

**Oxford church of Christ and
Lafayette-Oxford-University church of Christ**

Mediation Project

October – December 2008

Final report

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Introduction

In mid-2007 approximately 20 members of Oxford church of Christ (OCOC) left that congregation and started a new one, the Lafayette-Oxford-University (LOU) church of Christ. Following a series of conversations involving members of both congregations, the possibility of engaging in a series of professionally mediated discussions was explored early in 2008. A detailed proposal, naming Norris and Salli Beth Cline of Knoxville, Tennessee as mediators was accepted by the leaders of both groups. This report summarizes the process and outcomes from that mediation project.

The purpose of this report is to inform OCOC members who did not attend the mediation sessions about the communications that occurred within and ancillary to those sessions. Additionally, the report may be of interest to other former OCOC members and to the community at large. This report is for unlimited distribution. However, readers should be aware that the original version is available only on the world wide web (<http://www.loucoc.org/mediation/report.pdf>) or by email from doug_shields@hotmail.com and accept no substitutes.

Mediation Plan

The mediation project plan that both congregations agreed to support was as follows:

"Proposal for a series of professionally-facilitated mediation sessions between the Oxford church of Christ and the LOU church of Christ.

Objective: To engage in a healing dialog among New Testament Christians that will foster deeper understanding, love and forgiveness. We hope this will lead to greater love and harmony in the future. No specific objectives beyond these are set at this time.

What: A series of mediated discussions.

When: Four Sunday afternoon sessions, 2-4 pm, October 19, November 9 and 30, December 14.

Where: University Christian Alpha-Omega Student Center.

Who: The Clines; current elders of the Oxford church of Christ, their wives, and Bob and Linda Brewer; and adult members of the LOU church of Christ.

All members will be given opportunities for involvement and regular information updates on the project

How: The mediator will be paid \$400 per session plus travel expenses. Costs will be borne by the two congregations, with OCOC providing 60% of the funds and LOU providing 40%. Funds will be deposited with a third party (Dr. Larry Walker, an elder in the Calvary Hill church of Christ) ahead of time, and he will disburse them to the mediator."

Prior to the first mediation session, the Clines distributed several questions to all members of both congregations and invited written responses. Responses were mailed or emailed directly to the Clines by each respondent. A copy of these questions (but NOT the responses) and all of the handouts and other ancillary materials pertaining to this project are available in files maintained by Doug Shields, Jr. Hereinafter, these materials will be referred to as "the project file." These materials include lists of the participants in each session. Almost all of the participants (about 12 adult members of LOU, the OCOC elders and Bob and Linda Brewer) attended all four sessions. Since session ground rules included a provision for confidentiality, speakers will not be identified by name in the following pages.

Mediation ground rules called for "brutal honesty." Discussions were sometimes heated and emotions ran high on both sides. However, much important dialog occurred. It is up to all local Christians to determine whether this dialog becomes "healing dialog," by handling this information in a compassionate, thoughtful way. May God be glorified as we learn to, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Session 1: October 19

After introductions, Norris Cline presented an overview of conflict management and dispute resolution. Key points included definitions of litigation, arbitration and mediation. In addition, Norris pointed out that "self help" or "getting even" (for example, malicious gossip) could be used to address conflict, but was generally destructive to all concerned. The entire group agreed that we wanted to address this conflict situation as a problem to be solved rather than as a battle to be won. The group also agreed on a set of ground rules to guide these discussions, and these are part of the project file.

Each congregation was invited to present a narrative of the history of the conflict that focused on their actions, thoughts and motives during the conflict.

A spokesperson presented a narrative on behalf of LOU. About 12 months ago LOU members were in shock and confusion. They felt the OCOC leaders had arbitrarily rewritten procedural rules as events went along. They felt that they had lost their church home, and their problem was not with OCOC members, but with the leadership. During the controversy that occurred at OCOC regarding relocation in 2006-2007, the LOU members felt that disagreement over property decisions had been stifled, and that dissenting members had been encouraged to leave. Emotions still run very deep and lack of confidence in OCOC leaders is pervasive. In conclusion, LOU longed to hear a specific description of hurtful decisions instead of a vague apology.

A spokesperson presented a narrative on behalf of the OCOC eldership. A hard copy of the narrative statement is in the project file. A key part of the statement was series of seven specific apologies. The OCOC elders apologized for

- Not doing a better job of communicating and listening.
- Not providing adequate leadership for the 2006-2007 Looking Ahead Committee.
- Not countering the perception that incorporation of the congregation meant that they viewed the church like a business. The elders felt a need to act quickly to address potential legal liability created by the actions of a member who is no longer part of either congregation. The bylaws which were enacted have been repealed and replaced.
- Moving too quickly in responding to the unsolicited and unexpected offer they received from a buyer for the church property.
- Not acting more wisely in handling the voting process for relocation. Although the proposed relocation did not receive the required 2/3 majority vote, absentee votes were received from disabled elderly members, some with Alzheimer's disease, and members who rarely attend.
- Not responding to charges leveled in the March 2, 2007 meeting. Silence may have been interpreted by those present as arrogance.
- Not handling the announcement on March 4, 2007 in a better way.

