



Living into Loving Relationships in Christian Community

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A Prayer for the Unity of the Church (adapted from BCP 204)

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, even as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, whom you sent and who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Beloved Community

*"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
(John 13:35)*

"Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34)

Living into loving relationships in Christian community is an initiation into living into God's kingdom and an invitation to others to also live this Way. The kingdom of God happens in community and is revealed through community. We strive to create a culture of effective, loving interpersonal relationships.

Most of us are part of our church communities because we've truly experienced other people caring for us and God's presence with us (in Bible studies, youth groups, pastoral care, outreach ministries, etc.).

The harshest criticism of the church today is that it doesn't act much like Jesus. The greatest attraction to Jesus for non-church people is the abundance of love Jesus offers. See, e.g., [unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters](#), by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker Books, 2007).

Love One Another

- Treat one another as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31; Luke 10:25-28)
- Avoid judging others (Luke 6:36-37; John 8:3-11)
- Reconcile with one another (Matthew 5:25-26)
- Confront one another (“meeting face-to-face”) (Mark 7:25-29)
- Confess to one another (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9)
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32; Luke 6:38; John 20:23)
- Encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24; I Thessalonians 5:11)
- Worship together (I Thessalonians 5:16-19)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16; I John 5:14-15)
- Welcome others (Romans 15:7).
- Teach one another (Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:16)
- Help one another to grow along our spiritual paths (Matthew 28:19-20; John 20)
- Encourage one another to use our spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4; I Peter 4:10-11)

Jim Gettel, [Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow](#) (Deep River Books, 2017), 125-135.

Creating a Loving Culture

How good are our processes for creating the community culture we would like to have?

Attention to anxiety and stressors

Identify stressors. Examples of significant changes a church community might experience include:

New clergy and/or leadership styles

- A. Loss of long time pastoral style leader (especially if this was not alleviated by an interim or grieving period and shortly following Tom Weber’s leaving)
- B. Beginning implementation of growth objectives by new leaders
- C. Natural differences in style, approach, activities between leaders

Financial pressures	A. Recognition of earlier growth when connection with pastor is lost (sense of church being larger, loss of home) B. New people C. Restated desire for more growth
Size transitions	
Broader context	A. National church issues B. Economy C. Political, such as war D. Personal and family E. Any kind of change ¹

Reduce stressors as much as possible for a time, let the system calm down.

Spiritual focus

Biblical and theological reflection: Stories from scripture, when woven with our stories and reflected upon theologically, produce a center, a basic purpose, and a focused mission for the church.

Prayerful discernment: Pray together! Decisions are to be “discerned” with a spiritual eye rather than through a rational or deductive process.

Visioning the future: Take the long, unhurried look. Anticipate the fulfillment of trends as well as the intervention of God through the unexpected.

“Christ opened up the way to God and to one another. Now Christians can live with each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only through Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one; only through him are we bound together.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Pastoral care: Disagreements arise when people are under stress/distress in their personal lives.

- Who is responsible for pastoral care in our congregation?
- Is each member connected with a small group or ministry team which looks out for them?

¹ Jim Gettel, *Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow* (Deep River Books, 2017), 275-297 and Appendix C, *Leading Change in Church Communities: 10 Important Questions*.

- Is our first response to disagreement or anger to ask: “What are you going through?”

Mutual ministry (I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; Romans 12)

- Do we recognize and affirm one another’s uniqueness and interdependence (incompleteness) in spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, personality types and experiences?
- Is everyone invited into a ministry where they can apply their spiritual gifts, heart (passion), abilities, personality and experience (SHAPE)?
- Do we understand our roles (of Vestry, ministry teams, priests, staff)
- Are we patient with a slower pace of shared leadership for collaboration and consensus building?
 - Do we use a consensus model with an objective to keep discussing and refining until we arrive at a decision that everyone can live with?

Communications: Do we focus on developing relationships vs. just conveying decisions or information?

