

HUGHES BAPTIST CHURCH

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Dealing with Disputes, Complaints and Grievances: Policy and Procedure

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Preamble: This policy was directly copied from the Principles of Operation, Appendix 1, 18 October 2015. For the avoidance of doubt, the Principles of Operation, Appendix 1 is the master document.

1. Introduction

Differences of opinion are normal and to be expected. They can in fact be very healthy. However, when a dispute becomes divisive, God's word tells us what to do, providing guidelines for our personal relationships with other believers, and suggesting a framework for resolution (Matthew 18:15-17). This document addresses these issues and is a component of the Principles of Operation.

The Bible calls those who become aware of causing offence to action immediately.

So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. (Matt 5:23-24)

Those offended are of course immediately aware of the offence but not always the other person, particularly if the hurt was inadvertent.⁵

Terminology

For the purposes of this document the phrase 'member of the Hughes Baptist Church family' means anyone, Member or not, who is a regular attendee of the Church and who regards HBC as their Church.

Those hurt by other's words or actions are referred to as offended, because they have rightly or wrongly taken offence. The other party to a dispute is initially referred to as the offending party, but it needs to be emphasised that they may have unintentionally and unknowingly caused offence.

In the early stages of dispute resolution the offence is a private matter for the offended to consider and then for both parties to consider together. By step 3 there will be others involved and the dispute is unlikely to be a trivial matter or simple misunderstanding. From this point on the offending party is referred to as the accused party.

2. Principles for a Biblical Resolution of Disputes

Matt.18:15-17 carries the potential to heal, to restore, and to foster reconciliation, and yet it is a process that is too often ignored in the local church. Don't deny a dispute, conflict or offence exists. Every day you wait to address one, violates Ephesians 4:26, which says "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry".

a. Commit to owning the values

Be the model of Matthew 18:15-17 so that it becomes part of the fabric of Hughes Baptist Church. Refer to the Personal Covenant at the end of this document.

b. Monitor yourself

Learn to discern which misdemeanours and indiscretions you can let be covered by sheer grace and which offences must be addressed. 1Timothy 4:16 says, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." Exercise verbal discipline, remembering that affirming and encouraging words reduce defensiveness and a "gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1).

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c. Redirect individuals

Resist the temptation to listen when someone discusses a dispute he or she is having with another person in the Church and instead redirect that person to honour Matthew 18:15-17 by talking directly to the other party.

d. Protect the Body – the Church

Resist the temptation to become a party to an unjust personal campaign. Don't let matters escalate to teams taking sides. Encourage a graduated escalation which gives the other party opportunity to come to resolution without being ambushed unfairly. Think and pray about the likely consequences of forwarding e-mails and copying letters. If you are unsure, delete, burn or shred offending material.

e. Narrow the issue

Although you may be tempted to expand a dispute to include more than the original alleged offence, narrow the focus to address only that issue.

e. Be solution-orientated

The goal of Matthew 18:15 is reconciliation. Focus on understanding what went wrong, why it went wrong and how it can be prevented from recurring in the future.

f. Use the 'mirror technique'

Appreciate that Matthew 18:15 requires communication between an offended and an accused party at the former's initiative. That understood, very often we do not hear each other clearly. Listen to what the other person has to say and repeat back to each other what you hear, asking, "I understand you to be saying such-and-such. Is that true?"

g. Be open to agreeing to disagree

Sometimes a dispute is resolved by understanding each other - and then "agreeing to disagree, agreeably," - walking arm-in-arm even if you cannot see eye-to-eye.

h. Be committed to follow-up

Some relational disputes cut deeply. Be intentional about investing time in rebuilding the relationship once the dispute has been resolved.

i. Be gracious when others confront you

Allow others to respectfully express their frustrations and do not switch the discussion from the issue they have with you to an issue you have with them.

3. A Biblical Resolution Process

Step 1 - Overlooking an Offence

Many disputes could be resolved by quietly overlooking the offence caused. "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook the offence." (Prov.19:11). Overlooking an offence is a form of forgiveness, and it involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent up bitterness or anger. (Proverbs 17:14 & 1Peter 4:8).

Those offended are asked to commit their ways to the Lord and let Him defend them.

Commit your future to the Lord! Trust in him, and he will act on your behalf. He will vindicate you in broad daylight, and publicly defend your just cause. (Ps 37:5-6)

So first of all glorify God and put him first rather than practicing a "me-first" attitude. Remember that Christ suffered much unfairly, and we are asked to share in His suffering. Recall that Jesus suffered wrongly for us, to the glory of God (1Peter 3:18, Philippians 2:5-11).

