

East Ohio Conference

Rule of Christ Training

Jesus said... ⁸So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. ¹⁰"Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father. ¹²"If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? ¹³And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn't wander away! ¹⁴In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish. ¹⁵"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. ¹⁶But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. ¹⁸"I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. ¹⁹"I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."

– Matthew 18: 8-20

What is the Rule of Christ?

Quite simply, it is a biblical way of approaching conflict or concerns. The Rule of Christ program was originally developed by the late Rev. Terry N. Gladstone, a Deacon in the Michigan Area, as a way of applying Jesus' teachings from Matthew 18 to the life and relationships in the local church. Many Annual Conferences have adopted variations of this Rule of Christ model because it is so very effective at addressing our way of communicating with one another and improving our ability to become effective disciples for Jesus Christ. As Bishop Tracy S. Malone said in her first Episcopal Address to East Ohio, "A key foundational strategy for discipleship is congregational health. Healthy churches make healthy disciples. Healthy disciples make healthy disciples. Healthy disciples transform the world... The overall health of the church, and the overall vitality and effectiveness of ministry, largely depends on how pastors and churches handle conflict, disagreements and relationships."

Since we are Christians, (literally people who follow Christ) it's important for us to follow Christ in this way of approaching our conflicts and concerns. What has been amazing with this plan is, much like other spiritual disciplines, choosing to intentionally include Christ in our way of speaking and communicating, the positive effects spread throughout a congregation. People begin to adopt this way of speaking and communicating with one another, simply because the Rule of Christ is a better way for us to communicate!

This training is an adaptation of Rev. Gladstone's work, adding in elements from other models of Conflict Mediation, Communication Styles Training, and Church Systems Training. The Rule of Christ model is essentially an applied Bible lesson, but these other elements help us to better understand the cause of poor communication and some solid tools that help us implement the Rule of Christ Model.

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Before we jump in— it’s important set up some ground rules for good communication. These concepts come from Rev. Eric Law, an Episcopal Priest, the executive director of the Kaleidoscope Institute which is committed to creating systems that “seek and serve Christ in every person and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Mutual Invitation:

To ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

1. The leader or a designated person will share first.
2. That person then invites another to share; choose any group member.
 - a. If you are not ready yet, say “pass for now” and then invite another to share. You will be invited again later.
 - b. If you don’t want to say anything, simply say “pass”, and proceed to invite another to share.
3. This process will be repeated until all group members have been invited to share.

This is a good system to implement, not just during this training, but in general conversation. It’s important to listen to people and to hear from those who might be struggling to speak. Developing a system that encourages all to share, opens our communication broadly and emphasizes our need to hear those who don’t always feel they have a voice.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T:

R – Take **RESPONSIBILITY** for what you say and feel without blaming others. When I think about it, I am responsible for what I do and say. I am responsible for how I react/respond to what others say and do.

E – Use **EMPATHETIC** listening. Try to understand what others are sharing. If you can’t understand, at least be compassionate (just by listening). There is not always an answer needed, just a listening ear.

S – Be **SENSITIVE** to differences in communication styles. We all speak in different tones; some quiet, some loud, using fast or slow speech. Some people need eye contact to feel heard, while others might be uncomfortable with eye contact.

P – **PONDER** what you hear and feel before you speak. Ask, “did I hear or understand you correctly?” (repeat what you think you heard with a question)

E – **EXAMINE** your own assumptions and perceptions. What are my assumptions? Is it necessary to repeat what I think is important? What kind of outcome am I looking for? Is it important or necessary to pursue a conversation or is it a means to an end?

C – **CONFIDENTIALITY**; keep all information private.

T – **TRUST** ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong. Be open to the possibility of more than one interpretation, with neither being strictly accurate or precise. Looking at our own importance and possessing the ability to humble ourselves and be submissive to the idea, that our thoughts are sometimes not the best for a perceived outcome. Trust is very powerful. This can make ourselves more available to the process of humility and submission.

Understanding – Conflict/Concern:

“Our church doesn’t have any conflicts.” This is something we’d all like to believe, but it is about as truthful as saying that “our church doesn't have any sinners”. This process helps us to develop better ways to deal with *conflict* and *concerns*. People struggle with the word conflict, but in reality, a conflict can be any number of things. It can be a simple disagreement, or it can be a fistfight during the Trustee meeting. (Don’t laugh too hard. That actually happens!) Conflict can be as simple as a misplaced word, or as complex as a 40-yr feud between two church families. Conflicts and concerns are inevitable wherever there are people because: 1) each one of us has our own ideas on how to do things and 2) our natural communication methods are TERRIBLE!

