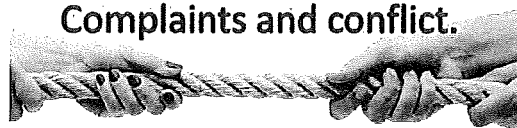


## How to Deal with Conflict and Complaints

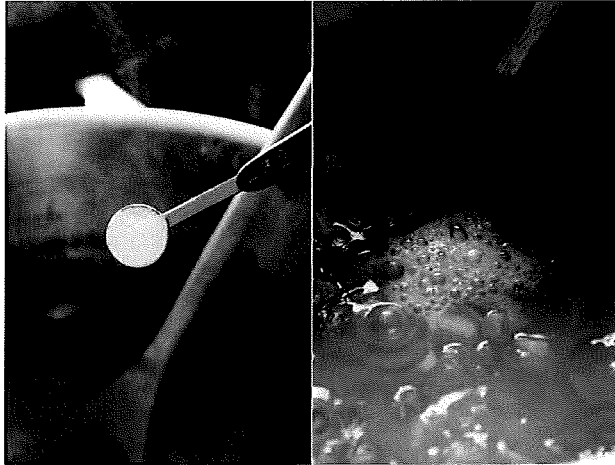
You are an elected or volunteer leader in your congregation. As a leader you may be in a position to hear complaints or be aware of conflict. If someone comes to you and says, "You are on the council (board or committee). I need to talk to you about this problem, concern, issue or situation." What do you do? Consider these steps.



**Conflict is normal.**  
**Healthy ways to deal with**  
**Complaints and conflict.**

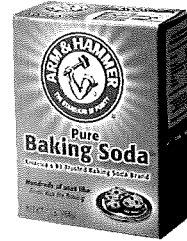


1. **Follow Matthew 18: 15** "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." Encourage people to speak directly with the person they have a problem.
2. **Do not gossip. Avoid Triangulation: talking to others about the problem.** Encourage direct, face-to-face communication between the conflicted individuals. Instruct folks to deal directly with the board or individual. If that is not possible instruct the person to talk to the personnel committee or president **If Loretta has a problem with Bob, she should talk to Bob and not to Kathy.**
3. Be careful about addressing complaints through **email** that can be quickly forwarded. Consider responding with a short note that lets the sender know you've received the message and an invitation to meet to talk about it face-to-face.
4. Be a good and careful listener. Say "I'm sorry," about the problem. "I'm sorry you felt hurt." Be empathetic, sympathetic but don't take sides. Remain neutral. Ask questions to gain more understanding. Look for areas of agreement.
5. Wonder and ask about possible solutions to the problem. Try to imagine "win/win" solutions.
6. Keep Jesus in the conversation. Remember you want to grow a healthy church so that the next generation will come to know and love Jesus. The purpose of the church is to participate in God's mission to redeem the world Don't be afraid to say, "I wonder what Jesus would do?" Offer to pray about the problem. NO one want to join a church that is fighting over what color to paint the fellowship hall.
7. No anonymous complaints will be discussed at council meetings. Anonymous letters may be kept on file but not read at council meetings. Only signed letters will be read. The phrases like "a lot of people are saying," or "everybody thinks" are manipulative and not accepted. Individuals can only state their own feelings or opinions. Encourage folks to use "I" statements.



## Neutralizing Negativity in Church

All good cooks know that when they make homemade creamy tomato soup with fresh garden tomatoes, they must add baking soda to the tomatoes to neutralize they don't, of the will cause



the cream and milk to sour/curdle and the soup will be a hot mess. Gossip, rumors and lies are like acid and can sour ministry, make it less effective and appealing. However, **church council leaders can implement a plan to neutralize gossip and negative communication patterns.** The following are suggested steps to neutralize gossip.

Declare your congregation to be a "Golden Rule Church."

For the next year (52 weeks) print in the bulletin and/or on the screen.

WE ARE A GOLDEN RULE CHURCH.

**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Matthew 7:12**

- We want our words and actions to reflect the Jesus' Golden Rule.
- We will refrain from gossip, rumors, slander, and lies (8<sup>th</sup> Commandment and meaning in Luther's Small Catechism see below)
- We will refrain from actions that would be hurtful or degrading
- We will strive to speak and act in ways that will build up our brothers and sisters in Christ and give glory to God.

In addition to the weekly pledge to be a Golden Rule Church,

- We will **train every council member to act as a neutralizing agent to gossip and unhelpful conversation. They will be trained using the 7 steps for Dealing with Congregational Conflict. See below.**
- If the gossip, rumors and lies continue to be spread then we recommend that you call in a consultant to help you work through conflict. This negative behavior is damaging the church you love and your pastor parish relationships.

**THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT** You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

*What does this mean?* We should fear and love God, so that we do not lie about, betray or slander our neighbors, but excuse them, speak well of them, and put the best construction on everything.

## **10 tips for pastors and church employees-dealing with complaints in ministry<sup>1</sup>**



1. **Complaints in ministry are normal.** Know that complaints are an issue in every area of ministry. The less personally you take complaints and criticism, the better off you will be emotionally and the more you will be effective in ministry. Take a deep breath and count to ten before responding stay thoughtful and not reactive. **Acknowledge what they say, "I hear you saying... AND avoid getting defensive.**
2. **Maintain some humility.** Sometimes complaints are about an area where you or the ministry needs to improve. Take responsibility for your own growth, and look for areas that you need to develop. **Avoid getting defensive.**
3. **Avoid getting defensive.** Defensive leaders can rarely lead creatively and positively.
4. **Apologize when necessary.** Let them know you're sorry they were inconvenienced or disappointed or upset, then also thank them for giving you the chance to work it out with them. "Thank you for raising our awareness about this problem, or my favorite, "Thank you for raising my self-awareness." Avoid getting defensive.
5. **Expect criticism and complaints** when you take a stand as a leader, or when the church begins to move in a clear direction. This is not about you; it is about the whole system reacting to an upset in the balance. (Anxious system) Stay on course, and don't let it throw you. The clearer you are about where you are going, the better. Keep Jesus in the conversation and reiterate the mission of your church. Congregations that lack clarity about their purpose in God's mission are more prone to complaints and conflict.
6. **Offer Support, offer to pray about the situation. Keep Jesus in the conversation.**
7. Watch how people express their views about something they don't like. Those who can define their position in terms of themselves are more mature than those who say "you should," or "you shouldn't" or "they always" or "they never." This will give you a clue about who is more mature. It's more important to have people who can say "I think," "I believe" "I agree" or "I disagree" than it is to have people who agree with you. (Use "I" statements). Those who can define their own views on an issue are the best candidates for leadership positions themselves. (Self-Differentiation)
8. **Move On,** when all is said and done, you can't dwell on church members complaints, and you can't please everyone.
9. Notice when the petty everyday stuff starts getting to you. This is about you and your own emotional state, and finding some ways to get a little distance physically or emotionally will help.
10. Remember that a complaint-free ministry is probably going nowhere.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from <http://www.churchcentral.com/blogs/top-ten-tips-for-dealing-with-complaints/>

# 10 Steps for Solving Conflict<sup>2</sup>

1. Set place, date and time to meet to talk about the conflict
2. Name the problem, define the problem
3. Identify how every person contribute to the problem
4. Brainstorm possible solutions to the problem
5. Narrow down the list to 3-4 most likely solution
6. Everyone commits to try one solution
7. Determine length of time to try solution
8. Set a date to meet again to evaluate
9. Evaluate
10. Celebrate success or try another solution

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<sup>2</sup> From Prepare Pre-marriage Inventory <https://prepare-enrich.com>