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For this finds God's favour, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favour with God. For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. (1 Pet 2:19-21)

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but give place to God's wrath, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Rather, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:16-21)

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matt 5:38-42)

In Matthew chapter 5, verse 39 means that you allow yourself to be insulted without retaliation. Verses 39 and 40 must be taken in context with the entire paragraph (Matthew 5:38-42) which corrects how the Pharisees incorrectly taught that "an eye for an eye" allowed personal revenge when, in the Old Testament, "an eye for an eye" spoke of equitable justice meted out by a governmental body.

"If the matter be small, which we may lose without considerable damage to our families, it is good to submit to [overlook] it for peace' sake." (Matthew Henry – Theologian)

Look into your own heart and your motivation for wanting to address a perceived offence.

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For by the standard you judge you will be judged, and the measure you use will be the measure you receive. Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to see the beam of wood in your own? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' while there is a beam in your own? You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Mat 7:1-5)

First get the log out of your own eye before confronting a brother/sister over an issue. Ask yourself, how have my ways or words contributed to the conflict? That's a hard thing to do - the admission of our own possible wrongdoing. It's much easier to blame the other person. But blaming others is not the Christian way.

Bottom line is to act not according to human nature, but according to the new Christ nature within you. To help you do this take time to meditate and reflect on God's word, seeking His love and being aware of His provision for us.

Step 2 - Personal Reconciliation

Of course, letting all bad action go unchallenged is not helpful in the long run. As was stated earlier the offending party may be unaware of the issue. Also, an indiscretion or offence may be too serious to overlook or may have already caused damage to relationships within the church.

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Mat 14:19)

The first step in taking action against offence is for the offended party to privately speak with the person who has caused the hurt and ensure that they are aware of the grievance. We need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Mat 18:15)

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State the circumstances and the hurt – that is all. Once the other party is aware of the grievance it is their obligation to act. The offended does no more. The prime obligation to take action to restore relationships rests with the alleged offender, not the offended party (Matthew 5:23).

If this step fails refer again to Step 1 before proceeding. Not over-reacting will be heaping coals on the other party's head.

Step 3 - Witnessed Reconciliation

If after prayerful consideration it is necessary to take further action then the next course of action according to Matthew is to involve one or two other Christians as witnesses to your attempts to explain the perceived offence and as further accountability to the alleged offender.

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (Mat 18:16)

Note that the witnesses accompany you; they don't approach the accused person on your behalf. Christians are aptly qualified to evaluate and resolve issues and disputes involving Christian disputants. These "witnesses" are to facilitate the parties to see the issue more clearly and to help identify solutions (Matt.18:16).

The witnesses' role is not to take sides, but to encourage each individual to work towards resolving the dispute between them and to consider the situation from the other person's perspective, identifying his/her feelings for the other person's role and how he/she sees the problem and its resolution from that position, so that "every matter may be established".

The witnesses are more than just a support to one side of the dispute. We do not want to elevate a one-on-one dispute to a two-on-two or three-on-three dispute. It would be best to use people who know both the offended and the accused people, who are mature Christians trusted by both parties, and who are motivated by a desire to see reconciliation. Their joint role is to hold both parties to account for accuracy and gentleness in what is said and to assist within insight into the other person's perspective of the issue. They do not need to be church leaders or Pastors but could be. Before beginning this process, remember confidentiality is essential.

At this step you are not yet formally bringing the matter to the notice of the church leadership, and an accused person is entitled not to be prematurely made the subject of public discussion.

If this step fails to achieve a satisfactory resolution then check Step 1 again. Perhaps just knowing that other people are aware of the issue, despite a recalcitrant believer, is comfort enough.

Step 4 Appeal to Church Authority

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; (Matt 18:17a)

According to Matthew the third step is to take the matter to the church. This does not mean standing in front of the congregation and blurting out your hurt, but rather making an approach to a Pastor or Elder depending on the nature of the alleged offence.

You have heard that it was said to an older generation, 'Do not murder,' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says 'Fool' will be sent to fiery hell. (Mat 5:21-22)

When any of you has a legal dispute with another, does he dare go to court before the unrighteous rather than before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you not competent to settle trivial suits? Do you not know that we will judge angels? Why not ordinary matters! So if you have ordinary lawsuits, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame! Is there no one among you wise enough to settle disputes between fellow Christians? Instead, does a Christian sue a Christian, and do this before unbelievers? The fact that you have lawsuits among yourselves demonstrates that you have already been defeated. Why

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not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? But you yourselves wrong and cheat, and you do this to your brothers and sisters! (1 Cor 6:1-8)

Aggrieved people *who have followed Steps 1, 2 and 3* and who wish to take the matter further should bring a written and/or verbal complaint to a church leader – Pastor or Elder.

