

What are our relationships really
like within the PCA?

And how does the gospel
(and our own PCA Book of Church Order)
call us to something better?



*A Summary of Tara Barthel's 2006 WIC Survey
on Biblical Peacemaking with Suggestions for
Applying the PCA Book of Church Order
Appendix on Christian Conciliation*

With the help and oversight of my beloved husband, Fred, my pastor, Jason Barrie, and my elder and his wife, Jeff and Amy Laverman, I have prepared this article with the sincere hope that it will help all members of the Body of Christ, and particularly the Presbyterian Church in America, to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

I am particularly grateful to the hundreds of women in the PCA who completed my survey on biblical peacemaking to help me understand the strengths and weaknesses within the PCA when it comes to biblical counseling, biblical peacemaking, and redemptive church discipline. Although I do not mean to imply any sort of scientifically-analyzed statistical significance from my findings, their insights have proven invaluable and I hope to share even more of them in future articles and teachings.

If the leaders of my church or I might be of service to you in the future, we truly hope that you will not hesitate to contact us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tara', followed by a horizontal line.

Tara Barthel
www.tarabarthel.com

Relationships in the PCA

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35

“The outworking of God’s grace in us is demonstrated in relationships.” Susan Hunt

What are relationships like in your church? Women’s ministry? Family?

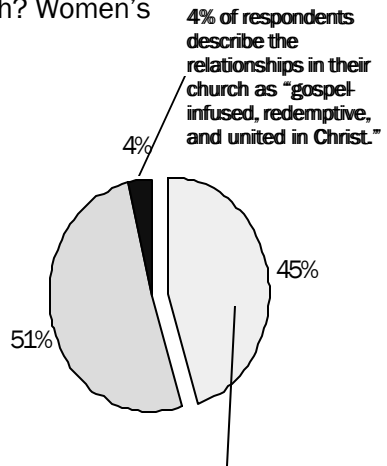
Based on many conversations I have had with PCA women over the years, as well as hundreds of responses from my 2006 WIC Peacemaking Survey, I am confident that *some* of you would describe relationships in your church as “gospel-infused, redemptive, and united in Christ.” Praise the Lord for this evidence of His grace!

Sadly, many of you (45%) would describe the relationships in your church as neutral, distant or even seriously conflicted. (And the remaining 51% are somewhere in between.)

The situation grows even more bleak when we consider how many PCA women describe the relationships among their church’s *women* as “gospel-infused, redemptive, and united in Christ”: **None**. 0%. Not one person.

No women in the PCA (0%!) described the relationships among their church’s women as “gospel-infused, redemptive, and united in Christ.”

Is this important? Does a lack of redemptive relationships among PCA women matter? As busy as we all are, should we really apply ourselves to learning how to develop gospel-infused relationships?



45% report “neutral, distant, or seriously conflicted” relationships in their churches.



Is Peacemaking Important?

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:23b

“Biblical peacemaking is one of God’s highest priorities; therefore, it must be one of our highest priorities.” PCA Book of Church Order¹

The impact of our personal conflicts on our churches and communities is profound. To paraphrase the great preacher Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, conflicted Christians are, to say the least, a poor recommendation for the Christian faith. For Jesus himself taught us that the world would know him when Christian relationships are marked by unity: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23b). It is only as we overlook, forbear, forgive—love one another—that Christians will reflect Christ to the world (John 13:34–35).

Because biblical peacemaking has always been one of a Christian’s most important ministries (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18; Gal.6:1), the PCA Book of Church Order states that, “One of the most powerful ways that we can encourage reconciliation with God is to model reconciliation among people.”

“Jesus gives the world the right to judge whether the Father has sent the Son on the basis of whether the world sees observable love among all true Christians.”

Francis Schaeffer

The BCO continues, “When others see us resolve our differences in a loving and biblical manner, they are inclined to give more weight to what we say about the Lord (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23). On the other hand, when they see Christians embroiled in disputes, they tend to write God’s people off as hypocrites and dismiss the claims of Christ (Rom. 2:21-24; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).”

