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| 1. **Purpose and Scope:**
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| This purpose of this procedure is to outline the process to be followed when addressing complaints or conflict that arise at or in connection with the ministries, operations and relationships at [insert name of church]. It covers any concerns, disagreements and issues that arise in the life of the church. This procedure applies to anyone who works, volunteers or attends any activity, ministry or service of [insert name of church].While the principles of managing complaints and conflict outlined here apply to any situation, this procedure does not apply to employment and supervision related issues for paid staff, to potential breaches of the CofCQ Ministering Persons Code of Conduct, or to reporting of disclosed or suspected harm, abuse or criminal behaviour. Referral processes and procedures for these matters are outlined in Step 1. |
| 1. **Background Information and Principles:**
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| Complaints and conflict that arise in the normal course of church life may relate to, for example, the way funds are spent, the actions/opinions of church members or staff, the way a ministry is run, how different aspects of church services are conducted, where operational and decision-making responsibilities for various things lie. They may also arise when there are differences of opinion and needs between church members, between staff and leadership/governing groups, or within these groups. Issues often arise where there are differences in preference, where there is a lack of clarity or communication, where different theological positions are held, where different things are valued and/or where a group or individual doesn’t feel heard, valued or acknowledged. All of these may be consciously or sub-consciously held or felt. If not acknowledged and dealt with in a healthy way, these things can result in unhealthy and divisive conflict. It is important to acknowledge that conflict is normal.[[1]](#footnote-1) Churches should expect that at times there will be disagreements that arise from natural differences outlined above. It is also important to understand that if dealt with in a healthy way by a healthy church, conflict is not fatal. If a church, and especially its leadership, feels like any disagreement or complaint is a potential disaster, the tendency will be to ignore it or panic about it[[2]](#footnote-2). Neither is a healthy response.Having good communication, clear processes and structures for providing feedback, addressing complaints early when they are usually small, and only involving those who are in disagreement or actively helping resolve it, all help to avoid situations that lead to unhealthy conflict[[3]](#footnote-3). All church members should commit to following the guidance in Matthew 18:15-17 when dealing with complaints and conflict.**Principles for Complaints and Conflict Handling**[Insert name of church] is committed to appropriately responding to and facilitating the timely and informal resolution of complaints and conflicts experienced in the normal operating of church life. In doing so, [insert name of church] commits to:* valuing feedback because it fosters a welcoming and safe environment by allowing anyone to raise a perceived problem, and provides a clear way to respond;
* having appropriate regard for the privacy and confidentiality of those making a complaint;
* an approach where those making a complaint attempt to resolve it directly with the person/group involved in an informal way;
* not dealing with people who will not identify themselves by name or who claim to represent “many others” or “they”, unless those others can be named and agree to acknowledge their interest in the complaint raised;
* not responding to anonymous or unsigned letters, notes or emails where the sender is unidentifiable;
* an approach to handling complaints where all parties involved value one another as human beings made in God’s image, value putting in the effort to understand different points of view, and agree that the good of the congregation is paramount;
* the principles of natural justice, including fairness and un-biased decision making;
* resolving complaints and conflicts in a timely manner; and
* making this procedure available to all church members.

Members and attendees of [insert name of church] are expected to commit to:* raising complaints or areas of conflict directly with the individual concerned or ministry leader responsible in the first instance (with the exception of sensitive, harmful or abusive situations);
* engaging in complaint and conflict resolution processes in good faith; and
* maintaining privacy and confidentiality and not engaging in gossip.

**Principles for Hearing and Responding to Complaints**Anyone receiving a complaint or being advised of a conflict will follow these principles. This applies whether they are the individual concerned or the person responsible for the issue/area, or are a third party:* Listen well and affirm the complainant as a person.
* Take notes (with permission) to help remember and process what you are being told and store these securely.
* Be careful not to take sides, don’t be defensive and try not to take it personally.
* Maintain privacy and avoid gossip by not talking about the complaint with anyone else, unless it is to obtain advice from a mentor or more senior staff member in confidence and without sharing personal details.
* Follow Step 1 of this procedure and immediately refer any complaints or conflicts not covered under this procedure to the appropriate parties/process and provide appropriate support to the complainant and respondent.
* Ask the complainant what other actions or avenues they have taken to try to resolve the matter to date, what outcome they would like to see and what action they are requesting of you or others.
* Provide advice on how the complainant can manage the complaint themselves and the options they have available under this procedure.
* If the complaint or conflict seems to be a matter of differing opinion or personalities, remind the complainant of the varied nature of church family and preferences of individuals.
* If the complaint or conflict relates to an area you are responsible for, affirm the complainants concerns if appropriate, but don’t feel you have to respond immediately. Acknowledge what they have raised with you and ask for time to consider, investigate and respond.
* If you are the individual concerned or person responsible, always respond to a complaint as promptly as possible and provide reasons for your response.