Just like any other system, or set of rules, the Rule of Christ only works if we actually choose to use it. Of course, I can say the same thing about good dental care... but I think we have all probably had a cavity or two, amen? Even with our BEST efforts and practices, we can still make mistakes. This is to say that this process isn’t about perfection. It is about trying our absolute best to work together, while accepting the fact that even the best practices and efforts will still yield some conflict. CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE. This process is Christ’s way to help us “de-charge” most of the “drama” and negative energy of any concern, so we can get back to the good work that God is calling us all to do.

First let’s dig a bit deeper on the nature of conflicts and concerns, so we can understand why they happen in all of us, but also how Christ calls us to see those struggles differently – both in ourselves and each other.

Conflict 101:

- A conflict is more than just a disagreement. It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether the threat is real or not).
- Conflicts continue to fester when ignored. Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs. In this way, our own perceptions are more ‘real’ to us than the facts– but each person’s perceptions are different from others.
- Conflicts trigger strong emotions. Conflicts can bring forward strong emotions and feelings from other conflicts (especially past conflicts) that are unresolved. These emotions can cloud and interfere with our ability to resolve a conflict, and can alter our perceptions, making our “reality” of the situation even more different from others in the room.

While conflicts are unavoidable, they are also an opportunity for growth. When you’re able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements.

Understanding – “Right” and “Wrong”:

As we’ve already established, “right” and “wrong” are all about perspective in a great many things. Obviously, there is an absolute Right and an absolute Wrong, but since we aren’t God, how can we determine what these absolutes are, and since most of our lives are lived somewhere outside the range of absolutes, how do we know when something is “right” and “wrong”?

When Jesus taught us, He asked us to try to avoid making judgments of “right” and “wrong”, and Jesus was very critical in His ministry of those believers around Him who regularly looked for the “right” and “wrong” in others. This doesn’t mean that we can’t make “judgment calls” for our own life to make decisions. Life is constantly about determining our own personal sense of “right” and “wrong”, but we mustn’t ever go past our own boundaries to begin passing those same definitions onto others. The moment we do that, our personal discernment turns into a judgment and none of us have the right to claim Jesus’ job description as Judge.

In conflict, we feel like someone is “bossing” into our personal space, and when we get hurt, it’s ok for us to see that as “wrong”, but how do we talk to someone else about that behavior? It’s important is to realize that all our feelings are just perceptions and our perceptions aren’t always what is really happening. I once video recorded a counseling session (with people’s consent) where one person felt everyone in the room was attacking them. Later, when we watched the video. we found that they were, in fact, the only person acting aggressively. That didn’t mean that the person feeling threatened was “wrong”. Their perception was real, and their feelings were real. Putting a label, like “wrong” on their behavior only would make it harder to figure out *why* they felt threatened, or what can be done to help them *not* feel threatened. Conflict Resolution is never about finding out “rights” and “wrongs”, but discovering clear and transparent communication, so that everyone can be on the same page. That’s it! A good deal of the work in conflict resolution is centered around clearing communication and translating what is said, to reveal the real messages in between people. Very often, a perceived threat might translate to be a misplaced word, nonverbal communication, or prior misunderstanding.

Understanding – Perception:

As mentioned earlier, a great deal of our personal confrontations over “right” and “wrong” stem from differing perceptions of the facts. We each experience the world in different ways, from different directions and from different perspectives. This can create a wide variety of different perceptions of what happened during any specific event.

To further complicate things, we interpret our perceptions based on a WIDE variety of changing factors. Are we already in a bad mood when an accusation gets flung at us? Is there a history of negativity between the persons involved– that now floods forward with this accusation? Unresolved conflicts from other relationships can also jump out during a conflict. In one resolution, I encountered a woman who reacted VERY defensively (and with strong aggression) when she was confronted by a clergy person. Apparently, the clergy pointed at her during an accusation, and she (much to her own surprise) erupted! During the ROC resolution of their conflict, by exploring that eruption we were able to see that during

childhood, her abusive father would often point at her to make insulting accusations. Is it anyone's fault the eruption happened? Should we waste time labeling "right" and "wrong"? Instead, we respected that eruption and allowed Christ to bring healing, not just for the clergy/congregant conflict, but also for some of the congregant's wounded past.

The point is that as human beings, we utilize multiple forms of communication: verbal cues, non-verbal cues, body language, tone of voice, inflection, and volume of voice. These all become multipliers and dividers that shape (or deform) our perception of what was really said and what was heard.

