the opportunity to reflect on and pray about what has happened.

33 Where a conflict has been serious there will be hurts which remain to be healed, notwithstanding a resolution of the matter giving rise to the difficulties. The District Superintendent and the Circuit Superintendent will work with the Minister to ensure that suitable pastoral care is provided to individuals, including the

Minister and the congregation. If appropriate, ministry may be undertaken for a period by another suitable Minister.

34 The Committee recommends that for an open and transparent process of healing within a congregation the following must be addressed:

- acknowledgement of the problem to the congregation.
- When ‘things go wrong’ within the life of a congregation there needs to be a radical re-discovery of Gospel values e.g. by a well prepared and skilfully led opportunity for biblically based study and prayer in which all parties are invited to take part.
- Urgent and serious consideration needs to be given to children and young people whose homes and families may have been involved in or affected by the conflict.
- Careful consideration should be given to the provision of adequate pastoral care.
- Opportunity needs to be given to individuals to seek reconciliation with others in an open and managed way.
- Attention needs to be given to a service or event in which there would be conscious and visible signs and expressions of reconciliation, e.g. the Covenant Service or Holy Communion.
- If re-stationing is necessary there may be a need for a short term appointment of an assisting minister or an interim minister.
- The process must be agreed between the Circuit and Connexion.
- The implementation needs to be monitored by the District Superintendent or her/his nominee.

OTHER ISSUES

Accountability

35 There is little or no accountability for the minister who has been ordained. The “character questions” which are asked at each meeting of the Spring Synod no longer adequately meet the requirement.

Training in supervision is now mandatory for those who superintend probationers, but the Church needs to think about how accountability to ministerial discipline is built into our structures and practice.

The Committee therefore recommends that Conference re-examine our understanding of and process for accountability and discipline for ordained ministers.

Role and Stationing of District Superintendents

36 The role of the District Superintendent (DS) is crucial to the development and implementation of this model of accountability. It is important for their role in this area, as in other areas, to be clearly spelled out. The Church’s current legislation sets out the duties and responsibilities of a District Superintendent, including her/his responsibility to ‘take such action as he/she may deem to be helpful to the promotion of peace and order, and to the faithful and judicious execution of the Church’s discipline’ (Manual of Laws 9.15 – 9.19). However, experience has shown that it has not always been easy for a District Superintendent to know when and how any intervention was advisable or helpful. The current legislation also provides for the election of a District Superintendent, subject to the exigencies of stationing, for a period of three years with a maximum of six years in succession in the same District (Manual of Laws 6.43(d)). However, it has often

been the case that stationing considerations have taken precedence over an adequate tenure in office.

The Committee, therefore, welcomes the work of the Working Party appointed by General Committee to review the appointment and role of District Superintendents. Our recommendation is that District Superintendents be appointed for at least three years and normally five years, and that the appointment should override all other stationing considerations. They must be provided with adequate training as recommended above (paragraph 11).

Appendix 1 - Case Studies

Case 1 Two Families “Fall Out”

A small country church has two dominant families who vie for control. In a dispute over who should cut the anniversary cake to mark 100 years the two families fall out and stop talking to each other.

In the initial response the local minister feels he is unable to deal with the situation.

The two families refuse to meet and the local minister feels torn by this issue because he inadvertently caused this by inviting the person to cut the cake.

The minister and Society Steward agree that it would be helpful to have the Superintendent Minister involved. A joint letter is written outlining their concerns and requesting the help of the Circuit Superintendent. She arranges two separate meetings and seeks to listen to them and establish the facts. During the period since the initial fall out other things have happened and past upsets have also been aired in public.

One family is prepared to engage in a process with the Superintendent Minister but the other family won't because they feel the Superintendent is overly familiar with the other family. Realising this, the Superintendent feels she has no option but to refer this to the District Superintendent (DS).

Following a review of the situation and realising the complexity of the historical disputes, the recent flare ups and her concern for the wellbeing of the local congregation, the DS decides to refer this to the CAP. A mediation process is established. Through the help of trained mediators both sides are eventually brought together and enabled to begin to understand the historical nature of the ongoing conflict between the two families and the damage this has done to the local congregation. The CAP in conjunction with the DS draws up a report outlining the recommendations for implementation to be overseen by the DS. The local minister also meets with the mediators and is given insights into the future handling of the two families and steps to take if difficulties occur in the future.

Case 2 “Expectations!”

