



ST TIKHON ORTHODOX CHURCH

AN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

Guidelines for Parish Conflict Resolution

“Let brotherly love continue.” (Hebrews 13.1) “But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the Law, for they are unprofitable and futile. As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him” (St. Paul’s Letter to Titus 3.9f)

Resolution of conflict in a parish is an urgent matter whose goal is to maintain the peace, harmony and unity of the Church, for so it is well-pleasing to God, recognizing that Christ died for the sake of us all – for both us and those with whom we may have differences of opinion. Dissension in the Church is a scandal that makes a mockery of Christ’s loving death. The sign that we are His disciples lies in our love for one another.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church [i.e., pastor or bishop], and if he refuses to listen even to the Church, let him be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17)

1. Disputes should be confined to the absolute minimum number of people, completely avoiding slander and gossip.
2. Recognize that we do not all have to agree on everything, that there are legitimate differences in perspective, but that mutual respect and love must always prevail. Respect includes abiding by the judgment calls and discretionary decisions of those in authority, even if you would have made a different decision had you been in charge. Give them your input, but then allow the parish priest, committee chairmen, etc., to do their work to the best of their ability, setting aside criticism and showing them gratitude for their efforts.
3. If you have an issue with another parishioner,
 - a. Speak to him privately.
 - b. If you are not able to resolve the issue, take it to your pastor.
4. If you have an issue with your priest,

- a. Speak to him privately.
 - b. If you are not able to resolve the issue, then you may take it to your dean.
 - c. If there is a charge of misconduct or moral impropriety against the priest, keep the matter confidential, informing only the dean, who will report the matter to the diocesan bishop. (If the charge is against the dean himself, then you may go directly to the bishop.)
 - d. If the issue is one of general lack of effort or of incompatibility between a priest and the community he serves, having already worked with the pastor and solicited the help of the dean, the parish council may decide to request a change of pastor. The request must be kept in the strictest confidence and communicated to the bishop by a letter signed by every member of the parish council; those dissenting must also sign, but they may indicate their dissent. The bishop looks to the parish council, for the most part, as the voice of the parish. They are the ones who were deemed in good spiritual and financial standing and properly elected by the general assembly, but he alone will then decide whether or not to reassign the priest.
5. Nothing should happen without the knowledge of the parish priest, and no meeting of the parish council may ever take place unless the pastor is present or has authorized the meeting to take place in his absence. In no case should people beyond those directly involved be troubled with a dispute. No letters, e-mail messages, petitions, etc., should be circulated.
 6. If the issue remains unresolved, then and only then, you may make an appointment with the diocesan bishop. Such an appointment must be set up through the pastor.
 7. Confidential correspondence to/from the diocesan bishop or metropolitan is strictly the property of the hierarchy and is not to be shared with anyone.

Let us be sure to heed the words of St. Paul, realizing that sometimes there are in the flock, wolves in sheep's clothing. In his letter to the Romans he writes, "I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissension and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded Romans 16: 17-18)"