Fortunately, we can choose to put aside the need to figure out who's perception was "right", and who's perception was "wrong" (which will always be a losing battle). Instead, we can choose to just focus on the need to find understanding. How do we find understanding? I'm so glad you asked!

1. Make understanding the priority rather than winning or "being right". If your goal is to win, then your goal isn't resolution. If you truly want resolution, then make listening your priority. Speak clearly. Speak simply. Don't express yourself with actions, or lots of nonverbal communication. Don't raise your voice— or go "screechy" to emphasize your words. This only makes you sound insincere.
2. Listen to the other person's feelings, in addition to their words. How can you demonstrate that you care about their thoughts and words? Remember, if you care, then so will they.
3. "Treat others as you would want them to treat you." It's one of Jesus' BEST rules for us. Don't interrupt. Don't raise your voice. Allow others to speak first and choose to listen. Ask the quiet people in the room for their opinion.
4. Remember that God is in charge of your life. Keep Him there! Focus on the present and future, rather than the past. The past can't be adjusted, but the present and the future can. Be willing to let go of the negative past to find Christ's future. Be willing to agree to disagree and move on toward what things can be agreed upon. If you hear negativity, don't fall victim to it!
5. Work constantly to listen for issues of miscommunication. Ask for clarification on misunderstanding, or for confirmation on proper understandings. Work constantly to allow Christ to lessen feelings of anger, judgment, resentment, and frustration. These feelings and perceptions are constant distractions, and they will pop up like critters in a "whack-a-mole" arcade. Give them to God.
6. "Resolution" is just another word for "peace". This can be a temporary peace, or (ideally) a long-term solution. What's important is *not* that we all agree about everything, or that we even get along; what's important is that we can understand one another and respect one another enough to get our ministry done. Amen?

The Wheat and the Weeds:

Ok, what if someone doesn't want to work toward understanding? That's a good question. Let's look to Scripture for an answer: ²⁴Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. ²⁵But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. ²⁶When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. ²⁷"The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' ²⁸"An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. "'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. ²⁹"No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'"

If a person doesn't want understanding, then they are probably a weed. I know that's hard to hear, having been a "weed" myself a time or two. The reality is that whenever we aren't ready to submit ourselves to Christ (or to the Rule of Christ), we are choosing to stand "out of place" from the rest of creation. That is exactly what a weed is: a plant that stands out of place from where it should be. We all can find ourselves standing out of place from God's plan sometimes, Amen? Does God dislike us for that? Do you believe that God hates dandelions or poison ivy? Surely, they are precious creations in His eyes. We call them weeds because they show up in places where they don't fit. A rose out in the middle of a wheat field is a weed. It doesn't belong there. The same rose, were it to be in a different place, say in the middle of a flower garden, it would be a crowning glory! Jesus' answer to the weeds is time. Jesus tells the workers (us) to leave the weeds alone, because we will do more harm than good. We aren't told to rip them up, or bind them, or burn them. That will be someone else's job at the time of harvest. God doesn't despise the weeds, and neither should we. Clearly from the parable, it isn't our job to determine who and what are 'weeds' because the weeds don't belong to us. That's God's business, not ours. Instead, all 'weeds' are given time to change.

So, if we don't remove or harm the weeds what else can we do? What if, we applied this Rule of Christ with (what we suspect) are "weeds" and allowed them the opportunity to change? Perhaps even the same opportunities that Jesus affords us when each of us has fallen short on our faith and path? Imagine a gossip in your church. They have tremendous purpose and ability given to them by God. People want to listen to them and that's a gift! If that same gossip was given the opportunity to transplant themselves into a different purpose for the church? Those same gifts and abilities could easily become powerful tools of evangelism and prayer. The same gifts turned outward, rather than turned inward. What a blessing for the church and for heaven, for one's heart to be so changed! Unfortunately, that change can only happen if each of us are willing to seek understanding and be part of a larger system. All of us must choose to submit to a Rule of Christ.

Our work (as a church family) is to help each other to see the crowning glory within each other and to help one another to find our place in God's ministry. Every church and every place has a purpose for each of us in God's ministry. The problem is that we each decide (on our own) where to set our roots and when conflicts arise, we refuse to submit to Christ and each other. By assisting each other and all of

us submitting to God, we can each find our best talents to serve God, our best purposes to serve the church and to discover the crowning glory of God's Spirit that lives in each of us.

Triangling:

Rev. Gladstone used a "Triangling" model to discuss one of the most common forms of conflict development. Originally part of a larger model, from 1956 research of Dr. Steven Karpman ("the drama triangle"), this more simplified model helps us to see how negative communication styles can develop into complex conflicts. Essentially, "triangling" is when Person "A" is arguing with Person "B", and to lessen the tension, they choose to drag Pastor... err.. Person "C" into the mess.

