

Conflict is a word that normally strikes fear when it happens, or even when it is mentioned as a possibility. Conflict, however, is a natural and normal part of life. Conflict is often seen as unnatural or inappropriate, and possibly shameful or embarrassing. When something is seen as shameful, the natural response is avoidance.¹ This is generally the case with conflict in the church, especially in a church planting situation. The thought is conflict has the potential to undermine church planting efforts, so conflicts are ignored. Ironically, ignoring conflicts has a much greater potential to undermine the church plant than properly addressing the conflicts that will naturally arise.

Defining Conflict

Defining conflict is one way to come to understand the nature of conflict. Webster defines conflict as “competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state of action.”² This definition underscores the harshness that can be involved in conflict; however, harsh opposition does not have to be a part of conflict, but often it is.

Consider these other definitions of conflict. Think about the application of these definitions to a Christian context. A conflict is a “situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other but not both.”³ “Conflict

¹Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler, ed., *Making Peace With Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 29.

²*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1983), s.v. “conflict.”

³Larry L. McSwain and William C. Treadwell, Jr., *Conflict Ministry in the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 25; quoted in Kenneth O. Gangle and Samuel L. Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 131.

is two or more objects aggressively trying to occupy the same space at the same time.”⁴

“Conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.”⁵

Review the four definitions again. Reflect on the following questions. What elements of conflict are identified in these definitions? What aspects of conflict identified in these definitions are incompatible with Christian values? Write your own definition of conflict.

When Conflict Happens

Church planters face a unique set of factors that can cause conflict. As the church plant completes mileposts of development, conflict can enter at any of a number of points. Church planters and core groups should be aware of the causes of conflict and the stages of development at which conflict is most likely to occur.

One reason conflict occurs in a church plant is that core values are not shared among the church planting team or core group. Core values are valuable for evaluating in what activities the church plant should be engaged. If activities are consistent with core values, there is not a problem. Conflict arises when a member has a core value that differs from the stated values of the group and wants to participate in an activity based on that value. A decision must be made, and the person either opts not to be involved in that activity or be untrue to the stated core values. Either way, a conflict of values must be addressed.

⁴G. Douglass Lewis, *Resolving Church Conflicts* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 73; quoted in Kenneth O. Gangle and Samuel L. Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 131.

⁵Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1956), 8; quoted in Kenneth O. Gangle and Samuel L. Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 131.

Another reason for conflict is the lack of agenda harmony. Agenda harmony is the idea that members of the core group and/or the church planting team have the same agenda for the church plant. If this agenda is not unified, then conflict is likely to happen. Perhaps one member of the core group has animosity toward another church in the area. This person may desire to see rapid growth and be willing to proselytize in order to be bigger and better than the other church. The church planter, by contrast, is desiring to see most of the growth of the church come from evangelistic efforts. The agenda of these two will eventually clash. Agenda issues are very difficult because the conflicting agenda item is often hidden until the opportune moment. The conflict, then, leaves others saying, “Where did that come from?”

A third reason conflict occurs in a church plant is when the core group does not represent the focus group. Each church plant has in mind a group of people they are trying to reach. This could be a cultural group, a socioeconomic group or an ethnic group, but there is a target group of people. When the core group is not representative of the focus group, conflict may occur. The core group will likely operate in a way with which they are familiar and comfortable. The core group’s methods may not be compatible with the culture of the focus group. In this situation, the core group must make a conscious decision to embrace the culture of the focus group or run the risk of conflict.

A developmental stage of church planting at which conflict may occur is the movement from a core group to public worship services. This transition can be a period during which conflicts arise. When the reality of this transition takes hold, some will not actually be as committed to moving to the next stage as they may have seemed. They may try to undermine or slow down the transition from a small group to an actual congregation where new people are being admitted. (To read further on this, check the CPN paper “Core Group.”)

