

Matthew 18:15-20 outlines a procedure which may guide churches in difficult matters affecting their relationships. In such situations the basis for action must be the local churches involved not any hierarchical structure.

This bulletin seeks to develop these principles so as to provide guidelines for assisting churches experiencing difficulty. It is important for the well-being of our churches and the honour of the Lord that we act in a right way when there are tensions in any of the churches. Churches have responsibilities to each other, as do individual Christians. Our fellowship as churches includes the willingness to give and receive admonition.

Historically churches have recognised their responsibility to each other in this way, for example:

"In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about the matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so-called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers." (Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689, Chapter 26:15. See also The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658)

Two different kinds of situation may be envisaged:

1. WHEN THE ACTION OF ONE CHURCH OFFENDS ANOTHER CHURCH

If a church is acting in an unscriptural way or seems to be acting in a way which offends a sister church, such as condoning heresy or scandalous behaviour, then the pattern of Matthew 18:15-20 and the example of Acts 15:1-35 provide guidelines for action.

The following principles are indicated:

- 1.1 A church is free to approach an offending church in a brotherly and courteous way and to expect to be received in the same spirit.
Matthew 18:15; Acts 15:1-6
- 1.2 If the matter cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the churches involved, then assistance may be requested from one or two other churches.
Matthew 18:16
- 1.3 If this fails to resolve the issue, or indicates a failure to act according to biblical standards, then the matter may be referred to the Regional Council, and if necessary, the Annual Assembly.
Matthew 18:17
- 1.4 If a church fails to respond to the exhortations of fellow churches, this can only be regarded as a serious breach of fellowship, and further action will need to be considered by the A.E.C.W. as a whole.
- 1.5 Churches also have a responsibility to advise fellow member churches of any matters which may affect the fellowship of the churches, e.g. discipline of members, dismissal of pastor or other church officers, division leading to the formation of a new church / fellowship. Churches who become involved, e.g. through disaffected members from another church attending services, should be careful to respect the other church's position, and make contact with them. Churches which, having carefully considered the matter, do not feel able to uphold another member church's discipline should formally advise the other church of this.

2. WHEN THERE ARE DIFFICULTIES BETWEEN A CHURCH AND ITS PASTOR

Sometimes serious breakdowns occur in the life of a church. The pastor may have lost the respect and confidence of the church and the church may be in danger of disintegrating. The pastor and his family may have to consider leaving the church and having to facing a very uncertain future.

Other churches have a responsibility to seek to help and influence such a situation for good. Help may be forthcoming from another pastor and his elders, or from two pastors from neighbouring churches. Galatians 6:1-2 may be applied in principle to a pastor or to a church. This is obviously a very sensitive area and churches may feel that internal matters should be kept within the church. However, every church should consider as paramount the wider cause of the gospel and be willing to submit to the wise and objective judgement of brethren whom they hold in high regard in the life of the churches.

The following guidelines may be helpful:

- 2.1 A church and pastor in such difficulties should feel free to call upon a respected pastor of a nearby church to give advice and counsel in their dilemma.
- 2.2 If the problem concerns the pastor and makes it difficult for him to give leadership in resolving the problem, he and the church should consider inviting another pastor, for whom they have mutual respect, to advise and, perhaps, to chair officers' and/or church meetings called to consider the matter.
- 2.3 Where there are known difficulties, but a request for assistance is not forthcoming, then either a neighbouring pastor and one of his elders, or two neighbouring pastors should, out of concern, consider approaching the pastor/church to offer help.
- 2.4 In churches where there is no pastor, and disintegration of the work is possible, a church committee could be formed consisting of a local pastor, one of his elders and the officers of the church in difficulty.

All these steps will require the willingness and voluntary submission of the churches and individuals involved in a spirit of brotherly love and fellowship.

When Things Are Going Wrong

Guidelines for Churches

There is no such thing as a perfect church or a perfect pastor. From time to time difficulties may arise between two churches, or between pastor and people, or between one section of a congregation and another. In a loving relationship and with the exercise of wisdom these will often be overcome and the work go on unhindered. However, there are some situations where things deteriorate and the work is endangered. There may be the possibility of division within a church or between churches.

Churches experiencing serious difficulties should, as a matter of urgency, consider seeking assistance from other churches, pastors or elders. When help is requested and provided by other churches or pastors it may be possible to avoid division and all the consequent unhappiness.

The A.E.C.W. consists of independent, evangelical churches associating together. At our first Annual Assembly we agreed, amongst others, the following basic principles:

The Independence and Autonomy of the Local Church

We believe that local churches are free, under the authority of Christ, to order all their affairs without interference.

Our associating does not establish any authority to rule or govern over associating churches.

Our associating is voluntary and analogous to the relationship between individual Christians and the local church.

Interchurch Relationships

We want to promote the fullest possible co-operation in fellowship and witness between all churches and fellowships which embrace the evangelical faith.

We recognise the freedom of each local church to associate with other local churches without loss to their chosen level of autonomy.

The New Testament also gives principles which may be applied to interchurch relationships.



'Yn llwsgi, heb ei diffa'
'On fire, but not consumed'

Associating Evangelical Churches of Wales
Cymdeithas o Eglwysi Efengylaidd yng Nghymru

When Things Are Going Wrong Guidelines for Churches

Issued by the AECW.

A copy can be downloaded from our website: www.aecw.org.uk

Advice and further information is available from:

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Churches Advisory Bulletin No. 3
May 2011

PRINCIPLES FOR ASSISTING CHURCHES EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES

At our first Annual Assembly we adopted basic principles on which we were agreed. These included the following statements:

2. THE INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Our associating does not establish any authority to rule or govern over associating churches.

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We want to promote the fullest possible co-operation in fellowship and witness between all churches and fellowships which embrace the evangelical faith.

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The New Testament also gives principles which may be applied to interchurch relationships.

Matthew 18:15-20 outlines a procedure which may guide churches in difficult matters affecting their relationships. In such situations the basis for action must be the local churches involved not any hierarchical structure.

IN THE LIGHT OF THESE STATEMENTS THE FOLLOWING APPROACH SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN THINGS ARE GOING WRONG:

1. Churches have responsibilities to each other, just as do individual Christians. Our fellowship as churches includes the willingness to give and accept admonition.
Churches will normally approach inter-church issues through their pastor and elders.

2. Churches have a responsibility to act if:
Another AECW Church appears to be acting in an unscriptural way.
Matt.18:15 - "sins".
Another AECW Church seems to act in a way which offends another AECW Church.
Matt.18:15 - "against you".
3. A Church is free to approach the offending Church and to expect to receive a courteous and brotherly response.
Acts 15:1ff
4. If the matter cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the churches involved then assistance may be requested from one or two other AECW Churches.
Matt.18:16
5. If this fails to resolve the issue or indicates a failure to act according to biblical standards, then the matter may be referred to the Cluster or Annual Assembly.
Matt.18:17
6. If an AECW Church fails to respond to the exhortations of their fellow churches this can only be regarded as a serious breach of fellowship, and further action will need to be considered by the AECW as a whole.
7. AECW Churches have a responsibility to advise fellow member churches of any matters which may affect the fellowship between the churches, e.g. discipline of members, dismissal of pastor or other church officers, division leading to the formation of a new church/fellowship.
Churches which have difficulty in upholding another member church's discipline should formally advise the other church of this.