Visualize these "triangles":

- Your brother has not visited your mother in the nursing home for the last three months, leaving the responsibility to you and your sister. You call your sister to complain.
- Your next-door neighbor's dog has been left outside every night for a week. He is barking each night around 2:00 AM and you can't sleep, so you call your other neighbor to complain.
- Mary is concerned that the new pastor is not spending any time visiting new families. She doesn't actually know what visits are being done; that would require calling the pastor. Instead, she feels this constant concern that visits aren't being done, just as she has had with the last 10 pastors. She decides to speak to the Administrative Council chairperson about her concern, as she has with the last 10 pastors (true story!).

Going to a third person instead of the one with whom we have a problem, is as natural to us as anything we do in life. We go to someone else to validate our own feelings and negative emotions but doing so creates new conflicts and problems.

In most situations, conflicts and concerns are not about content. Rather, conflicts are most often about:

1. miscommunication
2. confused relationships
3. misplaced emotions

In Mary's case, the real conflict was about her desire to share in visitation ministry, but she was told 10 pastors ago that she couldn't, so she spent the next 25 years nitpicking clergy.

Knowing this is the real nature of the problem, we can fix it by practicing a healthy way to approach a conflict, so that:

- 1) all parties can come to understand everyone else's point of view (breaking the miscommunication)
- 2) all parties can find a place to witness mutual respect (re-establishing relationship)
- 3) all parties can have an opportunity to clearly express how they feel, in a place where they know they are being heard (expressing feeling)

It works! In many cases, using The Rule of Christ not only resolves conflict, but strengthens relationships. Ask Mary! She is an awesome visitation minister today and the clergy in her appointment love her! This system works!

Rule of Christ Model:

Now that we have a foundation of how to see things differently, we can jump into the Rule of Christ Model, which is a practical way of approaching communication and concerns, before they become larger conflicts. This model is essentially an applied Bible study of Jesus' teaching from Matthew 18:8-20. The Rule of Christ is divided into 6 steps, but this adaptation divides the first step into two parts.

Step 1a: Self Reflection (Matthew 18:8-9)

Jesus tells us to take time to examine ourselves and our role in a conflict. He directs the reader to look inward and to accept that it is better to release something harmful, than to hang onto it and jeopardize the whole body. Now, it's easy to incorrectly apply this teaching outward and say, "We should kick this person off the team, rather than have them wreck everything," but Jesus has us start by reflecting inward, toward ourselves. In other words, "it is better for you to lose some attitude of your own, than for you to lose your love of your brother" or "it is better for you to drop your hard feelings about your sister in faith, than to lose that relationship".

In Practice:

- Take the time to pray and reflect on the events that led to these feelings or conflicts.
- Utilizing the Discernment Journal (described in the Tools section) is extremely helpful here.
- Question the following:
 - What is my concern/conflict?
 - What is my position on the matter?
 - What is my perception of the other person's position?
 - Is there history behind my concern or reaction?
 - What am I responsible for in this situation?
 - Can I let this go?
 - If I am able to let this go, the matter is resolved. IF NOT...

Step 1b: Look with Jesus' Eyes (Matthew 18:10-14)

In the Lord's Prayer, we regularly say the words, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive others who have trespassed against us." That is a conditional request for God to forgive us, in the same way that we forgive others. In this next section of Jesus' teaching on conflict, He walks us through a classic parable of the lost sheep. Look at the person across from you in this conflict. Are they lost? Are they wounded? The Way of Jesus is to approach the other party with the same integrity and respect that each of us would want to be treated. Are you seeing your brother or sister with your eyes, or with Christ's? If you don't lead with forgiveness, then you aren't going to find any forgiveness.

In Practice:

- Continue your prayers, now considering how this situation appears from the other person's perspective. Spend some time reflecting on where God is leading me in this situation. As God's servant, what am I called to do?
- If the matter needs to proceed further, move to Step 2.

Step 2: One-on-One (Matthew 18:15)

The purpose here in approaching the other person is to resolve conflict, **not** to create conflict. The clear example of Christ is to approach the other, in decency and respect, and share your trouble. Jesus' words here are clear: we should go to the person involved, not the choir director, or the custodian, or your neighbor. If someone has hurt us, we should go to them directly. Why? Well, this is exactly how we would want to be treated. Amen? And to go about "triangling" with everyone else, we aren't fixing our problem, we're just creating new ones!

The second item of note in Jesus' directions, is that we should approach the person privately, not publicly or through a rant on Facebook, but we should go to them in whatever way that will create a personal, respectful conversation to share our feelings.

