



Upstate New York Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Conflict and Healing Team

*The Upstate New York Synod is a Resurrection People who
Pray First, Walk Together, and Change Lives*

The resurrection of Jesus gives ample testimony that for Christians, the forces of evil simply will not have the final word. The power of God is at work in us each week as we gather to celebrate the risen life of Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament. St. Paul reminds us: *“since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 3: 23-24). We receive this grace with gratitude, a sign of God's presence with us.

Like the first disciples, we journey together. We gather in congregations to share our lives, pray for one another, proclaim the good news to others, and to live as followers of Jesus Christ. When a shared focus on mission and a sense of cooperation and partnership unite a congregation, the members experience joy and peace. When anxiety, uncertainty, or conflicts divide the congregation, members often experience pain and sadness. The resurrection of Jesus helps us to remember that God is always offering new life. Conflict and trouble give way to grace, as God invites us into new ways forward in our life together.

Tension and anxiety in the church are normal and have been a part of church life from its earliest days. We see in 1st and 2nd Corinthians a church struggling to prioritize spiritual gifts. The Galatians lashed out at so-called “super-apostles” who challenged Paul's authority. In 1st John there is a mass exodus of members who came to believe that Jesus really didn't come to this earth as a human being. While none of us are immune from the divisions that are experienced in the world, as a resurrection people, we have received gifts of grace and new life from God in Jesus Christ, grace to heal our wounds and new life to help us see past tension and conflict to possibilities we had not been able to see on our own. Grace urges us toward forgiveness. New life is possible through reconciliation. The God of Exodus and Easter sets us free.

The Synod's Conflict and Healing Team (CHT) is a ministry resource available to congregations at difficult times in their life. Members of the team walk together with congregational leaders in times of anxiety or conflict, reminding them of the new life and hope that is offered in Jesus Christ and assisting them in making decisions that will lead to greater health and unity.

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Who

The CHT is a group of rostered and lay leaders who have been appointed by the Bishop. They come from all across the synod and bring with them a variety of gifts and vocational backgrounds. They believe in the power of the resurrection and have seen it take shape again and again in congregational life. They have been trained to listen and to observe, to offer a safe place for difficult conversations to take place, to analyze and speak the truth about what they observe, and to recognize the difference between the visible symptoms and the underlying causes of conflict. They see themselves as having been called to work with Congregation Councils, rostered and lay leaders, and congregations, not only to help them understand the sources of conflict but also to develop healthy strategies for future life and growth.

The CHT meets regularly throughout the year for prayer, sharing, and conversation about the congregations currently being served by the team, for updating and training, and to help the Bishop in providing workshops and sharing information at Conference and Synodical gatherings. Prayer is fundamental for this team. We pray first, for all whom we are serving. Prayer undergirds the entire process of helping.

What

Conflict comes to a congregation in a number of ways. Conflict can arise when there is anxiety about change and fear about the future. As congregations seek to be faithful to Jesus and to their mission, issues about outreach to unchurched neighbors, new patterns of worship, youth ministry, or declining worship attendance can lead to frustration and anger. At other times, conflicting personalities within a congregation's membership, or between congregation and pastor, can lead to conflict. Sadly, there are also occasions when sexual or financial misconduct ignites conflict as feelings of betrayal and anger cloud judgment. Unfortunately, in some congregations, conflict becomes a pattern that surfaces again and again as a result of unaddressed or unresolved issues from the past. By facing the conflict, naming issues, concerns, causes, and patterns, the CHT can help congregation to use conflict as the springboard for new life and new growth in the Spirit. We are a resurrection people. Jesus is living among us.

When

The faithful nature of congregations means that most situations of conflict have been worked on by congregation councils, committees, and individuals within the congregation before outside help is sought. Many times the faith and goodwill of hard-working congregational members can successfully address conflicts and re-focus the congregation toward its mission and ministry. The CHT exists for those times when the best local efforts have failed to address the issues of conflict. The CHT is committed to walk together with members and leaders of congregations in times of conflict or anxiety. The best time to request help from the CHT is when the leadership of the congregation believes it needs to draw on the resources CHT can provide.



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How

The CHT works under the direct and close supervision of the Bishop. The first step in engaging the CHT is to have the official leadership of the congregation telephone the Bishop's office and make the request. Individual congregation members who think that CHT could be helpful are encouraged to work through their Council or other elected leaders. It is most helpful when both the pastor(s) and elected leaders can make the request together. At that point the Bishop may ask the congregational leaders to contact the CHT chairperson directly, or the Bishop will notify the CHT chairperson, who will then be in contact with the leaders. The Bishop may also contact the conference dean or one of the Bishop's assistants to gain an understanding of the particular situation. It's important for congregations to know that engaging the CHT does not preclude any of the other ways the Bishop's office may assist the congregation.

