

MAINTAINING AND REPAIRING COVENANTAL BONDS

GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

Living in covenant is hard! Tensions are inevitable. Here is some guidance from Follen Church's Covenantal Right Relations Team (CRRRT)[i] on ways to address frayed covenantal bonds in the spirit of our covenant.

Start with your own reflection

Don't rush into action. Slow down. Pay attention to your body. You might prepare for reflection with a breathing exercise. One example: <https://cmbm.org/self-care/soft-belly-breathing/> Some questions for reflection: What might you not be noticing about your own role in what occurred. Might a simple misunderstanding underlie the tension? If you're telling yourself an unflattering story about the other person, get curious. For example, ask, "What might I not understand about their intentions, views, and life experiences that differ from mine?" Is the problem related to the facilitation or structure of a meeting, or confusion about what is expected in a particular role? Did it emerge in a rushed circumstance without opportunity to get closure? Did other factors bring out unskillful or unthoughtful ways of interacting, on your part, the part of others or both? Consider cultural factors that may have contributed to the conflict. Is there a difference in power and identity such that a microaggression occurred?

When we experience conflict, it's only natural to want to seek support, but it's important to consider the intention you bring to such a conversation. Are you looking for a larger perspective? If your intention is to enlist support for "your side," ask yourself if your portrayal of the situation is in the spirit of our covenant and based on reliable information. Sometimes when people in conflict speak to others who might support them, it has the unintended effect of spreading the conflict in the congregation.

Some possible next steps

Share your concern with the other person in a simple, constructive manner.

If you were impacted by a specific situation, test out your sense of what happened. For example, "When x happened, I was concerned that it meant y. Is that how you understood it?" If there's an ongoing dynamic, reflect on it with the other and speak personally about your experience or needs. For example, to a committee chair, "I've noticed that our meetings are very fast-paced, with full agendas, and some people speak quite a bit more than others. Is this a dynamic you've noticed? If so, "As an introvert I find it hard to participate. Can we talk about ways to address that?" In another case, an apology might be in order, e.g., "I'm sorry I was so short with you when we last talked. I wasn't at my best, having slept little the night before." Or you might want to note a gap between intention and impact, e.g., "I don't think your intention was to hurt me but I want you to understand how your comment impacted me as a person with my life experiences."

Invite a more in-depth conversation.

The invitation. If you anticipate a need for a more complex conversation, invest some thought in how you might invite that conversation. If you're ready to speak to the other person about an incident that left you feeling harmed, disrespected, or misunderstood, keep in mind that they might have given no thought to the incident or to what they would hope to address in the conversation with you. When you approach them, don't insist on having the conversation at that moment. Let them know what you'd like to talk about and why, e.g., so we can better understand each other. Ask if they'd be willing to have a conversation about it. If so, the conditions might be right for the conversation to happen at that time or it might be better to find a time free from distractions. Waiting also allows both participants to be more intentional and less reactive. Depending on how intense or complicated the situation is, or the pre-existing relationship is, you might ask if the other person would like to have a third person involved. (See below.)

Where to start: Start by ensuring that you're both talking about the same thing, free of interpretations. "The way I remember what I said and you said is x. Is that how you remember it?" Then, using "I" statements, you can share how you interpreted it (and hear from them) and how it made you feel (and hear from them). Why? Because in conflicts, we tend to jump to conclusions. We are selective in what we attend to. We see it through the lenses of our life experiences and culture, and we attach meanings. A slow-paced conversation that places emphasis on unpacking meanings over drawing conclusions is a gift for each participant.

A constructive ending: Close with an eye to the future. Have you asked something of each other or offered something to each other to avoid future harm or tensions? Have you gained insight about yourself or the other that you'd like to share? Have you identified structural, cultural or systemic factors that could be constructively addressed with leaders?

Bring your concern to an appropriate leader or group in the congregation.