1. How are our communication processes among ministries?
 - Meetings (Vestry, committees, annual and special parish meetings, calendar meeting, joint meetings)
 - Committee liaisons
 - Minutes
2. Do we use the most personal communication medium possible within the congregation (asking, Who? What? How?)
 - Interpersonal interaction (pastoral care, meetings, Christian formation classes and study groups, coffee hour, passing the peace, social events, mission activities, etc.)
 - Phone calls
 - Live announcements during services
 - Programs, e.g., stewardship
 - Mail
 - Email
 - Paper: Weekly Bulletins, brochures, bulletin boards
 - Media: calendar, Facebook, Website, Blogs, E-News, etc.

Behavioral expectations

- a. Do we have or are we discussing a behavioral covenant for our leaders (governing board, ministry teams) and/or members of our congregation?
 - o Sample covenants: Mennonite Peace Covenant (http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Agreeing-and-Disagreeing-in-Love_11-2013.pdf) or sample Episcopal Church covenant (<http://trinitymonroe.weebly.com/community-covenant.html>).
 - o Leaders learn how to confront negative and disruptive behavior and how to prevent triangulation. They understand boundaries and the importance of self-differentiation (personal maturity; ability to function openly in an ambiguous, stressful or conflicted environment; spiritual vitality; and emotional stability).

- b. Personal and leadership team functioning
 - o Focus on self, not others²
 - o Stay in close relationship with God
 - o Contemplate how you are personally doing with staying in emotional contact with others, defining yourself, managing your own reactivity, and maintaining healthy boundaries
 - o Cultivate a "heart at peace"³

- c. Mediation (Matthew 18:15-22 below)

Loving Confrontations

1. *What happens when relationships are not attended to? Leaders need to encourage, facilitate and mediate confrontations that may help the community make better positive decisions about questions that do not have clear answers and solutions.*

Poor or lacking communication takes us out of relationships. For example, making assumptions may harm the underlying trust needed for relationship.

Conflict may occur when we do not understand one another or trust one another or when our desires, expectations, fears, or wants seem to collide with the desires, expectations, fears, or wants of others.

² Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." (Luke 6:37)

³ See *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict* (The Arbinger Institute, 2015).

Examples of areas of tension are differences in values (family systems, such as generational leadership, diversity, worship, leadership styles, money), mutual ministry, shared leadership.

Unresolved tensions that become conflict can destroy community, including a lack of spiritual growth, a drain of the church's resources, diminished ministry opportunities, decreased church attendance, voluntary or involuntary leadership separations, congregation division, and sometimes church splits.

2. *Loving confrontation is often an effective response to conflict.*

Loving confrontation is the opposite of passivity or avoidance; confrontation means simply "meeting face-to-face," or addressing.

Confrontations can and should be positive.

When we address a problem or a challenge with another person, we often can reconcile with that person and move forward.

Confrontations are required in any successful relationship, especially love. Without confrontations, we give up on relationships.

There are real benefits to working through disagreements over values, goals or methods if they are relevant to the mission of the community or the challenges the community is adapting to.

3. *Leaders need to encourage, facilitate and mediate confrontations that may help the community make better positive decisions about questions that do not have clear answers and solutions.*

Break old patterns: Churches sometimes have "old issues" or conflicts which were never fully resolved and which tend to resurface in unsettled times.

New leadership and styles: Churches need to consider whether, as a whole, patterns of lay involvement in the church are healthy or unhealthy, empowering or disempowering for most of the congregation, and to empower and to welcome leadership gifts from all parts of the congregation.

New commitment: The congregation can improve itself structurally, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually to enter into stronger relationships with one another.

New experiences: Church conflict responses promote peace and unity, glorify God, and provide opportunities for the church to prosper in all areas.

4. *We may avoid dealing with a challenge or problem just because we dislike confronting another person – especially if this means making ourselves vulnerable or putting ourselves at risk.*

Most of us are uncomfortable with confrontations. Failing to confront often means failing to raise awareness or solve problems.

Avoiding loving confrontations undermines change by harming relationships, preventing reconciliation and closing off the productive learning that differences in perspective may spur.

Scripture Reflection: Matthew 18:15-22

Jesus said, "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 along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Questions for Discussion among Congregational Leaders

How do we do when we have conflicts (as a Vestry or in the congregation)? Do we follow the steps Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15-20?

Every person and community faces challenges in their interpersonal relationships. What are areas of unresolved tension in this Vestry or congregation? (If we can, let's just list areas of disappointments or differences without trying to reconcile them.)

a) Past b) Present

Why is it difficult to talk about these kinds of things?

