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JERICO CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH RELATIONAL COMMITMENTS



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Introduction

The following Commitments and Church Covenant are designed to help the people of our church understand how best to relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes authentic relationships. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, counseling, confidentiality, and mutual accountability.

These Commitments are intended to help us build a strong community of faith. By *community*, we mean a group of people who have voluntarily joined together to encourage and support one another as we worship God, grow in our understanding of his love for us, and seek to tell others about the salvation and peace they, too, can find through faith in Jesus Christ.¹ The allegorical story in Appendix A further explains the profound affect that following these Commitments can have on our Jericho Congregational Church community. We invite you to read this before reviewing the Commitments and the Church Covenant.

We know that true community isn't easy to achieve. Each of us brings our own expectations and agendas into the church. This diversity usually leads to rich discussions and creative ministries; but sometimes it can lead to conflict (James 4:1-2)

These Commitments pull together key principles directly from God's Word. These Commitments are designed to accomplish several important purposes:

- They remind us of our mutual commitment to work together to pursue unity, maintain friendships, preserve marriages, and build relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
- They help to prevent surprises, disappointed expectations, confusion and conflict by describing how we expect to relate to one another within the church.
- They provide a clear path when conflict threatens to divide us, and they remind us how to move quickly toward reconciliation.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, the words "we" and "us" refer to the members and leaders of this church, as well as the people who continue to attend our church after receiving a copy of these Commitments.

- They establish guidelines for how our leaders will counsel others, guard confidential information, and protect our children from abuse.
- They define and limit the spiritual authority of church leaders and thereby insure that all members are treated fairly.²
- Finally, they reduce our church's exposure to legal liability by clearly establishing our relational practices and by affirming our mutual commitment to resolve conflict biblically.³

As you read our Relational Commitments, we encourage you to study the Bible passages that are cited next to particular provisions. We want you to be confident that these Commitments are fully consistent with the Word of God.⁴

If you have not yet formally joined our church, then we'd encourage you to begin the process to do so. In the mean time, you and your family are welcome to attend our worship services, find fellowship, and seek assistance. These Commitments establish how all the people of Jericho Congregational Church intend to interact with each other. Therefore, while as a non-member you will not be held strictly accountable for these Commitments, there is an expectation that regular adherents will appreciate and seek to abide by these basic biblical principles.

As followers of Christ, we will do all we can to encourage you to grow in faith and godliness and to live a life that honors our Lord Jesus Christ and enhances the witness of His church.

The Leaders of Jericho Congregational Church Adopted on January 27, 2011

² The term "leader" in these Commitments refers to the *pastors and deacons* of our church.

³ See www.peacemaker.net/risk_management for information on how these Commitments can help to prevent conflict and reduce exposure to legal liability in our church.

⁴ Embracing these Commitments does not imply that you affirm every explanatory comment, biblical interpretation, or resource mentioned in this document, but rather that you agree to support and follow the specific action steps set forth in sections entitled "Commitment to" If your conscience prevents you from affirming a particular concept or commitment in this document, you may request a special waiver of that provision.

COMMITMENT TO PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9).

Our church is committed to building a culture that accurately reflects God's peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. We realize that bitterness, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14).

Therefore, out of love for Christ and in reliance on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we are committed to resolving our differences according to the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

Personal Peacemaking

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- We will try to get the "logs" out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29). If we have a problem with others, we will talk *to* them, not *about* them.
- We will make "charitable judgments" toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15).
- When we offer a word of correction to others, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- As we seek to resolve differences with others, we will look out for their concerns and interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3-4).
- When others seek forgiveness, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as freely and fully as he has forgiven us so that we might glorify his reconciling grace (Eph. 4:32).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek assistance from our church leaders or other wise people, and we will listen humbly to their counsel and correction (Matt. 18:16; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).
- If a person has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will assist him in seeking to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- If we have a dispute with or within our church and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will obey God's command not to go into the civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Instead, we will submit the matter to mediation or arbitration.⁵

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will bring praise to our Lord Jesus Christ and lead others to know his infinite love and peace.⁶

⁵ By making this commitment, the church as a corporate entity and each of its members recognize and agree with the biblical principle of not taking each other to civil court. We commit to resolve legal differences through biblical mediation or arbitration, as commanded by 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. We recognize that if a dispute involves possible coverage by an insurance company, it may be necessary to file a legal action to engage the company and access coverage.

⁶ These principles are adapted from *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 3rd Ed. 2004).

COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING MARRIAGES

So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate (Matt. 19:6).

