

SOUTHRIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH

LEADERSHIP CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS

Preamble:

Southridge Community Church appreciates that church leadership is a high calling and serious responsibility (Hebrews 13:17). As a result there are lofty expectations of those who play leadership functions in the church, particularly in the way that they exhibit a mature Christian character and model the lifestyle of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

At the same time we appreciate that no human is perfect (Romans 3:23)—including leaders. And we believe that conflict is not only inevitable in relationships, but sometimes critical to the full functioning of a team to optimizing the diversity within the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). A life of following and serving Jesus is not a conflict-free life; rather, it is one that develops the behaviours of conflict resolution.

This is particularly important in relating to and resolving conflict with church leaders (1 Timothy 5:19), because it can affect the unity of the church and the reputation of Jesus in and around our community. So, in the spirit of providing the best care possible for individuals—especially those experiencing conflict with a church leader—as well as protecting the integrity of our church’s leadership and its testimony to the surrounding community, we want to outline the practical steps of conflict resolution outlined by Jesus Himself and clarify how this process applies to conflicts with church leadership.

Process:

Jesus taught the following 3-step process when resolving conflicts with people:

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Matthew 18:15-17 [NIV]

In the case of a conflict with a leader in the church...

Step 1: Discuss the issue in private, face-to-face with the leader.

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”

Matthew 18:15 [NIV]

Conflict resolution begins by talking directly to a person; not talking about them. This dialogue demands face-to-face interaction to allow things like tone and body language to support clear communication and understanding. As well, the responsibility to initiate this conversation is on the offended individual (inasmuch as Matthew 5 teaches that you must initiate reconciliation anytime you're aware that you offended someone else), and Jesus provides no alternatives or excuse clauses. You can't avoid this step because 'you don't like conflict' or because 'you don't want to jeopardize your relationship' or because 'the leader won't listen'. It is imperative that any believer mature enough to participate in the ministry of Southridge Community Church demonstrate that maturity through this step of Jesus' conflict resolution sequence. And in the case where a leader doesn't seem to listen, or remains unrepentant, Jesus directs us to a second step.

Step 2: Contact the leader's direct supervisor and include them in the next private, face-to-face discussion with the leader and a witness (if possible).

And, as an intermediate step between 2-3, if necessary...

Step 2.5: Contact the Lead Pastor and include them in the next private, face-to-face discussion with the leader, a witness (if possible) and their direct supervisor.

“But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

Matthew 18:16 [NIV]

Sometimes a third party is required to play a mediating role or facilitate a greater degree of objectivity among two people in relational conflict. Jesus describes these people as 'witnesses'—individuals close to the situation who could add perspective or play a translating role between the two conflicting parties. In the case of church leaders, in addition to potential situational witness within the conflict itself, the supervisor of the leader is now included in the conversation, because of the accountability role that they provide to both what and how a leader carries out their responsibilities. The leader's

supervisor would play a mediating role in the conversation and would strive to ensure relational reconciliation as the goal of the discussion.

In the case where resolution cannot be achieved in this way, the Lead Pastor (or supervisor's supervisor) becomes involved, now playing the mediating role between the offended person (and witnesses) and the leader (and their direct supervisor). Of course, it's possible that the leader's supervisor mediates in a flawed or ineffective way, or that they—or even the Lead Pastor—cannot maintain objectivity because of their close personal allegiance to the leader at the centre of the conflict. In such extreme cases, Jesus provides a third step.

Step 3: Contact the Chair of the Board of Elders and include the “arm’s length” Elders in the next private, face-to-face discussion with the leader, a witness (if possible), their direct supervisor and the Lead Pastor.

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Matthew 18:17 [NIV]

When Jesus instructs to, “tell it to the church,” He’s not encouraging someone to gossip or broadcast a conflict in a public or congregation-wide kind of way. Rather, He’s referring to the step of bringing an issue to the leadership of the church who oversee the church’s activity as its final authority. Here at Southridge, this leadership body entrusted with that responsibility is called the Board of Elders, and their purpose is to oversee and provide direction and accountability to the day-to-day leadership provided by our staff and ministry leaders. So, in the case of a conflict with a ministry leader, there exists a higher body of leadership to oversee the mediation of the conflict if it can’t be resolved at a ministry or staff leadership level.

To help ensure objectivity in this process, all conflicts of interest among Elders and mediation participants must be declared, and a subset of all Elders who are “arm’s length” (i.e.: not related to or tightly relationally connected to any party within the mediation) will serve as the governing body to help resolve the issue.

In Ephesians 4, Paul teaches ***“We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”***—this is the spirit and goal behind biblical conflict resolution: the love of each other and the growth of Christ’s church!