

# The Rule of Christ for Congregations

## A Matthew 18 Application of Family Systems Theory to Address Conflict Well

**For** Those Seeking to Establish a Procedure for Addressing Conflict in the Faith Community. Written for United Methodist traditions it is easily adaptable for other faith traditions.

**Matthew 18** guides the making of a user-friendly procedure in a faith community.

### **Process Summary**

1<sup>st</sup> step, verses 8-9: examine your intentions and actions so far. The 'Discernment Journal' is provided to assist you with this self-examination.

2<sup>nd</sup> step, verse 15: go directly to the person with whom you are in conflict, with confidence 'when the two of you are alone' and work it out.

If this proves unsatisfactory,

3<sup>rd</sup> step, verses 16-17a: get help hearing each other.

The 'Concern Brief' is provided to assist you inviting others to help. If this proves unsatisfactory,

4<sup>th</sup> step, versus 17b, follow Jesus Christ's example on how to relate to persons with whom you disagree.

For assistance contact Naomi García,

change, systems, conflict...4 good.

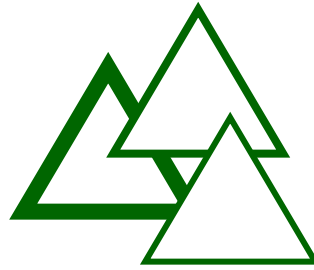
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*In memory of disciple, musician, peacemaker and originator  
of this guide, Rev. Terry N. Gladstone, Deacon,  
Detroit Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.*

## Chapter One: Triangles



### Imagine this ...

Two siblings are fighting over who gets to pick the next video to watch. As the argument increases they decide to take it to .....

The second grade class is out on the playground for recess. Mandy and Derrick get into a fight over the playground ball. They go to ....

Your next door neighbor's dog has been left outside every night for a week. He starts barking each night around 2:00 AM and you can't sleep. You call ....

### Or imagine this ...

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.

You are concerned that the new pastor is not spending any time visiting new families. You speak to the Administrative Council chairperson about your concern.

Your wife is preoccupied with work – both at work and at home. Your children complain to you that Mom won't let them have friends over. You tell the kids, "Don't expect much from Mom these days. She is preoccupied with work."

### Comments:

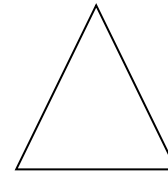
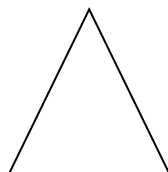
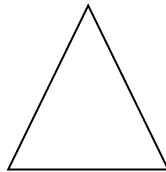
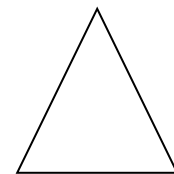
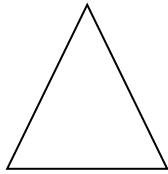
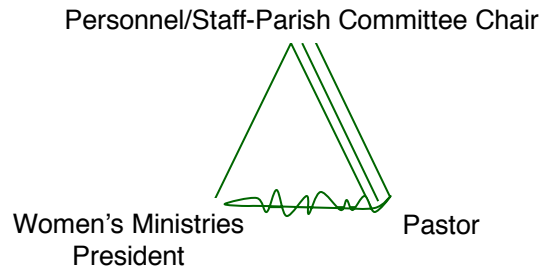
Going to a third person instead of the one with whom we have a problem, is as natural to us as anything we do in life. It is frequently our preferred method for settling conflicts and binding our anxieties.

Learning about how triangles work in a church will greatly aid the Staff-Parish Relations Committee or other designated body in understanding conflicts and relationships in the church. Most conflicts are not about content. They are, rather, about relationships and emotions. Jesus had a lot to say on this topic.

**To Think About:**

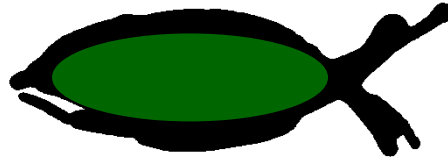
1. What are some of the natural triangles that you are in? Name the three points of each.

Example:



2. Think about the relationships in each of these triangles. Is their conflict between any two sides? (Indicate this with a zigzag line)
3. Are any two sides especially close in their relationship? (Indicate this by drawing 3 bold lines between the two sides)
4. When we draw close to one side of the triangle, we may draw further apart from the other side. What are your thoughts?

