

(Note: This policy deals with separation as it relates to reconciliation in which one or both spouses give at least some agreement to seek counsel and where divorce is not imminent.)

As we work with troubled marriages, we often encounter situations where separation has already taken place or where it may be recommended:

“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.” 1 Corinthians 7:10-12

AND

“Yet, if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave: the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.” 1 Corinthians 7:15

Because these situations are intensified and confused by emotions, it is important for us, as Elders, to have a basic posture and structure from which to guide and counsel most effectively.

Short-term Goals of Separation:

1. A passage of time
 - a. to reduce stress
 - b. to feel safe
 - c. to reach a safe environment
 - d. to receive wise counsel
 - e. to receive medical help
 - f. to gather thoughts
 - g. to regain emotional and physical strength
 - h. to understand
2. A safe environment
 - a. to avoid injury
 - b. to be free from threats
 - c. to be free from a “sick” pattern of relating
 - d. to experience caring support and protection

Long-term Goal : Reconciliation (to move from enmity to friendship enroute to marital harmony)

“Genuine” Reconciliation

- a. not an external appearance of “intactness” that hides the core of the relational difficulties
- b. not a relationship where partners deny the necessity of a process of healing
- c. not a “coercive” reconciliation that is a result of physical or emotional threats
- d. not an “acquiescent” reconciliation with a view of just getting back together for some false sense of security.

TYPES OF SEPARATION

1. “Protective Separation” usually occurs as a crisis-intervention decision to protect a spouse and family from potential or ongoing injury. This is usually the result of abusive behavior by the spouse. The abuse occurs at any or all levels - physical, verbal, or emotional. It may occur occasionally or daily.

The decision to separate for safety and protection very often is encouraged by a non-family member. The troubled family system often minimizes or denies the presence of abuse in the home. As “guardians of the flock,” we, as Elders, may be called upon to encourage separation when we determine a person’s safety (physically or mentally) is at stake.

Additionally, domestic violence is a crime. Our police and other civil authorities must be apprised of situations that we determine are intolerable and where a person’s physical well-being or their property is in danger.

Ultimately, however, the decision to separate from one’s spouse must be an individual’s own decision.

Protective separation is usually time-limited and must move toward the parameters of a therapeutic separation.

2. “Therapeutic Separation” usually occurs at the recommendation of a person working closely with the couple. This is often a pastor, counselor, or friend. This type of separation is called for when the behavior of one or both spouses continually thwarts the efforts to reach stability in the marriage. In most cases, there has been a long period of gradual decline in the marriage relationship and there have been ongoing requests for the troublesome behavior to change. An example of this would be when a spouse has some kind of addictive behavior, be it alcohol abuse or gambling or pornography, etc. and will not agree to getting help. The benefit of a separation under these conditions is to allow the anxiety level to increase to the point of motivating a change in behavior in either or both partners. A therapeutic separation has specific goals and parameters as outlined in this policy.

3. An “Unqualified Separation” is the third situation that we are often asked to evaluate. This occurs when one or both spouses separate without a view toward protection, per se, or with any plan for reconciliation. Sometimes this type of separation occurs as a result of an established “sick” pattern of “conflict resolution” or coping mechanism. One or both partners have a strong compulsion to escape the conflict by simply running away.

PARAMETERS OF RESPONSIBILITY DURING SEPARATION

(Preferable collaborators: both spouses, one or more church representative, a counselor)

1. Living arrangements

- a. Confirm where each person will reside. (If personal safety is at stake, authorities must be notified and an anonymous location may be appropriate)
- b. Confirm who will be responsible for any children involved.
- c. Confirm how financial support will be arranged.

2. Personal contact

- a. Sexual relations are strongly discouraged until significant change has been observed and there is a commitment to heal the marriage.
- b. Personal purity must be maintained during the course of separation.
- c. Visitations should be arranged and agreed upon by both partners.



GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH
MARRIAGE AND SEPARATION
POSITION PAPER

POSITION P-5
Adopted: 5/1/01
Revised: 6/15/15
Reviewed: 1/28/22

3. Church Involvement

- a. The responsibilities of the church and its representatives is restricted to: spiritual encouragement, accountability, and any necessary advocacy directed to appropriate helping agencies or legal counsel.
- b. Any perceived “crisis” that threatens the safety of a spouse or their family should be reported to appropriate authorities.
- c. A representative of the church should be named as an “accountability contact” for each spouse, and in some cases, for other family members.

As people come to us for counsel in situations like this, our first determination must be whether or not there is a commitment or intent to move toward a more appropriate way of dealing with the marital discord. This could be a commitment to get marriage counseling or a movement toward a therapeutic separation.

Practically speaking, these decisions will not be easily reached. It is in the best interest of each of us, as church representatives, to seek additional input from at least one other pastor or Elder.