Another area of conflict can be in relationship to the sponsoring congregation. Church planters are encouraged to have a written covenant to define the relationship between the church plant, church planter and sponsoring congregation. Often, this covenant is never put in place or it does not clearly define the relationships. In either situation, conflict will almost certainly arise at some point in time.

These are not the only sources of conflict in a church planting setting, but they are some that have been identified as the most common sources. There will be other land mines that decorate the church planting path. There will be other sources of conflict and there will be other mileposts at which conflict occurs. The key to any of these is not avoidance, but rather being prepared to deal with conflict when it does occur.

Preventing Conflict

While avoiding and ignoring are harmful conflict resolution strategies, preventing conflict is a worthwhile goal. Conflict prevention should be the first goal of a conflict management system. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” certainly applies to conflict prevention.⁶

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie have a book that outlines the ideals that govern their order. One section states the goals, such as “to be a fellowship where loves abides,” “to be servants of Christ for the world,” and “to pray for the salvation of all the world.” The following section is the “Rules.” The rules are guidelines the sisters follow in living together. The preface

⁶Tim Hicks, “Steps for Setting Up an Effective Conflict Management System,” Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education, n.d. (Web page); available from <http://mediate.com/articles/hickst4.cfm>; accessed March 19, 2002.

of the rules states, “We have these rules so that we will not kill each other.” The sisters realistically understood that the lofty idealism of the order could not prevent conflict.⁷

Church planters are encouraged to write down statements of vision, mission and core values; however, guidelines for preventing and dealing with conflict are seldom considered before it’s too late. Since conflict is a certainty, considering some rules for conflict would not be a useless task. Rules need to be stated at the beginning or at least before a conflict arises.

When writing guidelines for conflict prevention, several principles need to be remembered. First, encourage differences of opinion. It is not bad to disagree as long as people are not hurtful in the process. Encourage divergent ideas and creative approaches to ministry.

Secondly, state the method, not just the principle. There are several biblical principles that deal with conflict. Those principles need to be proclaimed, but the method for attaining the principle needs to be stated also.⁸ Outline the method for dealing with differences in both good times and in bad.

Third, self-control is the key to conflict prevention.⁹ Without self-control, a conflict prevention guide will not be effective. Self-control is a fruit of the Christian life and needs to be encouraged to be displayed, especially in dealing with troubled situations.

Along with a written guide for conflict prevention, there are several skills that the church planter can enhance that will help prevent conflict. Listening is an important skill for many areas of ministry, but it is especially helpful for preventing conflict. Listening to a person that has a strong need or negative emotions can help that person to resolve those issues. If those issues are

⁷H. Newton Malony, *Win-Win Relationships* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 130-131.

⁸*Ibid.*, 130-141.

ignored rather than addressed, there is a higher probability that those same issues will develop into a major conflict.¹⁰ Take the time to develop your listening skills so that you learn to really hear what people are saying. (See CPN paper: “Listening Skills.”)

Awareness is another skill that will help in conflict prevention. Certain words or actions propel some people into conflict. It is important to be able to read the storm warnings. One needs to be aware of the signs and patterns in his/her own life and in the lives of others that indicate conflict is about to happen.¹¹

Learning to properly release tension will also be helpful in preventing conflict. Tensions tend to build in the normal course of life. If a person yells to release tension, they build tension in someone else if they yell at them. Conflict, on some level, will likely occur. It is important to release tension in a way that does not build tension in someone else.¹²

A final skill in conflict prevention is increased emotional support. Do not discount the need for emotional support to prevent unnecessary conflict. If a person’s emotional needs are being met, they are less likely to have the need for conflict.¹³ Mentor relationships and Church Planter Networks are designed to make sure church planters have the appropriate emotional support.

Resolving Conflicts

Most likely, the best conflict prevention strategies will not circumvent all conflicts in the church plant. For those situations where conflict does exist, a sound conflict resolution strategy

⁹Ibid., 152.

¹⁰Robert Bolton, *People Skills* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1979), 210.

