

Conflict Management Policy – Ashley Baptist Church.

The New Testament encourages us to make every effort to develop the unity of the church. God commands us to love one another, to be sensitive to each other, to forgive one another, to encourage and honour one another (Eph. 4: 1-6). We recognise that conflict is an inevitable feature of people being in community. We believe that well-managed conflict can be productive in building a mature and healthy fellowship.

In Matthew 5: 23-26, Jesus declares the importance of seeking personal reconciliation quickly. Reconciliation is a process, and feelings run deep, but we affirm our intention to act according to scripture.

Regular teaching on the subject of relationships should be a priority. Preaching and teaching, including in small groups, must stress the importance of unity within diversity. Differences of opinion are welcomed, but they must be shared in a spirit of grace and humility. To forgive and to receive forgiveness are vital parts of community life.

When criticism is made against a minister, elder, deacon or members of the fellowship it must be carefully weighed. Some criticism can be positive and offered in love. Critical friendship is important to any community. We encourage the church to honestly acknowledge any unresolved conflict. If ignored, it may fester and grow. Jesus calls on us to own the task of seeking reconciliation. In this spirit, we should summon the courage to speak with the person concerned.

We recognise that there will, at times, be conflict within the church. As Christians we are expected to work hard to be forgiving and gracious. If not dealt with in a spirit of openness and forgiveness conflict can be damaging and destructive. We recognise that it can be the strategy of the evil one to generate conflict in the church and therefore we encourage everyone to pray for the church's protection and to guard their own hearts, words and actions.

The goal in conflict situations is not to win or score points – it is reconciliation. We are commanded to love one another, even our enemies. We need to learn to say sorry, to accept other people's apologies, begin the healing.

There is a commitment by the minister and leadership team at Ashley Baptist Church to resolve differences in a positive, timely, constructive and Christ-like manner.

The minister and leadership team are intent on providing a safe environment where the dignity of every individual is respected and to deal promptly with matters of conflict and dispute. This procedure creates a framework for the minister, church leadership team, members, paid staff, volunteers and attendees to work together in overcoming differences that arise and to find common ground to promote peaceful resolutions based on Christian love.

Please note that those members of the Ashley Baptist Church who are contracted, paid, staff will also be able to follow the established grievance procedure and where appropriate will be able to receive support from their trade union or friend. This would not preclude them from following the procedure set out below for matters outside of their employment.

How to raise a conflict issue and the stages to achieve a peaceful resolution.

Stage one – self-reflection and prayer.

Praying about the situation is an essential and important first step.

Make time to examine your own heart and involvement in the situation and to seek God's direction on the best way to proceed – if at all – for the good of the church's overall mission.

If the matter is not resolved through self-reflection and prayer the next stage is to engage in dialogue.

Stage two – one on one discussion with the person concerned.

Engage in dialogue.

Arrange to meet with the person concerned - as soon as possible - for a 'one on one' discussion to put across your feelings and viewpoint and to try to seek common ground to settle your differences.

(Not everyone will be comfortable doing this and so, for those members of the church community who may struggle with this, we would suggest that they consult an elder for advice either in person or if they are uncomfortable with that, they could put the details of the issue in writing and pass it to a member of the leadership team who will then assist the church member in following it up).

Think about the best place and time for this to happen, probably not a quick conversation in the church car park after an event or service, but a time and place where both parties are comfortable and ready to talk. Use the building if you can to find a discreet and appropriate place for the conversation, or a neutral space, a café, on a walk, or any other appropriate circumstance.

The church expects members to be able to solve conflicts or disputes at this stage through development of an understanding of the problem, through humility and prayerful forgiveness and acceptance that our experiences of an issue or problem are probably very different depending on our viewpoint.

If a face-to-face meeting does not bring about a satisfactory resolution the next step is to approach a member of the church leadership team who will provide guidance and advice on how to move forward.

Stage three – guidance and assistance from an elder

Who should I choose? Any of the elders would be happy to help. If they do not feel that they are able to assist or feel that another member of the group would be a more appropriate mediator from within the church, they will make an introduction.

The elder's role at this stage is to serve as a mediator to take time to identify and understand both parties' point of view and to assist the parties involved to move forward in a positive and constructive manner to a shared solution.

In order to do this the elder will first meet individually with all of those who are involved in the conflict and once they have a clear idea of the views of all sides, they will convene a meeting. This will be conducted in a prayerful and positive manner.

If following these meetings, the parties involved in the dispute cannot be reconciled the elder will refer the matter to the Minister.

Stage four – guidance from the minister or regional minister

The minister will convene a meeting of all of those involved in the conflict. If the minister feels compromised in any way, they will refer the matter to a member of the regional team for final mediation.

If they are able, the minister or regional representative should then recommend a remedy to the conflict following thoughtful and prayerful consideration. The conflicting parties will be invited to take 21 days to consider the outcome, and their response.

However, it may be that the minister and/or the regional representative feel that the discussions would benefit from input from the whole leadership team before a resolution is finalised and in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to engage the whole church community. The church body will then be asked to support the recommendation through the result of a democratic vote.

Timescale – the longer a dispute lingers, the more collateral damage it can inflict on church members and the mission of the church. In order to avoid this, each stage should be conducted as swiftly as possible and the process should be completed within three months of the original conflict being raised with the elders.

Note: the process should have a defined end point. The purpose of the process is to resolve conflict so it is important that a time limit is put on the amount of deliberation and discussion etc so that the parties involved and the church can move on. Conflicts should not become endemic.