

MAINTAINING AND REPAIRING COVENANTAL BONDS: GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

Living in covenant is challenging, and tensions are inevitable. Here's guidance from First Parish in Waltham's Committee on Ministry on addressing strained connections while upholding the spirit of our relational covenant.

Reflection and Preparation

- **Slow Down:** Begin with personal reflection. Avoid rushing into action. Pay attention to your body and consider starting with a breathing exercise such as this one: <https://cmbm.org/self-care/soft-belly-breathing/>
- **Reflective Questions:** Ask yourself:
 - What might you be overlooking about your own role in the situation?
 - Could a simple misunderstanding underlie the tension?
 - If you're telling yourself a negative story about the other person, get curious about their intentions and experiences.
 - Is the problem related to meeting facilitation, role confusion, or lack of closure?
 - Did external factors lead to unskillful interactions?
 - Consider cultural differences that may have contributed, such as power dynamics or micro-aggressions.

Navigating Conflict

- **Seeking Support:** In the spirit of our relational covenant, when seeking support for conflict, ensure your intention is to gain perspective, not just to garner support for your side. Sometimes when people in conflict speak to others who might support them, it has the unintended effect of spreading the conflict in the congregation - which exacerbates the situation.
- **Next Steps:**
Consider:

- Sharing your concern with the other person in a simple, constructive manner. *For example, “When x happened, I was concerned that it meant y. Is that how you understood it?”*
- Reflecting on ongoing dynamics and discussing personal experiences or needs with the other party. *For example, to a committee chair, “I’ve noticed that our meetings are very fast-paced, with full agendas, and some people speak quite a bit more than others. Is this a dynamic you’ve noticed?” If so, you might respond: “As an introvert I find it hard to participate. Can we talk about ways to address that?”*
- Offering an apology or noting a gap between intention and impact. *For example: “I’m sorry I was so short with you yesterday. I wasn’t at my best, having slept little the night before.” Or, “I don’t think your intention was to hurt me but I want you to understand how your comment impacted me.”*

Inviting In-Depth Conversations

- **The Invitation:** If you anticipate needing a more complex conversation, consider how you might invite it. Approach the other person without insisting on an immediate conversation. Allow time for both parties to be intentional and less reactive.
- **Starting the Conversation:** Ensure both parties are talking about the same thing, free of interpretations. Use "I" statements to share how you interpreted the situation and how it made you feel.
- Why? Because in conflicts, we tend to jump to conclusions. We are selective in what we attend to. We see it through the lenses of our life experiences and culture, and we attach meanings. A slow-paced conversation that places emphasis on unpacking meanings over drawing conclusions is a gift for each participant.

A Constructive Ending

- Conclude the conversation with an eye to the future. Have you asked something of each other or offered something to avoid future harm or tensions? Have you identified structural, cultural, or systemic factors that could be addressed?
- If tensions arise in a particular group, consider sharing your concern in that group. *For example: “What I’ve noticed/experienced is…”* or speak to the chair/facilitator who might find ways to invite all members to share what’s working well or not in the group. A general guideline is to seek help in a direct

manner and at the most “local” level, e.g., with one other person, the chair of a committee or in a committee meeting.

- If there are broader systemic or cultural issues in the congregation or issues related to policy or decision making, speak to an appropriate person in leadership. If you have a concern about a staff member, see “Special Considerations” below. Don’t report concerns anonymously. Be accountable. Get help from the Committee on Ministry (CoM).

Seeking Help

- **Committee on Ministry (CoM):** Seek help from the CoM, who can assist confidentially in various ways, from serving as a sounding board to providing facilitative presence for a conversation or connecting you with mediation resources. The CoM can help you surface fresh perspectives, or identify untested assumptions, and prepare for a difficult conversation. Sometimes such reflection calms the “stirred up” feelings, enhances self-knowledge, and ensures that any next steps with the other person are well-thought out.
- CoM members can also provide a facilitative presence for a conversation between two people who want to heal a strained relationship; the facilitator can help them listen carefully to each other. Often when each party feels heard and understood, resolution and healing become possible. In more challenging situations, parties in conflict might meet separately with a facilitator or co-facilitators to prepare for a constructive dialogue. Pre-meeting discussions with facilitators might involve supportive coaching regarding avoiding pitfalls and maintaining a sense of positive purpose.
- If mediation is needed, CoM members may be able to suggest a resource. The planning process of a facilitation or mediation would be tailored to the situation with input from the participants about their hopes and concerns and would invite their ideas about ways to proceed. If one party in a conflict declines to engage in reparative work, a member of the CoM might seek to understand their concern but would not impose a conflict resolution process.
- If a conflict is causing significant disruption to relationships and processes in the congregation, the Minister or a member of the Lay Pastoral Care Team might become involved.

Special Considerations

- **Church-Wide Conflicts:** For church-wide or multi-member conflicts, the CoM might work with others skilled in this issue to design a process for addressing the issues, leading to recommendations to church leaders.
- **Safety Concerns:** When it's a matter of safety First Parish's safety guidelines will inform the CoM decisions. Any situation affecting safety will be referred to the Minister and others with special training. Safety issues include "actions or threats of violence, abuse, harassment, etc. that could cause harm to or inappropriate infringement on i) FPW members, family, renters, visitors, or staff, ii) church property, or iii) the church as an institution, and to any other unforeseen circumstances that lead to a safety concern." The Minister or members of the CoM may consult someone with expertise germane to a particular incident or situation. Such a process might lead to recommendations to the Parish Board or other church leaders.

Staff Involvement

- Staff are part of our covenanting church community, but their relationships with First Parish in Waltham are also contractual. The minister and others in a supervisory role can only carry out their duties if they are aware of tensions that emerge with and between staff. For example, they can provide coaching to help staff members constructively address relational tensions. If there's a pattern in concerns expressed, it can be addressed in a staff evaluation. For these reasons, members should bring concerns about tensions with staff to the relevant supervisor. If the supervisor and staff member think the CoM or others can be of help, they are invited to seek their support.

Committee on Ministry Members:

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