



**Ambassadors
of
Reconciliation™**

MEMO

October 13, 2011

TO: Members and former members of Sovereign Grace Ministries

FROM: Ted Kober, President

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

I write this memo for four purposes:

- To provide some background information on the Group Reconciliation process and reflect on initial feedback we have received so far regarding the process.
- To answer questions regarding confidentiality in this process.
- To adjust the teaching requirement in response to the feedback.
- To confess my part in contributing to confusion and hurt among people invited to participate.

Background and Reflections on Initial Feedback

At the request of the Board of Directors of Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM), Ambassadors of Reconciliation (AoR) began meeting in July with the SGM Board and a few other people to learn about the reconciliation needs of SGM. As a result, AoR produced a report in August recommending different approaches that SGM could take in order to address their current needs for reconciliation and adjudication.

One of those recommendations included Group Reconciliation Assistance. This is a process we have developed over many years to assist organizations that are struggling with conflict. It incorporates five elements:

- Teaching biblical peacemaking
- Interviewing individuals and leadership groups for gathering information and coaching people to take steps toward reconciliation
- Mediating a few key parties (if willing) and identifying others who may desire mediation assistance (often from other providers)
- Evaluation of documents, interview information and other material received
- Reporting observations and making recommendations

Many organizations that suffer from conflict share common characteristics, and yet each one is unique in strengths, weaknesses, polity, beliefs, and culture. While the process we use works

well in many settings, there are times we adjust the process to better serve the unique needs of the people in that organization.

As we are receiving inquiries and responses to the invitations for people to participate in this process, we have received a number of different messages that set this case apart from others. These responses have included both criticisms and encouragements.

Feedback: Criticisms

Two areas receiving a number of criticisms include issues regarding confidentiality and the teaching requirement.

- Confidentiality
 - Individuals have been sensitive to the application of “confidentiality” and its application in the various parts of this process. While people in previous cases have asked about confidentiality, this intense focus on it has been unique from other organizations we have served.
 - Speculation on our motives, inaccurate information, and misinterpretation of our standard procedures have been shared broadly regarding what AoR is requiring regarding confidentiality. For example, an inaccurate claim has been made that if people talked to someone from AoR they cannot talk to anyone else about these issues again. This false impression appears to have increased anxiety for some regarding this process.
 - There appears to be confusion of what should remain confidential from a biblical and legal perspective and what should be more transparent (as opposed to inappropriate secrecy).
 - There appears to be significant distrust of leadership from those who believe that they have been hurt as a result of how "confidential" or "secret" information has been handled.
- Teaching requirement¹
 - While in past cases, a few people grumbled about the training requirement initially², we have not experienced such an *intensity* of strong negative reaction

¹ AoR’s Group Reconciliation Assistance process typically requires that people attend a full-day seminar on biblical peacemaking before meeting with one of our reconciling team members. Because the SGM Board indicated that many throughout SGM have had exposure to teaching on peacemaking, AoR proposed a half-day seminar on the topic *Getting to the Heart of Conflict*, a study on deeper topics of idolatry, its relationship to conflict, and healing through confession, repentance and forgiveness. Our plan was to focus on our confession to God and hearing his forgiveness proclaimed to us personally through a brother or sister in Christ, based on promises found in Scripture. The reasons for the teaching is to help prepare people to give us their feedback in light of scriptural teaching, and to help prepare people to receive brief coaching on how to apply that teaching. Past experience has shown that those who attend the teaching benefit more from the personal interviews because they better understand how to approach the matter in a godly manner and are more ready to receive coaching. Interviews with those who do not attend the teaching tend to be less satisfactory for the participant as well as AoR’s ability to gather information. The purpose of the interview is not simply for gathering information but also for helping each person take one step toward reconciliation or personal healing. In past experience, the teaching has served people and their organizations well.

² Often the most ardent supporters of requiring the teaching as part of the process were those who initially grumbled about it. Moreover, a number of people from past cases reported that they found the teaching helpful for dealing with other relationships in their lives (e.g., family, work, and community) and encouraged us to keep this as an essential part of the process.

- from so many as we have in this situation.
- Some have pointed out to us that they have received lots of training in biblical peacemaking and either don't want more or don't need more.
 - One person indicated that he felt this was belittling to him because he has been involved in past teaching on this topic.
 - Some people indicated that they felt this requirement was burdensome and unnecessary.
 - A few messages compared their situation to one who has been abused, indicating that such a requirement was another way to inflict pain on someone who was already victimized.
 - Others have referred to the teaching as "jumping through hoops."

Feedback: Encouragements

While we have received these and other criticisms of the process, we have also noted some unusual encouragements:

- People have thanked us over and over again for our willingness to serve SGM, more than we have experienced in other cases. This appears to be one of the positive reflections of the culture.
- People have expressed their personal encouragement and indicated that they are praying for us, more so than we usually experience. This has been true even of many who have criticized the process.
- Some people have already demonstrated a teachable spirit. This does not mean that each one always agrees with everything that we say, but rather that they are open and have actively sought counsel.

Reflections

While it is early to draw final conclusions from this initial feedback, our initial observations include the following:

- Initial responses reveal that there are strong positions ranging from strong loyalty and support of leadership to strong opposition of leadership.
- Strong emotional responses from the various positions sometimes result in communications that do not reflect godly behavior.
- It is apparent to us that something significant has impacted a number of people over time and their views of such things as confidentiality, transparency, and secrecy. This seems to have resulted in increasing sensitivity to these topics.
- While support for leadership is present, there is also an obvious mistrust of leadership past and current, including those serving SGM and some of its churches.
- We at AoR failed to anticipate the intensity of the concern regarding confidentiality and the requirement for the teaching component.