The following steps for resolving informal and formal complaints and conflicts are based on the principles in Matthew 18:15-17. |
| 1. **Steps for Resolving Informal and Formal Complaints and Conflicts:**
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| **Step** | **Action** | **Person Responsible** | **Document Used & Records Kept** |
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|  | Determine the nature of the complaint and the appropriate process and procedure to follow:* For reporting of disclosed or suspected abuse/harm or criminal behaviour, and support of those who disclose or are accused of such behaviour or activity:
	+ Access the Quick Reporting Guide at <https://www.cofc.com.au/churches/church-resources/safe-churches>
* For issues between staff members or between staff and their supervisor/supervising group, refer to the church’s *Staff Grievance Procedure.*
* For an allegation against a ministering person of ethical/moral nature which is in breach of the CofCQ Ministering Persons Code of Conduct, contact the Ministry Ethics Unit of CofCQ via it’s Chair, or governance@cofcqld.com.au:
	+ The Ministry Ethics Unit of Churches of Christ in Queensland is a committee of the Conference Council whose role is to oversee the Council’s ministry ethics (professional standards) involving affiliated church leadership and Ministering Persons.
	+ The MEU should be contacted where there is an allegation against a ministering person of ethical/moral nature which is in breach of the [CofCQ Ministering Persons Code of Conduct](https://www.cofc.com.au/getmedia/5e9c5677-2186-4ed5-a1e3-7117d2e9ed75/Code-of-Conduct-Ministering-Persons.pdf). This contact can be made by any person formally as above or through a whistle-blower email (whistleblowing@cofcqld.com.au).
	+ Depending on the severity of the allegation, and the response time required, the MEU may nominate a representative to work with the church leadership within the grievance procedures of the MEU and of the local church, to advocate for a fair process until the matter is considered by the MEU Committee.
* For all other complaints and conflict, use this procedure

