



SEEKING TO BE FAITHFUL TOGETHER: *Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement*

In a spirit of trust and love, we promise we will...

*Give them a hearing...
listen before we answer*

(John 7:51 and Proverbs 18:13)

1. **Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ;**
 - we will keep our conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange,
 - we will not ask questions or make statements in a way that will intimidate or judge others.
 2. **Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.**
 3. **State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.**
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Speak the truth in love

(Ephesians 4:15)

4. **Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teachings.**
 5. **Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity;**
 - we will not engage in name-calling or labeling of others prior to, during or following the discussion.
 6. **Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns.**
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*Maintain the unity of the
spirit in the bond of peace*

(Ephesians 4:3)

7. **Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree.**
8. **Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension;**
 - we will be ready to forgive and be forgiven.
9. **Follow these additional guidelines when we meet in decision-making bodies:**
 - urge people of various points of view to speak and promise to listen to these positions seriously;
 - seek conclusions informed by our points of agreement;
 - be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who do not agree with the majority and respect their rights of conscience;
 - abide by the decision of the majority, and if we disagree with it and wish to change it, work for that change in ways that are consistent with these Guidelines.
10. **Include our disagreement in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.**



As Presbyterians, we are called to work for the “peace, unity and purity of the Church” (*Book of Order*) as we seek to be faithful to God’s work in the world. However, disagreements and conflicts are inevitable in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as we try to be faithful. They exist within committees, congregations, presbyteries, synods, at General Assemblies and in the national life of the denomination.

Conflicts are inevitable in all of life and certainly in the church. The history of the church is filled with conflicts and disagreements. Several of Paul’s letters address the conflicts that were common in the early church. There have been and are going to be disagreements as Christians attempt to discern God’s work in the world and as we interpret Scripture.

Conflicts can be harmful and even destructive. They can cause individuals a great deal of pain and the community of faith immeasurable damage. Congregations have been divided; denominations have experienced schisms.

At the same time, conflicts can be an opportunity for new insights, learning, and individual and corporate growth. Disagreements can illuminate a topic in helpful ways and can present solutions to problems that previously had not been seen. The successful resolution of conflict can also bind people together in a powerful way.

The Bible contains many stories of conflict and disagreement and much advice about how they can be addressed. As those stories indicate, God is already present wherever there is brokenness, granting wholeness and peace. God promises to be with us in times of disagreement and calls us to reconciliation, trust, love and forgiveness.

We realize that our perspectives are limited, so to help us affirm each other, enhance our community, stay open to the viewpoints of others and be sensitive to cultural diversity, we commit ourselves to the Guidelines in a spirit of prayer, trust and love, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for use by sessions and congregations.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE GUIDELINES *for use by sessions and congregations*

1. What are the Guidelines and how did they come about?

“Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement” is a response to requests from many Presbyterian congregations that have experienced pain and brokenness resulting from disagreements that were not dealt with in a healthy and productive way. Some of these disagreements were about issues important in our national life (e.g., abortion and human sexuality), while some of them were about matters dealing with the life of the congregation (e.g., should we start a building campaign?).

Every congregation has conflicts. They will either be occasions for divisiveness and harm, or they will provide opportunities for growing and learning. The Guidelines may help congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) use conflict in a creative and productive way.

The 204th General Assembly (1992) adopted the Guidelines for its own life and provided this tool to congregations and the other bodies of the Presbyterian Church to help them deal with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements that occur.



2. What is the biblical basis for the Guidelines?

The Bible contains many stories of conflict and offers a great deal of guidance for dealing with disagreements. It is also rich in its description of God's peacemaking and reconciling work.

