

"Maintaining Healthy Congregations"

Introduction

Maintaining healthy congregations is vital both for our own sake and for the witness of Jesus Christ in the world. This is affirmed often both in Scripture and in statements adopted by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

The "Mission Statement" adopted by the 1992 Assembly declares:
"God calls us to a shared life in which we love, honour and are reconciled to one another whilst respecting our diversity within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. "

The 1990 Coleraine Declaration included the confession that we are too often conformed to this world: *"by our failure to listen to one another (and) by our lack of concern for the divisions within the Church, the Body of Christ. "*

Taking to heart these statements and conscious of the costly impact of poorly handled disagreement in congregations, PCI established a Conciliation Panel in the mid-1990s both to provide help from trained conciliators during times of conflict between members and also to provide training and materials that will nurture a culture of conciliation within the church.

These four Bible studies are intended to help leaders and members explore ways in which we can work to maintain healthy congregations in relation to some of the areas of congregational life that can and often do lead to conflict.

The topics for the four sessions are: Restoring Broken Relationships (Matthew 18), Healthy Decision-making (Philippians 2), Managing Change Effectively (Acts 15), and Living Together With Difference (Ephesians 4:1-6.)

The overall title for this series, "Maintaining Healthy Congregations" emphasises that these studies are for all congregations – those that are currently healthy and those that might be experiencing some difficulties. It also emphasises that becoming and remaining healthy congregations is something we have to keep working at very intentionally.

Each one-hour study is suitable for use with Session meetings, Mid-Week Bible Studies, PW meetings, Youth Fellowships, Bible Classes, home groups, or as the basis for sermons. Several of the studies or the whole set might be used together for an elders' conference or other longer event in a congregation or presbytery.

Each study can be used by itself or all four can be used as a series. They do not refer to material that may have been covered in a previous session, so they can be used in whatever order you choose.

Bible passages and themes explored in this set of materials:

Matthew 18:15-20: *Restoring Broken Relationships.*

Theme: *Jesus acknowledges that conflict is going to be a part of life in the church and promises to be with us in exercising a ministry of conciliation where the restoration both of the person and of the relationship should be our goal.*

Philippians 2:1-4: *Healthy Decision-making*

Theme: *Healthy decision-making requires that we understand and look not only to our own interests but also the interests of others and that we make use of processes that help us move toward decisions which most members can embrace.*

Acts 15: 1-30 *Managing Change Effectively*

Theme: *The way in which disagreement over change is managed can lead to great harm or great growth in the body of Christ.*

Ephesians 4:1-6 *Living With Difference*

Theme: *There are key biblical virtues we can apply to enable us to live together even while we are in disagreement.*

For each session there is:

- a commentary on the passage(s) of Scripture (intended primarily as background reading for the leader during preparation)
- a format for a one-hour study session, with suggested input for the leader, discussion questions and other group activities such as case studies
- an optional set of PowerPoint slides

Some Biblical and theological background underpinning both these Bible studies and short courses by the Conciliation panel:

Jesus himself implores us to take the initiative in urgently sorting out our disagreements when he says *"When you are offering your gift to at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."* (Mt. 5:23-24.)

Jesus also suggests that at times we may need help in dealing with conflicts: *"If another member of the Church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to take one or two others with you ... and if the member refuses to listen to them tell it to the Church."* (Mt. 18:15-17a.)

Ephesians urges us *"lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."* (Eph 4:1-3.)

Galatians reminds us that the life in the Spirit ought to result in a community marked by concord: *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* (Gal 5:22.)

Romans urges us *"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all"* (Rom: 12:18.)

And Colossians commends us to *"Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."* (Col. 3:13.)