## Chapter Two: The Jesus Model



District Superintendent Joyce White, had a call from Harvey Ludlum at First United Methodist Church in Glenport. She really did not want to call Harvey back. These calls always took a long time. Harvey was very concerned about his church and the way they were treating their new pastor, Rev. Mary. This was the first time that First UMC had a female pastor and Harvey really wanted to make this a success but he was constantly being bombarded with complaints from parishioners. He felt he couldn't talk to anyone else in the church about these issues and always called the D.S. for advice. Rev. White had come to expect this call and dreaded it. She didn't really have any good answers to his questions and concerns. If only the Bible had something to say on this subject.

### Comments:

There are several triangle relationships in the above story. All appear to be pretty messy to handle at this time. Where can we find help?

The Bible does have something to say on this subject. In fact, Jesus lays out a plan for handling concerns in the church and it is found in Matthew 18. It has come to be known as the "Rule of Christ for the Congregation". This model is a fairly linear model for resolving concerns. What follows is an outline of The Rule of Christ and an application of it.

## Matthew 18: The Rule of Christ

*If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire*

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

*But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

*If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*

*...and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you, as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

### 1. Look at Yourself Matt 18:8-9

Jesus tells us to take time to examine our role in the conflict. Ask yourself these questions:

- Can I let it go? (If the answer is “yes” there is no need to confront the other person.) If not...
- What may the other person perceive that I have contributed to this problem?
- What does God see?

Change your behavior based on these insights.  
*If not resolved ...*

### 2. One on One Matt 18:15

The purpose of this second step is to resolve the conflict...not to get mad or to get even. Remember to:

- Speak for yourself by starting your sentences with “I”
- Work hard to understand the other person’s point of view
- Work together to create solutions

*If not resolved ...*

### 3. Get Some Objective Help Matt 18:16

Others can help the two parties see possibilities. Take some one with you to help mediate or to help facilitate the process.

This is a good time to involve a church committee to help you resolve the issue. They can act as the “witnesses”.  
*If not resolved ...*

### 4. Take it to the Church Matt 18:17a

Use the resources of the Church. Bring in someone with skills in conflict resolution or someone who has the power to resolve the issue.

*If not resolved ...*

### 5. Shake the Dust Matt 18:17b (see Matthew 10)

There are some issues that can not be resolved. The church should remember its mission. Let go of the anger and disappointment at the unresolved issues and move on with your ministry.

### 6. God is There Matt 18:20

This is God’s powerful promise to be with us in the midst of our problems.

**To Think About:**

Think about a recent conflict you were a part of. From your point of view:

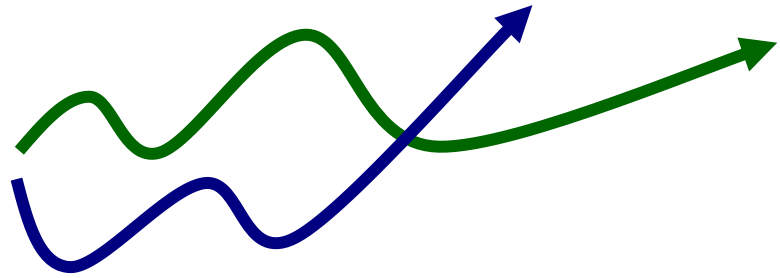
- who initiated the concern?
- to whom did they go with their concern (at first)?
- What were the results, consequences etc.?

Name a time when you felt compelled to raise the level of intensity in a conflict, but after thinking and praying about it you realized you could let it go?

For each of the following cases, finish the story by following The Rule of Christ:

1. One of the members of the adult choir is upset that the pastor is ignoring the choir director. They should ...
2. The church secretary hears two members talking about the custodian's poor job of cleaning up after the rummage sale...
3. A Trustee is invited over to the parsonage for dinner and is disturbed by the condition of the kitchen...
4. There are many complaints about the churches lack of new members. The pastor receives an anonymous letter threatening to take this concern to the SPRC or other designated body if the pastor does not take immediate action to get new members.
5. A relatively new member makes an appointment to see the pastor and explains that she is leaving the church because of criticisms she received from the older members of the UMW when she chaired the craft fair last month.