- God, through Jesus Christ is reconciling the world and gives us the ministry of reconciliation. (II Corinthians 5:17–20)
- We are one body. (I Corinthians 10:7)
- We are called to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)
- Make peace with your sibling when you have a conflict. (Matthew 5:23–24)
- Bless those who persecute you; live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:14–16)
- Be kind to one another and forgive one another. (Ephesians 4:13–16)
- Listen carefully before you speak. (Proverbs 18:13)
- Speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:13–16)
- Work for consensus. (Acts 15:1–31)

3. Why should your session and congregation agree to use the Guidelines?

Conflicts and disagreements occur in congregations. Where there are people who care deeply, there is bound to be conflict.

The Guidelines offer clear, simple suggestions for dealing with differences, so they become occasions for growing in grace and understanding, not times of divisiveness and separation. Though use of the Guidelines cannot prevent conflict from happening, they might help develop an open, helpful climate where differences are dealt with productively.

4. What are some suggested steps for considering the use of the Guidelines in your congregation?

- Leadership: Ask a committee of session or several elders to lead the session in a study of the Guidelines.
- Bible Study: Suggest that an adult church school class or Bible study group study the biblical insights on conflict and what to do about it. It would also be useful if the session would have their own similar study.
- Skill-Building Sessions: If the session has not recently used a portion of their meetings for learning skills for dealing with conflict, consider using and adapting this resource. Also consider using this resource in your adult education program.
- Study the Guidelines: Ask the session to study the Guidelines by examining each one of them. The session might ask these questions about each Guideline:
 - How might the use of this Guideline help create a healthy atmosphere for dealing with conflict?
 - How might the use of this Guideline help deal with an existing conflict?
 - Would you like to change this Guideline or remove it from the list?
- Vote on the Guidelines: The session might vote to use the Guidelines in its own life and to encourage and help members of the congregation make use of them. The session might also wish to overture the presbytery to agree to use the Guidelines for its life together. Ask a committee of the session to help the session and the congregation make use of the Guidelines.
- Report to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program: Please inform the Peacemaking Program when your session agrees to use the Guidelines, about your experience with them, and other efforts to deal with conflict and disagreement.



5. How can our session actually use the Guidelines?

Once your session has agreed to use the Guidelines, there are several ways to use them:

- Encourage all members of the session to take responsibility for using the Guidelines during the meeting.
- Urge session members to use the Guidelines and remind others to use them during informal conversations in the congregation.
- Read a simple prayer together prior to the start of the session meeting that asks God's help in dealing with conflict effectively.

One possible prayer:

Gracious and Loving God, you have called us together to do the work of your church. Be present with us during this meeting, guide us that we may make decisions that will reflect your loving presence in this world. Create within us open minds and hearts, that we will not fear conflict or run from it, but embrace it, knowing that it is an opportunity for growing in faith and a fuller understanding of your will for us. Help us to listen to each other, share our thoughts in loving, honest ways and do all we can to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

- Pray before voting on a matter that has created significant disagreement, reminding all present that some will be happy about the decision and some will be disappointed.
- Use the Guidelines in ways that encourage open candid discussion. Discourage using the Guidelines in ways that would stifle the airing of disagreements and impede session members from sharing their opinions.
- Display the Guidelines in the rooms where the session and other committees meet.
- Review and evaluate the session's use of the Guidelines each year. Help each new class of the session understand the Guidelines and their use.

6. How can the Guidelines be used in our congregation?

- Reproduce the first page of this form and include it in a Sunday bulletin or in your congregation's newsletter in an effort to give copies to as many members as possible.
- Display the Guidelines on several of your church's bulletin boards.
- Present the Guidelines to the committees of session, the choir and groups within the church of all ages.
- Invite members of these groups and other leaders in your congregation to a training session on the Guidelines. Include training on the Guidelines in new member classes and elder and deacon training.
- Ask the worship leadership team to find ways that the Guidelines might be emphasized in worship.
- At a congregational meeting, ask the congregation to decide if they will use the Guidelines.
- If a congregation votes to use the Guidelines, consider having an evaluation annually at a congregational meeting on how effectively the congregation has used them. This evaluation might produce suggestions for using them better.

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PDS # 24358-20-002