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Conflict in the Church: A Continuum of Consultation Options

When conflict arises in the church, leaders can explore a variety of options for consultation offered by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC). The option eventually pursued depends on certain key variables, including: the level of anxiety being experienced; how widespread the anxiety is within the congregational system; the level of commitment among leaders to seek genuine healing and reconciliation. The full range of options listed below may help leaders discern the best course for their congregation, given the circumstances they are experiencing.

Congregational Mediation Process: One option would be to pursue a full-scale congregational mediation process. The accompanying brochure entitled *When You Disagree... It's OK to Ask for Help* outlines the typical steps in such a process: contracting phase; information gathering and education phase; healing phase; problem-solving phase; closing phase. An ongoing process of coaching for the pastor and, potentially, other key leaders is also a typical part of the process.

The circumstances within which the congregational mediation process makes the most sense include: 1) a fairly high and wide-spread level of anxiety in the congregation; 2) the need to make some win-win decisions regarding issues of disagreement facing the congregation; 3) the need to address hurts in interpersonal relationships in the congregation in a healing manner; 4) a need to bring closure to unresolved hurts from the past (both recent and more distant past), so as to prevent the recurrence of destructive, multi-generational conflict patterns in the future.

This process typically takes from six to twelve months to complete. Before entering into such an intensive process, LMPC asks for an expression of support from congregational membership. In churches that operate according to a congregational polity system, this is usually done by a congregational vote of those present at an officially called congregational meeting; we would want to have a vote whereby at least 67% of those present and voting express their support for undertaking the congregational mediation process.

In churches where the official leadership board has the authority to make such decisions – including the authority to commit significant funding – we still want to insure that there is broad congregational support for that decision. In such cases, we use a survey form – composed of continuum questions – that is passed out at an officially called congregational meeting where we've explained the process to members and answered their questions about it. We would want to insure that there is something approaching 67% of the members who attend such a meeting who would indicate their commitment to support the leadership board's decision to undertake the congregational mediation process.

LMPC staff invests substantial on-site time in the congregational mediation process. The education phase includes two weekend workshops (described below). The information-gathering phase entails several steps, including a series of ninety-minute small-group sessions during which the interests of participants are recorded for problem solving later in the process. The healing phase usually includes two five-hour sessions held on Saturdays to work at neutralizing history. The problem-solving phase also includes two five-hour, Saturday sessions. It all concludes with a closing service of reconciliation. Additional on-site time may be involved, if further coaching with the pastor or consultation with leaders – or if interpersonal mediation with key individuals – is needed.

The congregational mediation process is designed to involve the entire congregation. The participation and support of key leaders, including the pastor, is crucial. All members are encouraged to attend the educational events, one of the small group sessions, and all of the large-group healing and problem-solving sessions.

Mediation with a Smaller Group: While higher levels of anxiety or more significant hurts may be present among a segment of the congregation, they sometimes do not characterize the congregation as a whole. In such situations, and after careful assessment involving LMPC staff, an alternative to a full-scale congregational mediation process involving a smaller group of members, or a particular segment of the congregation, may be designed and implemented. While such a process follows the same basic steps of the congregational mediation process – contracting, information gathering, education, healing, problem-solving, closing phases – it involves fewer participants and typically requires less time and expense.

However, caution should be exercised in not choosing to pursue the smaller group mediation option because of expediency, when what is really warranted by the situation is a full-scale congregational mediation process. That is, in order for any consultation process to be effective, all parties who have been impacted by past conflicts, all parties who have the potential to be impacted by the outcome of the process, that is any agreements reached or decisions made within the context of the process, and all parties who have the potential to block the implementation of the outcome of the process should be involved in the process.

Moreover, even in a smaller group mediation process, there is a need to insure that people representing all of the various perspectives on the issues facing the congregation are included in the process. Prior to initiating the mediation process, the leadership board would need to secure the commitment to participate from those who would best be involved in the process. It would be important to include people impacted by the conflict who hold diverse perspectives on the issues being faced, including those who are neutral or more moderate in their views, since such people can have a moderating influence on those who are polarized. Finally, people serving in significant, formal positions of leadership, as well as those who hold informal positions of leadership in the congregation should be involved in the process as well.

Educational Workshops with Coaching of Leaders: When intensity within a congregation is not at a particularly high level, there is another alternative to the congregational mediation process that is worth exploring: providing a series of two educational workshops, in conjunction with a process of periodic coaching for congregational leaders and the pastor.

The two workshops we would recommend are: *Healthy Congregations*, followed some weeks later by *Conflict in the Church: Entrusted with the Message of Reconciliation* (see enclosed workshop outlines). The workshops would be valuable for anyone in the congregation, although leaders and those involved in any conflicts should be particularly encouraged to attend.

The consultation process for the pastor could begin prior to the educational workshops. This coaching process would focus on assisting the pastor's efforts to understand and manage his or her own functioning as a key leader in the congregational system. The consultation process for congregational lay leaders would be in tandem with the educational workshops. The focus would be on empowering leaders to implement the workshop learnings and to work at institutionalizing healthy conflict transformation procedures for the future.