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, he established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all to know that you are welcome in our church.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in fellowship groups in which people can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). We hope that husbands will spur each other on to love and cherish their wives, and that wives will encourage one another to respect and love their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our leaders are committed to helping couples who face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness and ongoing discipleship.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce without sinning against God or a spouse. We believe divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

Even though divorce is *permissible* in these situations, it is not *required*. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to turn back, and freely forgives us when we return to him (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7). When divorce becomes an option, an offended spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). When someone is considering divorce, he or she is advised to bring the

situation to our leaders and work with them as they determine whether grounds exist, promote repentance and reconciliation, and provide additional support for the couple

Regardless of the situation, we rejoice that divorce never diminishes God's free offer of love, grace and forgiveness.

COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

The prudent see danger and take refuge (Prov. 27:12a).

Children are a blessing from God, and he calls the church to support parents in their responsibility to train children in the Lord. Therefore, the church should be a safe and blessed place for children, where they can grow, play, form friendships, and learn to experience and share the love of Christ.

Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, however, it is possible that children could be harmed even during church activities. We cannot guarantee that such things will never happen within our fellowship, but we are committed to taking every reasonable precaution to protect our children from foreseeable harm. This commitment includes, but is not limited to, the following steps:

- We do not allow anyone to work regularly with our youth (children or teenagers), unless he or she has regularly attended our church for at least six months or is under the supervision of a regular Jericho Congregational Church attender.
- We require all of our youth workers to complete a thorough application and screening process.
- We require that, whenever practicable, youth workers serve in teams of two or more and be visible to other workers.

If a child is harmed in our church, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, and to hold offending youth workers fully responsible for their actions.

COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL COUNSELING

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).

All Christians struggle with sin and its effect on our lives and our relationships. When believers struggle with wrong attitudes or behaviors, God can call them to seek assistance from other believers, church leaders, and/or our pastors, who have the responsibility of providing pastoral counseling and oversight (see Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17; James 5:16).

We believe that the Bible provides good guidance and instruction for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, pastoral counseling is based on scriptural principles rather than psychology or psychiatry. Unless they specifically state otherwise, none of those who counsel in this church are trained or licensed as psychotherapists or mental health professionals.

God calls our leaders to set an example for us “in speech, in life, in love, and in faith and purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, we expect them to treat everyone with every respect and courtesy, and to avoid even the appearance of impropriety (Eph. 5:3).

To prevent our pastors from being placed in situations that might compromise their pastoral commitments, we agree that we will not try to compel them to testify in any legal proceeding or otherwise divulge any confidential information they receive through pastoral counseling or ministry (Prov. 11:13, 25:9).

COMMITMENT TO CONFIDENTIALITY

*A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret (Prov. 11:13).*

The Bible teaches that Christians should carefully guard any personal and private information that others reveal to them. Protecting confidences is a sign of Christian love and respect (Matt. 7:12). It also discourages harmful gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13), and thus encourages people to seek help. Since these goals are essential to the ministry of the gospel and the work of the local church, all members and attenders are expected to refrain from gossip. In particular, our leaders will carefully protect all information that they receive through pastoral counseling, subject to the following exceptions.

When our leaders believe it is biblically necessary, they may disclose confidential information to appropriate people in the following circumstances:

- when a leader is uncertain of how to help a person or person(s) about a particular problem and needs advice from other leaders in our church (Prov. 11:14) or when steps for additional accountability or redemptive actions clearly become necessary to help bring about restoration (Matt 18:15-20);
- when the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11-12);
- when leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Rom. 13:1).

COMMITMENT TO ACCOUNTABILITY

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on
toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).*

A. Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom and glory in the midst of an imperfect world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of imperfect people (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggles and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic or harsh, as society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions God's discipline also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to help us back onto the right track.

This process, which is sometimes called “corrective” or “restorative” discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God’s name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to that which we value in other aspects of life. We value music teachers and athletic coaches who bring out the best in their orchestras or teams. These same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be helped and lovingly corrected if we do something contrary to what God clearly teaches in his Word.

We also recognize that church leaders are called to high level of accountability about their faith and conduct (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Therefore, they are committed to listening humbly to loving correction from each other or from any member in our church.

B. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God’s Word, seeks him in prayer, and draws on his grace to identify and change harmful habits and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we become so blind or tangled in our shortcomings that we cannot free ourselves. This is why the Bible says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a word, behavior or doctrine seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. “If he will not listen, take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:16).