Starting Out

Once the request is made, the CHT will, in many instances, form a team of two or three CHT members to work directly with your congregation. Whenever possible, both clergy and lay persons will comprise this team. They will set up an initial meeting, often with the Congregation Council, the Mutual Ministry Committee, the pastor, or all of them, to begin the listening and observing process. Typically time is set aside for individual, confidential interviews between congregation members and the team. Occasionally the team schedules a congregational history event if it seems useful for clarifying the situation.

This is the normal way the CHT proceeds. Depending on the nature and scope of congregational conflict, the team may suggest other models, for example, a council retreat or congregational visioning event.

Drawing to a Close

Each CHT team will assess the best way forward, in consultation with the Bishop and the entire CHT team. Eventually the team prepares a summary paper to explain its findings. This summary typically includes a review of the work done, observations gleaned from interviews, and other interactions. Specific recommendations for the congregation and pastor are often offered in the report. This summary paper will be shared with the congregation. In some cases, where warranted, a private letter is prepared for the pastor, including additional recommendations of a more personal nature. It is important to note that the team's observations and recommendations are not presented to the Congregation and pastor until they have undergone a complete review by the Bishop and/or Synod Staff. Because the CHT is an extension of the Bishop's ministry to the Synod and its congregations, the Bishop has the authority to review, alter, change, or approve all communications of the CHT with congregations.



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Obligations of the Congregation

Once the summary report is delivered, it is the congregation's responsibility to follow up by addressing the observations and recommendations in the report. When requested or appropriate, the CHT has sometimes agreed to return in 6-9 months for follow up or further consultation. The Synod remains committed to its mission of continuing to walk with the congregation, providing whatever resources or assistance that it might have to offer. While congregations are not obligated to do anything but receive the report, it is the hope and prayer of the CHT and the Bishop that the congregation will take the report seriously and work to discover new ways to move forward in addressing conflict and refocusing the congregation on mission. The team has witnessed several examples of congregations using these reports as the beginning place for exciting renewal in their communities. It is important to remember that grace is at the core of our Christian identity and it is by grace that we are resurrection people. When congregational members, leaders and synod leaders partner together in the sometimes difficult, but always joy-filled, work of God, we often are given a glimpse of His new life.

Key Understandings

1. The CHT is neither designed nor able to provide a quick fix for difficult problems. When anxiety is running high in a congregation, it is hard to accept that the solutions to the problems and conflicts are going to take time. Often, the problems have been present in the congregation for some time before the CHT is contacted. Any expectation that the work will be completed quickly is unrealistic. This process typically takes six to nine months from the time of a first meeting until a completed report is presented to the congregation. Time for discernment is vital for the process to effect any real change. It's important for the congregation to remember that the folks on the CHT team are all volunteers, with other occupations and commitments. Often they will be traveling from a distance of two or three hours in order to do their work. That work is then thoroughly reviewed and refined before it is presented.
2. The mission of the CHT is to help congregations address conflict, not to resolve it for them. CHT members are not "experts" coming to "fix" the congregation. Rather, they come to facilitate a process that works through observation, listening and feedback. Not everyone in a congregation sees conflict or problems in the same way. Part of the work of the CHT involves uncovering causes of conflict which often lie hidden under the surface of particular presenting issues. A key ingredient of the CHT's work is to invite congregational leaders and members to hear one another in fresh ways. Lives can be changed when people hear and learn from one another. Even while the work of the CHT is in process, congregational leaders are expected to continue the normal work of leading the congregation.
3. When the conflict involves the pastor, not all recommendations to the pastor are made public. In many situations where some or all of the conflict relates to the pastor, the pastor's role in the conflict will be acknowledged in the summary report. The summary report will usually include observations and recommendations for the pastor as well as for the congregation. However, there may be recommendations, even requirements, of a more personal nature that are shared with the pastor in a separate letter, but not with the whole congregation.



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Other Ways to Use the CHT

The CHT may be helpful to a congregation in other ways, which do not involve conflict. You might wish to engage someone on the CHT to:

- attend a staff meeting to discuss: boundary awareness issues; safe sanctuaries; computer use policies, healthy leadership, etc.
- attend a congregation council meeting to discuss any of the above topics, to review the guidelines for conversations about difficult issues, to be an “outside” resource in a congregational retreat, to discuss potentially difficult topics, e.g. change in Sunday schedule, new styles of worship, congregational future, or Churchwide Assembly actions.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are people of the Cross. Times of conflict in the congregation are never sought but sometimes are unavoidable. Our faith tells us that in Jesus, death gives way to new life.

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In the life of a congregation, it is probably impossible to avoid the pain of difficult times. Still, God is present in those painful times revealing the depth of God’s love for God’s people. The Conflict and Healing Team is one of the ways that the Upstate Synod lives into its mission with the congregations of the Synod.

Contact the CHT through the Upstate Synod Office:

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