

Considering Formal Intervention

A guide for congregational leaders facing entrenched divisiveness

≈ To be used only in consultation with the Healthy Adventist Churches Team, NNZC ≈

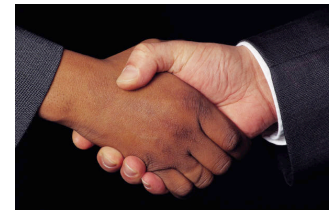
1) Scriptures for encouragement and instruction

- The New Testament speaks to issues in the churches of the time—including issues of conflict and division. From these original contexts, we may discern *principles* and *responses* that apply to circumstances we're facing today. We need the help of the Holy Spirit as we study the Scriptures and make applications to our own situation.

Look at situations
in New Testament
churches



Seek guidance from the
Spirit, through prayer



Leaders agree on a
course to take

- As you read the following Scriptures,* look for biblical principles and responses that would be helpful to us right now. Space is provided after these selections, for you to write the principles and responses you find.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Matthew 18:15–18.

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Romans 16:17, 18.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some . . . have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1:10–13.

Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." . . . Do you not know that saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13; 6:2.

**"Are you not
competent to judge?"**

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 1 Corinthians 11:18.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:30–32.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15.

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind. 1 Timothy 6:3–5.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. Titus 3:10, 11.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies. . . . Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. 2 Peter 2:1, 2.

These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Jude 19, 20.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write . . . I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you . . . have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. . . . Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Revelation 2:1, 2; 3:19, 20.

- Biblical principles and responses that might apply to our present situation:

Problem: An unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words, resulting in strife and constant friction

2) Evaluating the nature and level

- Are the behaviours of the divisive person:
 - a) Caused by any wrongdoing or need for confession on the part of leadership?
Not caused by a problem on our own part _____
Caused by a problem on our own part _____
 - b) A long-standing and ongoing threat to peace in the congregation?
 Yes _____ No _____
 - c) A detriment to the goals of the congregation for mission, outreach and growth?
 Yes _____ No _____
 - d) A frequent and continuing source of conflict, criticism, distraction, and unrest in the congregation?
 Yes _____ No _____
- Share and discuss answers to the above. _____

**TASKS
LEADERS
MUST FACE &
RESPOND TO
—DIFFICULT,
BUT
NECESSARY**



**Evaluate the nature
and level of the
divisive behaviours**



**Measure which of
three responses
would be best**



3) Measuring a response

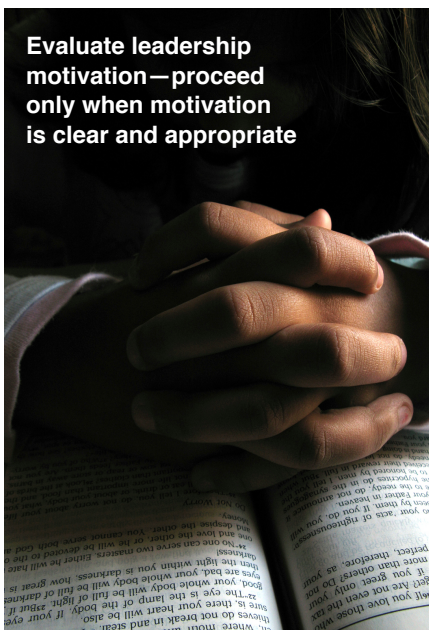
- At this point, which one of the following three courses of action would most glorify God and honour His body, the church?
 - a) ☐ **Wait and watch.** Continued patience and forbearance, with further prayer for wisdom and for a change in the situation.
 - b) ☐ **Counsel and appeal.** A further period of specific counselling and appeal with the person in question.
 - c) ☐ **Formally intervene.** Prayerfully and firmly, present options that will drive the issue to closure in a way that honours integrity and is biblically guided, although difficult.
- *Pray* over these. Then *select one* of the above as the action you think would be best.
- Share and discuss answers. _____

4) Evaluating leadership motivation

- If formal intervention is indicated, what is our *chief motivation* for choosing this course of action?
 - a) Our own frustration or impatience.
 - b) A desire for control and power.
 - c) A desire for retribution or punishment on the offender.
 - d) Fear of criticism if we don't do something.
 - e) Conscientious leadership and accountability—taking a difficult stand in Christ for the sake of His body, the church; and also potentially for the sake of the divisive person.
- Discuss each of these possibilities. Then, note the group's *chief* motivation here. _____

- Based on this, should we proceed with formal intervention, or do we need to do more “soul work”? Yes, we must proceed _____ No, we need more thought and prayer as leaders _____

Formal intervention is a prayerful, firm presentation of options that will drive the issue to closure in a way that honours integrity and is biblically guided, although difficult



Evaluate leadership motivation—proceed only when motivation is clear and appropriate

