



Conflict Resolution

by Ken Newberger

Church Conflict and the Lesson from a Pocket Watch

An old-fashioned pocket watch illustrates a physical law which Einstein considered the premier law of all science

- the second law of thermodynamics. In layman's terms: in closed systems, there is an irreversible tendency for energy and matter to move from order to disorder. Systems or things that are not open to outside influence run down, break down and become less and less useful.

Houses fall into disrepair, cars stop working and watches wind down and stop. Scientists propose the energy in the entire universe itself will eventually burn out and turn cold. Unless a carpenter reinforces or rebuilds the old structure; unless the auto shop replaces the rusted metal or repairs the broken component; unless someone winds up the old-fashioned pocket watch, those things which were once in excellent working order become useless. Over time, what was once "perfect" becomes non-functional, in an invariable movement toward disintegration.

How Does this Relate to a Local Congregation?

Conflict in the church often becomes a closed social system. When it comes to addressing ongoing, unresolved conflict in the church, one of the most oft-stated refrains church leaders make is, "we'll handle this (growing) conflict ourselves." From my experience, this is an early indication that the conflict will not end well. What typically happens is that communication and relationships break down even further.

For years, conflict resolution theorists and practitioners have recognized the inherent negative interpersonal dynamics of closed systems.

- "Direct negotiations have a limited usefulness once the level of conflict has escalated in intensity." D. Augsburger

For churches stymied by conflict, the best way to reverse the trend toward social disintegration is by calling upon the outside assistance of one trained to positively impact such systems. Only with the infusion of energy from outside the system are matters within the system more likely to improve.

- “(Direct) negotiations are hard to sustain and frequently break down, so that the next resort is usually coercive self-help.” K. Avruch

The Lesson from an Old- Fashioned Pocket Watch

The lesson to be learned from an old-fashioned watch is that an agency other than the moving parts of the watch itself has to wind the timepiece in order for it to properly function. It is a mistake for those whose churches are experiencing ongoing, unresolved conflict to think that with just a little more time, everything will get better. Closed systems don't get better. They get worse. Eventually, they stop functioning altogether.

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Closing Illustration

The story is widely told that after electrical engineer Charles Steinmetz retired from General Electric years ago, he was asked to return to diagnose a problem involving a complex system of machinery. Steinmetz came to the facility to examine what went wrong. Finally, he took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and marked an “X” on one of the machines. To everyone's amazement, the defective component laid exactly beneath the “X.”

The retired engineer billed General Electric \$10,000. Seeking an explanation for such a large amount, the company asked Steinmetz for an itemized bill. GE received this breakdown: “\$1 for the chalk; \$9,999 for knowing where to put it.” The moral of the story? Intervention by an expert from outside a broken system is pivotal in bringing order back within that system – an axiom applicable to churches in conflict as well.