

Process for Handling Complaints as an Officer

Dr. Sandy Willson

When church members call with a complaint, we should always thank them for the call and assure them that this is a good opportunity for everyone to grow in maturity, including the caller. Then, we should follow these principles:

1. If the caller is a staff member, calling with a complaint regarding staff, ask if he has talked to his supervisor and/or the supervisor's supervisor. If not, urge him to do so. If he has not made that contact, then offer to go with him to the supervisor, or the supervisor's supervisor and hold him accountable for such. If he has gone to them and the problem is still unresolved, then recommend that he meet with the Personnel Committee chairman and the senior pastor and offer to go with him.
2. If the caller is a church member complaining on behalf of a staff member, suggest that the caller ask the staff member to talk to his own supervisor. If he has done so and the problem is still unresolved, the caller can be encouraged to contact the staff member's supervisor or the senior pastor or the chairman of the Personnel Committee. Inform the caller that you are unable to help until that step is taken. Tell the caller you will be glad to help him communicate with the staff member and the supervisor. If he is unwilling to follow the advice, it is probably a good idea to warn the caller of the evil of gossip and the dangers of drawing conclusions based on partial information. Tell them that you are going to take no action, nor draw any conclusions from what has been said, until proper procedures are followed.
3. If you receive continuing calls from or about staff, you should contact the senior pastor or Personnel Committee chairman to discuss the calls and to decide if an investigation into the realities of the situation should be initiated.
4. If the caller is a church member calling to complain about a staff member, discern whether the issue is a personal grievance or a performance issue. If the former, encourage the caller to follow the guidelines of Matthew 18:15-17; if the latter, refer him to the staff member, supervisor or to the senior pastor.
5. Do not share any information with any caller regarding any staff member about whom he complains. Information can only be shared with the consent of all concerned parties.
6. If a member calls to complain about some program or event, normally you would direct him to the appropriate staff member or elder who oversees that area of ministry. You may also listen to his complaint and decide if you agree with part or all of the complaint, in which case, you will share your concern first with the appropriate staff member or elder.

Process for Handling Complaints as a Member of Personnel Committee

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1. As stated above, if the caller is a staff member, ask if he has talked to his supervisor and/or the supervisor's supervisor. If not, urge him to do so. If he has made that contact, then offer to contact the chairman of the Personnel Committee who will normally ask the senior pastor to investigate or meet with the caller and his supervisor and the senior pastor, to seek a resolution to the problem.
2. If the caller is a church member calling on behalf of a staff member, let him know there are staff policies about handling complaints. If the subject staff person has not followed such policy, encourage the caller to urge the staff member to do so. Warn against gossip and drawing conclusions with partial information. Offer to help effect healthy meetings, if the staff member needs help. Do not share information about any staff members. Rather, inform the caller that he will have to gain the permission of the staff member about whom he is concerned in order to enter the dialogue and to obtain confidential information about that staff member's performance from the supervisor (all in the presence of the subject staff member). The caller needs to be approved as a confidante by the supervisor as well as the complaining staff member in order to enter these conversations. Offer to help effect such a meeting, if you feel it wise. Otherwise, simply assure the caller that all parties are being dealt with equitably and that the situation is under healthy management. If appropriate, feel free to share the officers' philosophy of ministry and conflict resolution with the caller.
3. If the caller is a church member calling to complain about a staff member, discern whether the complaint is a personal grievance or a performance issue. If it is the former, encourage the member to follow the guidelines of Matthew 18: 15-17, and suggest that either he meet with the staff member, or you meet with the staff member or both of you meet with the staff member. If the complaint is a concern about performance, assure the caller that he can talk to the staff person's supervisor or to the senior pastor or you can communicate with the senior pastor on his behalf.
4. If you have concerns about staff members or staff process, you should take the liberty at any time to become informed about any matter from the senior pastor, and, if unsatisfied, feel free also to engage the issue with the full Personnel Committee.