5) Approaching formal intervention

- Consider each divisive person individually.
 - Avoid any “guilt by association”—especially in regard to the person’s spouse, other close relatives, or friends.
- An appropriate course of action may be undertaken by the primary leadership group (the Board) as normally constituted, through a majority vote.
- What is included in an “appropriate course of action”?
 - a) The leadership group may act in appeal, reproof, and request—in line with its mandate from membership to oversee and protect the congregation and its mission.
 - b) The leadership group may recommend that the church make a formal expression of disapproval; or that the church take action to remove the person from church membership. Note that only the church as a body has the right to follow through on either of these two recommendations, at a properly called business session.
- c) The leadership group, on advice from its chair, may agree on a secret ballot method when it comes time for leaders or members to vote on a significant action.
- d) When leadership action will be taken without unanimous agreement, the leadership group as a body may request general agreement from each leader who exercises a choice to abstain or vote against the intervention, that as a team member he or she will respect the decision that has been made by the majority, and will not undermine it. In the case of secret ballot, this request will of course be indirect, rather than direct. There must be no intimidation or repercussion; only a request for support as a team.

Leadership has a mandate to oversee and protect the congregation and its mission

6) Decision time: What kind of intervention?

- The leadership group must now decide which of the following would be the most appropriate action, given the history and current response of the person, the effect of the divisive behaviours, and the person's own pain and circumstances:

- ☐ **Last appeal.** A final appeal for acknowledgment, confession, repentance, and changed behaviours; with clear expression of the church-related consequences of not doing so. (See Matthew 18:15-18.)
- ☐ **Request to consider withdrawal.** A formal leadership request for the person to consider voluntarily seeking another context for fellowship and worship, for the peace and progress of the congregation. (See Romans 16:17, 18; 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15.)
- ☐ **Church expression of disapproval.** A *statement of intention to recommend* to the congregation a formal expression of disapproval (also known as a vote of censure), according to guidelines in the Church Manual. The expression of disapproval provides for a specified period of "grace and probation" during which the offending behaviours might be rectified. The person continues in fellowship but not in any kind of leadership, nor with any voice or vote in the operation of the church. Note that during this period the congregation cannot recommend the person for transfer to another congregation. (See 1 Corinthians 5:12; 6:2.)

Some Reasons for Membership Removal

- Disorderly conduct that brings reproach on the church
- Divisive or disloyal behaviours in a co-operative or organised way—or support for such behaviours
- Persistent refusal to recognise properly constituted church authority
- Persistent refusal to submit to the order, counsel and discipline of the church

- ☐ **Removal from membership.** A *statement of intention to recommend* to the congregation removal from membership, following guidelines in the Church Manual. If approved by the congregation, this might be accompanied by a formal request for the person to seek another context for fellowship and worship, effective immediately. The serious action of removal from membership is for the sake

of the congregation. The Church Manual provides that this step may be taken in cases of "disorderly conduct which brings reproach upon the church"; "adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organisation"; "persistent refusal to recognise properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church". (See Titus 3:10, 11; 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13; Jude 19, 20.)

- Is there another intervention option for our circumstances, not described above? _____
- Much prayer right here!* Then, see how the Spirit is leading in regard to which level of intervention seems appropriate. See if there is consensus, and take a formal vote (secret ballot recommended).
- Note the decision here, along with any other significant conclusions or factors emerging from the process. _____

Factors to Consider

History of the person in the church

Current response of the person

Effect of the divisive behaviours

The person's pain and circumstances

7) Planning the formal intervention

- 1) Renew leadership commitment to confidentiality, integrity, respect, trust in God.
 - Especially remind one another of the importance that there be no gossip, criticism, undermining, or breach of confidentiality outside the leadership process.
 - Discuss what may and may not be said when questions come.
- 2) Set a period beforehand for fasting and prayer.
 - Check in with each other at the end of this period, to discern whether any further discussion is indicated.
- 3) Prayerfully select three representatives to conduct the intervention, and designate one of these three to take the lead.
- 4) Arrange a suitable time and place for the intervention.
 - As soon as possible—avoid delay.
 - In a setting that is safe and private.
 - On church property or neutral property—not at the person's property.
- 5) Let the person know the *general* purpose of the meeting.
 - E.g. "To come to an understanding about the issues of division that we have previously talked about."
- 6) Let the person know the names of the people with whom he or she will be meeting.
- 7) Decline to provide any further information.
 - E.g. "I don't feel free to speak for the others on this—let's wait until we can meet together."
- 8) If the person asks to bring another person along, ask who that person will be; and agree, unless this presents clear and obvious concerns.
 - If the presence of the supporting individual would seriously complicate the purpose of the meeting, ask for or suggest someone else.
- 9) Leaders not included in the intervention: Commit to spend the entire time of the intervention in prayer.
- 10) Full leadership group: Prepare a written *statement of message* to be included in a letter that will be given to the person during the intervention.
 - In the letter, simply and briefly state the situation and the options.
 - If divisive behaviours are the issue, stick solely with the behaviours and make it clear that these behaviours are the presenting issue—not beliefs.