¹¹Ibid., 210-211.

¹²Ibid., 211.

¹³Ibid.

needs to be in place. Tim Hicks suggests three principles for a successful conflict resolution system.

1. When conflicts do happen, they should be resolved as quickly as possible.
2. Conflicts are best addressed as directly as possible with those who are involved.
3. Conflicts should be dealt with at the most informal level of dispute resolution possible.¹⁴

These principles are wholly consistent with biblical standards for handling conflict and are foundational for successfully resolving conflict situations.

Another principle for biblical conflict resolution is “win the person and not the argument.” Too often the goal of resolving a conflict is to win, to be right. The biblical goal for conflict resolution is to solve problems and keep relationships intact.¹⁵ Matthew 18:15 says, “Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.”¹⁶ Make your goal to win the person and not the argument.

A biblical conflict management system consists of four key components.¹⁷ Ken Sande summarizes the components of biblical conflict resolution.

Glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). Biblical peacemaking is motivated and directed by a desire to please and honor God. His interests, reputation, and commands should take precedence over all other considerations. This focus not only shows our love and respect for God but also protects us from the impulsive, self-centered decisions that make conflicts even worse.

Get the log out of your eye (Matt. 7:5). Peacemaking requires facing up to our own attitudes, faults, and responsibilities before pointing out what others have done wrong. Overlooking the minor offenses of others and honestly admitting our own faults often

¹⁴Hicks.

¹⁵John W. Vale and Robert B. Hughes, *Getting Even: Handling Conflict So That Both Sides Win* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 47.

¹⁶NKJV (New King James Version).

¹⁷This section is a summary of Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997). A detailed discussion of each component can be found on pages 13-234.

will encourage similar responses from our opponents and open the way for candid dialogue, reconciliation, and constructive negotiation.

Go and show your brother his fault (Matt. 18:15). At times, peacemaking also requires constructive confrontation. When others fail to accept responsibility for their actions, we may need to confront them in a gracious, yet firm, manner. If they refuse to respond appropriately, we may need to involve respected friends, church leaders, or other neutral individuals who can help restore peace.

Go and be reconciled (Matt. 5:24). Finally, peacemaking involves a commitment to restoring damaged relationships and developing agreements that are just and satisfactory to everyone involved. Forgiveness and cooperative negotiation clear away the debris left by conflict and make possible reconciliation and genuine peace.¹⁸

It is a good idea to have guidelines in place for how conflict will be handled before it occurs. A good conflict resolution strategy would integrate the four principles of conflict resolution with Sande's components of biblical conflict resolution. It would be helpful to identify several methods for each of the four components. In writing out the methods, using appropriate Scripture, a conflict resolution system will be formed for your church plant. A healthy exercise might include members of the core group and/or church planting team helping to formulate the methods for conflict resolution.

With conflict, the question is not "if," the question is "when?" Conflict will most assuredly happen. When two or more people are together, conflict is almost a given. Lofty notions of unity and harmony will not prevail to prevent or resolve conflict. Good systems of conflict prevention and resolution are a must. Remember the admonition of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, "We have these rules so we will not kill each other."¹⁹

¹⁸Sande, 10-11.

¹⁹Maloney, 131.

Proverbs on Conflict

10:19 When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. NIV	10:19 Don't talk so much. You keep putting your foot in your mouth. Be sensible and turn off the flow! TLB
12:16 A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult. NIV	12:16 A fool is quick-tempered; a wise man stays cool when insulted. TLB
15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. NIV	15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but harsh words cause quarrels. TLB
16:32 Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city. NIV	16:32 It is better to be slow-tempered than famous; it is better to have self-control than to control an army. TLB
25:11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. NIV	25:11 Timely advice is as lovely as gold apples in a silver basket. TLB
25:28 Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control. NIV	25:28 A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls. TLB
29:11 A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. NIV	29:11 A rebel shouts in anger; a wise man holds his temper in and cools it. TLB

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