

Guiding Principles and Process For Dealing With Conflicts  
Within the body of Christ at Perimeter Church  
(September 28th, 2009)

**Introduction:** Conflicts that come to the attention of the church staff or elders usually begin as personal disputes between two or more individuals. Typically, when one side feels they are not getting what they believe is right, they bring charges of sin against the other side. As a result elders and/or staff members are called upon to solve the dispute. The “solving” of the dispute *may* use the vehicle of a church court, but in the grand majority of disputes, the church court is neither necessary nor preferred. Conflicts can often be resolved by healthy pastoral guidance for the parties in conflict.

The hope of this paper is to equip elders and leaders with some guiding principles that, can both (1) help leaders as they minister to parties in conflict and (2) help leaders properly convey their role so as to avoid any misperception about it. This paper is also written to help those, who are not skilled in the process, to know how to refer people into it and to help them understand what happens when they do.

When conflicted parties refuse to be reconciled, formal church discipline will be used to further the goals of purity in the Church, the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, and the spiritual good of offenders (1 Cor. 5:5). Every effort should be made, however, to resolve conflicts through repentance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation before formal charges are entertained by a church court (Appendix I, BOCO)

In the spirit of 2 Cor. 5:14-21, the following Guiding Principles and Process are set forth:

**Guiding Principles and Process:**

1. ***The Need for Reconciliation***

In cases where personal peacemaking has failed (Appendix I, BOCO) and/or couples/individuals are stuck in blame-shifting, and they have asked for church intervention per Matthew 18:17, Perimeter Church through the Reconciliation Ministry Team (RMT), which is a committee of the Judicial Commission (JC) of the Session of Perimeter Church, shall initiate a reconciliation process, keeping in mind the glory of God, and consistent with:

- a. the RMT’s understanding of the Word of God for us to be reconcilers,
- b. the church members’ commitment via Membership Covenant to submit to the government and discipline of the church,
- c. the concern of all to further the church’s purity and peace.

2. ***The Intake Process***

When a conflict comes to the attention of the RMT the Pastor of Shepherding and the Chairman of the RMT shall appoint an RMT member(s) to lead the process of initial assessment. This will include the completion of a Self Assessment Report for data gathering and may include a face-to-face meeting with the parties.

- a. The RMT member(s) will determine if the parties are willing to come under the care of a Spiritual Care Team led by elders. If so,
- b. The RMT will appoint a Spiritual Care team (also a committee of JC), assign a case number and **orient the SCT**. Primarily, the RMT will appoint men who are in the Reconciliation Ministry Focus Area (MFA) or Shepherding MFA.
- c. The RMT will determine immediate next steps, in conjunction with the SCT, which may include but not be limited to:
  - i. a relationship assessment by professional Christian counselors/therapists,
  - ii. individual/marital counseling,
  - iii. mentoring and/or coaching,
  - iv. temporary stepping down of members from leadership and/or ministry positions
  - v. reading of the Word, prayer and structured personal reflection exercises using tools such as *Peacemaker*.
- d. The RMT will establish a schedule for meetings and develop a short term plan including regular communication plan to all who need to be in the know. In general, cases will have a 90 day charter/window.
- e. The RMT will recommend signing of a release of confidentiality form(s) so that the SCT may communicate with and receive reports from professional counselors/therapists.

### 3. *The Make-up and Responsibilities of the Spiritual Care Team*

- a. The SCT will consist of elders and women (in marital cases or cases involving women), who have been trained in spiritual care and conflict resolution.
- b. The SCT will proceed on a foundation of prayer and a hope in the glory of God to be revealed. The SCT is first concerned for His Kingdom, not for détente between two individuals.
- c. It is not helpful to speak out, even in love, without doing so prayerfully and with the glory of God in mind. Words spoken in love must come from a concerned heart and through a gentle tongue.
- d. The message must be presented as from the Lord. This does not mean that the message will be received with grace. The SCT needs to be prepared for pushback and even anger to be misdirected at them as they try and point people to Christ.
- e. They are to examine their own hearts as the exercise of spiritual care is meant to be a means of blessing to all involved.
- f. They are to manage the process, not the outcome. The individuals who are the subjects of spiritual care are responsible for the outcome.
- g. They are to encourage the individuals to examine themselves for sin and to put it to death by the power of the Spirit. In doing so they must judge only who is “right” and who is “wrong” when sin is identified in either party,

especially when the individual(s) shows no evidence of genuine repentance.

- h. They must be responsive to the will and Word of God even though they are sympathetic to the plight of the parties. The truth must be spoken, whatever the cost.

#### 4. *The SCT Expectation & Outcome*

The Spiritual Care team expects to be engaged in a spiritual process, coming alongside the conflicted parties and assisting them to get back into right relationship with Christ whom they have professed to follow. The parties subject to the process are responsible for the outcome.

It is hopeful that the Holy Spirit will use the means of grace to promote change and holiness in His people. As He has given mankind free will, it is not always the case that they respond to Him. Consequently, when one party is unwilling to remove the beam from his/her own eye before attempting to remove the mote from another's and refuses to listen to the exhortations/counsel from the SCT over a period of time, the team shall forewarn the member that they are on the verge of church discipline.

