TOOLKIT

CHURCH CONFLICT & DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Church conflict can consume the energy leaders need for ministry. A volunteer feels overlooked. A board conversation becomes personal. A change exposes frustrations that have been building for years. Many pastors know a conversation is needed but are unsure how to begin it without making matters worse.

This toolkit helps you prepare, listen carefully, address specific concerns, and agree on responsible next steps. It is designed for small-church realities and adaptable for churches of any size. You can use it yourself, with a ministry leader, or in a leadership-team training session.

The goal is to pursue truth, protect dignity, and strengthen accountable relationships. A constructive conversation may produce an apology, clearer expectations, a changed decision, a boundary, or agreement about how a decision will be made. Complete agreement is not always possible.

How to use this toolkit

- Read the safety guidance on page 2 before planning a meeting.
- Review the biblical foundation on page 3.
- Use the preparation worksheet on page 5. Allow about 15–20 minutes.
- Keep the conversation guide on page 6 nearby during the meeting.
- Record commitments using page 8 and review them at an agreed time.

What is included

1. Choosing the appropriate response
2. Biblical foundations
3. Understanding the disagreement
4. Conversation preparation worksheet
5. A practical conversation guide
6. Sample language for difficult moments
7. Agreement and follow-up worksheet
8. A completed ministry example
9. Team discussion and a seven-day next step

Preparation and follow-up worksheets are editable in Word and printable for handwritten use.

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CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE

Before arranging a conversation, ask whether the people involved can speak freely and safely. A difference of opinion, repeated unkind behavior, and suspected abuse require different responses.

Ordinary disagreements

Examples include scheduling, ministry methods, communication gaps, differing preferences, or unclear responsibilities. Use this toolkit when participants can express concerns without intimidation or retaliation. If there is a clear authority difference, offer a support person or impartial facilitator.

Repeated harm or a significant power imbalance

Repeated humiliation, intimidation, retaliation, or misuse of spiritual authority needs accountable oversight. Do not assume a private meeting will be safe or sufficient. Consult an appropriate safeguarding specialist or independent adviser. A person implicated in the concern should not control its review.

Suspected abuse or immediate danger

Sexual abuse, domestic violence, threats, child or vulnerable-adult abuse, and suspected criminal conduct require protection and appropriate reporting. Do not use mediation or reconciliation meetings as the first response. Do not require an affected person to confront the person accused. If there is immediate danger, contact local emergency services. Follow applicable reporting requirements promptly; internal church review must not delay required reporting. Seek qualified safeguarding guidance and allow the appropriate authorities to investigate.

Confidentiality and support

Keep information limited to people with a legitimate responsibility to respond. Explain that you cannot promise absolute secrecy where safety or reporting duties apply. Keep necessary factual records securely and avoid circulating sensitive details in prayer chains, group messages, or public meetings. A person may seek appropriate pastoral, professional, or safeguarding support without being accused of gossip.

When outside help is appropriate

Seek help when conversations repeatedly fail, factions are forming, leadership impartiality is compromised, or participants fear consequences for speaking honestly. Select someone whose role, competence, and independence match the concern. Coaching can help with ordinary ministry communication; safeguarding concerns need specialist support.

These are general ministry guidelines, not a complete safeguarding policy. For specialist guidance, see GRACE, Abuse in Your Church 10 Guidelines for Responding Well: https://www.netgrace.org/s/Abuse-in-Your-Church-10-Guidelines.pdf

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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Christian leadership calls us to speak honestly while remaining accountable for how we treat people. Read these passages in context, then consider their application to the situation before you. The summaries below are paraphrases, not Bible quotations.

Listen before responding

James 1:19–20 and Proverbs 18:13 call us to listen carefully and restrain hasty speech and anger. Ask what you have not yet understood. Strong emotion may signal a concern that needs attention, but it does not justify harmful conduct.

Pursue restoration with humility

Galatians 6:1 directs believers to restore someone gently while examining themselves. Before correcting another person, consider your own actions, assumptions, and use of authority. Gentleness can coexist with firm expectations and consequences.

Address sin responsibly

Matthew 18:15–17 describes a process for addressing sin within the community of believers, beginning personally and involving others when necessary. It is not a blanket requirement to meet privately with someone who poses a danger, and it must not be used to obstruct reporting abuse. A preference or disagreement about ministry strategy is not automatically sin.

