

GLCRC Guiding Principles: Navigating Conflict

Why does GLCRC Need a Plan to Navigate Conflict?

Healthy navigation of church conflict gives hope to everyone in the congregation by reducing the pain and suffering that unresolved conflict can cause to both individuals and groups.

Healthy navigation of church conflict helps people maintain the Unity of the Body of Christ as they pursue His mission in the community and the world. Healthy navigation of conflicts also helps the church to be known for loving God and people, rather than for quarrels and conflict. (John 17:22-23; 1Corinthians 12:27; John 13:34-35; 1John 4:11; 2 Timothy 2:14)

Healthy navigation of church conflict requires that those involved value one another as human beings, put forth the effort to understand opposing points of view, and mutually work to preserve the Unity of the church. Navigating conflict in a God-honoring way is paramount to everyone's ongoing transformation as disciples of Christ.

Who is Responsible for Navigating Conflict in a Healthy Way at GLCRC?

Members, regular attenders, leaders, staff, Consistory members, and Pastors all have a responsibility to work to resolve their differences in ways that honor and glorify God. Creating a climate that encourages people to settle their differences in healthy ways will require everyone to grow and mature as disciples of Christ.

When conflict arises between two individuals, we encourage them to take the steps outlined in the next section. Our Pastors and Elders are available to coach them through this process if that would be beneficial. When unhealthy conflict arises between a person(s) and the church or its staff, it is likely that the Elders will get involved. For example, if unhealthy conflict arises involving a staff member, including pastors, who are acting within the scope of their duties as given by Consistory to further the mission and vision of the church, the Elders will step in to mediate the conflict.

Helpful Scripture references: Hebrews 10:24; Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 1:10; Galatians 5:13-15; Galatians 5:24-25; Philippians 2:1-3, 14-15; Philippians 4:4-8; Romans 16:17; Colossians 3:8-10; 1Peter 2:1; 1Peter 4:7-10; Matthew 7:1-5; Matthew 18:15-17; Book of Titus.

How to Navigate Conflict: A Biblical Model

Before reading this section please read Matthew Chapter 7:1-5 and Chapter 18 paying particular attention to 18:15-17. During Jesus' ministry he was quite aware of the brokenness of the world but yet knew that His mission was to reconcile the world unto himself. Part of what that meant was that he would have to teach his people how to handle conflict as the church was formed and began to grow. Conflict can be healthy and help the church move together faithfully in mission. However, conflict can become unhealthy when it focuses more on people and preferences and less on the church's Mission and God's Vision for it. Unhealthy conflict can destroy the Unity of the church and must be confronted.

In Matthew 7:1-5 and 18:15-17, Jesus lays out a process to handle unhealthy conflict, with the end goal always being reconciliation and Unity of the Body of Christ.

The first step is to examine yourself in light of Matthew 7:1-5. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what your contribution is to the conflict. In light of what He tells you, is there cause for you repent? Is the concern/conflict that you have even worth proceeding to the next step, or is it best to let it drop? Step two is a conversation between the two

people in conflict, initiated by one of them. This conversation would entail a humble face-to-face exchange of ideas, and a time of listening to each other. Jesus' approach is personal, so this step would not involve sending anonymous notes or emails, nor would it involve social media. The two people might not resolve their conflict in only one conversation, so they may need to sit down together for multiple conversations. If their series of conversations does not bring them toward some level of resolution, then it likely will help them to move to step three, and bring in a third person to help them pursue reconciliation. The goal of the third person is not to help one person gang up on the other person involved, but to increase the chances that the conversation will be humble and gracious. When this conflict involves the church, it may be helpful to bring an Elder or Pastor into the conversation. If the third step does not bring about reconciliation, Jesus tells us to bring the issue to the church. This fourth step would require the sitting Elders and Pastors to become involved. Again, the goal is not to gang up on anyone, but rather to say, "We want to encourage reconciliation, so that we can be in right relationship with God, and with each other." At any point in this process, the Elders may consult third-party experts to help bring resolution to the conflict. Regrettably, if a fifth step becomes necessary because of someone's ongoing, unrepented sin, this final step in the process could lead to excommunication, or other forms of discipline. Jesus tells the church body to no longer treat this person as a brother in Christ, but as someone who needs to be reached by the Gospel. While excommunication may sound extreme, it may be necessary as commanded by Jesus to preserve his Bride, the Church.

Scripture is very clear that Unity is a high calling for the church. As a denomination, the RCA takes this Biblical call to Unity in the Body very seriously. When Pastors and Elders are ordained, they make a promise to God and the congregation to preserve the Unity of the church as part of their installation liturgy. If people within the church act in a way that threatens the Unity of the Body, Pastors and Elders are required to act to preserve it. Likewise, when people join the church and become members, they make promises to pursue the Unity of the church. Clearly, when the Unity of the church is threatened it must be taken seriously. It should be noted, though, that Unity and uniformity are different things. Individuals might not all agree 100% on a given topic, but Unity requires everyone to set aside personal differences and speak together as one voice to a hurting and broken world.

In the interest of preserving the Unity of the Church, when people feel that differences within the congregation have not been settled to their satisfaction, they may choose to leave and join another worshipping congregation whose Mission and Vision better line up their perspectives. We see this in Scripture in Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways after a disagreement in order to preserve the Unity of the church and continue sharing the Gospel. Although these moments are difficult for all involved, God's people live as a people of hope, knowing that one day they will see Jesus face to face, and conflict will cease to exist.

