

THE HELP TEAM – AN OVERVIEW

The Help Team concept

An increasing frequency of conflict and concerns in congregations has suggested a means be provided to help congregations and pastors deal more effectively with such issues prior to involvement by the bishop or the bishop's assistants.

To that end, a Help Team has been created, consisting of individuals trained and experienced in conflict resolution with an emphasis on mediation. The Help Team is comprised of a male and a female clergy member and a male and a female layperson to ensure lay/clergy, male/female balance.

As conflict and concerns begin to be experienced in a congregation and before battle lines are drawn and positions become entrenched, a Help Team unit will come in by invitation to assist in resolving the issues. A Help Team unit will be composed of a male and a female. Both clergy and laity will be represented, if schedules permit.

The responsibilities of a Help Team unit will be:

1. to listen to all sides of any concerns
2. to work with the parties involved to discern the issues rather than focus on complaints
3. to offer insights into particular situations
4. to help the parties involved work toward a resolution of the issues

Relationship between Help Team and Synod

The Office of the Bishop need not know about the Help Team's involvement with a congregation. The matter could remain confidential from the bishop and synod staff. History indicates that troubled leaders and congregations often speak first with the bishop or a bishop's assistant before doing anything. In such instances, a referral would be made to the Help Team for assistance. Should a situation come to the attention of the Office of the Bishop from an outside source, the Office of the Bishop may call the pastor or council chair as a reminder about the availability of the Help Team. The important consideration is that early intervention by trained and caring individuals takes place before conflicts and tensions escalate to the point of severely impacting upon a congregation.

How the Help Team will function

Members of a congregation, the congregation council or the pastor are encouraged to involve the Help Team early in any situation considered to have the potential for significant conflict. This involvement can be requested by contacting a Help Team member directly and explaining the reason(s) for the request. Once the reasons have been clarified, arrangements will be made to contact all parties said to be affected so that everyone is aware of the situation.

Intake sessions will be scheduled, all on the same day, so that persons representing differing viewpoints can be heard separately. The intention is that everyone wishing to be heard will have an opportunity to do so. All the affected parties will be expected to attend these meetings, even though some of the affected parties may not feel problems exist. The meetings will be structured to obtain all the information relevant to the perceived issue(s).

Typical questions to be addressed during the intake meetings include:

1. What are the specific concerns?
2. Who is being affected by these concerns?
3. How are these concerns affecting the congregation as a whole, the pastor(s) and members of the congregation?
4. How long have these concerns been apparent and been having an impact on the congregation/pastor(s)?

Subsequent to these meetings, the Help Team members will prepare an analysis of the information gathered and submit copies of this analysis to all participants in the meetings. This is to ensure everyone is aware of what issues are to be resolved.

Mediation session

A mediation session then will be scheduled during which the Help Team unit will assist the participants in arriving at resolutions to the concerns raised during the intake meetings. Appropriate individuals who can represent the various viewpoints in a non-argumentative manner and with the authority to reach an agreement on resolution should attend the mediation session. The Help Team unit may suggest a feasible number after reviewing the intake information.

What is mediation?

Mediation is a non-adversarial process that brings potentially disputing parties together with a trained, impartial mediator, who helps the parties reach a voluntary, mutually agreeable settlement of the dispute. One of the benefits of mediation is that solutions are not imposed by someone not involved in the dispute. All decisions in mediation are made by the parties themselves. Therefore, all mediation sessions must include representatives of all viewpoints. The end product is a *written memorandum of agreement*, detailing all the issues involved and the resolution(s) to which the parties agree. This agreement is intended to help preserve relationships between parties and provide a basis for future evaluation of the parties' adherence to the accepted solutions.

The role of the Help Team unit during the mediation session

The Help Team unit will facilitate discussion of issues, but will not make decisions or recommendations. The Help Team unit will focus discussion on future ramifications, and will try to help the parties find resolutions that may not have been considered but will address satisfactorily the concerns of everyone affected. Help Team members have an obligation to conduct a fair process, but cannot ensure the terms of any agreement will meet everyone's preferences completely. The Help Team unit will assist in preparing the written memorandum of agreement, which all parties will be expected to sign and to which adherence will be expected.

How long does mediation take?

The complexity of the issues will affect the time needed for the mediation process. The willingness and ability of the involved parties to speak honestly and freely, with the Help Team unit's assistance, about the issues also will affect how much time will be required. Usually a full day should be allocated for any mediation session. Depending upon circumstances, more than one session may be required.

What about confidentiality?

The Help Team and all parties involved are expected to maintain the confidentiality of the situation within the membership of the congregation. The intent is to encourage open discussion,

albeit not aggressively antagonistic, without fear of unpleasant consequences. If the Help Team has been contacted directly, team members will not reveal to others, including the bishop and his staff, what congregation is involved. If a resolution cannot be achieved, the Help Team may suggest other methods to address the situation. If the Help Team feels the matter necessitates the bishop's intervention, all parties will be informed about the reasons for this conclusion, but the Help Team will not share this conclusion with the bishop. Contacting the bishop will be the responsibility of the congregation/pastor(s).

Cost to congregation, commitment involved

Mediation has proven to be a very effective method to resolve differences in many different situations. Court systems in many states, including South Carolina, have instituted programs requiring certain cases be referred to mediation before the case goes to trial. A key to the success of any mediation effort is the commitment of the participants to reaching solutions through the mediation process.

The Help Team comes into any situation with the understanding that all parties are open to what the mediation process involves and are committed to participating actively in the **entire** process. Inherent in this commitment is the willingness of all parties to resolve the issues identified during the process and a willingness to accept at least some solutions that may be different than anticipated or preferred. The various components of the mediation process are described in the Agreement to Participate in the Mediation Process, to be signed by the appropriate representatives of the congregation, and in the "Additional details of the mediation process" sheet.

To underscore the importance of commitment to the mediation process, congregations/pastors deciding to proceed with the mediation process will be asked to make an investment of a small fee as an indication of that commitment. This fee will range between \$200 and \$600, depending upon the confirmed/communing/contributing membership number. In addition, a congregation will be asked to reimburse a portion of the team members' out-of-pocket expenses, such as travel and meals. The intent is to keep costs at a minimum so that any congregation can utilize the service without cost being a consideration.

Follow-up

At an agreed upon time, usually between four and six months, the Help Team unit will meet with all the parties who participated in the mediation session to discuss the status of the situation and whether additional assistance is needed.

Early intervention an important factor

Also important to the Help Team approach is early intervention. The sooner Help Team members can become involved in a potentially difficult situation, the better the chances for success in diffusing that situation. A phone call to a Help Team member could help to clarify a situation and avoid difficulties down the road.

Help Team members and contact numbers

The Rev. Lester Cutter,	803/892-4516
Mrs. Beth Singletary,	803/405-1264
The Rev. Timothea Sharpe,	803/561-0078
James L. Telfer,	803/781-1464