



M I C H I G A N
M I N I S T R Y
N E T W O R K

**OVERCOMING A SEASON OF DIVISION OR STRIFE
IN THE LOCAL CHURCH
PLAYBOOK**

No matter how much we desire to have health and unity in a local church, there will be moments and, sadly, even seasons of division and strife.

While this reality may be discouraging, know that it is possible to endure and survive. This playbook walks through how to overcome these seasons and come out the other side.

The goal is to move the church from disagreement to renewed trust so the mission of the church can be accomplished. The goal isn't simply to stop gossip, stop conflict, or stop people from arguing.

Conflict is rarely resolved in a moment. Trust is often built through consistency over time. Don't rush through the conflict; rather, lead through it.

Biblical unity isn't about pretending nothing happened. It's about learning to address what happened in a way that honors Christ.

Remember: A season of division doesn't have to become the identity of the church or you.

THE LEADER'S ROLE

When a church faces a season of struggle, the leader's primary role is to bring stability to the church. This can be challenging because conflict is often directed at the leader.

When conflict comes, leaders tend to lead in one of three ways:

1. **Go passive.** This is when we bury our heads in the sand and act like it isn't happening, or we try to appease the complainers, which creates a whole new set of long-term issues. Ignoring or denying it does not make it go away.
2. **Attack the people.** Sometimes leaders will try to run out complainers, correct them in public, or join the fray. Attacking those that appear to be causing the conflict does not bring resolution or unity.
3. **Make big changes.** Sometimes leaders may try to make changes in the church to overcome or advance the mission. When division is active, leaders should resist the temptation to immediately launch new ministries or try to "out-vision" the conflict. Allowing conflicts to dictate change steers away from God inspired vision and change.

The best way to lead during a divisive season is to:

1. **Take care of your heart.** This involves examining our hearts and our responses to others before we engage.
2. **Pray.** Every leader needs to first seek the wisdom of God to gain divine insight and direction for the situation at hand.
3. **Listen.** The only way a leader can gain full insight into what is happening is to hear what is being said. Listen objectively to all sides and ask the Holy Spirit to help discern the truth.
4. **Commit to truth.** Division usually grows in environments where people don't know what is true. Get to the heart of the matter and find out what is really going on. Don't avoid the truth. No matter what is said, even if it causes you to have to face your own actions, it is wise to do what's right instead insisting on being right.
5. **Communicate.** When leaders don't communicate, it leaves room for people to receive wrong and harmful information. In the absence of information, people also tend to fill in the missing information with their own assumptions and theories. If this false information is repeated without correction, it often becomes what people believe.

EXAMPLE: Some concerns have been raised within our church. While we are willing to address anything that is unhealthy in our church, we want to do so

without rumors or speculation becoming facts. We are committed to truth, prayer, listening, and a biblical process of reconciliation.

NOTE: Be cautious not to over-communicate or come across as defensive. That doesn't mean one should not address untruths or lies; however, simpler is often better. Transparency does not mean publicly discussing confidential matters. It is wise to protect personal information, counseling/private conversations, others' personal matters, and vulnerable people. You can tell the truth without violating confidentiality or sacrificing your integrity.

6. **Identify the true magnitude of the problem.** Don't exaggerate or ignore the situation at hand. Gaining a clear understanding of how serious the problem is will help you decide the need for the level of action that is necessary.
7. **Face the reality.** It is unwise to treat every complaint as valid, but don't dismiss complaints simply because they're uncomfortable.
8. **Protect the innocent.** In every conflict, some people do not understand what they may have been drawn into, let alone those who have no clue what is occurring.
9. **Seek outside counsel.** Talk to a trusted friend that will help you see the situation clearly. Go to a leader that can help you process and make decisions moving forward. Then, when you make those decisions, own them as your own.
10. **Give grace whenever possible.** The goal isn't merely determining who was right. The goal is restoration. The process aims to obtain truth, resolve misunderstandings, repent when needed, forgive, reestablish trust, and restore the relationship.
11. **Continue to do ministry well.** Division and strife can be very consuming and affect all areas of our thoughts and lives if we let it. Do your best to recognize that there is still a lot of good in the church and minister well even when it's difficult.
12. **Identify the issue(s).** This requires skill, objectivity, and discernment. The greatest way to identify and assess what is occurring is to ask great questions of yourself and others. Here are some examples:
 - What really happened?
 - Where is there inconsistency between what people are saying and what is true?
 - What is the concern about what may happen if this doesn't get resolved?
 - Who has been hurt by what is occurring?
 - What are the legitimate concerns/grievances?
 - What misinformation entered the situation?
 - What leaders are involved and/or what leadership mistakes have been made?

