

Pastoral Relations Committee
Zeeland Classis

Recommended Policy: Classis Involvement in Congregational Conflict

September, 2005

The Pastoral Relations Committee of Zeeland Classis is given the responsibility to provide pastoral care for pastors and consistories in much the same way that a board of elders provides pastoral care for the members of their congregation.

It is not unusual for there to be conflict in the life of the church. In fact, conflict may be one of the ways through which God reveals himself. Our differences can lead to growth and a deepening of relationships and of ministry fruitfulness. For this reason, conflict must be handled appropriately. Jesus, in Matthew 18:15-20, instructs his followers to ask others in the church for help in settling conflicts when necessary. In faithfulness to that teaching, a classis can be a place where others turn for counsel and insight.

In order to follow the steps Jesus describes in Matthew 18, we believe:

- It is always best for the individuals involved in a conflict to make a sincere effort to communicate clearly and directly with each other, and so settle their differences as promptly as possible. This would imply that a pastor and consistory (or involved member of a congregation) should not take their conflict outside of their own congregation until honest and diligent prayer and effort has been made toward achieving a resolution. *This would not, however, restrict individuals from seeking confidential advice on how best to proceed from the Classis. It may, in fact, be advisable to inform the Pastoral Relations Committee of the issue so that a basic awareness is created.*
- If the conflict has not been resolved by sincere efforts between parties directly involved, the Pastoral Relations Committee should be asked to serve a mediating role in the conflict. It is not the committee's intention or desire to "take sides" or to use its influence to "fix" the problem. The committee shall gather information and make an assessment of the conflict, giving advice to all parties and assisting them as they work toward resolution.
- If, after these efforts have been made, the conflict is not yet settled, the Pastoral Relations Committee will determine a course of action to be taken by all parties involved, and will make recommendations to the larger Classis (as necessary). The conflicted parties will remain under the care of the committee until resolution seems complete. *This stage of intervention should never be the first step, but should be viewed as the final stage [at the Classis level]. Only in rare situations should it become necessary for the Pastoral Relations Committee to supercede the authority of the pastor/consistory of the local church.*

It is our desire that brothers and sisters within the body of Christ live in harmony with each other. At the same time, we understand that sin remains within us "against our own will" and that conflicts will often arise. We would hope, however, that issues will be faced honestly and quickly, so that they do not become more difficult still. On the occasions that a conflict is addressed by the Pastoral Relations Committee, that committee shall be free to seek the assistance of any outside counsel deemed helpful (pastoral care counselors, Specialized Interim Ministers, Regional Synod staff, etc.).