### Chapter Three: Two Paths



Vicky was a very active member of First Church. Over the years she had held many positions on church committees, had volunteered significant hours of time to the Sunday School and was sought after for advice by the previous two pastors. But Vicky did not like Laura, the new Sunday School director.

She and her husband had talked about the situation over the last few months and felt that someone needed to take action. She and her husband decided to share their concern with the Palmers before making any official request. They wanted to see how the Palmers felt about the situation. Vicky invited the Palmers over for dinner and after dinner they began to lay out their concerns about the Sunday School and Laura's leadership. The Palmers were quiet at first but did agree that things did not seem to be going smoothly. Vicky suggested that she was ready to approach the Staff Parish Committee with the problem and request that they do something before the whole Sunday School fell apart. "That might be a wise thing to do", said Gary Palmer, "but you may want to see how other parents feel before you go to the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC)."

The next day Vicky began her effort to interview the parents. She asked each parent the same question, "Do you feel that Laura is doing a good job with our Sunday School?" She found, in their answers, many similar concerns to her own and recorded each of the concerns carefully. She was now ready to take this list of concerns to the SPRC. Vicky called the SPRC chair and told him that she had a list of concerns from the parents. She insisted the SPRC take immediate action before the whole program fell apart. "Who has these concerns, Vicky?" he asked. Vicky responded, "Everyone has asked to remain anonymous. They do not want Laura to take it out on their child. I can give you a written summary of everyone's comments though."

### Comments:

This story illustrates a typical path that church members use to handle their concerns. It looks like this:

1. I become concerned with something
2. I share my concern with a trusted friend. Since my friend offers no major objections, I decide to continue on a course of action.
3. I begin to interview people in order to find evidence and support for this course of action.
4. I call (or write a letter to) the chairperson of the appropriate committee. I share the evidence and strongly insist that the committee handle the problem.
5. I stipulate that the information that has been shared needs to remain confidential and I also indicate that I cannot share the names of those who have been interviewed.
6. The committee either ...
  - Handles the concern and does what I suggested
  - Tables the concern
  - Discusses the concern but finds no support for the suggested action
  - Handles the concern in a different way
  - Never hears about the concern because the chairperson handles it or forgets about it.
7. No one calls you back. You see no evidence that they took your complaint seriously. (Of course, you indicated that everything needed to remain confidential and you could not reveal who was actually complaining.)

This typical pattern results in quite a bit of anxiety. The Staff-Parish Relations Committee has become triangled into the problem or concern. Communication is very difficult. A face-to-face resolution is almost impossible. There is a lack of direct information and so each person's assumptions play a big part in the discussion.

### To Think About:

Consider encouraging this pattern instead:

When you become concerned about an issue ...

1. Spend time alone with God.
2. Go directly to the person with whom you have a concern.
3. If you cannot work it out, ask a third party to assist you.
4. If you still cannot work out the problem use the resources of the church to assist – perhaps calling in an authority or conflict mediator.

Adapted from Matthew 18



## Chapter Three: An Application of The Rule of Christ



### SALLY'S STORY

Let me tell you a story about an imaginary church. Sally Foster had never really liked the new youth director, Adam, but when her daughter came home from the spring retreat very depressed Sally decided it was time to do something about it. She wanted to make sure, however, that she was not the only person feeling this way and so she decided to first visit Marnie Hollstrum's mother, Vicky, and see if she felt the same way.

As Sally talked with Vicky she did not notice that Vicky was largely silent but when Sally asked, "Don't you agree that something should be done?" Vicky said, "Yes, I suppose so". That was good enough for Sally. She was glad that she was not the only person concerned about Adam. She decided to poll all of the parents of youth and get their comments before she asked the SPRC to do something.

Sally spent the next two weeks calling all the parents and recording their concerns about the youth director. She carefully recorded all the concerns and presented them to the PPRC Chairperson after the 11:00 service on the following Sunday. He wanted to know what he was receiving. "These are the concerns of the parents of youth in our church. We are asking that the PPRC take immediate action to remove Adam as our youth director. And you will see why after you read the comments." "Who have you talked with, Sally?" "I really can't reveal their names to you, Dave. They have all asked that you keep these comments confidential."