Checklist: Planning the Intervention

- | |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to confidentiality, integrity, respect, trust in God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A prior period of fasting and prayer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Select three representatives, one to take the lead |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arrange time and place; details clear and confirmed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communicate to the person only the general purpose and other essential information |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be prepared if the person asks if a supporter can accompany |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment on the part of other leaders: Pray through the intervention |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a letter—a written statement of message |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anything else? _____ |



• Notes on planning the intervention _____

8) Conducting the intervention

- 1) Make sure each participant is clear on the time and place, and will be on time.
 - Best to travel together and arrive together.
- 2) Be completely committed to calmness, courage, clarity, and trust in God—no anger, defensiveness or impatience, regardless of responses from the person.
- 3) Begin the intervention with a succinct but heartfelt prayer.
- 4) Leader: Present the reason for the meeting, reflecting the written statement from the leadership team.
 - Each of the other representatives may make additional, short comments, reinforcing the action and its intent.
 - Give the prepared letter to the person.
- 5) Allow the person to respond—listen respectfully. Follow the Spirit's direction for the rest of the meeting.
 - Do not be drawn into detailed discussion or argument.
 - Do not prolong the meeting unnecessarily—when its purpose seems accomplished, bring it to a close.
- 6) If the person does not provide a definitive response during the meeting, ask for such a response within a set time—e.g. three days, or five days
 - Express that if no response is received or the response is not acceptable for resolution, it will be understood that the next steps of leadership action will be pursued as described.

Checklist: Conducting the Intervention

- | |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to calmness, courage, clarity—no anger, defensiveness or impatience. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer . . . Presentation . . . Letter. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listen to the response . . . Follow the Spirit. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Based on the response and within a set time, follow up with the steps already agreed upon. |

9) Follow-up to the intervention

- 1) Immediately afterward, report personally and confidentially (*not* by email) to the rest of the leadership team.



- 2) Courteous formal communication with the person should be part of the follow-up, keeping the person apprised of steps being taken.
 - Never by email; always by regular mail or in person (phone call or personal visit).
- 3) Be guided by the Spirit in terms of normal *personal* communication with the person.
 - All members of the leadership team must be careful not to undermine the action taken, even as they might express their personal interest in the person's well-being.
- 4) Appropriate communication with the general body of church membership should be simple and non-defensive, well-planned ahead of time, conducted without delay, respectful of the person as an individual and a child of God, and guided by much prayer and the Spirit.
 - Consider one-on-one communication with key persons who are not part of the leadership team. This communication should take place immediately after the intervention (never by email).

- All communication should be factual, brief and simple, respecting confidentiality and staying well clear of speculation, criticism and gossip.
- Let church members know that while leaders are not free to share all information guiding their actions, Biblical counsel and accepted church procedures have been followed in this case, with much prayer and careful thought.



- 5) Fasting and prayer is perhaps more important after the intervention, than before.

10) Supplement: Guidance through the church

- The **SDA Church Manual, Chapter 14**, is valuable and instructive. It should be read and understood before taking any formal action.

- a) Note the introductory compilation of comments from Ellen G. White, including these:

This statement [Matthew 18:18, on binding and loosing] holds its force in all ages. On the church has been conferred the power to act in Christ's stead. It is God's instrumentality for the preservation of order and discipline among His people. To it the Lord has delegated the power to settle all questions respecting its prosperity, purity, and order. Upon it rests the responsibility of excluding from its fellowship those who are unworthy, who by their un-Christlike conduct

would bring dishonour on the truth. Whatever the church does that is in accordance with the directions given in God's word will be ratified in heaven. (*Testimonies*, vol. 7, 263.)

If wrongs are apparent among His people, and if the servants of God pass on indifferent to them, they virtually sustain and justify the sinner, and are alike guilty and will just as surely receive the displeasure of God. . . . In vision I have been pointed to many instances where the displeasure of God has been incurred by a neglect on the part of His servants to deal with the wrongs and sins existing among them. Those who have excused these wrongs have been thought by the people to be very amiable and lovely in disposition, simply because they shunned to discharge a plain Scriptural duty. The task was not agreeable to their feelings; therefore they avoided it. (*Testimonies*, vol. 3, 265, 266.)

The Lord has delegated to leaders responsibility for making sure the church prospers and preserves order. If leaders use amiability and kindness as an excuse to avoid dealing with wrongs in the church, in effect leaders sustain and justify those wrongs; and receive God's displeasure.

- b) Note this cautionary comment that highlights our great need for discernment, prayer, and the guidance of the Spirit, even as we undertake necessary actions:

Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging character and motive. He knows our nature too well to entrust this work to us. Should we try to uproot from the church those who we suppose to be spurious Christians, we should be sure to make mistakes. Often we regard as hopeless subjects the very ones whom Christ is drawing to Himself. Were we to deal with these souls according to our imperfect judgement, it would perhaps extinguish their last hope. (*Christ's Object Lessons*, 71, 72.)

We must deal with those who bring dishonour to Jesus and to the church. But while we can judge behaviours, we must never judge character and motive. That is God's work—His alone.

11) God's promise for leaders

The testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt. James 1:3–6.

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