¹ I have included excerpts from the PCA Book of Church Order Appendix I on Biblical Conflict Resolution at the end of this booklet.

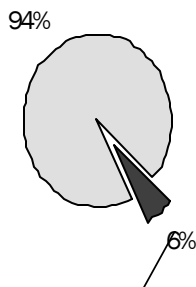
Are PCA Churches Peacemaking Churches?

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” Psalm 133:1

“Many Christians do not fully understand the emphasis God places on living at peace and in unity with others.” PCA Book of Church Order

Given what you have already read from our own PCA Book of Church Order (including the supporting biblical citations) about the *importance of peacemaking*, would it surprise you to learn that only 6% of all PCA survey respondents said that biblical peacemaking is an “integral part” of their church’s ministry? And only one-third of all PCA churches have ever provided training or instruction on biblical conflict resolution.

Since most of us are not learning how to respond to conflicts in a biblically faithful manner, relational conflicts, divorces, and even church splits continue to plague our beloved denomination.



Only 6% of PCA women report biblical peacemaking as an “integral part” of their church’s ministry.

Listen to just a few survey respondents:

- “We love the theological doctrine of grace without much emphasis on functional/practical doctrine.”
- “Relationships have been broken and over one hundred people have left our church.”
- “Our elders do not discipline our members and we are not accountable to one another.”

It seems, then, that PCA churches have some opportunities for improvement when it comes to educating and equipping their members to live out the ministry of biblical peacemaking.

Learning to Promote Peace

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:3

“Meaningful, lasting relationships are characteristic of the covenant of grace. It is only grace that can move us beyond self-serving relationships.” WIC Bible Study Series

If you are a Christian, then Christ calls you to be a peacemaker. The admonition to “go and be reconciled” is the call to reflect the very heart of God in our lives. The gospel itself is the greatest message of peacemaking—we are reconciled to God through Christ. That same gospel is our foundation for reconciliation with other people.

Reconciled relationships entail much more than merely the absence of conflict. They reflect the positive qualities of love, kindness, trust, and compassion.

The first step of learning to promote peace is to start with *yourself*.

Personal Peacemaking

Peacemaker Ministries summarizes a systematic framework for understanding and resolving conflict as *The Four G's*:

- *Glorify God*—How can I please and honor God in this situation?
- *Get the log out of your eye*—How can I show Jesus’ work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?
- *Gently restore*—How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?
- *Go and be reconciled*—How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

Consider how you can study and apply the biblical foundation for these principles:

- Read *The Peacemaker* (by PCA ruling elder Ken Sande) and visit www.Peacemaker.net.

- Read *Peacemaking Women* (by Tara Barthel & Judy Dabler) and visit www.tarabarthel.com to participate in our online discussion board for peacemaking women.

And then introduce peacemaking in your spheres of influence:

- Use the *Young Peacemaker* materials by Corlette Sande and teach your children how to resolve conflicts in God-glorifying, constructive, and biblical ways.
- Prayerfully consider hosting a *Peacemaker Group Study* or using *Peacemaking Women* as a Bible study or evangelistic outreach (because everyone has conflicts).

Corporate (Church-Based) Peacemaking

As you consider how you might (gently and humbly!) help your church leaders to further develop a culture of peace, please be careful. It is a sad, but true, irony that sometimes, people get so excited about the importance of biblical peacemaking that they end up causing *conflict* over peacemaking. Please don't do that!

But consider what you might do:

- Introduce your church leaders to Peacemaker Ministries (www.peacemaker.net); especially the “Peacemaker Church” and Small Group materials.²
- Draw their attention to the *PCA Book of Church Order Appendix on Biblical Conflict Resolution* and ask how you can help them to implement it.
- Pray for your elders and give them a copy of *The Peacemaking Pastor* (by Rev. Dr. Alfred Poirier, Westminster Theological Seminary, Chairman of the Board of Peacemaker Ministries, and PCA Teaching Elder).
- Introduce them to the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (www.ccef.org): The counseling ministry of Westminster Theological Seminary whose mission is to “put Christ back into counseling and counseling back into the Church.”

² In my survey, 34% of the women reported that they had never even heard of Peacemaker Ministries.