The third point in Jesus' directions say that we should "point out the offense" to the other person. The point of this (in light of Jesus' teachings from verses 8-14, and from what is said in the rest of verse 15) is to "win the person back". Our goal is to do a lot more explanation of our perception and a lot less confrontation. Amen? Your goal in speaking to the other person is to help them to understand your point of view. You can't do that well by making accusations or speaking disrespectfully to them. So, what can you do to help them to see the world through your eyes (remember step 1a)? What can you do to help them see you with Jesus' eyes (remember step 1b)?

In Practice:

- Plan on approaching your sibling with the same decency and respect that you would want to receive.
 - If you feel you can't do this you, either need more time to process your own feelings (return to steps 1a and 1b), or you need to move onto a further step and get help for yourself.
- If you can arrange a One-On-One meeting, be sure it is a time, location, and setting that allows for confidential sharing and comfort to the person you need to speak with.
- When it's time to meet:
 - Speak for yourself, not bodies of persons or third parties.
 - Be ready to *listen*.
 - Share your feelings, not accusations.
 - Approach the conversation to request help. "My feelings are hurt, and I need help to feel better." "I am confused, and I need clarity." "I feel frustrated, and I need to get that off my chest." You need something and they can help. Don't turn this One-On-One time into a new conflict for them. Bring Christ for both of you.
 - If apologies need to be shared, apologize! No one must apologize because they were "wrong", but they should certainly be ready to express their regret that someone else was hurt unintentionally. Anyone can say "I'm sorry you got hurt when you felt that way."

- Be clear about next steps. What needs to happen for peace to return? We can't fix what was done, but we can prevent it from happening again.
- If the conflict is resolved, then Praise God! If not, then move on to Step 3.

Step 3: Get Some Help (Matthew 18:16)

Now, Jesus doesn't say "go gather some other people who agree with you." This isn't about "sides", it's about resolving conflict and helping all parties to understand other points of view. Bringing in other objective parties can help balance and calm feelings on both sides, and they can also help both sides stay on the Rule of Christ. If the last step failed to resolve the conflict, Jesus directs us to get some help at this point, because feelings are probably wounded enough and communications are strained enough, that other helpers are needed to win both parties back.

At this stage, the person with a grievance submits to the mediating persons for resolution. It's a useful time for ROC mediators to have individual Discernment Journals (if available) so they can easily see where each party is coming from. This very often reveals the simple communication breakdown, or history that is the root of the conflict.

In Practice (for the mediator):

- Pray
 - Lift both parties up in prayer using the same principles from Step 1a & Step 1b. See them through their own eyes (prayerfully you have a Discernment Journal) and see them through Christ's eyes.
- Set Up Mediated Meeting
 - Set up a time convenient and respectful for both parties.
 - All persons invited to the meeting must be cleared by both parties and mediator(s).
 - Have a clear understanding (from both parties) of what they might hope to accomplish in the meeting.
- Actual Meeting
 - Begin with prayer.
 - Set "ground rules" for clear communication.
 - Set goal of meeting, for all parties to be satisfied with results and clear communication.
 - Have discussion, with moderation by mediator using Mutual Invitation and R-E-S-P-E-C-T
 - Remember: the goal isn't to have everyone agree about the past, but to have everyone agree on a future.
 - Assign needed follow up.
- If the conflict is resolved, then Praise God! If not...

Step 4: Take It to The Church (Matthew 18:17a)

If the last step also fails, it is time to bring in more helpers. Getting to this stage means that: the mediators feel the issue needs resolution, and they need help. This often involves dangerous conflicts or consequences that impact the whole life of the church. This step can have several layers or attempts,

including the involvement of a Conflict Resolution Team, SPRC Team, or even bodies outside the local church, like the District Superintendent, an EOC designated Conflict Resolver, etc. The purpose of the process is still the same: to create resolution of the conflict and open understanding for clear communication, but now others will step in to assist the process for that to happen. If there is going to be a resolution of issues, it will occur at this stage, but the sad truth is that not all issues get resolved.

In Practice (for the mediator team):

Utilize all the same actions as in Step 3, but with a larger group.

1. Pray
2. Mediated Meeting
3. Actual Meeting

If the conflict is resolved, then Praise God! If not, then...

- Consider taking the issue to an even higher board within the church.
- Consider bringing in a conference mediator or conflict resolution specialist.
- If no other way can be found, and the conflict is detrimental to the life of the church, upon agreement of the Administrative Board, the Pastor, and in agreement of the District Superintendent, steps can be taken in accordance with the Book of Discipline to remove the membership of the individual creating the conflict.