C. Formal Discipline May Involve the Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction, Jesus commands us to bring the situation to church leadership (Matt 18:17a). If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of anything they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

After much prayer and discussion and with a conviction that action is truly necessary, our leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord’s Supper, and/or requesting them to step down from an office or ministry. (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may bring the situation before the congregation with the recommendation that the individual be removed from membership. If the congregation enacts that recommendation, we will then begin to treat that individual as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). We will lovingly care for this person as someone who has yet to fully understand and/or accept biblical truths, but may certainly be seeking them.

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church’s ability to help us, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline.

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered and begins attending another church, that church may be informed of the situation. This action is intended to help the individual and to protect other churches (Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual turns back, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

People who were involved in an open disciplinary issue at another church may not be allowed to become members at Jericho Congregational Church until this situation has been satisfactorily resolved.

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

CHURCH COVENANT

By the Members of the Jericho Congregational Church Our Commitments to One Another in the Sight of God

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and to publicly profess our faith, and having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

1. We give ourselves unreservedly to God's service and take this to be our church. Ever mindful of the welfare of our fellow members, we promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love. We promise that, so far as we are able, we will attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, share in its work, support and benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christians
2. We also engage to maintain family and personal devotions; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our conduct.
3. We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; and to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay. Whenever legitimate criticism or charges against anyone arise, we will follow Scriptural direction for church discipline, always with a desire for reconciliation and restoration and always making use of the cloak of love.
4. We acknowledge that we have received and read the Relational Commitments of this church and agree to live by them.⁷

Signature

Date

Print Name

Pastor's Signature

Date

APPENDIX A

A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

Two boys, John and Luke, lost their mother at a young age. When they were in their teens, their father was reported to have died when his plane crashed into the ocean. The boys had no other relatives, so two neighboring families took them in.

The Friendly family did all they could to make John feel welcome in their home. They gave him his own bedroom, provided his meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. Not wanting him to feel any pressure, they did not explain to him any of the family rules. Instead they hoped that he would notice how their other children behaved and decide on his own to act the same way.

Not knowing exactly what was expected of him, John frequently disappointed the family by violating unspoken rules. Feeling judged and unconnected to the family, he became increasingly independent. He came and went at any hour, played loud music, and spent long hours in his room with a variety of friends. When Mr. Friendly finally tried to talk with him about his behavior, John said, "I'm not your son, so you have no right to tell me how to live my life. I like having a bedroom and meals whenever I decide to be here, but I'll still do whatever seems right to me."

Tensions continued to build, and finally Mr. Friendly asked John to leave. Fortunately for John, there was another Friendly family in town, and they were happy to take him in. But there the cycle started all over again.

John's brother had an entirely different experience. Luke was taken in by the Loving family. They wanted him to feel welcome, so they gave him a room, provided meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. But they also wanted to avoid misunderstandings and conflict. So shortly after Luke arrived, Mr. Loving explained the family rules to Luke, so he would know how to get along with the rest of the family. He said, "Even though you are not my son, I will be glad to look out for you the best I can. But as long as you are in my home, I also will expect you to behave as my other children do."

Like any normal teenager, Luke sometimes broke the rules. When he did, Mr. Loving sat down with him, pointed out what he'd done wrong, and held him accountable to the same standards he had established for his other children. Luke sometimes resented this discipline, but he eventually realized it was always done in love, and it kept him out of a lot of trouble.

After a few months, Mr. Loving approached Luke and said, "Since you are living here like part of the family, we would like to make it official. If you feel this is where you'd like to stay, we'd like to adopt you and make you our son."

Luke gladly accepted and formally committed himself to the family. In doing so, he changed from being an orphan who merely resided in the home to being a son who willingly accepted and enjoyed all of the same responsibilities and privileges of his new brothers and sisters.

Suppose that John and Luke's father is rescued from an island two years later. When he is reunited with his sons and hears what has happened to them, which family will he thank the most? The Friendly family, who were kind enough to give John a place to hang out, but could not bring themselves to give him any boundaries? Or the Loving family, who welcomed Luke in, held him accountable to the same rules as the rest of the family, and invited him to be a son?

The answer is obvious. And there is a real Father who one day will evaluate the way we care for the people who come into our church family. Therefore, we are glad to welcome people and give them a place to worship, grow and serve. But being "friendly" is not good enough. We want to be loving, as God defines loving (Heb. 12:5-6; 10:24). Therefore, we will encourage and expect everyone in our church to live out the biblical principles that are summarized in these Relational Commitments.

And when people have lived like part of our family for a while, we will encourage them to "make it official." Living like an orphan, with its illusion of independence and self-determination, may seem appealing to some. But it cannot compare to the security, privileges, and sense of belonging that come from joining a biblical church and living as truly committed brothers and sisters in the family of God.