In Conclusion

As Christians, not all of us are called to youth ministry, music ministry, or work with the homeless, but we are *all* called to be peacemakers: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). Jesus himself taught us that our peaceful *relationships* show whether we are truly his disciples (John 17:23).

As we experience reconciliation and unity with the people around us, we are forgiving as the Lord forgives us (Col. 3:13) and building what Peacemaker Ministries refers to as a “**culture of peace**”:

“We must instill in women a vision of enduring relationships and a passion for reflecting Christ in our relationships.”

Susan Hunt

1. Members have a **vision for demonstrating the power of the gospel** and preserving relationships through biblical peacemaking. ¹
2. Church **leaders provide consistent modeling and teaching** to equip their congregations for peacemaking. ²
3. There is a **continual building of community** as members treat one another with genuine compassion and respect. ³
4. Members are **skilled at seeking reconciliation** and resolving conflict biblically. ⁴
5. Members naturally **look to the church for assistance and accountability** in resolving difficult conflicts. ⁵
6. **Peace and unity in the church overflows in a positive witness** to the outside world that draws others to Christ. ⁶

Can you imagine what the ministry of the PCA would look like if these six characteristics described every PCA church? By God’s grace, it can begin with you today!

¹ Matt. 5:16; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph. 3:10-11; Heb. 10:24-25

² Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 4:12; 2 Tim. 3:16, 4:2; 1 Pet. 5:2-3

³ Acts 2:42-47; 6:1-7; Rom. 12:15; Gal. 6:2; Phil. 2:1-5; James 1:27; 4:11-12; 5:13-16

⁴ Matt. 5:9, 23-24, 43-48, 7:3-4; 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:12-14

⁵ Gal. 6:1-2; Matt. 18:12-20; Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 6:1-8; James 5:19-20

⁶ John 13:34-35, 17:20-23; Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:2-3; 1 Pet. 2:12, 3:15-16

PCA Book of Church Order Appendix I

Biblical Conflict Resolution (Excerpts)



Preface

... Biblical peacemaking is one of God's highest priorities (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18; Gal.6:1); therefore, it must be one of our highest priorities.

... The purpose of this appendix is to provide guidance through the steps of biblical peacemaking ... Each presbytery should endeavor to have several elders trained in the methods of "Christian conciliation" (including mediation and arbitration), and available to serve as Christian conciliators in cases that could and should be resolved privately before judicial process is initiated. We would do well to follow the wisdom of those who have considered the importance of this matter. For example, Elder Edmond Clowney states, "Discipline...is not first an exercise of negative judgment, a matter of church courts and censures. It begins with the care of friends with whom we strive to follow Christ" (Clowney, E.P., *The Church*, IVP, 1995).

The Biblical Steps of Discipline as they Relate to Biblical Peacemaking

... Many Christians do not fully understand the emphasis God places on living at peace and in unity with others (Eph. 4:3). Preaching and teaching should regularly address this emphasis and the purposes for church discipline as set forth in BCO 27-3 and BCO 27-4.

... The Bible sets forth a process for resolving personal and substantive disputes in a constructive manner. This process is sometimes referred to as "Christian conciliation" and it may be used to resolve everything from minor personal differences to church divisions or lawsuits involving church members.

... There are many benefits to resolving disputes through Christian conciliation. It prevents a public quarrel that would dishonor the Lord Jesus Christ and diminish the credibility and witness of His church. ... In addition, conciliation encourages forgiveness and promotes reconciliation, which can help to preserve valuable relationships and strengthen the church (Eph. 4:29-32; Col.

3:12-17). Conciliation also helps people to identify and deal with the root causes of conflict, which may include such things as pride, selfishness, fear, vengeance, greed, bitterness, or unforgiveness (see Matt. 7:3-5).

... Teaching and Ruling elders are encouraged to learn all they can about Christian conciliation and develop local ministries that will equip members under their care to respond to conflicts in a manner that reflects the power of Christ working in their lives. The more church members understand these concepts and benefits, the more likely they will be to apply biblical principles when conflicts occur.