The combined education and more limited consultation process can be effective in lieu of a congregational mediation process in contributing to more healthy congregational functioning when three conditions are met: 1) there is not widespread, high-level anxiety within the congregation, nor is there an accumulation of hurts in need of healing; 2) lay leadership and pastor are relatively unified; 3) lay leadership and pastor are committed to doing the hard work of implementing the workshop learnings afterward.

Freestanding Educational Events: One or both of the two workshops described above (*Healthy Congregations* and *Conflict in the Church: Entrusted with the Message of Reconciliation*) are often used as freestanding educational events by congregations. This option is often pursued by churches when anxiety is relatively low in the congregation, with no significant need for healing in relationships.

The benefit of such workshops is that they can equip congregational leaders to put limits on invasive, destructive behaviors, and, thereby, prevent destructive conflict from emerging in the future. The workshops can also equip leaders with skills for addressing conflicts in a problem-solving way at an early level of intensity, so that the intensity level does not escalate to the point of creating division and polarization in the church.

In some cases, where a church is hesitant to engage the full-scale congregational mediation process – even though the situation clearly points to the need for that process – contracting for the two workshops can be an initial step that ultimately leads to helping people see the need to undertake the full-scale process.

Telephone Coaching: Finally, even when a congregation chooses not to invite on-site work by LMPC, pastors can benefit from ongoing telephone coaching with LMPC staff. Using a case study format, the pastor would schedule consultation sessions focused on specific congregational situations and how he or she can manage self most effectively in those situations. The coaching process is grounded in Bowen family systems theory and how such emotional process dynamics play out in congregational life. Such coaching can be particularly useful when pastors simultaneously attend LMPC's *Clergy Clinic in Family Emotional Process*.

LMPC's Fee Schedule: If a church pursues any of the above options, the following fee schedule would apply:

- \$160.00 per hour for on-site time – (\$240.00 per hour when two persons are on-site as co-mediators, which is typically the case in sessions in the information-gathering, healing, and problem-solving phases).
- \$80.00 per hour for off-site time – *e.g.* time involved in telephone conversations, coaching, special preparation, reviewing information, preparing reports, administrative tasks related to the case, etc.
- \$40.00 per hour per mediator for travel, set-up, or on-site downtime.
- \$50.00 overnight surcharge per mediator for each night required to be away from home.
- A per person charge for training materials:
 - \$22.00 per person for *Healthy Congregations* (couples can share a manual).
 - \$26.00 per person for *Conflict in the Church* (or \$40.00 per couple, if couples share a manual).
 - \$0.35 per person per side for additional handouts used in coaching or consultation sessions.
- Reimbursement for incidental expenses: copying, postage, long-distance telephone charges, books shared with key leaders, etc.
- Travel expenses: airfare and rental car, mileage @ the standard IRS rate (\$.535 per mile for 2017), airport transport, parking, tolls, lodging, meals, etc.

The above overview should cover the details sufficiently regarding the various options and how LMPC might be involved. If there were an interest in exploring the full-scale congregational mediation process further, the next step would be for LMPC staff to meet with the official leadership board to outline the steps in the process and answer their questions about it. Such a meeting can also be useful when a church decides to pursue the smaller group mediation option; however, such a meeting may not be necessary, if all members of the leadership board are fully supportive of moving forward with the process.

LMPC's Referral Network: If a church were to invite LMPC to facilitate a mediation process, our staff may or may not be in a position to take on the case, depending on how full our schedule is at the time that an invitation is issued. If we're not able to take on another consultation case directly, there may be people in our broader network to whom we can refer cases for mediation who may be available to serve as lead consultants on a case. Such people would be among those who have been trained by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center in the model we developed for facilitating a congregational mediation process. If asked to invest time in researching who among such people might be available to take on a mediation case, LMPC would need to keep track of such time for billing purposes.

If referring the case to an individual or team from our network, our staff would still supervise the process and serve as a coach to those persons and, potentially, to assist with some components of the process. Such coaching would primarily take place via the telephone, with the possibility of some limited face-to-face coaching sessions as well. The components of the mediation process for which our staff might be available to assist in the on-site work, if requested by the lead consultants, would be certain educational components and the structured dialogue sessions.

Conclusion: Whenever a church faces a time of conflict, leaders can have a difficult time discerning the best course of action to pursue. However, whatever option is chosen, a key ingredient in helping a church move toward healing and reconciliation is the capacity of leaders to step back from their particular position on the content issues being faced by the church and, instead, focus on their primary role of being stewards of congregational health.

With such a focus, leaders will give primary attention to their own presence and functioning, rather than getting caught up in the anxiety of the situation. As leaders focus on their own presence and functioning, they come to recognize the crucial importance of maintaining nonanxious presence – which includes managing their own reactive tendencies – in addition to staying connected with church members, while lifting up a clear vision for reconciliation that is consistent with the broader mission of the church. Such criteria should be the primary focus of leaders, no matter what the outcome on the content issues being faced.

When leaders are able to function in ways consistent with the above guidelines, it can have a calming impact on the whole church system. However, when leaders get caught up in congregational anxieties, it can heighten anxiety throughout the church system. Thus, leaders play a particularly important role in moving a church through times of anxiety, in such a way that allows God's Spirit to be active in helping Christ's church grow increasingly in healthy and wholeness, into all that God wants it to be.