Dave did not want to deal with this list of concerns. 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 the best they could do at the time. 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 youth program, and since they could not talk directly to the parents who raised the concerns, due to the fact that they did not 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 in addition, Dave would talk with Adam and ask him to make improvements in the areas that were mentioned in the letter.

Dave did meet with Adam and he promised to do better.

Sally waited for three weeks but she did not hear anything from the SPRC and she also noted that Adam was carrying on as if everything was normal. She couldn't believe the SPRC refused to take action, especially in the light of so much evidence from the parents. She knew she could not talk to the senior pastor about the issue because Adam was a friend of the pastor's family and so she 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 and mailed it the very next day.

**Comments:**

This is a committee that needs procedures for dealing with concerns. On the following page is an example of a complaint procedure process that was developed by a Staff-Parish Relations Committee. They have agreed to follow these simple procedures in dealing with complaints. It has helped them to stay focused on their goal of improving the relationship between the pastor and the parish and it has helped them to raise the functioning of the church members in accordance with The Rule of Christ.

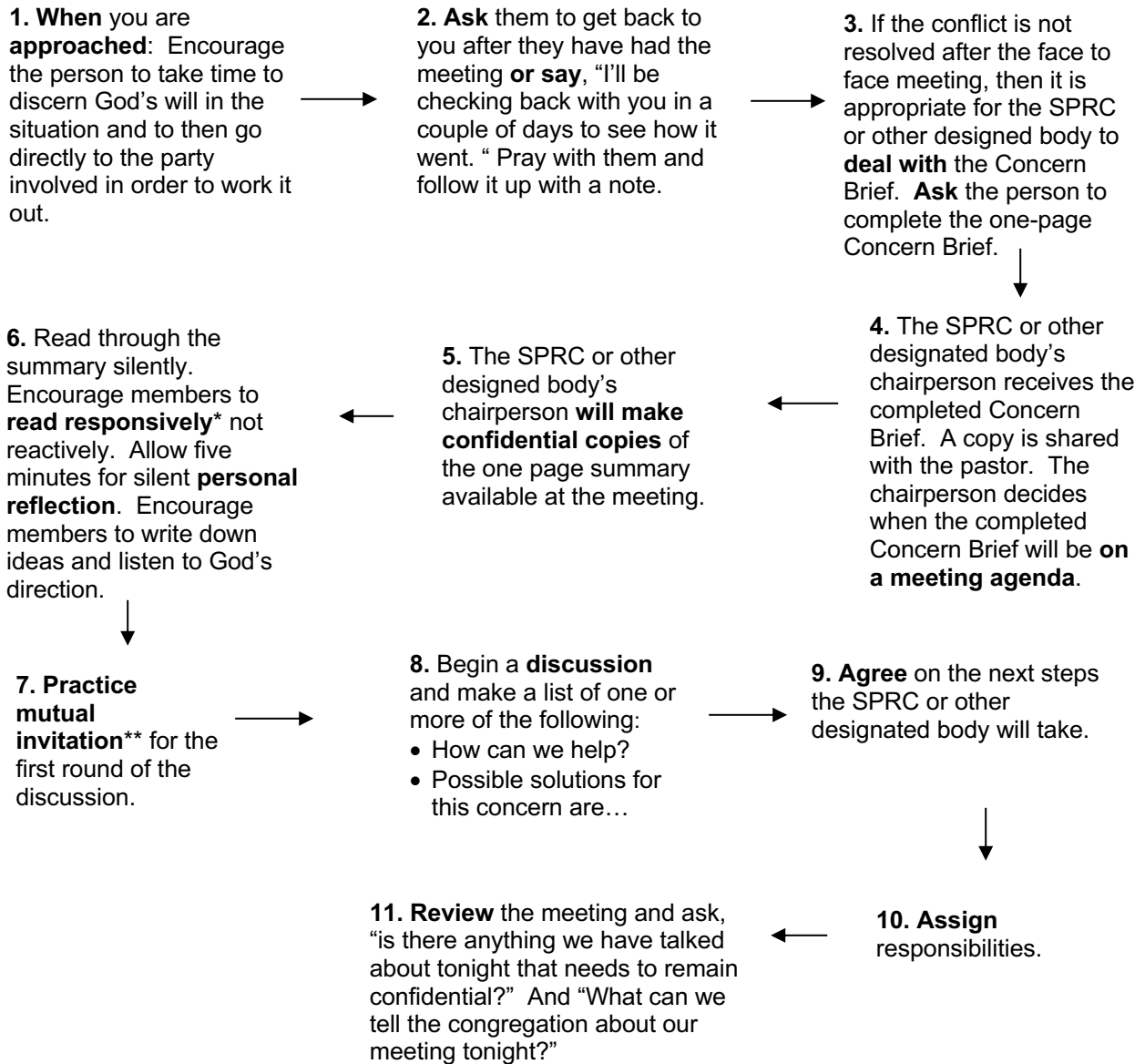
There is no one way to this. Each church is a unique and unrepeatable miracle of God and will come to its own conclusions on how to apply The Rule of Christ. Take a look at this sample process (on the next page) and then move to the “To Think About” section. It will help your committee work on establishing your own procedures.