Regardless of the decision found, it is vital for all parties to be able to move onto Step 5.

Step 5: Shake Off the Dust (Matthew 18:17b)

Accept the truth: some issues just are not going to be resolved. This is a biblically accepted value. Jesus tells us to just knock the dust off our feet and move on. The Apostles shared the same practice (Acts 13:51), as they left communities that were just too resistant to hear the Message of Peace. The idea of shaking off the dust is to leave the issue behind and to free yourself from the responsibility of bearing the burden forever. You release your ownership of the issue to Christ. In this stage, the anger needs to be released, as well as any disappointment for unresolved concerns (which is often easier said than done).

Step 6: God Is with Us (Matthew 18:20)

God makes a powerful promise to be with us, no matter what may happen. While we can let go of issues, we have God's promise that He will persist within the hearts of all parties and we can return to the work of ministry, knowing that Christ is with us all.

Well, there it is! Sounds simple enough, but will we choose to use it? This Rule of Christ might seem like a common-sense approach to communication (because it is), but it isn't the way we all naturally choose to handle our concerns and struggles.

Sally's Story:

Let's look at a typical church scenario to see how a conflict emerges. Remember to not think of things in terms of "right" and "wrong" behavior but keep a look out for what motivates the behaviors and choices. Let me tell you a story about an imaginary church (not really) called Blueberry Hill UMC (that part is made up) and the concerns of a congregant that we will call, "Sally".

Sally Foster had faithfully served Blueberry Hill UMC her whole life but had committed most of her time serving in youth ministry, at least until last year when she was told that the growing youth program needed a "professional Youth Pastor". That was when she met "Adam", the new youth director. Sally was surprised how quickly Adam was hired (and that she hadn't been asked for input on the process). As a result, Sally wondered how qualified Adam was for this important job.

Sally was excited for her daughter, who had just become a freshman that year and was just entered the youth ministry. Sally didn't know that her daughter was excited about starting youth ministry this year to (hopefully) get the attention of a certain boy in the youth program, who she took a fancy to. Sally was very concerned when her daughter came home from the Youth Fall kickoff event (RALLY DAY!) very depressed and unexcited about youth ministry. Rally Day had always gotten all the youth excited when she had led the program. She didn't speak to her daughter to discover that she the boy at Rally Day snubbed her daughter's interest. Sally watched her daughter for a few weeks, and she was deeply concerned to see her daughter wanting to avoid the church youth group altogether. Sally's concerns grew, but she wanted to make sure, that she was not the only person feeling this way and so she decided to first call another girl's mother, "Vicky", and see if she felt the same way.

As Sally talked with Vicky, she did notice that Vicky was largely silent. This was largely because Vicky didn't know what Sally was talking about, but Sally thought the silence was because Vicky was afraid to voice her genuine concerns. When Sally asked the direct question, "Don't you agree that something should be done?" Vicky said, "Yes, I suppose so," and that was good enough for Sally. She was glad that she was not the only person concerned about Adam, but she wondered what others thought. She wondered if she needed to help them find their voice, as she thought she had with Vicky. She decided to poll all the parents of youth and get their comments before she approached the SPRC.

Sally spent the next two weeks calling all the parents, to see if they had similar concerns as Vicky and herself. She started each conversation by asking the simple question, "Do you have any concerns about how Adam is leading our Youth Ministry?" Most seemed to not know what to say, and asked Sally if she had concerns (since she was making the call). Sally shared her concerns and then carefully recorded any responses expressed by the parents, just as she had with Vicky. On Sunday, she presented all her notes of the conversations to her friend "Dave" (the SPRC Chairperson) after the 11:00 service. "These are the concerns of the parents of youth in our church. We are asking that the SPRC take immediate action to remove Adam as our youth director. And you will see why after you read the number of parents opposed to Adam's leadership." Dave asked, "Who have you talked with, Sally?" Sally responded, "I

really can't reveal their names to you, Dave. They have all asked that you keep these comments confidential, since they don't want their children to be treated unfairly by Adam."

The list was a surprise to Dave. The SPRC had worked for a long time to hire this youth director. They knew Adam would need to gain experience, but they felt he was a great asset to the church. Dave did promise Sally that the SPRC would talk about the concerns she was raising.

At the next meeting, Dave presented the concerns as he understood them. The SPRC had a lengthy discussion, but since no one on the SPRC had any youth in the program, and since they could not talk directly to the parents who raised the concerns (since they didn't know who they were), they decided that the best course of action was to take a "wait and see" attitude. They would all watch very closely for the next two months, and Dave would talk with Adam, asking him to make improvements in the areas that were mentioned in the letter.