Whenever a part of the reconciliation process becomes a major focus, it may indicate some repeated patterns or themes of behavior that have made that area such a hot button. However,

there are usually a number of factors that contribute to such an emotional response, and one must use caution about making quick conclusions regarding those factors.

As we continue our process, we will be seeking to learn more about why these issues have brought about such intense reactions.

Questions on Confidentiality

What are expectations for confidentiality in the Group Reconciliation Assistance Process?

For Phase 1 (Seminar and personal interviews)

Individuals requesting interviews will not be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. However, AoR's reconciliation team members will hold identifying information confidential.

As will be explained at the end of the seminar and in our feedback forms, the general substance, but not identifying details, of information collected by the Ambassador team will be shared with SGM in a report. An individual may provide his/her name and contact information on AoR's feedback form, which will be helpful if the AoR Team has questions or if the individual requests a coaching interview, but individual names will not be shared with SGM leadership.

Contact information will also be useful if someone indicates on the form a desire for reconciliation assistance. Should a person give permission for this situation, his/her contact information may be forwarded to SGM only as it relates to follow-up in reconciliation assistance.

For Phase 2 (Personal coaching, mediation, and oral report to SGM)

Following Phase 1, a few key individuals will be invited to participate in additional coaching and possibly mediation. No one can or will be coerced to participate in any coaching or mediation. All parties and mediators involved must agree to mediation in order for it to occur. AoR does not know if its reconciliation team members will be involved in any mediations, since no one can be required to participate in this voluntary process. Because it is a voluntary process, a party may withdraw from mediation at any time.

Moreover, AoR will not be conducting all the mediations requested by individuals in Phase 1, but rather identifying those who wish assistance through mediation. Some of those requesting assistance may utilize other mediation services or SGM people who have received training.

Those who may be invited to participate in mediation led by an AoR reconciler will be given the opportunity to review and discuss with the mediators the *Rules of Procedure*³ including those that define the application and limits of confidentiality. Anyone considering such an opportunity will have the privilege of declining mediation if the rules or procedure or limits of confidentiality

³ The *Rules of Procedure* utilized by Certified Christian Conciliators™ can be found at http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.nuIWL7MOJtE/b.5378801/k.D71A/Rules_of_Procedure.htm. Rule 16 explains the biblical and legal reasons for the rules on confidentiality and the limits and exceptions to confidentiality.

are not acceptable. Note that the rules provide that parties in a mediation have the right to agree in writing on what will not be kept confidential.

Adjusting the Teaching Requirement

At AoR, we were taken by surprise by the negative reaction from a number of people regarding the teaching requirement. Initially, with support from the SGM Board, we made provisions for both a live teaching event and a recorded teaching event available on the SGM web site. Based on what we were told that many had already been exposed to biblical peacemaking, we decided to reduce the total teaching time and focus on material that went deeper than basic peacemaking. Nevertheless, these plans failed to meet the expectations of many we hoped to serve.

In response to the feedback we have received, we have decided not to make the teaching component a requirement prior to receiving feedback or meeting with people. We do not want the teaching requirement to become a roadblock for people participating.

Nevertheless, we encourage people to either attend the live training or watch the training on the web. We believe that doing so before providing feedback to us will be beneficial to everyone.

We will continue the rest of the process as planned. We will conduct on-site interviews in Gaithersburg November 8-10 following the live presentation of the teaching. After the presentation has been made available on the SGM web site, we will receive requests for telephone appointments for the following two weeks. Then, we will set up as many appointments as we can for the following weeks.

Confession

AoR proposed the Group Reconciliation Process that the SGM Board accepted. I take responsibility for designing and recommending the process.

Although I had some preliminary information that could have informed me prior to our proposal, I confess that I failed to anticipate the sensitivity to confidentiality. Thus, I failed to provide better information on explaining confidentiality in our initial proposal.

I acknowledge that the requirement for attending the teaching portion contributed to confusion and hurt for people. I failed to provide a better explanation for the process in the initial proposal or in a follow-up description. My hope is that the change in our process will open the door for more to participate.

Conclusion

Thanks to everyone who has provided feedback so far. I ask for patience as we continue through this process. Obviously, there is much that we at AoR need to learn about SGM before we can make recommendations, and that will likely take some months. We pray that through our teaching and coaching we can also share some things with you that you will find helpful for

personal healing as well as corporate change that will be God-pleasing. But, in spite of our good intentions, we are likely to disappoint people in various ways, for we are imperfect people. As we work through these challenges together, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:2-3 NIV).

These are difficult times for SGM leaders and members, current and former. Attempting to address these issues will continue to be a challenging work for anyone involved. I encourage all of us to use caution and patience as we respond throughout this process. While God does not desire for us to ignore important issues, he does call us to respond to them in godly ways. He also calls us to trust him and seek his guidance in all that we do.

May Christ’s love have its way with all of us, as Paul writes: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15 ESV).

Finally, I remind you that your hope should not be in AoR, what SGM leaders do or not do, how other key people respond to what lies ahead, or what results might occur. Our hope is found only in our Savior, Jesus Christ. In him we not only have forgiveness of sins and the assurance for eternal life, but we have his promises to be with us always, even to the close of the age.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7 ESV).