

The guide to raising concerns and complaints about leaders within APC

An introduction

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”(Ephesians 4:2–3 NIV11)

This guide¹ provides **a framework to provide appropriate ways to raise concerns and make complaints about leaders.** It also provides guidance on how such matters should be received. It is not primarily for dealing with issues of interpersonal offence that may occur between members. These should be dealt with according to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15-20 together with other scriptures such as James 3:17-18 and Col 3:13-14, etc.

Everything in this guide should be read and applied based on the foundational document:- **"Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love"** (Appendix 1).

The Scriptures take very seriously both accusations against those in leadership within a church and the conduct of those leaders. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul instructs Timothy—and through him the church of all times at all ages— “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning.” (1 Timothy 5:19–21 NIV11). Prayerful caution and great care should therefore be exercised in these matters.

This guide is aimed at issues other than those covered by the more "formal" processes described within **the Code of the PCNSW** for breaches of our Code of Conduct etc. It is not intended that this guide in any way circumvents the existing avenues for complaint that already exist, if that's the preferred method of the Session or complainant. It should also be noted that the word "complaint" has a legal formal meaning in the Code and the Code of Discipline. Within this guide, the word "complaint" is used in a more commonplace way according to the definition offered below.

What's the difference between a concern and a complaint?

A **concern** may be defined as ‘an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought’.

Concerns tend to be less specific and directed more to the future based on the present. eg. A member might have a concern that there seems to be a lack of focus on pastoral care within a church family.

A **complaint** may be defined as ‘an expression of dissatisfaction about actions taken or a lack of action’.

Complaints tend to be more specific and focused on past breaches of policies or promises. eg. A member might make a complaint that the advertised plan for pastoral care has not been followed.

A complaint is relationally more serious than a concern. A concern that is unsatisfactorily addressed can often lead to a complaint.

A complaint unsatisfactorily addressed can often lead to **conflict**.

¹ This Guide is heavily based on "A NON PERSONAL COMPLAINTS PROCESS", by Tim Dyer ©2016

How should *concerns or complaints* about *leaders* within APC be raised?

1. Are you raising a concern or complaint? Identifying your answer to this question will be helpful in determining how to proceed.

2. Have you raised your concern/complaint personally? If you have a concern/complaint against someone, you should attempt to deal with it personally with them first. We recognise though, that while approaching a person who has wronged you is good and right, it is more complicated when that person has positional or relational power over you. We recognise and appreciate this power imbalance might make dealing personally with your concern/complaint too difficult.

3. What would you like to happen next? Identifying your answer to this key question will also be helpful in determining how to proceed.

4. Who do you raise your concern/complaint with?

a) Where possible, the individual person involved.

b) Where a) is too difficult, we encourage you to raise your concern/complaint with an elder or a pastor or the Session as whole.²

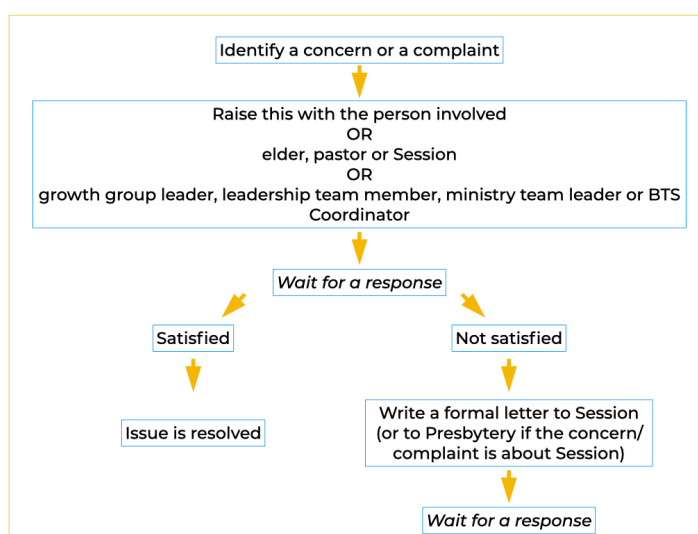
c) Where a) & b) are too difficult, we encourage you to raise your concern/complaint with your growth group leader or a member of your church leadership team or the BTS Coordinator.

5. Be prepared to put your concern/complaint in writing in a clear, objective and non-inflammatory manner. This helps you to be heard clearly. It should include a statement as to how you think your concern/complaint might be resolved for you. ie. What's your desired outcome?

6. The person or group should respond to your concern/complaint in a timely manner. Please understand, however, that complicated matters can sometimes take longer to address. If that is the case, you should be kept updated. Clear, gracious communication is important. Poor communication can create negative pastoral consequences.

7. You should be willing to accept the outcome.

8. Appeal. If you are unable to accept the outcome of the above process, you may write a formal letter to the Session. It will be raised at an appropriate meeting and responded to at that level. If the decision being appealed was made by the Session, it may be appropriate that an appeal be made to the Presbytery. Proper guidance and help will be given to you about this process. It's at this stage that the more formal processes prescribed by the Code become important.



² The elders and pastors of APC make up the Session. They are entrusted with the spiritual oversight of the members & congregations & ministries and organisations within APC. They are also entrusted to lead APC in its vision and strategies as we seek, under God & for his glory, to grow followers of Jesus both near & afar.

The Session is committed to creating a culture within APC in which it is permitted to raise questions & concerns and complaints.

Appendix 1:- Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love³

Commitments for God's people in Times of Disagreement in thought, in action, and in life.

"Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), as both individual members and the body of Christ, we pledge that we shall:

In Thought

Accept conflict

1. Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church. (eg. Eph 4:1-6; Col 3:12-15; Philippians 3:15-16)

Affirm hope

2. Affirm that as God walks with us in conflict we can work through to growth. Ephesians 4:15-16

Commit to prayer

3. Admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution (no prayers for my success or for the other to change but to find a joint way). James 5:16

In Action

Go to the other

4. Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoid behind-the-back criticism. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-20

In the spirit of humility

5. Go in gentleness, patience and humility. Place the problem between us at neither doorstep and own our part in the conflict instead of pointing out the others'. Galatians 6:1-5

Be quick to listen

6. Listen carefully, summarise and check out what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood. James 1:19; Proverbs 18:13

Be slow to judge

7. Suspend judgments, avoid labelling, end name calling, discard threats, and act in a non-defensive, non-reactive way. Romans 2:14; Galatians 5:22-26

Be willing to negotiate

8. Work through the disagreements constructively. Acts 15; Philippians 2:1-11

- . Identify issues, interests, and needs of both (rather than take positions).
- . Generate a variety of options for meeting both parties' needs (rather than defending one's own way).
- . Evaluate options by how they meet the needs and satisfy the interests of all sides (not one side's values).
- . Collaborate in working out a joint solution (so both sides gain, both grow and win).
- . Cooperate with the emerging agreement (accept the possible, not demand your ideal).

In Life

Be steadfast in love

9. Be firm in our commitment to seek a mutual solution; be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Christ; be steadfast in love. Colossians 3:12-15

Be open to mediation

10. Be open to accept skilled help. If we cannot reach agreement among ourselves, we will use those with gifts and training in mediation in the larger church. Philippians 4:1-3

Trust the community

11. We will trust the community and if we cannot reach agreement or experience reconciliation we will turn the decision over to others in the congregation or from the broader church. Acts 15

- . In one-to-one or small group disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate (such as the appointed leaders & pastors of the church).
- . In congregational or denominational disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate (such as recognised church consultants or mediators) or implementing constitutional decision-making processes, insuring that they are done in the spirit of these guidelines, and abiding by whatever decision is made.

Be the body of Christ

12. Believe in and rely on the solidarity of the Body of Christ and its commitment to peace and justice, rather than resort to the courts of law. 1 Corinthians 6:1-6

³ Adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church Triannual Session and Mennonite Church General Assembly, Wichita, Kan., July 1995

Appendix 2:- The guide to *receiving* concerns or complaints about leaders within APC.

To be given to Pastors, Elders, Growth Group leaders, Church Leadership Team members, Network Ministry leaders & the BTS Coordinator.

1. Concerns and questions about ministry, change, incidents and direction are to be treated as normal and welcome when they are raised in a responsible manner. Session should create a culture within APC in which it is permitted to raise questions & concerns and complaints. The godly instinct of elders to protect the pastor and other leaders should not be taken so far as to entertain no question or criticism.

2. Identify, using the definitions, whether what is being raised is a concern or complaint. This will be helpful in determining how to proceed. It will be helpful to have the person raising the matter understand whether they are raising a concern or a complaint. It should also be clarified as to what the person raising the concern/complaint wants to happen next.

3. Consider carefully whether the concern/complaint has substance. In other words, is it important and true? This will require wisdom. Hearing and receiving concerns/complaints and treating them seriously is not the same as naively believing them. They should not be based on hearsay, assumption or someone else's perception or comments. Some wrongs in love may be passed over (1Peter 4:8). Not every matter requires action.

4. People should be committed to dealing with their concern/complaint personally. If someone raises a concern/complaint, they should be asked if they have dealt with it personally before coming to you. Do not be party to gossip or malicious talk. If the person is, in good faith, seeking your advice on the best way to deal with their concern/complaint help them to understand this guide and seek assistance from a suitable elder if necessary.

While approaching a person who has wronged you is good and right it is more complicated when that person has positional or relational power over you. This power imbalance should be recognised and appreciated.

5. People should be prepared to put their concern/complaint in writing in a clear, objective and non-inflammatory explanation of the issue. This helps people to be responsible for their words, actions and the style of their communication. It should include a statement as to how they think their concern/complaint might be resolved for them. ie. What's the desired outcome? It also relieves the elder or other person of the responsibility of having to communicate the concern/complaint accurately.

6. It should be made clear by the Session who the appropriate person or group is to receive a concern/complaint. Where 4. is too difficult the concern/complaint may be received by an elder or a pastor, the Session as whole, the person's growth group leader, a member of their church leadership team or the BTS Coordinator.⁴

7. This person or group should respond to the concern/complaint in a timely manner. The next step in receiving the concern/complaint will require wisdom. Where appropriate the support of a pastor or an elder should be sought. The person who receives the concern/complaint will be responsible to communicate with the complainant through here process. Complicated matters can sometimes take longer to address. If that is the case, the complainant should be kept updated. Clear, gracious communication is important. Poor communication can create negative pastoral consequences.

8. People should be willing to accept the outcome.

9. Appeal. If the complainant is unable to accept the outcome of the above process, they may write a formal letter to the Session. It should be raised at an appropriate meeting and responded to at that level. If the decision being appealed was made by the Session, it may be appropriate that an appeal be made to the Presbytery. Proper guidance and help should be given to the complainant about this process. Its at this stage that the more formal processes prescribed by the Code become important.

⁴ This process, including these people, should be made public to the members of APC on the church website, in the Welcome to APC booklets and in other ways deemed helpful by the Session.

The people listed here should be familiar with this whole document and the process described. Session is responsible for them being trained, equipped and supported in this process.