Dave did meet with Adam, although Adam was shocked to hear the reported claims. Many of the notes didn't even make sense to him. He had no idea how to even approach many of these concerns (because most of them didn't exist). He promised to do better and doubled his efforts, but felt disheartened, a little betrayed and quite paranoid.

Sally waited for three weeks, but she did not hear anything from the SPRC . She also saw that Adam was carrying on, as if everything were normal! She couldn't believe that her church had refused to act, especially in the light of so much evidence from the parents! She knew she couldn't talk to the senior pastor about the issue, because he didn't really "do conflict", which is why Sally hadn't approached him in the first place. In reality, the senior pastor would have helped, but was never even informed even by the SPRC! Sally decided to turn to the only other person who would have power in this situation: The District Superintendent. Sally prepared a special letter to the D.S. that listed her concerns, along with the "proof" that vindicated her concern and mailed it the very next day. As you can imagine, this pattern results in quite a bit of anxiety. The SPRC, or pastor, becomes the "triangle" of concern. Communication is almost impossible. Face-to-face resolution becomes impossible. The SPRC is faced with acting on other people's speculations and assumptions, rather than on direct input or clear communication. The conflict is delivered to the SPRC to "fix it", so they do their best. Unfortunately, with this model of conflict resolution, feelings, and thoughts (the underlying cause of conflicts) are not even discussed!

Dissecting Sally's Story:

Sally has a problem with Adam	1
Sally goes to Vicky	1+1
Sally polls the parents	1+1+12=14
Sally brings complaint to Dave	14+1=15
Dave takes the information to SPRC	(15)+9=24
Dave talks to Adam	1+1 (24 hidden)
Sally assumes no resolution and goes to the DS	AT LEAST– 26 People are now involved!

Questions presented:

- What could Sally have done differently?
- What could have the SPRC done differently?
- What could have each of the parents done differently?

The solution is to change the church's way of handling conflict, so that all congregants follow a pattern that will lead to mutual understanding and clear communication. The Rule of Christ does this, by opening the channels of communication, avoiding deconstructive practices, and speaking directly to the beliefs and feelings that created the conflict in the first place.

As you read the story, there isn't just one conflict, is there? While it is tempting to look for "blame" (using "right" and "wrong" language), this situation shows that things were falling apart, long before they fell apart.

Let's look at the same scenario approaching this single conflict with the Rule of Christ.

The Rule of Christ Model

Look within yourself (Self Reflection)	1
One-on-One (Directly to person)	1+1
Get some objective help (Trusted friend, Lay Leader)	1+1+1
Take it to the church leaders (Pastor, SPR Chair, Board Member)	1+1+1+1

AT LEAST– 4 People are now involved!

By using the Rule of Christ, the chaos of the conflict isn't just controlled; it becomes utilized to create new life and growth! Imagine had the Rule of Christ been used here, what would have happened if Sally had been encouraged and helped to find a constructive pattern to be able to voice her concerns directly to Adam? Wouldn't we have uncovered Sally's wounded feelings for being forced out of Youth Ministry? Adam could have shared his own insights in seeing the tension between Sally's daughter and the boy who snubbed her. Sally could have been welcomed back into the Youth Ministry programming with all the benefits she could bring to the program. The SPRC would become aware of the need for a youth parent (perhaps Sally) on their Team to advocate for youth (and Adam). And the most positive result, the process would be validated among the participants, that any future conflict (with themselves or others) would be approached the same way! The system itself would slowly become "viral", spreading to all parts of the church as a new way of approaching conflict.

Putting it into Practice:

For those who will serve in the local or connectional role of ROC mediator, it really is important to practice and “role-play” some ROC mediation. This not only helps you to see the steps “in-play”, but also helps you to empathize in the roles of mediator vs. those in conflict.

Here are 7 different (REAL-LIFE) scenarios:

1. _____ (the pastor) has spoken to _____ (the church organist) and _____ (the choir director) for talking loudly to during the sermon. They won't stop.
2. _____ (the Trustee chair) has been the Trustee Chair for the last 15yrs. _____ (the Pastor) doesn't know how to discuss the need to have someone else step up for leadership.
3. _____ (the church custodian) doesn't have a job description– but 1/2 the SPRC feels that the job isn't getting done– although they don't have any measurable evidence.– just suspicion. They want to terminate the custodian.
4. The finance chair (_____), suspects that the volunteer church treasurer (_____) is stealing from collections. The chair is speaking about this openly with many people.
5. A Sunday School teacher (_____) refuses to follow Safe Sanctuary policy and leave her door open (there is no window in the door) and won't work with another person in the room. The SPRC doesn't want to 'offend her', but students are reporting they are 'scared' in her class.
6. A separated couple (both congregants) _____ and _____, use the children's program time on Wed night to trade off custodial care. They also have been using this time (increasingly) to fight with each other. It is impacting the children's ministry. You get to chat with the couple.
7. A long-time member of the church _____ is posting very negative opinions about their newly appointed pastor _____ on Facebook. The pastor has approached this congregant, concerning the attacks, and has asked them to please stop. The congregant says it is their right to post what they want on their own personal Facebook account.

