

## **ST. JOHN'S POLICY FOR RESOLVING ISSUES IN THE CONGREGATION**

*Jesus commanded his followers to “love one another” as he has first loved us; the church is expected to obey this command.*

Loving one another, however, does not mean that the followers of Jesus will always agree with each other. Rather, it is often because of the love we have for one another and for Jesus, that conflict occurs within the church. Sometimes this is uncomfortable and sometimes it's even painful. Always, though, the church should seek not to eliminate conflict, but to resolve conflict in a loving manner.

Because Jesus anticipated that disagreements would arise, he also gave us clear guidelines for resolving them. These are outlined in Matthew 18:15-20.

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”  
(Matthew 18:15-20 NRSV)

This policy for dealing with issues that arise at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church is based on Jesus' words about “loving one another” and the guidelines outlined in the gospel of Matthew. Therefore, we begin by assuming that disagreements are a natural consequence of being the church of God and, therefore, should not be ignored or denied but rather dealt with openly, honestly, and with integrity. We also expect that because Jesus has commanded us to love one another, we strive to engage in conflict in a loving manner so as to be considerate of one another's feelings, opinion, and differences.

As a result, the following principles will be followed:

1. When an issue or disagreement arises, individuals are encouraged first to attempt to work through them directly with one another. This discourages talking behind another's back, the spreading or hearing of rumors, and the dissemination of inaccurate/misleading information. Leaders and members are called to encourage one another in this behavior.
2. If someone feels too shy, intimidated, or fearful to meet with another individual directly, or if the person has already done so without success, then the person is encouraged to invite another member or two, from the Staff Support Committee, to join in the conversation with the other individual. This often helps facilitate communication, understanding, accuracy, and a loving approach.

3. If someone refuses to confront the person directly or with another, the person may choose to ask another member to carry the concern to the other person. This, however, will never be done anonymously. Anonymity produces confusion, misunderstanding, and does not allow for resolution. Anonymity should not be confused with confidentiality. Confidentiality is honored between one individual and another and should not be broken; therefore, the names of the individual as well as the content of the conversation should never be carried further. Thus, it is inappropriate for someone to say “someone is complaining about \_\_\_\_\_ but asked me to keep their name confidential.” This is not an issue of confidentiality but anonymity. Confidentiality will be honored; anonymity will not. If something is confidential it should not be discussed further, ever!
4. If a concern is still not resolved, it is then appropriate to bring it to the Congregation Council either in person or by letter. Again, no such concerns will be considered anonymously. Letters of concern or a request to address the council should be submitted to the President of the Council at least five days in advance of the next meeting and will be shared ahead of time with anyone directly affected by the concern. This is to insure that individuals affected are given ample time to properly prepare a response. It may also allow for resolution to occur, or begin to occur, before the council meeting.
5. Written letters and oral conversation should always keep in mind Jesus’ command to “love one another”.
6. Upon hearing or reading the concern, the Council may choose to refer the matter to a committee or appoint representatives to meet with the concerned individual(s). If the council believes that these concerns reflect the thoughts of a number of people, they may be raised and discussed during a town meeting. Ultimately, the Council may choose to bring the concern to the congregation, to a Synodical representative, or to an outside individual who can facilitate a resolution. These should generally be of last resort.
7. All situations where there is disagreement should be undergirded with prayer and consider the question, “what would Jesus do in this situation or, what would Jesus want us to do in this situation?”
8. This process holds true if the conflict or concern is with a committee and not an individual. The person should first address concerns to the committee chair or they may ask to be present at the next committee meeting in order to bring the issue before the whole committee. If the issue cannot be resolved then it is appropriate to bring it to the attention of the Congregation Council either in person or by letter.

In reference to issue resolution, Jesus said “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” It is our expectation that this promise is most certainly true.