These passages and many others speak of the responsibility of every Christian to approach relationships in the spirit of Christ. Applying them from the outset can help us to avoid much unnecessary conflict. Too many disputes in church are a result of pride, jealousy, hatred or frustration over not getting our own way. Remembering how God in Jesus Christ has shown us a depth of mercy that we did not deserve, we are called to acknowledge when we might be wrong or have acted unjustly, show forgiveness towards and be reconciled to those we have hurt or been hurt by, and even give way for the sake of Christ. Christian conciliation comes from lives rooted in Christ and seeking to fulfil the law of Christ. Hence, each study begins and ends with a time of prayer – recognising that we explore the issues in it as those who seek to follow Jesus and rely on God’s power to help us implement what we have been reminded of during them.

The New Testament is realistic in acknowledging that conflict is something that is often found, and perhaps always will be, even in a community of people seeking to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Far too often we in the Church manage disagreements and conflicts poorly. However, we find much helpful guidance in the New Testament for those times when disagreement and conflict begin to appear in our congregations. We need to spend time exploring biblical insights for doing so and considering how they might be applied in the kind of practical situations we face today.

Some presuppositions in these Bible studies and the short courses corresponding to them:

- Disagreement is a natural part of human life and Church life.
- Disagreement in itself is not a sign of or result of sin. However, if not handled appropriately it can turn into destructive conflicts.
- Conflict becomes sinful when our responses to it are destructive, hurtful or violent.
- We all have choices we can make in how we deal with conflict.
- A divided Church undermines its witness to Christ.
- Christians are called to demonstrate unity while at the same time recognising and accepting the reality of diversity.
- The Bible provides much guidance both about our attitude toward disagreements and processes for handling them.
- Conflict or disagreement is often an arena for God's revelation. It is a venue for learning, growth and change.
- We can and need to enhance our understanding of and skills for handling conflict constructively.
- While specific tools and processes can be extremely helpful, Christian conciliation is dependent upon lives rooted in Christ and seeking to fulfil the law of Christ. Equally, those rooted in Christ can benefit from processes designed to deal with conflict.

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Courses Offered by the Conciliation Panel



These four one-hour Bible studies correspond to four 2-hour training sessions for leaders that have been prepared by and can be facilitated by members of the Conciliation Panel. Most likely you would not want to use both these studies and the short courses with the same group of people. Hence, you may wish to use the facilitated courses for leader groups and use these studies for a wider audience or as the resources for sermons. Below is a description of each of those courses:

Understanding Conflict and its Causes

The aim: To enhance participants' understanding of conflict and constructive ways of handling it.

Topics include: The nature and dynamics of conflict; Common causes of conflict in the church; Choices that help to determine whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive; Biblical insights for handling conflict; Enhancing our skills for handling conflict with other individuals and in groups.

Healthy Decision-making

The aim: To enhance participants' understanding of healthy decision-making and ways of promoting and implementing it in their church context.

Topics include:

Positive and negative patterns of decision-making; Values to seek in meetings and decision-making; Understanding decision-making as a process; Drawing people in and encouraging participation; Generating and evaluating options; Moving from taking 'positions' to exploring 'interests and needs'; Reaching decisions and Following through.

Managing Change Effectively

The aim: To enhance participants' understanding of managing change effectively in their church context. This course does not focus on understanding external changes and how our mission might need to respond to these. Rather it is about internal change.

Topics include: Understanding diverse views surrounding change; Learning from the early church's example; Processes for exploring concerns and options; Building consensus; The importance of reviewing changes made.

Living With Difference

The aim: To enhance participants understanding of factors which making living with difference difficult and Biblical virtues that enhance living together, even while in disagreement.

Topics include: Living with diversity and difference;

Living together while in disagreement; Moving from debate to dialogue.

There is also a fifth course: **Skills for Handling Conflict**, which is intended for those either interested in becoming conciliators for PCI or simply developing more skills to use in their own context. *Topics include:* Communication skills, Using Effective Listening and Questions, and using a mediation process in a church context. This will be offered on a PCI wide basis every 2-3 years and involves a commitment to 2-3 evenings and two Saturdays.

For more information on courses or to make arrangements for having one delivered, contact the PCI Conciliation Service coordinator on +44 (0)28 9041 7205