- Is this a Biblical disagreement, or is this a matter of personality or fighting for a personal preference?

One of the biggest mistakes churches make is treating every disagreement as one giant problem. It is wise to identify the issue by asking:

- **Is it a sin issue like gossip, lying, manipulation, pride, or deception?** If this is a sin issue, it would be wise to use Biblical references when addressing it.
- **Is this issue a result of individual hurt (valid or invalid)?** Someone may be genuinely wounded even when nobody intentionally sinned. This requires listening, empathy, and care.
- **Is it just a simple difference of opinion between two or more people?** It is very possible that really good people can come to very different conclusions on an issue. The way to address this would be to approach it with great grace, humility, and discourse.
- **Is it a matter of personal preference?** This can come down to a wide variety of things such as music style/song selection, service style, décor of building, ministry effectiveness, personal dislike of a leader, or ministries discontinued.
- **Is it a matter of church discipline?** These include issues like abuse/sexual misconduct, financial mismanagement, ethical or moral violations, and/or criminal actions. This requires setting appropriate boundaries and may even lead to contacting authorities and/or removal of an individual from the church.

HOW TO RESPOND

1. **Pre-determine how you will handle conflict before you have to deal with it.** This will serve as a safeguard, protecting your actions from being driven by your own hurt and pain. When pastors are not cautious, the temptation may be to preach sermons or use platforms to get their point across. This is manipulative and will create more issues.
2. **Discuss directly and quickly.** Nothing gets resolved without direct, honest conversations with those involved. Matthew 18:15 instructs us to go to your brother privately.
3. **Bring resolution.** If a personal conversation doesn't resolve the issue and all parties are still attending the church, it may be necessary to involve an appropriate pastor, elder, or mature Christian. This should **NOT** be the first choice. When a pastor brings another person, it often widens the trust gap, leading to further conflict. This should be done only when absolutely necessary.
4. **Correction.** For unresolved or serious matters, appropriate church leadership becomes involved. Serious misconduct requires a more formal official response.
5. **Repentance.** Reconciliation without repentance can become a false peace. The solution includes appropriate acknowledgment and accountability. This applies to the pastor as well. Whenever a leader becomes aware of their own failures, it is essential that they lead the way through repentance.
6. **Forgive.** One of the greatest ways a leader can teach Biblical health is to teach the congregation how to forgive by leading by example and teaching theological principles for moving forward. Forgiveness doesn't mean that nothing ever occurred, that you have received all the apologies you should have, or that the damage and pain wasn't real. It also doesn't mean that trust is fully restored, consequences disappear, or the church's mission hasn't paid a cost.

However, Biblical forgiveness requires grace beyond what is easy, kindness when you feel angry, and the belief that a person's worst moments don't mean they are a terrible person. Forgiveness requires us to act like Christ, not like our natural vengeful nature.

7. **Rebuild Trust.** Trust is established and re-established through consistent and humble behavior over time. Leadership that puts kingdom principles into action through division will, in the end, gain trust with those remaining who can serve them well for the long term.
8. **Reunite Around the Vision.** Once the immediate crisis has stabilized, move on. Do not make the recent struggle an ongoing season. Your church will want to recover faster than you will. Don't allow your unresolved pain to skew the church's vision. Give people something to build toward. Remind your church

that God has called the church to accomplish great things. The church will need a future that is bigger than its past conflict.

9. **Focus on connection.** Unity grows through shared experiences. Establish a new sense of focused connection among church attendees. The more opportunities to do life together, the sooner your church will move beyond the conflict. Think fun, friendship, and family! A season of new relational focus will greatly move a church forward. People who once saw one another as opponents can rediscover they we are all on the same team and moving towards the same goal.
10. **Care for Your Leaders.** If the conflict originated with those on your leadership team, reconciliation has to begin there. Even if not, your leadership team has walked through betrayal and pain just like you. It is necessary to discuss matters openly and honestly. Some questions to ask may include:
 - How can we trust one another or the people in our church?
 - How will we disagree in honorable ways? How will we disagree in private and support each other and the vision in public?
 - Will we protect one another's reputation without condoning wrongdoing?
 - How are you doing?
11. **Evaluate Your Systems and Make Necessary Changes.** Don't simply heal the old system. Learn from it. Ask yourself what may need to change to prevent issues like this from happening again, or to prevent other issues from arising in the future. Ask: What allowed this conflict to become as destructive as it became? It would be wise to examine all aspects of one's church/ministry, including job descriptions and accountability structures, board and staff training, conflict-resolution processes, staff and board accountability, safeguarding policies, and communication protocols.