

Managing Church Conflict Creatively

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Acts 6:1–7 reminds us that churches are never free from conflict when they are true to their mission, and you don't pastor long until you discover the need for conflict management tools.

A majority of the conflict experienced in churches is the product of changing times rather than creative leadership. Remarkable changes have occurred in the pressures that pastors bear compared to pressures they experienced when their word was seldom questioned and their authority prevailed. Pastors need not be surprised when they find their authority and plans challenged, and they are caught up in a whole storm of protest. It's happening in every institution in our society, including the church.

Laypeople, frustrated by feelings of powerlessness from personal or professional change, often displace their frustrations and act them out in the church. Why there? The church is one of the few places they fear little or no recrimination. These conflicts must be managed constructively by mature church leadership.

Let's look at how the apostles handled the first major conflict in the Early Church (cf. Acts 6:1–7). The Jerusalem church was experimenting in "holding all things common." The Grecian widows, who were part of the Dispersion, lived outside Jerusalem and were saying they lived too far away to get as fair a share of the goods being divided as the Hebrew widows who lived in Jerusalem.

STAGES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The apostles followed a 3-stage pattern of conflict management: (1) *Desensitization*.

The widows were allowed to air their complaints, desensitizing the conflict. (2)

Deliberation. There was time for serious, mature discussion of the conflict. (3) *Decision*.

Let's take a closer look at how this New Testament formula for the creative management of conflict actually works.

Desensitization

Desensitization requires active involvement by leadership. You cannot constructively manage conflict by continually avoiding or denying it. You can't say, "The problem isn't there."

And you cannot constructively manage conflict by dominating it or simply forbidding it to happen by saying, "We *will* be in agreement. Do you understand me?" That approach won't work.

Instead, you first reassure everyone involved that conflict is normal in any human relationship, and the church is no exception. The ideal of perpetual peace in the church—without conflict—is unscriptural and unrealistic. Remind your people that differing viewpoints are perfectly normal. Emphasize that conflicts occur because people *choose* to look at matters in different ways, not necessarily because those matters *are* the way people *choose* to see them.

If you're going to be a master at handling desensitization, you cannot be *ego-involved* by seeing a situation only your unique way. If you say, "Well, this is the way God has shown it to me, and this is the way it's going to be," you're not going to desensitize anything. Rather, you will only *intensify* it, because you have made debating the position you have taken equal to debating with God.

Before you get too ego-involved in declaring your divine revelation, listen to what the Lord may be saying to others. The apostles let the Hebrew and Grecian widows express their feelings before they went to the next stage of conflict management.

Why? Once anxiety is reduced, a broader perspective can be taken. In almost any situation, the Holy Spirit can lead us to many alternatives.

Abraham Lincoln frequently suggested other possible interpretations of circumstances. He put all the potential points of view before people so that his debate opponent couldn't say anything new. Desensitization involves helping people see several different ways of viewing a set of circumstances. After people's feelings have been sufficiently surfaced and aired, move to the second stage of conflict management.

Deliberation

Consider the various points of view. In trying to help His disciples overcome their tendency to fear, Jesus said, "Fear not." Perhaps He was giving them the opportunity to have the broadest possible range of alternatives.

Christ wants a congregation to be open to any creative direction the Spirit of God may want to bring. But when church members and church leaders commit themselves to an ego-involved position, their anxiety that they may be proven wrong frequently builds rigid defenses that get in the way of God leading them the way He wants them to go.

Occasional personality conflicts between segments of the congregation and the pastor can affect the pastor's influence. But in most instances, it is a conflict with the *position* of pastor as the source of legitimate power in church leadership. People who refuse to engage in sincere, mature mediation while respecting the position of the pastor need to be seen for what they are and dealt with as decisively as possible (cf. 3 John 9–12 for the scriptural precedent).

John evidently felt he had been patient enough with Diotrephes—a man who had a long history of being difficult to deal with in the church. John showed the church what he, as their pastor, believed to be the model of a good man (Demetrius) and what he believed to be the model of an evil man (Diotrephes). Then he told them to avoid being like Diotrephes but to follow those who had a good report among them.