The Lay Worker and the Superintendent Circuit minister get into conflict over hours that should be worked and the work that should be done. There are ambiguities in the contract of employment. Their relationship is seriously affected and because this is a one church circuit other members of the circuit quickly begin to notice. The Lay Worker takes these issues to the District Superintendent (DS).

The DS arranges a separate meeting, but the atmosphere is soured because the Circuit Superintendent feels betrayed by the Lay Worker's actions and the Circuit Superintendent behaves in a hostile manner towards the District Superintendent.

The situation continues to deteriorate. Before the District Superintendent can gain a

full picture the Lay Worker proceeds to make a formal complaint under the “Dignity in the Church Policy”. The District Superintendent thus begins this formal process.

Case 3 A Refurbishment Project gone wrong

The minister and the congregation get into conflict over what needs to be done. The minister wants to retain the traditional architecture and layout of the church, a group led by the “Praise Group” want to refurbish and modernise the worship space with the removal of the pews, introduction of chairs, and new layout at the front with space for drums, etc. They have significant support within the congregation. At the planning meetings there are heated discussions between the minister and members of this group.

The Circuit Superintendent hears about this but it is too late. Divisions now run deep. The issue is now about the direction the congregation should follow. The Circuit Superintendent would be perceived by the minister as being sympathetic to the “Praise Group”. He realises that due to the speed with which this has occurred the District Superintendent should be involved as a matter of urgency. The DS chairs a meeting of the congregation. The discussions between the minister and the “Praise Group” members are now intense and there is more “heat than light” shown at the meeting.

The DS refers the issue to the CAP and they initiate a mediation process. Following extensive deliberations with the various parties there is no resolution and the mediators in conjunction with the DS draw up a report outlining their findings.

The DS meets with the minister and following this consultation they agree that his expectations and those of the congregation cannot move forward together. The minister informs the stationers of his willingness to move. The DS initiates follow up work with the minister to ensure that appropriate pastoral care and support is provided. The DS also meets with the congregation helping to put in place a process that enables them to work through the ‘Refurbishment Project’ in a constructive manner.

Appendix 2 Mediation

1 Mediation is a process for resolving conflict, where a third party, who is impartial, supports and helps the disputants find a way forward or reach an agreement. The important part of mediation is that the outcome is in the hands of the disputants themselves. The mediator does not make decisions or judge the parties. The process is focused on building the capacity of the disputants, themselves, to negotiate a mutually agreed plan.

Impartiality of the Mediator/Third Party

2 A third party in a dispute can listen, without prejudice, to each of the parties. This is critical to helping the parties talk and reflect on their situation. It can often be the first time they have truly been listened to in this way which, in turn, can make a big difference as to how they feel about the dispute. If the disputants believe the third party is not trying to persuade them of their point of view, the third party can help the disputants develop their own ideas as to how to resolve their dispute.

3 The number one rule for any third party is not to become part of the dispute. To this end, it is not possible truly to fill this role if there is a professional or

personal relationship with one of the parties in the dispute.

Reaching an agreement

4 Agreements in mediation can be written or verbal. Written agreements can take the form of a contract that both sign and keep. These do not become legally binding but are kept by the parties themselves. If there are any problems or a breakdown in the agreement, the parties will have agreed to return to mediation as part of the agreement.

5 Agreements negotiated in mediation have a high success rate and tend to last because the participants themselves have worked hard to reach them. They also are based on what the participants themselves understand as being needed and acceptable to both of them.

6 The language in any agreement should be clear and straight forward. Ideally it should be in the words of the parties themselves although sometimes, if the agreement is particularly complicated, the mediator will help in the framing of the document.

Conflict at the Heart of Mediation

7 Conflict can be a difficult and confusing experience for us all. We can get anxious and angry. We often lose the ability to see clearly what we should do. It also gets more difficult to see the other's point of view. As the conflict escalates, we alienate ourselves from the other person. They can become our enemy. We may lose a sense of their humanity and the awareness of our own ability to make mistakes. The stakes get higher for all involved.

8 Mediation offers an opportunity to turn this negative process around. As the parties work through the process with the mediator they are empowered to decide and act for themselves and start to recognise the other's point of view. Together, they begin to feel more in command of their own future again.

9 The mediator needs to understand the landscape of conflict. They act as navigator and understand the emotional ebb and flow throughout the process, knowing how to read the responses of each individual. There is a particular type of pastoral care that is required and good quality training with continued reflective practice is needed for every mediator. Mediators need to be fully trained and willing to attend regular supervision to provide the best quality duty of care to their clients.