The Senior Pastor (or other church leader acting on their behalf) will assist the two people/parties seeking reconciliation to meet with a specialist facilitator acceptable to both parties who is not yet involved in the dispute. Should the dispute be between the Senior Pastor and another Pastor or church family member, and still be unresolved, the Church secretary is to contact the Baptist Union and ask them to appoint an external facilitator to help resolve the dispute. This facilitator shall be a committed Christian.

It may be appropriate to use formally trained mediators or arbiters in more complex matters or matters involving significant amounts of money. It is also acceptable when considered necessary to use non-Christian advisors with advanced or specialized medical, legal, scientific or technical knowledge to help the Christian decision-makers make a fair and just decision.

All disputes between Christians should be capable of being resolved through these first four steps. If the process has failed, after being followed faithfully according to scripture and respecting all parties' rights to due process and natural justice, this calls into question the Christian standing of the person who cannot be reconciled.

If a person, who professes to be a Christian, refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, the elected Church Leadership, as the representative of Hughes Baptist Church, after deliberate discussion and prayer, will bring the matter to the Church membership. A Special Church Family Meeting shall be called by the Leadership to deal with the matter in the biblical way. The Church may exercise its ultimate sanction, which is to remove from ministry and/or membership the offending person/party, or the person/party who has refused to be reconciled. The decision of the Church shall be final and binding.

Step 5 - Appeal to Civil Authority

...and if he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt 18:17b)

This passage from Matthew suggests that, when all steps for brotherly reconciliation have failed, the offender should be treated as an unbeliever. For many people this means the way is open to then pursue the matter in the civil courts.

Of course, some matters between Christians will involve civil authorities of necessity; matters such as property settlement or eviction, bankruptcy and divorce. In some of these cases, however, it may be possible to achieve a private Christian assisted agreement before finalising the matter with civil authorities. But recall that Paul was horrified with Christians who rushed straight to the civil authorities to resolve disputes with other Christians.

If another Christian has brought a suit against you, then you should request the case to be put on hold while Christian mediation is pursued first. If this fails, then you may appear in court to defend yourself. If your adversary has a valid case against you, agree to a settlement quickly to avoid further costs, damages and/or attorney's fees (Matthew 5:25). A speedy settlement will also diminish harm to the cause of Christ by taking the matter out of the public eye.

Those involved in attempting to reconcile Christian disputants should note that their conduct should conform to civil principles of due process and natural justice, which are not inconsistent with what might be described as Christian fairness. Not to do so is to invite recourse to civil law.

Finally, note that when Christians are before the civil authority, they need to submit to it (Romans 13:1-7). The Apostle Paul cited Roman law and utilized secular courts to protect his legal rights (Acts 16:37-38, 22:25-29, and 25:10-12).

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Christians may use civil courts to resolve legitimate legal disputes with unbelievers. As with any behaviour, the Christian should do so prayerfully and with regard for the example they are setting. Other options for civil dispute resolution should be considered first.

Summary of Process

The Christian process for resolving conflict is counter-intuitive and not according to human nature. Often the hardest steps to personally accept and perform are the earlier steps - leave it to God and private resolution. Do not be tempted to skip these steps and go straight to witness support or church leaders.

Neutral parties, and particularly church leaders, need to ensure that people have thoroughly followed Steps 1 and 2 before agreeing to assist with Steps 3 or 4. People who become third-parties to the dispute should start first with offering support and assistance in Bible study and prayer time to help with Step 1.

The purpose of resolution is not personal victory but rather to build up the body and promote growth and maturity by quickly removing corrosive conflict with the least impact on the rest of the body.

Note that this process does not apply to criminal activity (Matt and 1Cor refer to civil dispute cases, not criminal ones). Resolution of cases involving the threat of physical violence should not be attempted using Step 2.

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4. Responsibilities

a. *The Offended*

If you have taken offence or been hurt or intimidated by the behaviour of others at church, you should follow the process above and do so while reading relevant Bible passages and coming before the Lord in prayer. If you become aware of some contributing fault on your part, then take action immediately as per the instructions below for the accused.