Tools:

Discernment Journal: Much like a fire extinguisher, the Discernment Journal is a great tool that many people don't ever notice, until after they really need it. The journal is a great resource for helping a person work through the vital questions that need to be asked to navigate Step 1a and 1b. We can't completely or honestly examine our own hearts without accountable questions. Most often, we just want to focus on the surface feelings, without discerning the causes, the effects, our own perceptions, significant history, or many other factors. By writing these down, we often already feel better. Are people required to fill out a Journal form to move ahead with the ROC? That's up to each church. I require having one to do a mediation, simply because I need clear perspectives of the persons involved. Moreover, I like to have them to compare to how the perspectives change over time (you know that happens). I usually summarize my need for this form as, "If it's important enough to move forward and discuss with others, then it's important enough to actually write your feelings down on paper." A final benefit of the Discernment Journal form is the legality. It is an awesome form to have handy in a very confrontational situation. If a person was assaulted in your church, there is no doubt that more conversations are going to happen about the incident. Wouldn't it be beneficial to have this form already filled out by each person involved? If the police ask the church for a statement, these forms will accomplish that request without the need for anyone to go on record.

Concern Summary: Another very useful, but seldom grabbed tool. The Concern Summary form also includes some great questions for finalizing or summarizing a conflict for mediation. These are more useful in more complex mediations, where it is important to establish next steps or agreed upon actions. With groups making this agreement together, they are also agreeing to the consequences of not following the ROC and not being accountable to their agreement.

Accountability Inquiry: This is a vital step in the process. A designated person, who both parties feel comfortable with, must follow up and see how things are going. The Accountability Inquiry allows people to verbalize their feelings of success or disappointment in the progress. This also allows the mediator to have an opportunity to revisit the steps, divert conflict, and get everyone back on track. I think it's also very beneficial for all parties including the mediator to know that we are all part of a caring, grace-filled family.

Next Steps:

So, what's next? That really is up to your church. This training is an opportunity to begin a new way of approaching communication. That kind of change doesn't happen overnight, but even in incremental changes, the work will yield amazing results. It is the recommendation of the Bishop and Cabinet, that this training be implemented, adopted, and utilized by each church. The easiest way that most churches have found to do that is through a sermon series that teaches the importance of each of these steps, completed with a covenant by the church that all members will choose to follow this Rule of Christ in their faith lived out with one another.

My recommendation for other churches, (including the churches that I have served), is for the pastor and the SPRC (who set the goals for the local church) to accept this process as a church policy. Meaning you would adopt it as your church's way of approaching communication and conflict. When I have helped churches to develop a Conflict Resolution Policy, the 3 main elements that are typically agreed to be vital were:

- A church-wide policy that is presented and accepted by the church as a new way to approach all communication.
- Clear procedures, that are available to everyone.
- A covenant by the church, to accept this new way of approaching communication, as a gift to God, and in covenant promise with God.

Regardless of what your church chooses, we want to know how you are putting this process into effect in your church. Within 1 month of your training, your trainer will be contacting your church leadership to see what plans are underway, or to assist in setting plans up. After that call, your D.S. will also be following up to see how plans are going. We believe in the importance of this tool for your church, and we've witnessed the change that churches have experienced in adopting this new way of communicating with one another. That's why we want to be accountable to you (like this model teaches us to do) and offer whatever help we can, so that your congregation will be able to have less conflicts and easier communication all around.

Please know that there is an abundance of people ready to assist your congregation. The EOC Conference Office is full of resources, staff, and guidance for your use. Please feel free to contact either of the EOC Trainers at any time for further questions or concerns you might have in moving forward. We have both helped several churches work through this process and have been overwhelmed with the positive impacts it brings to communities that implement the Rule of Christ. If you are struggling with church conflict, don't do this alone! Use this process to get help by making a call! That is the blessing of worshiping in a connectional church like the UMC— amen? We are all here to help! We are in this together and you are not alone!