Take responsibility for your part

Romans 12:18 recognizes both our responsibility to pursue peace and the limits of what we can control. You can choose honesty, patience, and appropriate action. You cannot make another person repent, agree, or change.

Apply these principles carefully

Forgiveness does not automatically restore trust, remove consequences, or reinstate a leadership role. Reconciliation and restored working relationships require attention to safety, truth, responsibility, and demonstrated change. Do not pressure someone to declare a matter resolved before those concerns have been addressed.

Prayer can help you prepare your heart and seek wisdom. It should not replace listening, responsible reporting, or practical action.

A prayer before the conversation

Lord, help me see this situation clearly. Show me where I need to take responsibility. Help me listen without preparing my defense and speak with courage and care. Give us wisdom about the next right step. Protect those who are vulnerable and help us act faithfully. Amen.

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UNDERSTAND WHAT IS DRIVING THE DISAGREEMENT

Start by identifying what people actually disagree about. A conversation about a ministry decision can become tangled with years of disappointment or uncertainty about who has authority.

Identify the main issue

- Information: Do people have different facts or incomplete information?
- Expectations: Were responsibilities, deadlines, or standards explained?
- Preferences: Are people treating a favored method as the only faithful option?
- Decisions: Is it clear who has authority and whose input is needed?
- Relationships: Has someone felt dismissed, embarrassed, or unheard?
- Conduct: Has a specific action caused harm or violated an agreed standard?

More than one category may apply. Choose one concern for the first conversation and identify other issues that need separate attention.

Separate observations from interpretations

- **Observation**: “The schedule changed after it had been sent to the volunteers.”
- **Interpretation**: “You do not respect the volunteers.”

Begin with the observation. Explain its effect and ask what happened. Treating your interpretation as a proven motive makes it harder to hear new information.

Ask what matters beneath the position

A person may insist, “We cannot change the service time,” because they are concerned about older members, transport, or losing a familiar community rhythm. Ask: “What are you most concerned we might lose?” Understanding the concern helps you evaluate options; it does not commit you to the requested solution.

Examine your contribution

Have I communicated late, made assumptions, avoided follow-up, or corrected someone publicly? Did I ask for input after the decision had already been made? Own what is yours without assuming responsibility for another person’s harmful conduct.

Respond to third-party complaints

When someone says, “Everyone is upset,” ask for specific concerns and distinguish firsthand information from assumptions. Avoid recruiting supporters. For ordinary disagreements, help people use an appropriate conversation or feedback route. If the concern involves intimidation, abuse, or fear of retaliation, offer a protected reporting route instead of sending them back to the person involved.

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CONVERSATION PREPARATION WORKSHEET

Use this page before an ordinary ministry conversation. Complete it briefly and honestly. You can type beneath each prompt or print it and write your responses.

Person and role _____
Date and proposed meeting time _____

1. Check safety and fairness

Can each person speak without fear of harm or retaliation? Is there a power imbalance? Would a support person or independent facilitator help? If safety is uncertain, seek appropriate advice before meeting.

_____
_____

2. State one concern using observable facts

What happened? When? What do I know firsthand? Avoid labels such as “lazy,” “disloyal,” or “always difficult.”

_____
_____

3. Explain the effect and examine your contribution

How has this affected people or ministry? What should I acknowledge or apologize for?

_____
_____

4. Identify what you need to understand

What facts, pressures, expectations, or concerns might I be missing?

_____
_____

5. Name the desired outcome

What would a responsible result look like? What is open for discussion? Who has authority to decide? What boundaries or standards must be maintained?

_____
_____

6. Write your opening and two questions

Opening _____
_____
Question 1 _____
Question 2 _____

7. Arrange the meeting

Choose a private, safe setting and enough time to listen. Explain the topic in advance. Do not ambush someone between services or imply a disciplinary meeting is simply a casual chat. Agree on participants and any needed support.

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Allow approximately 30–45 minutes for an ordinary disagreement. Adjust the timing to the situation. If new safety concerns emerge, pause this process and use the guidance on page 2.

