

South Atlantic Conference

November 20, 2022

LOCAL CHURCH DISPUTE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROTOCOL

Preamble

It is not unusual, nor should it come as a surprise to any, that sinful, finite human beings who comprise the body of Christ will occasionally have disagreements and interpersonal conflicts. This reality makes it necessary that a biblically rooted protocol for mitigating and resolving these eventualities be strategically enacted and lovingly implemented in every SAC congregation.

Purpose

The following protocol is intended to assist in resolving disputes and conflict in the local church at the lowest administrative level possible and with the fewest number of people necessary.

Protocol

The following procedures are presented in the spirit of John 13:34, 35 and the SDA Church Manual's emphasis on "Safeguarding the Unity of the Church." It is hoped that disputing parties would not seek to involve the Conference or move toward litigation until these steps have been followed in good faith.

Legal Disclaimer

This protocol assumes that no minor or any person who has been clinically diagnosed as mentally or developmentally diminished or disabled is involved in the matter as a complainant or respondent (the "party" or "parties"). This protocol also assumes that there is no physical abuse or threat of physical abuse or harm involved in the matter, in which case, legal or law enforcement assistance or intervention may be the immediate need instead of an unaided attempt at resolving the matter. This policy assumes that parties are competent and free to make the judgment to utilize the steps outlined herein. By using this protocol to seek resolution to their dispute or conflict, parties agree to hold harmless the South Atlantic Conference and its officers, directors, employees, and heirs.

1. Church Member to Church Member Disputes

- A. **Personal Effort** - First seek to resolve private matters one-to-one (Matthew 18:15) in a calm and kind manner as a best practice of seeking to resolve difficulties at the lowest level possible with the involvement of the fewest number of people necessary. Most misunderstandings or disagreements can be resolved if this step is faithfully observed.
- B. **Mediation** - If good faith private efforts to resolve the matter do not yield the desired outcome, prayerfully request the counsel of one or two neutral third-party individuals who have the regard of both disputants. It is hoped that in the hearing of "two or three witnesses" (Matthew 18:16) there will be breakthrough and a peaceful conclusion of the matter. The Elders of the local congregation should be carefully chosen and trained to provide unbiased conflict ministry to the members (Exodus 18:13-27). This important work of the Elders helps to lessen the workload of the Pastor. Members should first call upon the Elders for help to resolve their difficulties before calling upon the Pastor.

C. **Church Involvement** - In the (hopefully rare) case where intervention by neutral parties (Step B above) fails to bring about a peaceful conclusion or resolution of the dispute, then the Pastor after counseling with the Elders may decide if the matter should be brought before the Church Board, then to the church in business meeting, if warranted. If there is still no resolution in a matter that is the result of an erring individual “refusing even to hear the church” (Matthew 18:17-20), the church might need to exercise its option of last resort and separate the erring party from its membership. This option of last resort should be reserved for matters that rise to the level where such action is necessary to preserve the unity of the church and the dignity and safety of others.

2. Disputes Involving Church Members and the Pastor

A. **Personal Effort** - First seek to resolve private matters one-to-one (Matthew 18:15) in a calm and kind manner as a best practice of seeking to resolve difficulties at the lowest level possible with the involvement of the fewest number of people necessary. Most misunderstandings or disagreements can be resolved if this step is faithfully observed.

B. **Mediation** - If good faith private efforts to resolve the matter do not yield the desired outcome, prayerfully request the counsel of one or two neutral third-party individuals who have the regard of both disputants. It is hoped that in the hearing of “two or three witnesses” (Matthew 18:16) there will be breakthrough and a peaceful conclusion of the matter. The Elders of the local congregation should be carefully chosen and trained to provide unbiased conflict ministry to the members (Exodus 18:13-27) and can be a blessing to the Pastor also, depending upon the nature of the difficulty. Since the Pastor is primarily accountable to the Conference, it may be advisable for either party to request mediation by the SAC Vice President for Pastoral Ministries or his designee.

C. **Church or Conference Involvement** - In the (hopefully rare) case where intervention by neutral parties (the Elders or the Vice President for Pastoral Ministries or his designee) fails to bring about a peaceful conclusion or resolution of the dispute, then the Board of Elders (in the matter of an erring member) or the Vice President for Pastoral Ministries (in the matter of an erring Pastor) may determine to refer the matter to the Church Board, then to the church in business meeting (regarding the member), or to the Conference President and then to ADCOM (regarding the Pastor) if warranted. If there is still no resolution in a matter that is the result of an erring individual “refusing even to hear” the counsel given (Matthew 18:17-20), the church might need to exercise its option of last resort and separate the erring party from its membership. Should the Pastor refuse to hear the President or ADCOM, then corrective remedies per SAC policy may be applied. This option of last resort should be reserved for matters that rise to the level where such action is necessary to preserve the unity of the church and the dignity and safety of others.

Right of Appeal and the Goal of Reconciliation

1. Disputants have the right of appeal of any decision made by either the VP for Pastoral Ministries or ADCOM (for Pastors), or the Church Board (church members), respectively.
2. To achieve reconciliation and healing, erring parties are willing to acknowledge their faults. Any apology should be rendered in the forum in which the offence was given, whether in private or public. Offended parties should freely forgive repentant offenders (see Luke 17:3, 4; James 5:16; Matthew 6:12; and *Steps to Christ*, chapter 4).