MORNINGSIDE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

CONFLICTS RESOLUTION POLICY

Conflict is a normal part of congregational life. The Morningside UMC Conflicts Resolution Policy recognizes that the Morningside UMC community has experienced and will experience conflict, and provides a process for engaging the conflict in healthy ways for the individuals involved and for the congregation.

Biblical and Theological Foundation

In our congregation, conflict can be a catalyst for renewal, health and change, and can serve as a mechanism for creating momentum toward necessary growth. At other times, however, conflict can become destructive and cause serious dissension among people. A clear and healthy process for working through conflict will empower a congregation to move forward in the midst of the challenges, and increase faithfulness and effectiveness within the Church.

Jesus outlines the process of conflict resolution, saying:

> *"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. 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.*
>
> *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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

– Matthew 18: 15-19, NRSV

Jesus affirms healthy relationships, which include honest communication with one another, a willingness to be reconciled, and an acknowledgement of the need for forgiveness in our lives. He also claims to be in our midst when we are with those who disagree with us. We are at our best, and honor God, when we work to resolve differences, offer forgiveness and reconcile differences within the congregation.

Jesus teaches that ***"If people refuse to listen even to the church, let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*** Jesus would give the Gentiles and tax collectors a second chance over and over again, and responds to Peter's question about how many times he needed to forgive with, ***"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."***

We have the Scriptural mandate, the polity resources, and the process to grow our Church beyond occasional conflict. It requires intentionality, hearts intent on forgiveness, and a well-trained Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).

Procedures for Conflict Resolution

1. Communicate

"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."
– Matthew 18:15

Any congregant who is in conflict with another congregant should begin with prayer for herself/himself and the individual with whom there is a conflict. The congregant should invite God to share wisdom, enable understanding and an openness to communication that resolves differences. If the congregant is unable to let a hurt go, he or she should speak privately, in love, with the one who has offended, and attempt to work it out directly with the person. Jesus knew that the potential for resolution increases when fewer, rather than more, people are involved. Jesus invited people to avoid "building an army" at the outset by involving more than the immediate parties into the conversation. The congregant can choose to speak with the individual face-to-face, explain how it has affected the congregant, and provide an opportunity for reconciliation with the other person. The congregant is encouraged to start the conversation by saying – "I experienced (describe what you felt or experienced) when you (describe the action of the individual) and I would like to resolve our differences." If, however, the congregant feels uncomfortable directly confronting the offender, the congregant can proceed directly to Step 2 below, and engage a member of the SPRC.

2. Companions

"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."
– Matthew 18:16

If a congregant's concern is not reasonably resolved without intervention of others, then the congregant should speak to a member of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) and ask for help to resolve the concern. As a starting point, a congregant can contact the SPRC Chair or ask the Pastor to help arrange for the SPRC's involvement. In United Methodist churches, SPRC members are elected to be reconciling agents and interpreters. This may include having a member of the committee mediate a conversation between the individuals who are in conflict with one another. Before matters come before the SPRC as a whole, however, the offended congregant should include an SPRC member in a two-(or three)-to-one conversation. SPRC members should engage in a good faith effort to help resolve the conflict before escalating to the next step of the conflicts resolution process, but should refer the conflict to the full SPRC and Pastor if the conflict cannot be resolved within a reasonable period of time. In mediating a conflict, SPRC members shall follow the SPRC Guidelines for Conflicts Resolution.

When the concern is with or involves the Pastor, the SPRC Chair will contact the United Methodist Church District Superintendent if there does not appear to be resolution or a path forward to address the concerns presented. When the conflict arises because of an allegation of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, or sexual abuse, the SPRC Chair or the Pastor will contact the District Superintendent immediately (within eight hours) so that the Sexual Misconduct Policy will be implemented.

In any instance where a member of the SPRC becomes involved in mediating a conflict between or among congregants, the SPRC Chair will promptly notify the Council Chair, the President of the Board of Trustees (BOT) and the Pastor (so long as the Pastor is not the subject of the conflict). The Council Chair and the BOT President, in consultation with the SPRC Chair and, if appropriate, the Pastor, shall assess whether the matter should be reported to the full Council and/or the full BOT. If the matter is disclosed to the full Council and/or BOT, the Council Chair, BOT President and Pastor shall exercise their discretion to protect the privacy of the individuals involved in the conflict.

3. Council

"If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."
– Matthew 18:17

If the concern is not resolved within a reasonable amount of time with the prior step, then those with concerns can meet collectively with the full SPRC and Pastor. At this point the SPRC as a whole (representing the church) is involved. The goals for all involved at this point still remains reconciliation, building up the church, personal growth, and learning to live with less than perfect co-workers in Christian community.

In any instance where the full SPRC, as a whole, becomes involved as representative of the church, the SPRC Chair shall promptly notify the Council Chair and BOT President that the conflict has escalated to this stage of the conflicts resolution process. The Council Chair and the BOT President shall determine the extent to which the matter should be disclosed to the full Council and BOT, respectively, and shall exercise their discretion to protect the privacy of the individuals involved in the conflict. If the conflict cannot be resolved by the full SPRC and Pastor within a reasonable period of time, then the SPRC Chair, Council Chair, BOT President and Pastor shall confer, with input from the individuals involved in the dispute, on whether the dispute should be presented to the entire congregation of Morningside before escalating to the next step in the conflicts resolution process.

If a congregant involved in a conflict does not believe that the SPRC has adequately addressed his or her concern, or believes that the SPRC has not acted objectively, the congregant may ask the SPRC Chair to contact the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent will further review the concerns and determine if additional steps are warranted.

4. Clear Expectations

"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."
– Matthew 18:17

Someone who does not know about the life and teachings of Christ may assume that letting someone be "as a Gentile and a tax collector" means ending a relationship. Christians know, however, that this is precisely the person Jesus was most intentional about seeking. What this verse suggests is that there may come a time when the offending party needs a clear statement from the church that certain behaviors cannot be tolerated and that they may need to remove themselves from the gathered community until their behavior is in greater compliance with Christian community values.

If a conflict escalates to this step, then the SPRC and Pastor shall prepare the clear, written statement of the Church's expectations of the offending congregant's behavior. The SPRC Chair and Pastor shall present the statement to the full Council for review, input and approval. Once the full Council has approved the content of the statement, two members of the Church (the SPRC Chair, Pastor, and/or another Council member delegated to serve as the point of contact with the offending congregant) shall speak with the offending congregant to communicate the statement, and request that the offending congregant agree to meet the expectations and acknowledge his / her agreement by signing the written statement.

The Council shall exercise its discretion on whether to take any additional enforcement steps, including directing the offending congregant to cease attending the Church and taking such other steps as needed to enforce this directive.