

THE HELP TEAM – AN OVERVIEW

The Help Team concept

Conflicts and concerns have impacted churches with increasing frequency in recent years. This suggested a means was needed to help congregations and pastors deal with such difficulties prior to involving the bishop or the bishop's assistants. An important consideration was that early intervention by trained and caring individuals takes place before conflicts and tensions escalate to the point of severely impacting a congregation. To that end the Help Team was 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

A distinctive feature of the Help Team service is that even though sanctioned by the Synod, in essence the program operates independently from the Office of the Bishop. This is to address the concern that assistance by the Office of the Bishop often is viewed as "official action", implying the situation is beyond resolution. Operating the program in this manner also is to encourage congregations and pastors to seek assistance with the assurance of *confidentiality*. Members of a congregation, the congregation council or the pastor can contact any of the Help Team directly 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.

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 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).

How the Help Team functions

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. When a Help Team member is contacted, the reason(s) prompting the contact are discussed and a way to proceed is determined. Some situations may be such that some individuals are reluctant to use the Help Team without first having an opportunity for personal contact with a team member. In such instances, the Help Team coordinator can meet with the church council, the pastor(s) and/or other involved parties to discuss the Help Team approach.

Once a decision is made to proceed with the mediation process, intake sessions are scheduled, all

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on the same day, so 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 sessions 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 sessions. Appropriate individuals who can represent the various viewpoints in a non-argumentative manner and with the authority to reach an agreement on resolutions 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 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's assistance, about the issues also will affect the time required. Usually a full day should be allocated for a mediation session. Depending upon circumstances, more than one session could be required.

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Cost to congregation

One of the objectives of the Help Team is to provide a needed service at a cost that will not be a financial concern. Team members view this service as a ministry. The cost to congregations reflects that position rather than the generally much higher fees charged by companies offering similar services as a business. The Help Team fees are based on the scale used for an interim supply, and range from \$20. to \$25. per hour per team member, depending upon the size of the congregation.

Reducing the cost to a congregation is the fact no charge is made for related expenses, such as meals and mileage. These are covered by a grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, based on an evaluation of the program when initially created. Much has been learned about church situations by the Help Team through working with congregations, pastors and individual members. One fact that has become evident is the benefit of having a congregation incur a cost for assistance because a financial investment underscores the importance of commitment to the mediation process.

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.

Follow-up

A unique benefit of the Help Team approach is the follow-up provided. The Help Team will address (during the mediation session) responsibility for implementation of the mediation agreement. Circumstances can impinge, however, affecting the implementation. Therefore, at an agreed upon time (usually between four and six months after the mediation session), the Help Team will be available to review the status of the situation and to assist in addressing adjustments that may be needed.

Early intervention an important factor

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.
