Conflict in the Church?

Trying to keep it all straight!

Conflict is a natural part of being in community. Even in the Church where we try to follow the teachings of Christ as closely as we can, conflict is inevitable. And, that's not a bad thing!

Danger, Opportunity Ahead!

The Chinese symbol for crisis actually combines two words: "danger" and "opportunity". When two or more people in the church disagree over values, beliefs, the minister's visiting habits, whether or not to use the organ or a guitar or many other parts of congregational life, it can make us feel uncomfortable. At the same time, there is also an opportunity for learning and response, understanding and a move toward healthy change (another constant in human life!). God calls us to work toward right relationship with each other. Amazing things can happen when we discuss things openly and honestly with those directly involved and do so in the early stages of any disagreement.

Support for Resolving Your Conflict

What do I do first?

Direct Communication

When there is a conflict, it is always best to begin with the individual(s) involved first, before taking the conflict to other parties. Speak privately and compassionately to the person(s) about the issue and see if it can be resolved at an interpersonal level.

What if that doesn't work?

Support at the Congregational Level

When it is not possible to discuss the conflict with the individual(s) involved, or you have attempted to do this and feel that the conflict is still unresolved, the next step would be to seek the counsel and aid of the leadership structures in your church. At the local (congregational) level, the executive of your congregation's official Board or Council will be able to direct the conflict to the appropriate body (Ministry and Personnel Committee if the conflict is between a congregation member and paid, accountable staff or between two paid accountable staff members; the Board or Council, if the conflict is between two congregation members). Please approach the chairperson or secretary. If the conflict is between a congregation's member/staff member and one of those persons, another neutral member of the Executive should be approached.

What if that still doesn't work?!

Support at the Presbytery Level

If you still feel that the conflict is unresolved, and would like to seek help at the next level, you would contact the Secretary of Presbytery who will be able to help direct your questions to the appropriate Presbytery resource. At the Presbytery (district) level, the Pastoral Relations Committee provides support to congregational Ministry and Personnel Committees, and ministry personnel (ordained, commissioned or designated lay ministers), as well as other paid accountable staff. In some presbyteries, the Pastoral Relations Committee will also be involved with reviews of ministry personnel. A presbytery's Pastoral Oversight Committee might help clarify issues of conflict and offer support to the pastoral charge. As mentioned above, your presbytery secretary will be able to help direct your question to the appropriate person or committee in your Presbytery.

What if that still doesn't work???!!!

Support at the Conference Level

At the conference level, there are paid staff persons who have expertise with the formal and informal conflict resolution processes within the United Church. In order to access assistance at this level, you should contact the Executive Secretary (the senior administrative officer for Conference) who will put you in touch with the appropriate people.

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Danger/ Opportunity

Alternate Dispute Resolution
Committee of Bay of Quinte
Conference
The United Church
of Canada

What are the Processes that are used within The United Church of Canada to deal with Conflict?