#### 5. *From Spiritual Care to Formal Church Discipline*

- a. When one party is unwilling and/or refuses to listen to the exhortations/counsel from the SCT concerning sin, the team shall initiate formal church discipline (Matt. 18:17-18)
- b. Formal Church Discipline may be undertaken by the RMT or a separate team formed for this purpose. Preferably however, the SCT will undertake the formal church discipline as the need becomes apparent.
- c. The SCT will inform the party by means of a pastoral letter that they are on the verge of formal church discipline. This letter will include the pathway to be taken towards censure, timetable for response, the weightiness of censure and the end results of censures. The censures available to the church are:
  - i. Suspension from the Lord's Table
  - ii. Excommunication
- d. The SCT will submit a Case Summary to the RMT describing the offenses and the team's recommendation for formal church discipline and censure.
- e. The RMT will review the case and make recommendations to JC.

#### 6. *Formal Church Discipline*

When formal church discipline is initiated, the following shall be clearly specified by the SCT (BOCO 29, 31-32, 38):

- a. The nature of the offense(s)
- b. The accused
- c. The accuser, which is always the Presbyterian Church in America

7. ***Application of Censure***

The JC will determine if charges and evidence warrant prosecution. If they do, the accused will be notified in writing and censure may be applied with or without process depending on the responsiveness of the accused. Should censure be made all who need to know will be notified.

8. ***Information Flow/Reporting Process***

Timely communication is important between SCT, RMT and Judicial Commission. As such the following will be the ordinary flow:

- a. **From** the SCT **to** the RMT - regular (monthly) progress reports.
- b. **From** the leader of SCT, written Pastoral Letters **to** the member(s) on behalf of the SCT, when appropriate.
- c. **From** the RMT through the Committee Chair, **to** the Judicial Commission of the Elder Ministry Team – case summaries and drafts of letters of censures for approval and actions
- d. **From** the Judicial Commission **to** the Elder Ministry Team, reporting its actions for their receiving on behalf of the Session of Perimeter Church.
- e. **From** the Chair of the Judicial Commission **to** the member(s) under disciplinary action, all formal written communication of disciplinary actions e.g. letter of censure.

9. ***Additional Guidelines specific to marriage disputes***

- a. Oftentimes the need for spiritual care or even church discipline arises in the context of a marriage relationship strained by sin. In such cases, the goal is to address the sin. Often the sin comes to the attention of the SCT because of the fraying of a marriage and thus it should be seen as an opportunity to give glory to God and as an opportunity for spiritual growth. It is important to know that the marriage breakdown is symptomatic of the sin. A happy result of the members' repentance under the prompting of the Holy Spirit is that sometimes a marriage is saved.
- b. The SCT should be careful to not quickly make a decision about who is right or wrong in marriage disputes. They are to encourage the husband and the wife to confront their own respective sin, which may be contributing to their marital discord. This is not to mean that some times one spouse is clearly wrong in a specific area or issue. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict and draw people to repentance.
- c. If one spouse is considering divorce, it is appropriate for SCT to give its guidance on biblical grounds for divorce based on its knowledge of the scripture. They do so, not for the purpose of encouraging divorce, but for spiritual care and for warning against sinful divorce. If one party has grounds for biblical divorce it may or may not mean that the other party is subject to church discipline. It also may or may not mean that the other party does or does not also have Biblical grounds for divorce.

- d. In cases involving assets, child custody issues as well as relational issues, a process of mediation (see Appendix I, BOCO) using the services of a Certified Christian Conciliator may also be suggested.

***10. Perimeter Church position on Separation:***

- a. Just as we do not recommend divorce as a solution to marital discord, we also do not recommend separation to solve marital problems.
- b. In cases of physical abuse and/or threats where one spouse fears for his/her and the family's physical safety, they should call the civil authority and take steps to move themselves (and their children) to a safe place (Rom. 13:1-5).
- c. We view legal separation similar to divorce. Therefore, the biblical grounds for divorce will apply (Matt. 19:9 and 1 Cor 7:12-16).
- d. When a couple is separated without biblical grounds, they should not be engaged in ministry (public or personal) so that they can focus their attention on their own spiritual growth and relational healing and restoration through confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.
- e. If a couple remain separated without biblical grounds with no reconciliation in sight despite the counsel and exhortations from the SCT, then the team shall:
  - i. Step back and suspend the SC process (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15),
  - ii. Inform the couple that they may be placed under church discipline for refusing to honor their membership vow,
  - iii. Call them to grow spiritually through confession and forgiveness and to re-engage in the reconciliation process,
  - iv. Encourage them again to seek/continue professional Christian counseling to deal with their personal and relationship issues,
  - v. Continue to pray and care for the couple as appropriate through personal ministry.

These guidelines have been developed through experience but they are not perfect and cannot be expected to cover all variations. They are guidelines. Each case is different to a certain degree. All decisions will be made pastorally, with leading from the Spirit and the counsel of the team, RMT , JC and EMT.