

# A Crash Course in Conflict

*Three basic principles that can be adapted to deal with your church conflict.*

by Gary Fenton

A young leader is angered that the church Bible study she attends is now being taught by a kind but incompetent gentleman. The former teacher, who established and built the class, has been asked by the education director to take a new assignment.

The young leader does not want to see the class dwindle. Nor does she want to be a troublemaker. But she recently attended a seminar on leadership sponsored by her employer; she wants to address the problem.

She does—and sees it escalate from a problem to a conflict. Although the incompetent teacher was removed and the class remained strong, several folks were hurt along the way, including the teacher. But the most lasting impact was on the young leader. She grew negative and judgmental. Although prepared to cope with conflict in the corporate world, she was unprepared to deal with it in her church.

After this happened in our congregation, we added a section in our leadership training on dealing with conflict.

Much of church conflict is more like championship wrestling than city riots; it's usually not as painful as it looks. We cannot prepare church leaders for all types of conflict, so we give them three basic principles that can be adapted to meet the specific situation.

## **1. There is a difference between concerned disagreement and conflict.**

Conflict is a disagreement that keeps decisions from being made or the group from moving forward after the decision has been made.

Often leaders fear that any disagreement indicates conflict. A problem or difference of opinion, however, does not mean there is a conflict. There is conflict only when the group cannot make a decision or move forward.

Two years ago in a committee meeting, two strong-willed members had a spirited discussion. The next morning, a concerned young leader called and asked if he could meet with the two people to iron out their differences. We talked through what he had heard. I asked him, "Do you feel the group is ready to make a decision? Did the heated discussion block a decision?"

After some thought, he said it sounded more like *Crossfire* on CNN than a street fight. *Crossfire* is good theater, but it is not conflict. The participants don't quit the show because the debate is spirited.

## **2. There is a difference between reconciliation and resolution.**

Resolution usually means finding the answer. Reconciliation means bringing together the folks in conflict. Some issues will never be resolved, but people can still be reconciled.

Often in the process of seeking resolution, however, we compromise and seek middle ground. Many poorly designed church buildings are the result of trying to resolve the conflict between low costs and effectiveness; as a result, neither is accomplished.

A church in East Texas resolved a conflict over stained-glass windows by placing cheap, plastic replicas in its sanctuary. The art crowd will tell you the windows look as if they were purchased at Wal-Mart, and perhaps they were. The pragmatists still resent the fact that because of the windows they had to install extra lighting.

In this instance, the leader tried to help the group make the best decision, then reconcile the people to one another. He had it in reverse. Reconciliation brings people to relational unity but not necessarily to agreement.

A mature gentleman, opposed to the actions of a committee he was on, recently spoke strongly and directly against the committee's recommendation. After the meeting, the mature member sought out the committee's young chairman. It was obvious that the leader had been stung by the intensity of the opposition. The older and wiser man, even though he disagreed with the committee, conveyed his confidence and trust in the chairman. Neither man has resolved with the other his different views on the matter, but they are reconciled.

### **3. There is a difference between being peaceful and being a peacemaker.**

A fellow pastor told me about an elected church leader who refuses to become involved with anything controversial. This leader is a no-show on big issues and justifies his behavior as flowing from "a desire to be peaceful."

Being peaceful, however, is different from being a peacemaker, which we are all called to be.

Peacemakers do not sit on their hands; on the contrary, they are often in the middle of conflict, seeking to reconcile leaders. Peacemakers are often risk takers, willing to enter the fray with an expanded heart.

One of our members observed a growing distance between two Sunday school teachers. Their classes attracted the same ages of people and thus competed for new members. The aggressive personalities of the teachers were generating sparks, though there were no brush fires yet.

This member, without waiting for either a full-scale conflict to break out or the permission of the church leadership, met with each leader about the matter. Because of his preventative strike, the conflict was avoided. It also allowed both Sunday school leaders to save their reputations.

*Gary Fenton; Growing Your Church Through Training and Motivation; A Crash Course in Conflict; pp. 163-166.*