Paul was not quite as patient as John. As a pastor I frequently found Paul a great comfort to my heart, especially when I read his prayer for Alexander: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works" (2 Timothy 4:14).

The extreme action needed to deal with this kind of person should be rare in the life of a church. Most people—dealt with in love and patience—will move through conflict satisfactorily. In the nearly 26 years I pastored, the church board rescinded the memberships of 10 people. And when our sister churches inquired about any of these people, we were faithful to report the facts in terms of how these people had affected the unity of the congregation and the work of God.

In some instances these individuals learned from their discipline and did well. In other cases they caused the same kinds of disturbances in other churches that they caused among us.

Many people who cause disturbances in churches tend to be paranoid in their personalities—tending to feel either persecuted or messianic. Most congregations will have a person or two like this. If you try to nail them to a cross, you'll wind up with the marks in your own hands. And if you try to follow them in their messianic moments, it won't be long until they will be pastoring the church.

PARANOID PEOPLE

Paranoid people want prominence and power. Allowing them to have both will be disastrous for them and the church. God loves them and wants to help them, and pastors can help them best by allowing them to have prominence—without power. What positions would most likely fit this description in your church? Soloists? Choir members? Hostesses? Ushers? Such positions have legitimate tasks that need to be done in every congregation. Put paranoid people in places where they're out in the public—where they're seen and feel important. However, God help you if they get on your board or become your worship leader or Christian education director!

Why put them in positions of prominence? Because if you can find them a position of prominence without power, your congregation will see what you see, and the disruptive efforts of the paranoid people in your church will be contained. They won't be making decisions or sitting on committees.

Remember, though, even people who recognize such people for who they are will resent you if you attack paranoid members. Why? Because the *position* of pastor is supposed to be above that kind of behavior. Ask God to help you separate your feelings from your sense of responsibility in these situations. This will enable you to act from your *position* as pastor and spiritual leader of the congregation, instead of from your *personal* feelings.

Provide prominence without power, trusting that the people of God will keep leadership where it belongs: in the hands of responsible, mature believers. At the same time, help your congregation love disruptive people enough to allow the body of Christ to provide what therapy can be accomplished in their hearts and minds.

If certain people have only caused *you* difficulty, you may be the one who needs to change. Check with other pastors who've had to work with them, and see if they caused problems in other churches. Find out how they functioned in previous situations of leadership and power. This is one way fellow pastors can cooperate and help each other.

One of the things I learned when I was building a church staff is that you aren't really pulling off such a coup when you hire a staff person from another church without first talking to that senior pastor. You may simply be answering his or her prayers for deliverance!

DISRUPTIVE, MANIPULATIVE PEOPLE

When you have to deal with a disruptive, manipulative person on your staff or in your church, remember that such a person will see your kindness as stupidity. He or she will try to make your attempts at reason and reconciliation look like evidence of weakness. And your prolonged patience will be seen as an extended opportunity to manipulate and exploit the circumstances.

If you find yourself caught in the throes of a person's critical attempt to disrupt the church, it's important to keep your program going as though nothing had happened—including those justifiable features which may be under irresponsible attack. Don't publicize conflict. The truth will "out," eventually.

Mature members of the church will, in time, see the wisdom of what Paul admonished the church at Rome to do: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple [innocent]" (Romans 16:17,18).

By your words and deeds teach your people what good leadership looks like. And keep your hand on all levels of the leadership-selection process in your church. This is how you sustain—and at the same time contain—those unhealthy people in your congregation. Pray that exposure to the properly functioning body of Christ will bring healing to them before they can damage the cause of Christ.

If you are *for* something, a person like this will be *ag'in* it. They will be against enough things that the people in the congregation will observe it and still love the person, but they will have better sense than to elect the disruptive, manipulative person to a position of leadership in the church.

DISRUPTIVE, ARGUMENTATIVE PEOPLE

Disruptive, argumentative people will make your board or committee meetings even more difficult than they would otherwise be. They will want to override every other point of view during your times of deliberation and control the decisions you reach as a group. Save yourself a headache by keeping these kinds of people in positions of prominence—without power.

