

GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS, OFFENSES AND ACCUSATIONS

COMPLAINTS:

Every church can benefit from an easily understood process for handling complaints. The aim when responding to complaints is to enable them to be resolved informally, speedily, and fairly by discussion, problem solving, mediation and negotiation.

A complaint must be a written expression of dissatisfaction about an action, or lack of action by the pastor or a person acting on behalf of the church. Complaints will generally fall into one of the following categories:

1. Preferences- Most complaints in the church fall into this category. They usually involve personal preferences over such things like music, worship style, sermon subjects, programing, and church decor. Most of the time, the preference is simply acknowledged.
2. Productivity-Fewer fall into this category but would involve such things as not returning emails or phone messages in a timely manner, or failing to perform some essential function of the pastor's responsibilities.
3. Polity or Policy Violations- These complaints tend to be even less infrequent and generally have to do with a violation of the church's constitution or governing policies.
4. Performance-This represents the least of all complaints but is often the most serious and will involve the church's leadership in addressing the problem.

THE PROCESS:

All complaints and grievances must follow the steps outlined below. They must fill out the form below, state clearly in writing the nature of the complaint and grievance, and give it to the pastor or chair of the board as soon as possible.

1. The pastor and chair of the board will investigate the nature of the complaint after receiving the proper form below. If the complaint affects other individuals, they may be required to attend the meeting with the aggrieved individual. All meetings will occur in the presence of the pastor and board chair in order to facilitate proper accountability, effective communication, and resolution.
2. All parties affected by the complaint will receive a written response outlining any decision made, action taken, or follow-up required.
3. The entire board is to be present when entertaining any complaints that involve the pastor's breach of polity or policy or dereliction of duties or performance.

COMPLAINT FORM

1. State the nature of your complaint. _____
_____.
2. What are the specific details surrounding your complaint? Please state in one paragraph what took place, or what was said or done that has been disturbing or upsetting to you.

3. Date, time and location of the offending action: _____
4. Were any other church members present? (yes or no) _____ If yes, please list their names:

5. Have you spoken with the person/s you have a complaint against? (yes or no) _____
If yes, what was the result of your conversation together? _____

If no, why have you not spoken with them yet? _____

6. To the best of your knowledge, is this person/s aware of your feelings regarding this incident? (yes or no) _____
7. Do you believe there is any chance for reconciliation? (yes or no) _____
8. Do you want reconciliation? (yes or no) _____
9. Have you been to God in prayer about this matter? (yes or no) _____
10. What is it that you seek? In one sentence, please state your expectations. For example: Do you expect an apology? Do you want something changed? Are you seeking punitive measures? _____
11. What would you consider to be a fair and just solution that will resolve this matter to the satisfaction of everyone involved? _____
12. What will a solution to your complaint require from the other person/s?

13. What will a resolution to your complaint require on your part? _____
14. Are you willing to do this? (yes or no) _____

PERSONAL OFFENSES:

INTRODUCTION:

In Matthew 18, Jesus prefaces His direction for resolving offenses with the statement, "If another member of the church sins against you." The first question to ask is, "Has your brother or your sister sinned against you?" If the answer is no, it is not a sin, then you should not pursue the matter any further. Your "offense" may simply be a matter of individual difference, personal opinion, or preference.

If, on the other hand, you are angry with your brother or your sister for no reason and attempt to enlist others in your anger over this imagined or exaggerated offense, then you have sinned against your brother or your sister, and you have become the object of the process Jesus described. So first, be careful to determine whether the offense was a sin. Second, watch your own attitude does not escalate into sin over such things as individual differences or opinions.

THE PROCESS:

1. The first step in keeping with Matthew 18 is to go to the individual directly without discussing the offense with any other person. In a spirit of love and humility, recognizing that he or she may have misunderstood, lay the offense before the individual and ask for clarification. Is this what was actually said or done? Is this what was intended? Why is this objectionable? What would you like to see done about it? If you and the other individual reach a satisfactory resolution, the matter is closed. If you do not feel that a satisfactory resolution was achieved you should proceed to the next step.
2. At this point, take one or two elders with you and go to the individual again. In the first step, maybe the individual refused to listen to your complaint or give you an explanation that was satisfactory. Perhaps the individual refused to apologize to you or acknowledge their behaviour. Whatever the previous outcome, you still believe that the other individual is wrong and needs correction. After laying out your case before the elders, the elders may advise you that you have no case and the process may end here. If you did not achieve a satisfactory resolution, you may proceed to the next step. Again, you are not to discuss this complaint with anyone other than among those parties involved.
3. At this stage, you can request a formal hearing before the pastor and church board. As representatives of the church, they will represent the final stage in this process. Up to this point, your conflict has been private, but now it becomes public. The church board will hear your concerns and ask whatever questions are necessary to determine the real issues. It is a fundamental principle of justice, and a fundamental biblical principle, that an accused person has the right to face their accuser and hear firsthand the accusation. Therefore, you and all parties to the conflict should be present for the entire discussion. Both parties will be given time to explain their positions. The board will endeavor to be just and merciful, and will preserve the best interests of the church in making its decision. The board's decision and direction will be final. Paul's statement to the Corinthians applies: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?" (1 Cor. 6:2)

HANDLING ACCUSATIONS AGAINST A PASTOR:

It is important that the church and its leadership understands the difference between a compliant or grievance and an accusation. Accusations against pastors are far more grievous in nature and require the church's leadership to handle them cautiously and appropriately. Moses wrote, "One witness is not enough to accuse a person of a crime or sin. A case must be proved by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15 (NCV))." Paul says, "Do not listen [entertain in the NIV] to an accusation against an elder unless it is confirmed by two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19 (NLT))." In the following verse 20, Paul says, "those that *sin* should be reprimanded in front of the whole church."

The church's leadership must be certain that an accusation against a pastor is about a sin and is not simply about an individual's personal differences and opinions. It is a serious mistake on the part of a church's leadership to entertain any accusation against a pastor for something other than a sin. The complaint process is for all other concerns.

THE PROCESS:

1. All accusations against a pastor must be in writing. The accusation must have the signatures of at least two or three witnesses and given to the chair of the board. The board will also consider the character and motivation of the witnesses. (See: Deut. 19:16-19; Matt. 26:59-61 (NIV)).
2. If the accusations are founded, the denominational body for the pastor must be notified immediately. The board should determine the severity of the sin, the victims that are suffering as a result of the pastor's sin, the penitence of the pastor, and an appropriate response. Pastors that sin should be reprimanded publicly and treated with proper disciplinary action. (See: 1 Tim. 5:20) The church's denomination may be involve in this process.
3. If the witnesses have made their accusations public and it has been determined that the accusations are baseless or were meant to be intentionally injurious towards the pastor, then those who brought the accusations must be also be publicly rebuked and disciplined.(See Deut. 19:16-19)