Be aware that if you cannot resolve the matter through Step 1, resorting to Step 2 and perhaps Step 3 requires your personal involvement. Scripturally you cannot expect others (e.g. church leaders) to resolve the matter for you while you remain anonymous.

b. *The Accused*

If you are genuinely unaware of an offence you have caused there is no need to act. If you become aware, either through the prompting of the Holy Spirit or because of an approach by an offended person, then take action as soon as possible. God is not interested in all your other good deeds or your worship until the matter is resolved (Matthew 5:23). Don't get on the wrong side of God, because if you do not act he promises to defend the righteous.

In simple cases (where no harm was intended) the Christian thing to do is to submit to one another in love. It does not matter if the actions were righteous – if they have ended up being hurtful then some response and/or explanation is due.

If you believe the accusation against you to be wrong, then you may well become the offended party due to the false allegations. You still need to be engaged in this resolution process, seeking to consider in what ways you may have contributed to the misunderstanding and talking it through with your accuser privately in the first instance if possible.

c. *All Church Members*

Don't participate in gossip and rumours, and don't rush to conclusions about perceived hurts that are told to you. Support an offended brother/sister (including those falsely accused) by first encouraging them to work through step 1 and prepare for step 2, before agreeing to help them with step 3.

Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too. (Gal 6:1)

d. *Church Leaders*

The Senior Pastor, Associate Pastors, Elders, Board members, Ministry Leaders and all other mature Christians who become aware of conflict within the body of Christ need to encourage the offended party to follow this Biblical process for resolution. Most of all, *do not be tempted to shortcut the process or confront the accused on behalf of the offended*. First, check whether Steps 1 and 2 of the process have been followed, and if they have not, counsel the offended party to follow them. Whilst carrying another person's burden sounds like a kind act, in this case it is not nearly as effective as when the offended makes the first approach, no matter how difficult this may be to do.

Note that should Step 3 be reached, the witnesses accompany the offended and accused people as they attempt the next stage of reconciliation. They do not take the matter over on the offended or accused party's behalf. Note also that church leaders who have a conflict of interest with respect to a dispute/grievance should declare this and not participate in resolution efforts.

Where the matter reaches Step 4, it may be necessary for proper resolution of the matter to arrange for Christian reconciliation or arbitration services, and in these cases both parties may be supported by specialist legal advice.

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5. A Personal Covenant of Values

As a member of the Hughes Baptist Church family, I agree and subscribe to the following biblical attitudes and values.

- a) I accept that people are different and will have differences with one another.
- b) I accept that disagreement will be an experience of life and that divergence of opinion can be positive and useful.
- c) I will seek to be Godly in all my responses to others who raise an issue/s against me.
- d) I recognise that avoiding issues or relationships solely for the reason that there may be disagreement is not helpful and can be destructive.
- e) I will seek to have a dispute dealt with directly and quickly.
- f) Towards the other person, I will show compassion, empathy, love, respect and self-control, seeking to do so in a Christ-like way.
- g) For my part I agree to focus discussion of issues, relationships or descriptions of feelings. I will not resort to inappropriate attitudes and behaviours including, but not limited to:
 - name calling;
 - mind reading (attributing evil motives);
 - guilt making (“look how you made me feel”);
 - rejecting, disparaging or discrediting another person;
 - escalating a dispute by seeking to draw others into the dispute, other than those immediately affected or directly approached to assist with resolution efforts; or
 - keeping a detailed historic record of ‘he said, she said’ with the intent of using information to build a case against someone. [Note that good record keeping is important for defence against false allegations.]
- h) I will listen well and not over-ride or interrupt.
- i) My attitude will be one of grace, patience, forgiveness and humility.
- j) I recognise that I may need to change my attitude and understanding of an issue for progress to be made.
- k) I commit myself to honesty, openness, confession in seeking to understand my role and responsibility in an issue in dispute.
- l) I will seek to be positive, sensitive and to seek God’s help.
- m) I will work towards resolution and reconciliation, accepting differences where appropriate.
- n) I will not gossip to others and will seek to move on ‘in God’, rebuilding relationships based on trust.
- o) If I am a party to a dispute and cannot see a resolution being achieved, I will voice that I am prepared to take the issue to the next biblical step, but I will only say this if I am prepared to do so.
- p) I will not use information from confidential sources, nor indicate that such information exists without the express permission of the source or owner of the information.
- o) I will pray for myself as well as the other person.
- p) I will not publicly or privately denigrate the office holders of Pastor, Elder, Board Member or Ministry Leader. Rather I will uphold these office bearers as God’s chosen leaders of His people and ensure that any criticism or holding to account is done in an appropriate Biblical manner.

Therefore, let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. (Rom 14:13)