**To Think About:**

Follow these suggested steps to establishing your own procedures:

1. Remember that it is the discussion of these issues that will be the most valuable. A Complaint Procedure process that has had little discussion will also be of little value to your work. Remind the group that you will not make any final decisions in this first meeting.
2. Begin by reading “Sally’s Story” silently.
3. Ask the group for their reflections on the story. What is getting to you about this story?
4. Do a Bible study on Matthew 18. (See page 5.)
5. Show the group the sample complaint procedure process.
6. Use mutual invitation to begin your conversation. This step is very important to the process. If you simply open up the discussion to anyone who wants to talk, you will not hear everyone’s point of view. The mutual invitation process helps to get a lot of ideas out on the table before you open up the discussion.
7. After the mutual invitation round, open up the discussion. You may wish to start with this question: Which idea intrigues you the most?
8. Stop the discussion after an appropriate amount of discussion. Ask everyone to end this time by expressing one question that the discussion has raised for them.
9. Encourage everyone to take this sample home and to spend some time thinking about the suggestions and ideas that were expressed. Bring their ideas back to the next meeting.
10. Conclude the meeting by asking, “Is there anything we have discussed tonight that should remain confidential?”
11. Next Meeting: conclude your discussions and make decisions on a complaint process you wish to follow.

**Here is a sample Complaint Procedure:**



*\* Read Responsibly*  
To read "responsively" means Responsive reading seeks connections, deepens awareness and looks for solutions. (Reactive reading tends to be defensive, easily hurt or angered and looks to find where the blame can be placed.)

*\*\* Mutual Invitation*  
The goal is to encourage participation from all people in a group. The first person shares her or his point of view. No comments are allowed from the group. This first person then invites the next person to share. That person may share (or not) but in either case this one still invites the next person to share. This is continued until all in the group have had a chance to share/invite (or just invite). The conversation may then be less formal to allowing people spontaneously respond and discuss.

**DISCERNMENT JOURNAL**

Matthew 18 provides a process Christians can use to resolve conflicts. The first step in this process (verses 8-9) asks you to examine yourself. This journal will help you do that. The second step in the process (verse 15) is to go directly to the person, “when the two of you are alone” and work it out if you can.

**Begin in prayer. Ask God for direction and then complete this journal.**

**Briefly identify the issue: (Use only one sentence. This will help you focus)**

Your position on the issue:

Your perception of the other person’s/group’s position on the issue:

Put yourself in the other person’s/group’s shoes. What might they say that you have contributed to the conflict?

Describe the need you want to have addressed. There is a need for:

What are some possible Scripture images for this situation:

Is there a history behind your concern? Is this history impacting your reactions?

What steps can you take to remain calm, confident and connected to the other person?

**CONCERN SUMMARY**

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Name the person this concerns \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the steps you have taken to resolve and communicate this concern with the party(ies) involved:

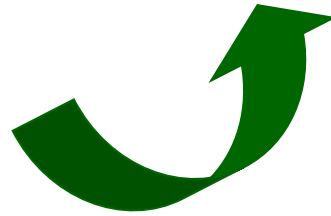
To what have the involved parties agreed?

What remains to be resolved?

State your concern as a need. *(It is very important to be concise in this statement to provide clarity for the committee)*

To be at peace on this issue, I need...