Feelings of hurt on both sides were briefly explored. LOU members were hurt when reprimanded from pulpit, and OCOC leaders and their wives were hurt by charges of dishonesty, impure motives, and ineffective leadership.

Session two: November 9

1. The Clines reviewed the ground rules with the group and presented an agenda, which is in the project file. Norris made a presentation providing a pattern for apology and forgiveness.
2. The first issue discussed was an audio recording was made of a meeting between four OCOC elders and 18 members on March 2, 2007 at Coleman Funeral Home. Participants were not aware that their voices were being recorded.
3. An OCOC participant took full responsibility for the recording; he noted that making the recording was wrong and apologized to the group. LOU members acknowledged his apology, stated their forgiveness, and all mediation participants agreed that this topic was closed.
4. The second issue involved several LOU members who took responsibility for their actions, confessed wrong, and asked for forgiveness. Admissions included:
 - Faulty assumptions about others
 - Repeating hearsay information about the elders
 - Failing to give credit to the OCOC elders for pure motives, even if their actions were not acceptable.
 - Unnecessary harshness and disrespectful tone in March 2 meeting.
 - Making disparaging remarks about the OCOC elders.

OCOC participants acknowledged these statements of apology, noted their forgiveness and agreed that the topics were closed.

5. OCOC elders noted that they were emotionally hurt by charges made in various settings during 2006 – 2007 that they had secretly concluded a deal to sell the church building when they had not.

Session 3: November 30

This session was a frank, difficult, and emotional one, as reflected in the description below. However, please know that the final results were positive, as perceived and expressed by members of both congregations. This was "difficult territory that had to be traversed" to get to a more peaceful and effective future in God's service. After a short review, this meeting opened with two statements.

An LOU member described the feelings of hurt and confusion she felt after the March 2, 2007 meeting and the worship service the following Sunday, March 4. This worship service included a sermon addressing issues related to the ongoing controversy and a statement read by the elders. A transcript of the statement was distributed, and is part of the project file. Three of the Oxford elders voiced clarification, apology, and affirmation to the LOU member, and asked for forgiveness. The LOU member concluded by stating that she just wanted everyone to know why she left OCOC and did not want anymore hurt on either side. She said that she loved everyone at OCOC and she had chosen to participate in the mediation project because she loved and cherished those friendships.

An OCOC elder then read a statement, which is in the project files, that identified words and actions by three LOU members that he found offensive.

- The first two LOU members had made statements in the first mediation session that they believed that his reputation with outsiders was not good. One of them said that the elder was known as an aggressive businessman, while the other was less specific. The OCOC elder expressed hurt and anger and asked them to name sources.
- The third LOU member was accused of making five false statements about the OCOC elder in a variety of settings in late 2006. The first three statements accused the OCOC elder of realizing dishonest personal monetary gain from the sale of the OCOC property and the fourth accused the eldership of secretly concluding an agreement to sell the property before telling the members ("it's a done deal..."). Finally, the LOU member was accused of calling the elders, "liars and dictators," and referred to the preacher as "that lying preacher." The OCOC elder denied that these accusations against him and the other OCOC elders were true.

The third LOU member referenced above then addressed the group. Handwritten notes containing the statement were provided to the mediators. (This statement is in the project files.) The LOU member asked for forgiveness for excessive discussion about the church controversy situation. However, the LOU member noted that "so much more has been assigned to me than I did or even had the power to do."

An OCOC participant acknowledged and accepted the apology and request for forgiveness.

Another OCOC participant suggested that it was now time for everyone to forgive and move on.

During the session, both the words "dishonest" and "aggressive" had been used to describe an OCOC elder. Following a short break, the mediator noted that there is a big difference between dishonesty and aggressiveness. At that point, in response to a specific question from the mediator, every participant from both congregations affirmed their belief that the elder was NOT dishonest, and committed to defend him if they heard rumors to the contrary. Some, including one who was accused of false statements before the break, said that already had defended him, and some said they had not heard any such rumors. About ten days following this session, this OCOC leader sent an email to all mediation project participants expressing deep appreciation for their affirming expressions.

Norris then urged that we use the remainder of the mediation project to look forward, as had been suggested before the break. It is not healthy for us to continue to deal with old statements of the past. Let's forgive and move on. What can we not forgive, drop, and move on from? Norris presented a definition of forgiveness, "to cease to feel resentment against." He also asked everyone to think about what we need to forgive...just the events of the last two years or offenses further back in time.

Norris told the participants, "The Lord's work needs to be done here whether you are one congregation or two. So you need to envision the future together. You need to ask questions such as these: What do we need to do differently? What thinking and behaviors could have prevented this problem? What attitudes of leadership and followership need to be dealt with or they will continue? How do we do business differently? We need a clean slate for dealing with behaviors and attitudes going forward. What should future behaviors be like? Do we want to be one congregation or peacefully coexist as two?"