If tensions arise in a particular group, consider sharing your concern in that group (e.g. "What I've noticed/experienced is...") or speak to the chair/facilitator who might find ways to invite all members to share what's working well or not in the group. A general guideline is to seek help in a direct manner and at the most "local" level, e.g., with one other person, the chair of a committee or in a committee meeting. There will be situations, however, that are best handled at another location in the organizational structure. If there are broader systemic or cultural issues in the congregation or issues related to policy or decision making, speak to an appropriate person in leadership. If you have a concern about a staff member, see "Special Considerations" below. Don't report concerns anonymously. Be accountable.

Get help from the Covenantal Right Relations Team (CRRT).

The CRRT is a small group of individuals at Follen with a range of skills and experience who you can call upon to assist confidentially in a variety of ways. For example, members of the CRRT can serve as a sounding board as you examine your hopes and concerns and your ideas about possible resolutions. They can help you surface fresh perspectives, or identify untested assumptions, and prepare for a difficult conversation. Sometimes such reflection calms the

“stirred up” feelings, enhances self-knowledge, and ensures that any next steps with the other person are well-thought out.

CRRT members can also provide a facilitative presence for a conversation between two people who want to heal a strained relationship; the facilitator can help them listen carefully to each other. Often when each party feels heard and understood, resolution and healing become possible. In more challenging situations, parties in conflict might meet separately with a facilitator or co-facilitators to prepare for a constructive dialogue. Pre-meeting discussions with facilitators might involve supportive coaching regarding avoiding pitfalls and maintaining a sense of positive purpose. If mediation is indicated, CRRT members who are trained as mediators would be available as a resource. The planning process of a facilitation or mediation would be tailored to the situation with input from the participants about their hopes and concerns and would invite their ideas about ways to proceed.

If one party in a conflict declines to engage in reparative work, a member of the CRRT might seek to understand their concern but would not impose a conflict resolution process. However, if a conflict is causing significant disruption to relationships and processes in the congregation, the Coordinating Team might become involved. In any situation that affects safety (which could include a conflict rising to the level of abusive language and/or behavior), the matter will be referred to the Safe Congregation Group.

Special Considerations

When the conflict is church-wide

If a conflict is churchwide or impacts several members of the congregation, the Coordinating Team, might ask the CRRT or others in the congregation to design a process for addressing the issues. This might involve a team of two CRRT members interviewing people with different perspectives on the issues and creating either small group or congregation-wide opportunities for structured conversations, careful listening, and consideration of ways to address the issues going forward. Such a process might lead to recommendations to the Parish Board or other church leaders.

When it's a matter of safety

Follen Church's [Policy on Safety](#) was approved in 2011 and revised in 2015 and 2021. The Safe Congregation Group, which proactively responds to situations or incidents that pose safety concerns, consists of the Minister, President of Program Council, Vice-President of Program Council, DRE and Co-chair of Lay Ministry. The group may consult someone with expertise germane to a particular incident or situation. Safety issues include “actions or threats of violence, abuse, harassment, etc. that could cause harm to or inappropriate infringement on i) Follen members, family, renters, visitors, or staff, ii) church property, or iii) the church as an institution, and to any other unforeseen circumstances that lead to a safety concern.”

When staff are involved

Staff are part of our church community, but their relationships with Follen are also contractual. Rev. Claire and others in a supervisory role can only carry out their duties if they are aware of tensions that emerge with and between staff. For example, they can provide coaching to help

staff members constructively address relational tensions. If there's a pattern in concerns expressed, it can be addressed in a staff evaluation. For these reasons, members should bring concerns about tensions with staff to the relevant supervisor. If the supervisor and staff member think CRRT can be of help, they will be free to seek that help.

[i] The creation of the CRRT was approved by Parish Board in June of 2020. In 2021, Reverend Claire, in consultation with the Nominating Committee, formed a team of four individuals with complementary skills and experiences who will serve three-year terms.