## Chapter Four: Inviting the Congregation



Frank had been diligent and invaluable as a member of the Trustees. Frank's special interest was in making sure that the furnace was running smoothly and efficiently. In addition, he had worked hard to reduce the utility bills. For three Sundays in a row, while Frank was making his rounds checking the building, he discovered that someone had left a window open in the fourth grade classroom. He couldn't believe the irresponsible behavior of the person who was doing it and he suspected that it was the teacher of the class. Frank wrote her a letter and attached a "mock" bill for \$35 to cover the cost of heating the room.

When the Sunday School teacher received Frank's letter she was so mad that she resigned her position as Sunday School teacher and called the pastor to say that she was also leaving the church.

The pastor brought the concern to the SPRC at its next meeting.

### Comments:

This kind of complicated story is common in church situations. Even assuming that your committee has complaint procedures, it may be that you have to deal with a situation just like this. What good will it do for your committee to have excellent complaint procedures that follow The Rule of Christ, if no one else in the congregation has any awareness of the procedures? You will need a plan for how to invite the congregation into this process.

### To Think About:

What plans can you make to educate your church? You might use this process to make some plans:

1. Invite everyone on the committee to find a partner. You will be interviewing this partner on two questions. Encourage them to tell stories and think about the details of their story. The two questions are:
  - Name a time when you found out about something in this church and it really made an impact on you. How did you hear about it? What was the topic? What did you do in response?
  - What are three most effective ways of communicating with people in our church? If we were to communicate every important topic in this manner over the next twelve months, what results do you think we would see?
2. Report back to the group what you have discovered in your interviews.
3. What are the common themes we have discovered? In other words, what are some effective means of communication in our church?
4. Now, think about the newly adopted complaint procedures. What would be the effective ways of inviting the congregation into helping us follow The Rule of Christ in resolving our concerns?
5. Make decisions about what you wish to do. Assign responsibilities.
6. Celebrate! You have accomplished a lot in the last few weeks.

## Chapter Five: Developing A Complaint Procedure

### I. Sally's Story

- Begin with the story about Sally. (page 9)
- Allow 3 minutes for silent reflection at the end of the story.
- Ask one or more of the following questions: Does this sound familiar? What bothers you about this story? Do you have any insights for our committee?

### II. A Typical Path

Outline the “path” on page 5.

### III. Biblical guidance

Go through the steps in The Rule of Christ (pages 5-6)

### IV. Applying Matthew 18 and Romans 12

- Refer to the complaint procedures chart. (page11) Allow members to look it over. Briefly describe each step.
- Discuss the chart by using the technique of “mutual invitation” to begin the conversation. (A description of the mutual invitation method is found on the chart.)
- Open up the discussion after each person has been invited. You may wish to start with the question, “What insight intrigued you the most?”

### V. Creating Your Own Complaint Procedures

- Ask each member to carefully read over the complaint procedures again and to make notes about which sections they would like to keep or modify. Bring these suggestions to the next meeting.
- At the next meeting, ask members to share their ideas. Do not allow any discussion of ideas until all have been presented.
- Point out the summary of Matthew 18 once again. Begin a discussion of all the ideas that were presented. Ask members to keep Matthew 18 in front of them. Test your ideas against this passage. Keep a copy of THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH in front of them as a resource. After 20 minutes of discussion, assign a recorder. Ask the recorder to put the ideas up on a piece of newsprint. Your own complaint procedures will begin to emerge.



## Chapter Five: Developing A Complaint Procedure

*~continued~*

- Develop your own steps for handling complaints. Give it a title. Check all the steps with the committee members. (If the discussion has been particularly complicated, the Chairperson might request that one member try putting all the ideas into a document. They will bring the document to the next meeting for the committee can refine.)
- VI. Finalize your procedures.
- Optional: practice your procedures using some role plays.
  - Devise a way to educate the congregation (see below).
  - Send a copy of your procedures to your consultant and to Naomi García at [ngarcia@michiganumc.org](mailto:ngarcia@michiganumc.org)
- VII. Educating the Congregation
- Devise a plan for educating the congregation.
  - Make sure you know who will be responsible for each step of your plan to educate the congregation.
  - Be open to making changes in the document based on feedback from the congregation as long as it is in keeping with Matthew 18 and THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.