Failure to Follow the Steps

Churches unwilling or unable to instruct their members completely in the full breadth of the steps of conciliation and discipline encourage resorting to unbiblical, worldly responses to conflict. The escape responses of denial, flight, and even suicide can be expected if church members are not positively directed to the biblical processes of Christian conciliation. Others, when not given the hope of having matters responded to within the body of Christ, will resort to civil litigation, verbal and physical attack, and possibly even murder to remove an opponent where there is no avenue for a just resolution.

Moving a case too quickly to formal church discipline can build barriers that could otherwise be dealt with in mediation or arbitration. Every church and presbytery is encouraged to equip elders and mature members with the skills of Christian conciliation, and to exhaust conciliation processes and remedies before moving to formal church discipline.

Conclusion

The courts of the church are encouraged to employ the means of Christian conciliation whenever possible. That is, churches and presbyteries are encouraged to defer judicial action until all other remedies have been exhausted. Peace, unity, and the mission of the Church can be furthered through careful and complete attention to every step of the process as set forth in *BCO 27-5* as understood through the expanded guidance concerning Christian conciliation as set forth above.

Tara Klena Barthel

From ballrooms filled with hundreds of women to rugged retreat camps with less than twenty, it is always a privilege to be invited to share fellowship and ministry with God's people.

Speaking Events

I generally speak at conferences and retreats on topics related to relationships, idols that lead to conflict, biblical peacemaking, etc. I will, however, prayerfully consider requests for custom topics. Currently, I do not have a set fee for speaking events, but please note that my schedule allows only so many events each month.

Conciliation Services

If you would like my help with a current conflict, I encourage you to first read and follow the biblical teachings summarized in the Getting Help section of the Peacemaker Ministries website before contacting me (www.Peacemaker.net). As a Certified Christian Conciliator, I provide all consulting conciliation services in a manner consistent with their guidelines and principles.

Online Resources

For more information, or to dialogue online with other women who are interested in growing authentic and redemptive relationships in the Body of Christ, please visit my website and discussion board at www.tarabarthel.com.

Thank you and God bless you!



Tara Klena Barthel formerly served as the Director of the Institute for Christian Conciliation, a division of Peacemaker Ministries. As such, she oversaw the delivery of all conciliation services and advanced conciliator training. Currently, she serves her family as a homemaker while regularly mediating, speaking, and writing on biblical peacemaking. Baker Book House Co. published her first book in June 2005: *Peacemaking Women—Biblical Hope for Resolving Conflict*. Prior to joining the staff of Peacemaker Ministries, Tara worked as an attorney and business consultant in Chicago. Tara, Fred, and their daughter Sophia Grace are members of Rocky Mountain Community Church (PCA) where Fred serves as a deacon.

What are relationships really like within the PCA? (And why does it matter?)

Based on hundreds of survey responses and interviews with women in the PCA, I have some good news to report! *Most* women report the *level of conflict* in their church as somewhere between “moderate” (we get along OK) and “present, but constructively handled.”

But here is a concern ... Only 6% report peacemaking as an “integral part of the church’s ministry.”

Why Does This Matter?

As Christians, we are *all* called to be peacemakers: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).

“One of the most successful techniques of Satan is to promote selfishness and relational conflict within the family of God ...”

Susan Hunt

Our own *PCA Book of Church Order* states that, “Biblical peacemaking must be one of our highest priorities,” and “Elders are encouraged to learn all they can about Christian conciliation and develop local [peacemaking] ministries.”

(And yet, *two-thirds* of PCA women never have received *any* training or instruction on biblical peacemaking.)

No women in the PCA (0%!) described the relationships among their church’s women as “gospel-infused, redemptive, and united in Christ.”

PCA Women Are Not United

Could this be one reason why *no* PCA women (0%!) described the relationships among their women as “gospel-infused, redemptive, and united in Christ”?

But There is Hope!

The goal of this article is to encourage you that you are not alone when you experience conflicted relationships. There is hope! And there are biblical (reformed) and practical resources and ministries available to help you and your church leaders grow redemptive, authentic, and *peaceful* relationships.