Note: In all of the above, ensure that the wishes of the person making the complaint are considered, but be aware and inform them in situations where duty of care or legislative requirements (e.g. mandatory reporting) mean that taking no action is not an option. | Person receiving complaint/disclosureSafe Ministry Contact | Copies of reports made under the relevant process/procedure |
|  | **Informal Complaints / Complaints Received In Person/Verbally** |  |  |
|  | If a complaint is received in person/verbally, follow the advice in Principles for Hearing and Responding to complaints.Ask the complainant to raise and attempt to resolve the complaint directly with the individual concerned or person responsible for the area/ministry in an informal manner. Let them know who the responsible person is if they don’t know (or find out and let them know). Do not take the complaint to someone else on their behalf.Encourage the complainant to raise the complaint with the appropriate person as soon as they are able to.Also consider whether there are relevant policies or procedures, including this procedure, which would inform the resolution of the complaint and if so, provide these to the complainant.**Note:** If it is a serious or sensitive complaint and/or it involves a Pastor, but it doesn’t fit the exceptions in Step 1, ask the person to consider formalising the complaint by putting it in writing. If necessary, assist the person to put the complaint in writing (but do not write it for them). Then proceed to Step 8, Formal Complaints. | Person receiving complaintComplainant | Notes from conversation  |
|  | If Step 2 does not resolve the concern, encourage the complainant to take someone with them to speak to the individual concerned/responsible person. | Person receiving complaint originallyComplainant + support person | Notes from conversation  |
|  | If the complainant feels out of their depth or the situation is still not resolved, advise the complainant to speak with a Pastor. Offer to go with the complainant to speak to a Pastor.The Pastor may determine that a resolution to the complaint or conflict be mediated by themselves or another pastor or member of [insert name of governance group], or may provide advice to the complainant about ways they can continue to attempt to resolve the concern with the individual/responsible person themselves. Note: If the complaint or conflict involves an Associate Pastor, go directly to the Senior Pastor. If the complaint or conflict involves the Senior Pastor, skip to Step 5. | Person receiving complaint originallyComplainantRespondentPastor | Notes from conversation  |
|  | If, after involving a Pastor, the matter is still unresolved, or if it involves the Senior Pastor or a member of the [insert name of governance group], the complainant should be advised to take the matter to the [insert name of governance group].At this point, if it is not already, the complaint or conflict should become formal and be put in writing by the complainant to the [insert name of governance group].If the complainant is not willing to put the complaint in writing to the [insert name of governance group], the matter will be considered resolved having been through steps 1-4.  | Person receiving complaint originallyComplainantPastor[insert name of governance group] | Formal complaint made in writing |
|  | For Steps 2-5, if you are the responsible person for the area/issue or you are the individual involved (the respondent) and you are approached by someone who raises an informal complaint with you, you should use the Principles of Hearing and Responding to Complaints to guide your engagement with the complainant and work towards a resolution in good faith.While it is important to ensure people feel heard, it is also important to respond and attempt to resolve a complaint or conflict within a reasonable timeframe. | Respondent / Responsible Person |  |
|  | **Formal Complaints / Complaints Received in Writing** |  |  |
|  | If a complaint is received in writing, acknowledge it within 2 days. Refer to Step 1 to determine if it falls within the scope of this procedure or should be referred to another process/procedure. If it does, advise the complainant of this promptly and guide them through the relevant process.If it is not a serious or sensitive complaint, and if an attempt has not yet been made by the complainant to resolve it informally, advise the complainant to follow Steps 2 to 5 of this procedure. Communicate this advice in person or via a phone call and then follow up in writing to confirm, providing a copy of this procedure if appropriate. Encourage the complainant to raise the complaint with the responsible person as soon as they are able.If the complaint will proceed to Step 8, advise the complainant of this within 1 week of receiving the complaint.Note: The exception is if the complainant states in writing from the outset that they are making a formal complaint, in which case proceed straight to Step 8. | Person receiving complaint | Copy of complaint and response/reply |
|  | Formal complaints in writing that have been made under Steps 5 or 7 will be referred to the [insert name of governance group].The [insert name of governance group] will consider the complaint or conflict at their next meeting and determine a way forward. The complainant and respondent will be advised of the next steps or a decision/outcome verbally with a follow up in writing as soon as practicable after the meeting. This may include appointing a nominated representative (pastor, Safe Ministry Contact or member of [insert name of governance group]) to investigate the complaint or handle the conflict (refer Step 9).If the complaint or conflict is urgent or sensitive and/or needs to be addressed before the next scheduled meeting of the[insert name of governance group], the [insert name of governance group] will either call a special meeting, or will nominate a representative (pastor, Safe Ministry Contact or member of [insert name of governance group]) to investigate the complaint or handle the conflict and will advise the complainant and respondent of this person within one week of receiving the complaint in writing. | [insert name of governance group] | Formal complaint made in writingMinutes of [insert name of governance group] meetingDecision or advice made to complainant and respondent |
|  | The nominated representative will investigate, propose and facilitate the implementation of a resolution to the complaint or conflict (if appropriate). Their approach will include: being prompt and impartial, maintaining confidentiality where at all possible, obtaining and reviewing all necessary information (including any actions/discussions from informal complaint process), input from complainant and respondent, seeking advice from the [insert name of governance group], providing a written record of the resolution to those concerned once reached and maintaining this confidentially on file. Depending on its nature and complexity, the nominated representative will attempt to resolve the complaint or conflict within one month of receiving the complaint in writing.In some cases, it may be necessary to have the complainant and respondent formally respond as to their agreement to/satisfaction with the resolution.The [insert name of governance group] will be kept informed of progress by the nominated representative, will pray for those concerned, and will be made aware of the resolution of the complaint or conflict to the extent required to be satisfied it is resolved. | Nominated representativeComplainantRespondent | Documentation of formal resolution and agreement of all parties (if required)Nominated representative notesMinutes of [insert name of governance group] meeting |
|  | If the [insert name of governance group] or their nominated representative cannot resolve the issue, member/s of the CofCQ Church Engagement Team may be called on to mediate or facilitate between the parties concerned, or to consult with church leadership on their process. Any invitation to the Church Engagement Team must come from the Pastors or [insert name of governance group]. | CofCQ Church Engagement TeamPastors[insert name of governance group] | Correspondence with CofCQ requesting assistanceAny records kept by CofCQ, including any entries in electronic risk management system |
|  | If the issue is still not resolved and if it relates to the Pastors, member/s of [insert name of governance group] or the direction set/decisions taken by the [insert name of governance group], the issue can be taken to a members meeting called in accordance with the [insert name of church constitution/guidelines] for discussion and prayer.The Pastors or [insert name of governance group] may request the assistance of the CofCQ Church Engagement Team or other trusted external person/group to assist in facilitating such a meeting. | CofCQ Church Engagement TeamPastors[insert name of governance group] | Minutes of members meetingCorrespondence sent to congregation regarding members meeting |

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| 1. **Associated Documents and References:**
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| Related Principles or Policies | Staff Grievance Procedure  |
| Last Review | Date this document was last formally reviewed.*It is possible that the date for review is different to the version date.* |

1. <http://johnmark.net.au/ps/?p=282> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2018/july/6-principles-healthy-churches-deal-with-conflict-well.html?paging=off> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid and <https://smartchurchmanagement.com/conflict-resolution-church/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)