Session 4: December 14

The session opened with a statement by an OCOC participant who had requested prayers from the congregation in the morning worship service following a confession of anger and lack of a forgiving spirit. She announced their determination to truly forgive.

An LOU participant affirmed the long-term forgiving nature of the OCOC participant.

Norris commended mediation participants for their commitment and regular attendance to the four sessions, and stated that this is indicative of their good intentions and motives. This spiritual commitment will be seen in hindsight by project participants but also by youth, community and brotherhood.

Norris then turned to the question of reunification of the two congregations. He stated his belief that the two groups are not ready to reunite, and discussion of reunification should not be on the table at this time. Attempting to merge and worship together would be disruptive. More time and behavior changes need to occur to rebuild trust to avoid a repeat of past problems. The healing process must continue.

LOU participants suggested learning from the past could allow us to make former weaknesses into strengths and allow the community to see a unified church.

An LOU member stated that they realized that there had been hurt on both sides.

Norris and Salli then offered a series of recommendations for consideration by the group. Those recommendations, supplemented by ideas from several other participants resulted in this list:

1. Continue dialog in small groups and one-on-one. Take care to talk with and not about one another. Contact those you have offended or who have offended you and speak to them privately. Try to talk positively about each other.
2. Non-compete. Do not attempt to recruit from the other congregation.
3. Pray for each other. If you pray for someone enough, you will love them.
4. Although visiting one another's worship services would be disruptive at this point, continue to interact socially in homes, restaurants and encourage others to do so.
5. Develop ways to get together for joint social and service opportunities.
 - a. These activities should be voluntary for the interested and ready.
 - b. Activities should take place at neutral sites.
 - c. Plan the activities. Ask people to sign up so you know who will be there.
 - d. Make such interaction a part of the work of the congregation.
 - e. Perhaps issue a press release to the local media regarding the joint event.
6. Eventually, we need to either not meet so close to each other or have a ministry-oriented reason for having two assemblies.
7. Employ creativity, open-mindedness, and out-of-the-box thinking. For example, could LOU rent space from OCOC and thus divert rental funds to ministry?
8. Communicate with and encourage youth. Report results of mediation project to them. Apologize to them for the turmoil. Welcome youth from the other congregation and invite them to participate in youth activities. Provide alternative conflict resolution training for young people.
9. Design and implement a joint program to reach out to former members who are not attending either congregation.
10. Keep lines of communication open by sharing bulletins (LOU announcements are posted on the web at <http://loucoc.org/announcements.htm> and OCOC bulletins are posted under the bulletin link on the left side of www.ococ.org) and by appointing a person from each congregation to serve as official liaison to the other group.
11. Reconvene the mediation group for a follow up session in 3-12 months.

The OCOC elders then presented a closing statement orally and as a handout:

Dear brothers and sisters,

We have heard the apologies offered by you, our brothers and sisters of the LOU church of Christ. You have listened to our apologies. Forgiveness has been extended. We want to repent of our sins, learn from our mistakes, and forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, we want to press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. We know that you do, too.

We have committed ourselves to continue to grow as shepherds, particularly in our listening skills, in keeping the flock informed, in handling conflicts, and in maintaining our focus on spiritual issues.

If any of you would like to return to the Oxford congregation and serve with and under our eldership, we would welcome the opportunity to meet privately with you or with you and your family. We want to always maintain an open atmosphere to such opportunities for unification, and this offer is for all former members of our congregation. We do ask that you make arrangements for such meetings in advance. The goal would be for a time that is mutually convenient for all concerned.

If you feel the Lord would have you remain as a separate congregation, we want to work to maintain unity and harmony between our congregations. Whether worshipping together or in different fellowships, it is our prayer that God be glorified.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Elders, Oxford church of Christ

Additional closing discussions and closing statements centered on idea that although LOU members had forgiven OCOC elders, they do not feel comfortable working under their leadership at present. Although this is an insurmountable hurdle at this point, it will not necessarily be one in the future. OCOC elders challenged everyone to forgive to the point that leader/follower relationships could be restored. Norris Cline noted that rebuilding such a relationship requires mentally separating a person from their past behavior and recommended the book [Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement without Giving In](#) (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991, Penguin) as a guide to this process.

A LOU participant noted that the LOU members agree with the principles of elder governance of the local church, but noted that the need exists for better leader/follower skills, conflict resolution skills, and for better, more participatory decision-making processes in which members feel valued. OCOC elders are already participating in and planning more learning opportunities for shepherds, to increase their effectiveness.

LOU members made a commitment to suggest specific next steps for congregational cooperation.

The final mediation session closed with the group reciting the following prayer:

*Lord, make me a channel of thy peace;
that where there is hatred, I may bring love;
that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness;
that where there is discord, I may bring harmony;
that where there is error, I may bring truth;
that where there is doubt, I may bring faith;
that where there is despair, I may bring hope;
that where there are shadows, I may bring light;
that where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted;
to understand, than to be understood;
to love, than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.*