Informal Processes

	Session/Board/Council/M&P Developed Process/Decision	Conflict Resolution Facilitator/ Alternate Dispute Resolution	Complaint - Informal
Description	The Session/Board/Council, upon receiving notice of a conflict within the congregation, can develop any conflict resolution process that they feel best fits the situation. E.g. If the conflict is between two halves of the Senior Choir, Session might suggest having the minister sit down with the group to talk things out. E.g. If the conflict is between the custodian and the Official Board, the Ministry and Personnel Committee might develop a process where each side's concerns would be heard and addressed.	Each UCC Conference has access to trained and neutral conflict resolutions facilitators (CRFs) who can be called in by congregations to help them resolve a conflict. CRFs will not "tell" congregations "what to do" or find the solutions for them. However, they will come in to help people listen to each other and find their own solution.	The description of an inappropriate action, specific to time and place, against a person or group of persons within the life and work of the church. This could pertain to ministry personnel or any member of the United Church. However, in this case, the person laying the complaint wants to follow an informal process rather than a process as found in the UCC Manual. E.g. This minister on this date, during the morning service, in this place falsely accused a member of the congregation of fraud.
What Happens?	A conflict situation is taken to the Board/ Session /Council and a decision is made on how to proceed.	The Conflict Resolution Facilitator will meet with the necessary people involved to develop an appropriate process to enable people to communicate their concerns and to hear others' concerns. For example, following a time of doing personal interviews, the Facilitator might suggest a circle session where involved persons spend time in a facilitated conversation discussing the conflict. The process will include working together toward an appropriate solution.	The complaint is sent to the appropriate church court (the court to which the person being complained about is accountable). E.g. If the person is a member of the congregation, the complaint is addressed to the Board/ Session/Council. If the person is an ordained, commissioned, or designated lay minister, or is another member of Presbytery, the complaint is addressed to Presbytery. The appropriate church court will meet to decide whether or not to take action and what action is appropriate.
At what point can this process be implemented?	After direct, interpersonal communication between persons has failed.	At any point in a conflict prior to a formal process (meaning found in the Policy Manual) being implemented. E.g. If a Review of the Pastoral Relationship has already begun, using Alternate Dispute Resolution would not be appropriate.	After direct, interpersonal communication between persons has failed.
How to begin?	Speak with either the Chair of the Ministry and Personnel committee or a Board/Session/Council member, as appropriate.	Speak with the Chair of the Board/Council/Session. Follow-up by putting the request in writing.	Send a letter outlining the details of the complaint to the secretary of the appropriate church court (as outlined under **"What Happens"** above), specifying that you wish to deal with the complaint informally.
Who makes the decision re: whether or not to use this process?	Board/Session/Council, as well as the individuals involved.	Board/Session/Council. However, if the individuals involved wish to pursue ADR, they may do so, but must cover their own costs. (See "who pays" below)	Individual or group laying the complaint. The church court to whom the complaint has been sent must follow up. The person against whom the complaint is being laid may demand, however, that a formal process be followed to resolve the conflict.
Who is involved in this process?	Board/Session/Council, or their representatives, as well as all involved persons.	Any persons or groups related to the conflict, the Conflict Resolution Facilitator, and perhaps representatives of the Board/Session/Council.	Any persons or groups related to the conflict, Presbytery representatives, and perhaps a Conflict Resolution Facilitator (if that person is chosen).
Who is responsible for covering the financial costs of the process?	Costs would be minimal. Any of these would be covered by the individuals involved. The Board/Session/Council may or may not decide to help with those costs.	If the Board/Session/Council has decided to bring in a CRF, that body may offer to cover costs. Otherwise, the individuals involved must do so. Some funding may be available from the Presbytery upon application.	Costs would be minimal unless bringing in a CRF. If the appropriate church court has decided to bring in a CRF, that body may offer to cover costs or individuals would be required to do so. Some funding may be available from the Presbytery upon application.

What are the Processes that are used within The United Church of Canada to deal with Conflict?

Formal Processes - found within the UCC Policy Manual		
Complaint - Formal (Section 72)	**Review of Pastoral Charge (Section 333)**	**Review of Ministry Personnel (Section 363)**
Same as Informal Complaint, except that the person laying the complaint wishes to follow the formal procedures as found in Manual section 72. (See section- **"What Happens")**	An information-gathering review of the complete mission and ministry of the pastoral charge which may or may not recommend or require certain actions. Section 333 reviews may also be implemented for non-conflict reasons (e.g.. To determine financial viability of a pastoral charge or for the creation of a new point to the pastoral charge).	An information-gathering review of the effectiveness of an ordained or commissioned or designated lay minister. Section 363 reviews may also be implemented for non-conflict reasons (e.g.. To determine whether or not a change in pastoral relationship is needed due to a change in family circumstances).
The complaint is sent to the appropriate church court (as in the informal process). Alternate Dispute Resolution is mandatory in cases of formal complaints. The ADR process would be initiated by the court. If ADR does not resolve the conflict, the Court decides on appropriate next steps. They may (among other options) send the conflict back to Executive, order a hearing or a review, choose an alternate form of mediation, or choose to take no further action. If a formal hearing (church court trial) is convened, the Court appoints a committee of three to five people, chose from he membership of the Court, to hear the evidence on all sides. A decision about how to address the complaint is then chosen by the committee from within the options listed in section 75 of the Manual. These range from warnings to expulsion from the church.	The Presbytery appoints a committee of people drawn from Presbytery members to study the situation. The study could involve interviews with members/adherants, surveys, a financial audit/review, building inspection, community surveys, etc. The study would involve any means necessary to establish the health and well being of the Pastoral charge. Appropriate Action may be recommended by the committee and will be brought forward to Presbytery for its consideration. Presbytery then makes the decision around what action may be taken. This action may range from taking no action to dissolving the pastoral Charge with many alternate actions between.	The Presbytery appoints a committee of people drawn from Presbytery members to review the conduct of ministry personnel. The review might include interviews with the minister, members/adherants, and perhaps expert resource people within the community. Appropriate actions (as laid out in section 363d of the Manual) may be recommended by the committee and will be brought forward to Presbytery for its consideration. Action ranges from taking no action all the way to expulsion of the minister from the Order of Ministry, with much in between.
After direct interpersonal communication between persons has failed.	When Presbytery has reason to believe that further study is needed to determine the reasons, within the Pastoral Charge, for the conflict.	When Presbytery has reason to believe that further study is needed to determine the reasons for the conflict which have to do with the effectiveness of the minister.
Send a letter outlining the details of the complaint to the Secretary of the appropriate church court, specifying that you wish to deal with the complaint formally under section 72.	A church Board/Session/Council makes a written request to the Presbytery. Presbytery may also decide on its own initiative based on information that comes to their attention (e.g.. A request from a Pastoral Oversight Committee after a triennial visit to a pastoral charge).	A church Board/Session/Council makes a written request to the Presbytery which then decides if a Section 363 review is warranted. Presbytery may also order a 363 review on its own initiative based on information it has received.
Individual or group laying the complaint. The church court to whom the complaint has been sent must follow-up	Presbytery decides to take an action or not to take an action.	Presbytery decides to take an action or not to take an action.
Any persons or groups related to the conflict, Presbytery Representatives, a Conflict Resolution Facilitator (ADR is mandatory under this process), and perhaps, legal counsel.	Members and adherents of the Pastoral Charge and Presbytery representatives. Occasionally, resource people from the community who have had expertise in some areas (e.g.. Financial planning) may be asked to participate.	The minister concerned, presbytery representatives, community resource persons, and, perhaps, legal counsel.
The costs of the CRF (the use of which is mandatory) would be covered by the court, (Board/Session/Council or Presbytery) which receives the complaint. If a formal hearing is convened, those costs are also covered by the appropriate court. Personal costs (E.g... Legal fees, if an individual chooses to seek legal counsel) are the responsibility of the individuals.	Costs related to the carrying out of the actual review are covered by Presbytery. Costs incurred by the Pastoral Charge in order to speak to the review are covered by the pastoral Charge (e.g.. During a review, a church Board decides to bring in an external auditor to prove their financial viability — this would be covered by the church and not Presbytery).	Costs related to the carrying out of the actual review are covered by Presbytery (e.g.. The Presbytery requests a medical examination of the minister. This cost is covered by Presbytery). Personal costs (e.g.. Legal fees or if the minister requests a second medical examination to challenge the first one).