Appendix

What is Conflict?

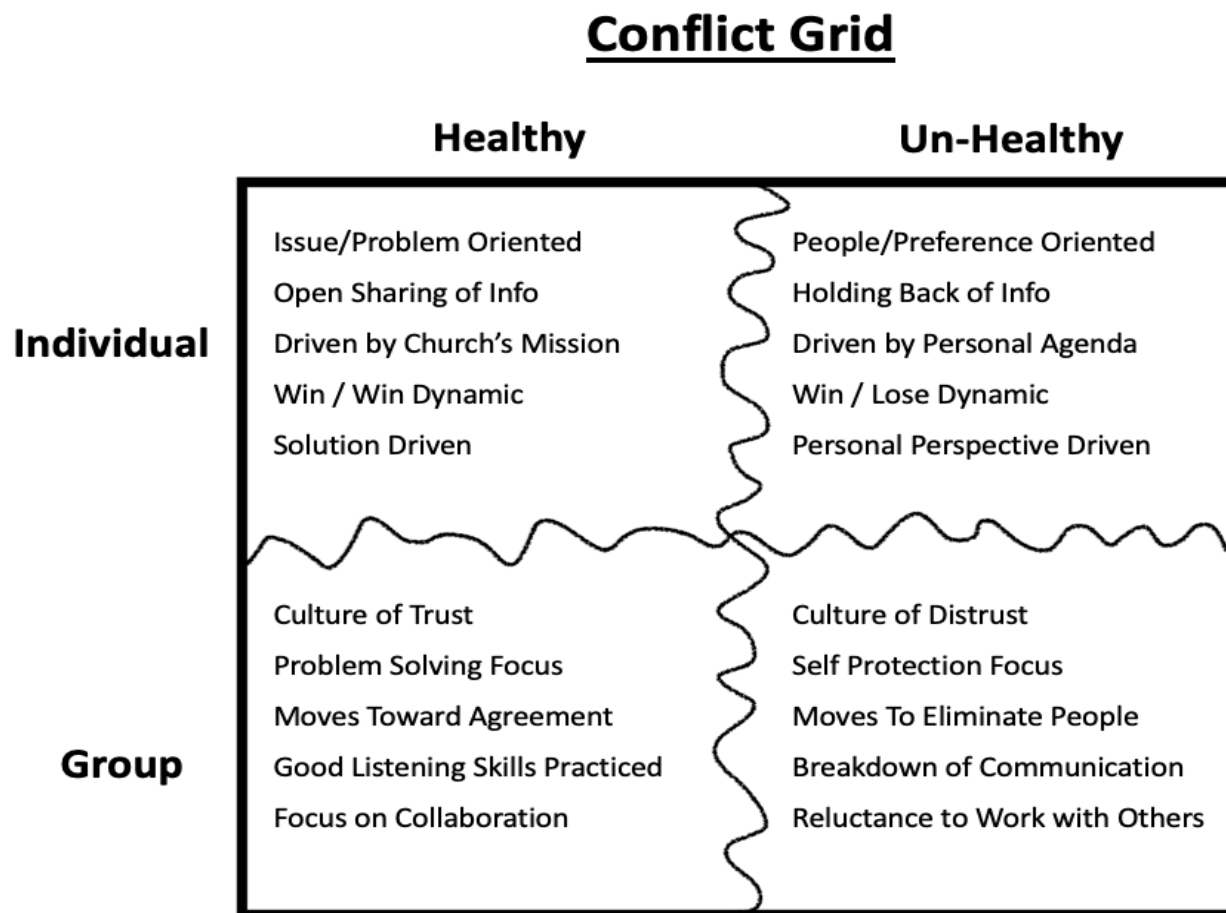
Use of the word "conflict" can mean different things depending on the situation, or the past experiences of the people involved. The following definitions show a wide range for what may be considered "conflict":

1. An incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests.
Synonyms: incongruity, mismatch, variance, difference, divergence, inconsistency
2. A serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one.

Synonyms: dispute, quarrel, clash, friction, strife, hostility, feud, antagonism

The first definition includes differences that are expected because each person in the congregation is a unique individual. Every differing perspective broadens the information base, helping to solve problems together, and make decisions peacefully and collaboratively. Individuals and groups with differing interests can have loving interactions based on common goals, without falling into negative patterns of behavior.

A range of more intense conflicts are described by the second definition. These types of conflict are more divisive compared to those in the first definition. A focus on personal preference rather than the issues, the development of a win/lose dynamic, breakdown of communication, personal attacks, or even factions characterize these more protracted conflicts. The following grid illustrates healthy vs. unhealthy conflicts between individuals and groups of people.



When does Conflict become Unhealthy?

Unhealthy conflict results when distrust grows, communication breaks down, and the focus is turned toward people rather than the issues. Serious disagreements between individuals or groups may develop into a “win or lose” mentality and be spread by way of gossip or anonymous letters, contributing to division throughout the whole congregation.

Antagonism is an extreme form of unhealthy conflict that involves repeated, wanton, selfish, and hostile attacks which are frequently directed toward someone acting in a leadership capacity.