1. Explain the purpose

"I value your contribution and want to talk about the recent schedule changes. I want to understand what happened and agree on a clearer process."

Explain your role and the limits of confidentiality. Ask whether the setting and participants are suitable. Offer prayer rather than assuming it is welcome in a tense moment.

2. Describe the concern and own your part

"On two occasions this month, the published schedule changed without the team being told. Two volunteers arrived for roles they were no longer assigned. I also recognize that I never clearly explained who could authorize changes."

Address behavior and impact. Avoid diagnosing motives, exaggerating frequency, or listing every previous frustration.

3. Invite their account and listen

"How did you experience this?" "What was happening that I may not know?" Let the person finish. Ask clarifying questions and summarize: "You were covering an absence and thought you had authority to make the change. Have I understood correctly?"
Listening does not require agreement with every claim.

4. Clarify the issue and decision authority

Name what you agree on and what remains disputed. Distinguish a shared decision from a decision assigned to a pastor, board, or ministry leader. Be honest if you are receiving input rather than offering a vote. New information may require checking facts or postponing a decision.

5. Agree on specific next steps

Ask: *"What could prevent this from happening again?"* Record what will change, who will do it, and by when. If conduct must stop, name the boundary and the appropriate accountability process. Do not make promises outside your authority.

6. Summarize and schedule follow-up

Ask each person to explain their understanding of the agreement. Record unresolved points without implying agreement. Set a review date and decide what, if anything, the wider team needs to know. End with appreciation for participation, without declaring trust restored prematurely.

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LANGUAGE FOR DIFFICULT MOMENTS

Use these examples as starting points. Adapt them to your culture and relationships while keeping the concern clear.

When you need to acknowledge your mistake

"I announced the change before speaking with you. That left you unprepared to answer the team's questions. I am sorry. I will consult you before future announcements affecting your area."
Name the action and its effect. Avoid following an apology with *"but,"* or making another person's apology a condition of yours.

When the person becomes defensive

"I hear that this feels unfair. What have I misunderstood? I also want us to address the specific concern about what happened at the meeting."

When someone questions your motives

"I hear that the decision felt dismissive. Let me explain how it was made, and then I would like to understand what you needed from the process."

When disagreement is treated as disloyalty

"We can raise concerns respectfully. Let us examine the concern and the way it was expressed separately."

Avoid using pastoral authority, spiritual language, or loyalty tests to shut down legitimate questions.

When someone raises their voice or interrupts

"I want to hear you. We need to take turns and speak without insults. Let us pause and decide whether we can continue respectfully."

If behavior becomes threatening, end the meeting and seek appropriate help. Do not block someone from leaving.

When you need a boundary

"You are welcome to disagree with the decision. Personal insults toward volunteers must stop. Future concerns should go through the agreed feedback process."

When you need time or cannot reach agreement

"We have heard different accounts. I need to check the relevant information before deciding."
"We agree on the concern but not the solution. Let us record both options and ask the appropriate leadership body to decide."

When the person refuses to meet

"I respect that you are not ready. Would another setting or a support person help? The ministry concern still needs attention, so I will explain the next appropriate step and give you a fair opportunity to respond."

Use established, proportionate procedures. Do not threaten exclusion simply to obtain agreement.

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AGREEMENT AND FOLLOW-UP WORKSHEET

Complete this together where possible. Send a brief factual summary to the participants and invite corrections. Agreement about next steps is not necessarily agreement about every account of what happened.

Meeting date _____
Participants and roles _____

The concern we addressed

_____
_____

What we agree on and what remains unresolved

Agreed facts or shared goals _____
_____
Unresolved concerns or decisions _____
_____
Who will review or decide unresolved matters _____

Specific commitments

Action 1 _____
Responsible person _____ Due date _____
Action 2 _____
Responsible person _____ Due date _____
Action 3 _____
Responsible person _____ Due date _____

Communication and support

Who needs to be informed, what should be shared, and by whom?
_____
What support, training, or role clarification is needed?
_____

Review and accountability

Review date _____ Responsible leader _____
What observable change will show progress?
_____
If commitments are not kept, what proportionate next step applies?
_____

At the review

Ask what changed, what remains difficult, and whether commitments were realistic. Record progress and unfinished work. If harmful behavior continues, use appropriate oversight and established procedures. Avoid repeatedly restarting the same conversation without accountability.