Keeping the levels straight

It is true that individuals will often seek the counsel of other persons, such as the Conference Personnel Minister, early in any conflict resolution process. It is important to distinguish, though, between who is acting in the capacity of pastoral support and counsel, and who is acting to resolve the conflict. For example, a presbytery Pastoral Relations Committee may seek the counsel of the Executive Secretary on a matter of process. As well, the minister may seek pastoral support through the Conference Personnel Minister. At the same time, the conflict is being "worked" at the presbytery level, not the conference level. In this case, the Executive Secretary and Conference Personnel Minister would likely ensure that each is allowed to go about his or her role individually, so that neither individual is advising both the Pastoral Relations Committee and the minister at the same time. In this way, if the conflict escalates to the conference level, each of the two individuals would be able to act without conflict of interest. It is important to attempt to resolve the conflict at the appropriate church level before moving on to the next.

A note about complaints of sexual abuse

There are specific, mandatory processes to hear and deal with complaints related to sexual abuse (sexual harassment, pastoral sexual misconduct, or sexual assault). These processes are outside the scope of this document. Any questions concerning these types of complaints should be directed to the Executive Secretary of Conference.

Church levels or courts

The governance of the United Church is divided into four different levels or "courts".
They are:

Congregation - your own church congregation/ pastoral charge.

Presbytery - a collection of congregations within a local region (eg. Belleville Presbytery) - local congregations elect people to represent them at Presbytery.

Conference - a collection of Presbyteries within a large region (eg. Bay of Quinte Conference which includes United Churches from Pickering to Algonquin Park, to Brockville to Pembroke).
Members of Conference can be elected by local congregations and Presbytery. Some members of Conference are automatically elected to Conference because of positions they already hold (eg. Chair of Presbytery automatically is a member of conference).

General Council - meets every two to three years as a forum for dialogue, consultation, worship, fellowship and national decision-making. It includes representation from all parts of the church. Commissionaires (delegates) to General Council are nominated by Presbyteries and Conferences.

Where to go for Conflict Resolution Assistance?	**What Processes May be Used? See full chart overleaf for details**
1. *Person-to-person* — direct communication with the person(s) with whom you have the conflict.	
I tried and it's still not resolved.	
2. *Congregational Level* — approach Ministry and Personnel Committee (or Board or Council) for help in resolving the conflict.	• Processes/Decisions developed by Session/ Board/Council • Conflict Resolution Facilitator/ADR • Complaint (Informal and Formal)
Still didn't work.	
3. *Presbytery level* — Contact Secretary of Presbytery to be directed to the appropriate person/committee for help.	• Conflict Resolution Facilitator/ADR • Complaint (Informal and Formal) • Section 333 Review (Pastoral Charge) • Section 363 Review (Personnel)
Still unresolved! 4. *Conference Level* — Contact the Executive Secretary for further assistance in resolving.	• Appeal Presbytery decisions • Further extension of processes available at Presbytery level.