What is our role in leading reconciliation of certain issues or concerns? What do we need help with?

What are the ground rules for "loving confrontation"? How do we need to treat one another in this conversation?

Are we helping others to discover their special gifts and encouraging and empowering them to use them?

Are we approaching all that we do together as opportunities to do the works of Jesus?

Are we sharing our love for one another in mutual ministry?

A Prayer attributed to St. Francis (BCP 833)

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Guidelines for Equity and Inclusion

These eight principles can help create and sustain equity and inclusion:

Try on each other's ideas, feelings and ways of doing things for the purpose of greater understanding and exploring all possible approaches. Keep what you like and let go of the rest at the end of the work session.

It's Ok to disagree. One of the necessary ingredients for differences to be expressed and valued is that people let go of the need to be, think or act the same.

It's not Ok to blame, shame or attack ourselves or others because of our differences.

Practice self-focus. Begin by talking about your own experience. It is helpful to make "I" statements when speaking about yourself and your experience, rather than saying "you", "we" or "one". When you intend to refer to others, be specific about who those others are --by name or group. When you really speaking about your own experience or opinion, use "I have found....." or " I think ...".

Notice both the process and content during work sessions. Content is what we say, while process is how and why we say or do something and how the group members react. Notice who's active and who's not, who's comfortable and who's not, who's interested and who's not, including yourself, ask about it, and share your own thoughts and feelings as well.

Practice "both/and" thinking. Look for ways to fit ideas together and not set up an "either/or" process or a competition between ideas. Look for the existence of many truths from the perspective of the many cultural backgrounds involved.

Be aware of both the intent and impact of your actions. The impact of our behavior and decisions on others will determine the success of inclusive work sessions. A major inclusion strategy is to learn and hear when our behaviors and decisions are having a negative impact even when we don't intend them to and to be willing to change that negative impact if it results in persons or groups being treated as "less than" or excluded. This guideline will require us to take risks with new ways of thinking and feeling, to share our reactions to others and to exchange honest feedback about the impact of our words and actions on each other. We can be both well-intentioned AND still say hurtful things and at the same time, be open to how to behaving differently with people who are different from us and who prefer and need different behaviors from us to feel fully valued and included in their relationships with us.

Confidentiality with regard to personal sharing is important. You can share the public work of the group, your own stories and perspectives and your own learning and areas for growth. Allow others to tell their own personal stories, opinions and learnings.

Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love – Commitments in Times of Disagreement

"Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), as both individual members and the body of Christ, we pledge that we shall:

In Thought

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| Accept conflict | 1. Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church. Romans 14:1-8, 10-12, 17-19; 15:1-7 |
| Affirm hope | 2. Affirm that as God walks with us in conflict we can work through to growth. Ephesians 4:15-16 |
| Commit to prayer | 3. Admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution (no prayers for my success or for the other to change but to find a joint way). James 5:16 |

In Action

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| Go to the other. | 4. Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoid behind-the-back criticism. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-20 |
| In the spirit of humility... | 5. Go in gentleness, patience and humility. Place the problem between us at neither doorstep and identify our own part in the conflict instead of pointing out the others'. Galatians 6:1-5 |
| Be quick to listen | 6. Listen carefully, summarize and check out what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood. James 1:19; Proverbs 18:13 |
| Be slow to judge | 7. Suspend judgments, avoid labeling, end name calling, discard threats, and act in a nondefensive, nonreactive way. Romans 2:1-4; Galatians 5:22-26 |
| Be willing to negotiate | 8. Work through the disagreements constructively. Acts 15; Philippians 2:1-11 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify issues, interests, and needs of both (rather than take positions).• Generate a variety of options for meeting both parties' needs (rather than defending one's own way).• Evaluate options by how they meet the needs and satisfy the interests of all sides (not one side's values).• Collaborate in working out a joint solution (so both sides gain, both grow and win).• Cooperate with the emerging agreement (accept the possible, not demand your ideal).• Reward each other for each step forward toward agreement (celebrate mutuality). |

<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-center/resources/agreeing-and-disagreeing-in-love/>