

# **Listening Team Guidelines**

## **Commission on Ministry**

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Abbreviations:

COM:	Commission on Ministry
CPR:	Church and Pastor Relations, a committee of COM
COMLT:	Commission of Ministry Listening Team
CLT	Congregational Listening Team

### **I. Introduction**

Conflict is a normal part of all of our relationships. Where two or more are gathered, there will be differences in opinions. Conflict is normal within a church. Conflict within a church can be healthy or unhealthy.

Healthy conflict is manifested by open, honest and direct conversations that are not accusatory in nature. Jesus gave us some excellent teachings about conflict. (See Matthew 18: 15-21) Unhealthy conflict is characterized by such activities as talking about a person instead of with a person, “parking lot” meetings, dividing into factions, or seeking to “win” at all costs (but I’m right, right!?). When levels of conflict become unhealthy, local churches may ask for guidance from trained members of the Commission on Ministry Listening Team.

### **II. What is the Commission on Ministry Listening Team and What Does It Do?**

It is a trained resource team available to congregations, who face situations of misunderstanding or conflict, for which they would like objective helpers. The team does not impose solutions, but rather accompanies aggrieved parties in seeking understanding, solutions and reconciliation. The team may provide a process of listening and mediation, and referral to other resources.

### **III. How Do We Know that We Need Assistance?**

How do you know if a team would be helpful? Generally, if a conflict is at stage three or above in the conflict chart below, most churches could use some help moving towards understanding and reconciliation.

Sometimes within the life of a church conflicts escalate, sides are taken, and grudges are kept. There are multiple stages of conflict identified by Speed Leas, a pioneer in working productively in church conflicts.

Level One: A Problem to Solve-- There are conflicting goals, values, needs. The focus is on solving a problem and not focused on a person.

Level Two: Disagreement—There is a mixing of personalities and issues. The problem cannot be clearly defined. Can be the beginning of distrust and personalizing problems.

Level Three: Contest—The conflict has the dynamics of “win/lose,” characterized by personal attacks, formation of factions, sides, and camps. Distortion is a major problem.

Level Four: Fight/Flight—The issue shifts from winning to getting rid of person(s). Factions are solidified. Talk now takes on the language of “principles,” not “issues.”

Level Five: Intractable Situations—There is no longer clear understanding of issue(s); personalities have become the focus. Conflict is now unmanageable. Energy is centered on the elimination and/or destruction of the person(s).

Level Zero: Depression: Depression is defined as “anger turned inward.” Sometimes congregations do not know they are in conflict because they are in a state of depression. The task is to raise their awareness that there are problems to be solved.

#### **IV. What is the Composition of the Ministry Listening Team?**

1. The Team consists of 10-12 members, all of whom are approved by the Commission on Ministry. Members do not have to be serving on the COM, nor do they have to be ordained officers of the church if they have expertise in

- mediation and reconciliation. Ideally, there would be members located in different areas of the presbytery. Terms of service would be three years, with a new class added each year.
2. Team members have received and/or agree to receive training in areas of importance to their work, such as systems theory, conflict resolution, managing change, and grief.
  3. All team members must do the boundary training that is required of all those serving on presbytery committees, commissions and teams.
  4. The team meets regularly (perhaps monthly) for case study review, skill development/continuing education, and support.
  5. Congregations in conflict may request assistance of the COM Listening Team through a Presbyter, the COM/CPR, or the congregation may be referred to the team by the COM liaison for that church.
  6. Two or three available persons from the larger pool of COM Listening Team members are assigned by the COM/CPR to work with a specific congregation as their Congregational Listening Team (CLT). In the case of an emergency, the chair of CPR in coordination with a presbyter may form a team.
  7. The congregational team shall work with the session to develop a covenant of mutual conduct and expectations for their consultation. Congregations are expected to agree to compensate the CLT for their mileage to and from meetings and for any materials used.
  8. The Congregational Listening Team is responsible for providing a copy of the covenant and their final report to the Commission on Ministry.

### **V. The Work of the Congregational Listening Team**

1. CLT's are to work to build trust, mutual respect and forgiveness and to create safe space for people to speak and listen. It is helpful to not only begin and end meetings with prayer but also include reflection on scripture as part of meeting with local congregations.
2. The CLT sets up meetings with the pastor, the session, and members of the congregation. It may be important to meet with members of the sessions and congregation individually. The purpose of these meetings is to listen carefully

and seek clarity of what the issues are, not to make a judgement on who is right or wrong. Meetings may take place by Zoom or in person. The congregational team may set up listening sessions at the church on stated dates so that people may sign up in advance for a particular time slot. It is important that all who wish to speak have an opportunity.

3. After all parties are heard, the congregation listening team writes a report that
  - A. States the names of the people on the congregational listening team,
  - B. Describes the process and the number of meetings held,
  - C. Summarizes the issue(s) and
  - D. Makes recommendations to the pastor and the Session.
4. The report is first given to the Committee on Pastoral Relations Committee and the Commission on Ministry. The CPR or the COM may provide input including the plan for providing the report to the Session. Then the report is given to the Session.
5. CLT's have no authority to implement any recommendations that they have for the congregation/ pastor/session. Only the Session has the authority to implement recommendations. The goal of a CLT team is to facilitate understanding and possible directions for the future.
6. The Session decides whether to accept, amend, or reject the recommendations so that all parties own the decision and the outcome of the process.
7. When prudent, the CLT may make recommendations to the Commission on Ministry on how to support the pastor and what a pastor must do within three months and/or before seeking a new call.
8. The Session in consultation with the CLT decides what portions of the report, in summary form, may be made public to the congregation.