Store this record securely. Include only necessary facts and commitments; do not add speculative judgments about someone's character or private information unrelated to the concern.

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A COMPLETED MINISTRY EXAMPLE

This fictional example shows an ordinary disagreement, with no known threats, abuse, or fear of retaliation.

The situation

A congregation of about 70 people is piloting a new guest welcome process. Ruth, a volunteer who has served for 15 years, criticizes it during two team meetings. The pastor feels undermined. Ruth feels that her experience has been ignored.

Preparation worksheet example

Observed concern: At two meetings Ruth called the plan “a waste of time” and interrupted the coordinator before questions were invited.
Effect: The coordinator could not finish explaining the process, and several volunteers left without knowing their roles.
Pastor’s contribution: The pastor approved the pilot without asking experienced volunteers for practical input.
Missing information: Ruth’s concerns about workload, training, and personal relationships with guests.
Desired outcome: Hear the concerns, repair the pastor’s communication mistake, and establish respectful feedback and a workable pilot.
Authority: The pastor has approved the pilot; volunteers can recommend adjustments. Any proposal to discontinue it will be reviewed after the pilot.

The opening

“Ruth, your years of service matter to this church. I should have asked for your input before launching the pilot, and I am sorry. At our last two meetings, the comments and interruptions prevented us from finishing the explanation. I want to hear your concerns and agree on how we can raise them constructively.”

What listening reveals

Ruth worries that guests will feel processed rather than welcomed. She also cannot use the proposed digital form. The pastor discovers practical weaknesses that need correction while still addressing the interruptions.

Completed agreement example

- The coordinator will provide a paper option before the next service.
- The pastor and Ruth will simplify the welcome questions by Friday.
- Ruth agrees to let presenters finish and raise concerns during the discussion time. The pastor will protect that time for everyone.
- The team will receive the revised process without a public account of the private disagreement.
- After four Sundays, the pastor and coordinator will review volunteer workload, follow-up completion, and guest feedback with the team.

The first meeting does not establish that everything is repaired. Follow-through will show whether the revised process works and whether people can disagree respectfully.

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TEAM DISCUSSION AND YOUR NEXT STEP

Use these questions in a 30-minute leadership conversation. Discuss patterns without naming absent people or disclosing private situations. If a safeguarding concern is disclosed, stop the exercise and respond appropriately.

Team discussion questions

1. Which conversations do we tend to avoid, and what happens when we delay them?
2. How do we distinguish facts from assumptions about someone's motives?
3. Can volunteers and members question leaders without fear of retaliation? What makes our answer credible?
4. Which recurring disagreements might be caused by unclear roles or decision authority?
5. How do we acknowledge our mistakes without expecting an immediate apology in return?
6. When would a support person, independent facilitator, or specialist be necessary?
7. How will we check that an agreement leads to changed behavior?

A short practice exercise

Use the fictional example on page 9. One person plays the pastor, one plays Ruth, and one observes. Practice the opening and listening for five minutes, then discuss: Was the concern specific? Did the leader own a mistake? Was Ruth able to explain her concern? What question helped? Switch roles if time allows.

One step within seven days

Identify one ordinary ministry conversation you have been postponing. Check safety, complete the preparation worksheet, and invite the person to a suitable meeting. If a direct conversation is inappropriate, your next step is to contact the appropriate independent support or safeguarding professional instead.

My next step _____
I will take it by _____
The support I need _____

You do not have to carry every ministry challenge alone

Small Church Guys helps pastors strengthen church health, leadership, and ministry systems. If you would value help preparing for a difficult ministry conversation or developing healthier team communication, schedule a ministry call to discuss your situation and the support that may fit.

Schedule a ministry call: https://calendly.com/jesse-smallchurchguys/30min

Explore resources and weekly encouragement:
https://www.smallchurchguys.com/resources and
https://www.smallchurchguys.com/blog

Scripture summaries in this toolkit are paraphrases. Read James 1:19–20, Proverbs 18:13, Galatians 6:1, Matthew 18:15–17, and Romans 12:18 in your preferred Bible translation. The conversation tools are practical ministry guidance, not a validated assessment or a guarantee of resolution.

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