

DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

GCI pastoral intern discussion starter

by Ted Johnston

Introduction

Throughout my 25+ years in vocational ministry (as church pastor, district pastor, youth ministry director, and church health trainer and consultant) a common denominator has been dealing with conflict. I must confess that doing so has not been one of my favorite tasks. However, it's been one of the most productive.

I've learned that conflict is a normal and inevitable fact of church life. I've learned that rather than indicating that something is terribly wrong, conflict may actually be a sign of church health—showing that members actually care and thus are willing to risk emotional turmoil for the church they love. Conflict can also indicate positive movement (no movement=no conflict).

However, I've also learned that conflict can be an indicator of a lack of church health, typically resulting from spiritual immaturity, including pride and self-centeredness.

I've seen conflict dealt with productively—in ways that facilitate needed change by increasing awareness, raising excitement and adding vitality. Unfortunately, I've also seen conflict dealt with poorly, sometimes with long-lasting, disastrous results.

Be sure of this: conflict is coming to a church near you! When it does, the pastor (perhaps you) and other leaders will need to “step to the plate” to help their church deal with the conflict. Thus, knowing how to do so productively is vital. I pray that this discussion starter will help facilitate a lively dialog on this important topic.

To prepare for that dialog, please read the rest of this document and then three related online documents (click on the not links):

- ***Managing Church Conflict Creatively***
http://ag.org/top/church_workers/intper_gen_conflictmanag.cfm
- ***GCI Church Administration Manual, Chapter 8: Grievance, Discipline and Appeals Processes***
<https://online.gci.org/live/StaticContent/Manuals/Church%20Administration%20Manual.pdf>

Cycles of church conflict

Experts note that church conflict tends to occur in cycles. The first typically starts following three to six month long “honeymoon” period. The second comes 18-24 months later, and the third about five years after that. This pattern of course, may vary in your locale. But it is helpful to know that conflict comes and goes, reminding us to not overreact when it does (overreaction is a typical “rookie” mistake that can do a great deal of harm).



I faced my own “rookie” conflict just a few weeks after beginning my first assignment as a senior pastor (in 1990—I had hair then!). My “honeymoon” period didn’t last as long as the “experts” said it should. After only a few weeks on the job, one of the leading male members showed up at my door and handed me an 18-page long, handwritten letter that listed all the reasons that he could see that I would not make a good pastor. I gotta tell you, that hurt my ego! But, thank God, I did not overreact; I did not get mad; I did not get defensive.

Instead, I listened (a vital conflict resolution “tactic”). In fact, I listened deeply (thank you Jesus!). What I learned then (and even more deeply in several long discussions later—some with his wife), was that there were deep-seated hurts in his soul. Though certainly I was not perfect as a pastor, most of his lashing-out at me had little to do with my performance. And so it often goes with conflict. Take time to listen and to pray, and through prayerful listening learn what is really going on. The real source of conflict sometimes is hidden away.

Sources of conflict

When you encounter conflict, you'll want to identify the contributing factors. Here are several possibilities:

- **Poor communication** concerning the roles of church leaders (including the pastor), policies and procedures, leading to confusion about overlapping responsibilities and goals.
- **Abuse of power and absence of leadership.** These often are at the root of church conflict
- **Personality clashes.**
- **Attitudes.** Differences of feelings or perspectives cause conflict. The more attitudes are shared, the less conflict will exist.
- **Substantive conflict.** Misunderstanding or disagreement over facts, goals, or strategy causes conflict.
- **Emotional conflict.** This occurs when a clash of personal values is at the root.

Environmental factors

Churches that are strong in the following environmental qualities are well equipped to deal productively with conflict when it arises:

- An atmosphere of love, trust, inclusiveness and mutual respect
- Shared leadership with collaborative decision-making/problem-solving processes
- Regular evaluation and feedback
- Clarity of vision and mission
- Mutual accountability among members and leaders
- Understanding of and openness to change
- Ability to deal with life's ambiguities and paradoxes
- Emphasis on spiritual formation

Unproductive strategies

Here are unproductive approaches to conflict resolution:

- **Avoiding:** refusing to discuss the conflict or to listen to the other's argument.
- **Mind-reading:** attributing ill-motives to the other by assuming you know their intent.
- **Silencing:** Crying or yelling to silence the other.
- **Gunny-sacking:** Unloading stored-up grievances; brining up past complaints to avoid discussing the current issue.
- **Manipulating:** Getting the other person into a receptive frame of mind, then presenting your demands to the now-weakened opponent.
- **Rejecting:** Withholding love and affection from the other in conflict.
- **Blaming:** singling out one person on whom all the responsibility for the problem lies.

- **Triangulating:** Unhelpfully looping third parties into the conflict who are not directly part of it (including you). This is a form of blame-shifting.
- **Demoralizing:** making them feel less than worthy to get your own way; using emotional force to make the other compliant.
- **Fighting below the belt:** Inflicting emotional damage by bringing up other's inabilities and failures.

Productive strategies

Here are several approaches to conflict resolution that tend to lead to success (though there are no guarantees).

- If needed, announce that a cooling-off period is necessary before discussing the issue.
- Take responsibility for your thoughts and feelings using "I-Language."
- Listen deeply: be open to the other person's opinions and arguments (listen lovingly to what you don't like).
- Try to see the situation as the other person sees it. Validate their feelings (validation does not necessitate agreement).
- Grant the other person permission to express their thoughts, concerns, complaints freely and openly.
- Avoid power tactics that suppress or inhibit the other person (like "You owe me").
- Focus on the here and now—not on issues that occurred in the past.
- Focus on the person(s) directly involved in the conflict (not their mother!).
- Express your own feelings with candid honesty (but remember that "a soft answer turns away wrath").
- Don't plan a strategy to try to win a war. Instead, aim for understanding and agreement with respect to the immediate source of conflict.
- Express positive feelings for the other and for the relationship.
- Offset harsh words by expressions of caring and commitment (remember the "soft answer").
- Be sensitive to the other person's insecurities and only bring up issues that the other person is able to handle—be satisfied with incremental progress.
- Last (but certainly not least) is praying—invoke the presence and power of the Lord Jesus, who through the power of the Holy Spirit is the Reconciler. If the other person is open to it, you might spend time in prayer with them and for them (and for yourself!).

As you discuss these unproductive and productive strategies I encourage you to share "real-life" instances when you've used them (or they've been used on you!). How did it feel? What were the results? What would you do differently now?