

SC035 Resolving Conflicts or Misunderstandings

A procedure for resolving misunderstandings and conflicts is to be followed when there is a misunderstanding &/or conflict situation between two or more members¹ of our church.

Scope

In this procedure document, misunderstanding &/or conflict situations are termed a *grievance* between parties.

A *grievance* includes but is not limited to the following categories:

- a. a disagreement (including a conflict) between two or more people where at least one person is a member of the church congregation
- b. a perceived offence has been caused by a member of the church congregation
- c. a perception by one person that they have been bullied by a member of the church congregation
- d. dissatisfaction with the manner in which a church worker (paid or volunteer) has fulfilled their ministry role.

Our commitment

Our commitment is to provide a procedure for church leaders to address grievances within the church, in a godly, loving, compassionate and procedurally fair manner.

This procedure is not applicable where there is a serious breach of a relevant code of conduct by a church worker. The Workplace Investigation Procedure is recommended in such cases.

In cases where crimes are alleged, the police and/or appropriate authorities will be notified.

In implementing the grievance procedure, we apply the overarching principles of:

- seeking to glorify God in our responses to each other
- striving to serve each other even in the midst of our disunity
- seeking to be Christ-like in our reactions to each other
- extending grace to each other
- focussing on restoration of relationships
- seeking help where needed, to address grievances

Pathways for resolving grievances

The nature of grievances (misunderstandings/conflicts) means that it is necessary to respond sensitively and with care for all parties involved.

In many conflict situations the assistance of a neutral third party is essential, to help each party understand the key issues and ways forward. The procedures must serve people, not the other way around.

The church commits to a case-by-case approach to the resolution of substantive issues and where possible, appropriate restoration of relationships between all parties.

The pathway employed will depend upon:

- a. the nature of the grievance
- b. the positions/roles of the parties involved
- c. the skills and/or capacity of the local church leader to address the situation

Pathway options

1. Personal approach

This approach may be useful for addressing personal disagreements and perceived offences. This is useful where there are not perceived significant power imbalances.

In the first instance where a grievance arises between one person and another leader/s or other church person/s, and the parties feel able to address their concern, they are to go to the other person and express their concern with a view to resolving their differences.

Peacemaking principles of glorifying God, serving each other and growing in Christ-likeness should be the focus in the attempts to resolve matters with the personal approach.

¹ A member of church congregation is a person who regularly attends (at least once a month) a ministry of the church (e.g. Sunday services, mid week Bible study, Friday night youth group)

It may also be wise for the person who is initiating the personal approach to do some preparation in terms of seeking counsel from a wise and unbiased senior leader or external person, or engaging in some conflict coaching, before approaching the other party/ies.

2. Locally-assisted approach

This approach may be useful for personal grievances where the personal approach has not been successful in restoring the relationship, or where perceived bullying behaviours have taken place, or where there is dissatisfaction with the performance of a worker.

This approach is to be assisted by a suitably-skilled elder, or Ministry Co-ordinator who may fulfil this role, with the permission of the church leadership group e.g. eldership.

Note: The person should not have a direction supervision role over any party. All conflicts of interests are to be declared and managed.

2a. Where a person feels for any reason they require help in resolving the grievance, they may speak privately to a church leader who is not a stakeholder in the grievance, to request assistance in addressing their grievance. In general the church leader to address grievances will be the church's Senior Minister &/or senior leadership.

2b. Where the church leader feels comfortable in assisting those impacted and where all parties involved in the grievance are willing to work towards restoring relationships, the church leader is to:

- i. meet with each party separately to ensure that all parties are given a chance to tell their story in private, working through the underlying concerns in moving towards resolution
- ii. clearly communicate the process to be used to each party during resolution meetings
- iii. hold meeting/s with all the parties to work through the issues and determine the course of action
- iv. follow up - ensure that the solutions are implemented
- v. monitor the situation - over time check-in with the parties to ensure they are going well with the situation

2c. At any stage throughout the process, the church leader may contact the denomination for assistance or resourcing. If the situation becomes untenable, the church leader is to contact the denominational Professional Standards/Safe Ministry Standards contact person or equivalent, or an external consultant.

3. Externally-assisted approach (external conflict resolution person)

Where the grievance has:

- escalated beyond the ability or capacity of church leader to resolve the substantive and or relational issues, or
- where the local church or any party involved wants independent help in moving towards addressing the grievance, or
- the grievance involves allegations of bullying, or
- concerns about workplace performance where the church worker is a paid person, then the church should contact a suitably-qualified conflict resolution person to implement an external assisted approach, e.g. a state denominational office.

In the event of an independent church without a denomination or where the denominational office is unable to assist e.g. due to resourcing or structural considerations, an external conflict resolution consultant should be engaged.

3a. Assessment of the grievance

Upon receiving a request to assist with addressing a grievance, the external conflict resolution person will complete a fact-finding exercise and make an initial assessment of the situation.

3b. Pathway recommendation report

The external consultant will write a report to the local church leadership group (board). This report will include an outline of key issues (material and relational) and recommend a resolution pathway to follow.

3c. Decision on pathway towards resolution

Taking into account the report, and any other advice or submissions made by key stakeholders, the local church leadership group (board) shall determine the resolution pathway that will be employed in this situation.

3d. Pathway employed

- 3d(i) Where the decision is made for any of conflict coaching, reconciliation, negotiation, or conciliation (mediation), the external consultant and relevant representatives of the senior church leadership will work with the parties on this pathway to bring about agreed solutions.
- 3d(ii) Where the decision is made for arbitration, then the relevant denomination representatives, along with relevant local senior church leadership, will work with the stakeholders to work on an arbitrated solution to the substantive issues.
- 3d(iii) Where the decision is made to implement a workplace bullying process, the Workcover process for addressing bullying shall be followed. An external consultant shall be engaged to carry out the investigation.
- 3d(iv) Where the decision is made to implement a workplace performance process, an accountable and transparent processes shall be followed.

3e. Implementation of solutions

Once all parties are in agreement, as far as is possible regarding solutions, then the relevant office holder shall communicate with all parties the implementation plan. Resources, both financial and human, shall be given to implementation of the solution.

3f. On-going monitoring of the situation

The church representative will, in negotiation with the parties, make health checks on the situation to ensure that the solutions that have been employed are working.

Acknowledgement:

Adapted from *Protocol for Addressing Grievances*
Anglican Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn - January 2015
Written by Peter Barnett and Celia Irving