During your deliberation of conflict-laden church business, encourage free discussion of the issues with all parties involved. In your board meetings and in your departmental

and committee meetings, encourage differing viewpoints. You can do this easily by being careful how you respond to someone who has given an opposing point of view. Say to this person in the group meeting, "Thank you for sharing from your standpoint. Now, let's hear from someone else."

Try not to move into any planning meeting with such tightly defined and preconceived plans that there is no room for other opinions. Have the understanding with your board and your department heads that these meetings are the place and the time when different viewpoints should be aired and explored for whatever creative advantage they may have over the plan as initially presented.

Others present may have valid opinions that need to be heard. Remember, you are looking for the *best* plan. When there are honest differences, let them be expressed in these kinds of meetings, to help the group reach a decision that represents the maximum Kingdom potential.

TIMID LAYPEOPLE

Laypeople with honest convictions are prone to sit too quietly in departmental planning meetings and on church boards, whether because of their own timidity or because of overpowering leadership. They often leave without expressing their real feelings during the meeting. What do they do? When they get out of the meeting, they are likely to say, "I didn't really agree with what the board decided." In trying to avoid the momentary discomfort of an honest difference of opinion, they have created a longer, deeper discomfort by saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time in the wrong place and in the wrong way.

CONCLUSION

Somehow we get deceived into believing that God can't be in an honest confrontation or difference of opinion; God can only be in peace and tranquillity. Churches can suffer from such mismanagement of conflict.

Mismanagement of conflict in difficult situations also occurs at higher levels of leadership because people hesitate to speak up. We need to avoid this trap at every level of the church.

Remember, the devil doesn't fear a big church. He fears a united church. Only when differences can be expressed in an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance can a truly

church-unifying point of view be discovered and defined. Mastering this process is leadership at its best.

ACHIEVING CLARITY OF COMMUNICATION

Love often expresses itself in honest confrontation. Differences of opinion do not necessarily equate with an absence of love.

Remember, the six interpretations of every spoken communication are:

1. What the speaker intended to say.
2. What the speaker actually said.
3. What the speaker thought he or she said.
4. What the hearer needed to hear.
5. What the hearer actually heard.
6. What the hearer thought he or she heard.

Pastors, you should work toward creating clear communication in your meetings.

Transferring thoughts and feelings from one mind to another is a complex and difficult challenge under any circumstance. The deeper the feelings of either party involved, the more difficult it becomes. But it's not impossible.

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING UNDER PRESSURE

Here are some guidelines for communicating under pressure that you may wish to share with your church leadership for future times of deliberation together. Of course, every churchwide or committee/departmental meeting should begin with prayer for open minds and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in arriving at the best possible resolution of all issues to be considered.

- *In your deliberations, try to use more I statements than you statements. I statements tend to be informative: "I feel we should get started on..." or "I think it would be good for the church if we..." You statements tend to be blaming: "You make me so angry," or "You always want the decisions to go your way." If you need to express anger, then own that anger and express it something like this: "When we talk about this subject, I tend to feel angry because..." Do you see how different—and how much less accusing—that sounds?*

Stating things in terms of what you feel and what you believe is needed will undoubtedly prove more effective than complaining about what is lacking in someone else's suggestion.

- *Give supportive feedback when people are willing to express their thoughts.* Statements such as "I'm glad you feel secure enough to express your feelings"; "Thank you for sharing your ideas and feelings"; or "You are a valuable member of this committee" will encourage more openness and honest dialogue—qualities which are sorely needed in the church.
- *Watch for metacommunication.* Metacommunication is a message about the message. For example, if I come to a troubled situation and say, "As I was praying the other night, the Lord spoke to me about this," I'm sending a message about the message I'm just about to give you. I'm telling you, "Don't challenge this; the Lord spoke to me." It comes across that the Lord never talks to anybody else.

If everybody sends that kind of message about their message before they give it, it's going to be obvious that somebody's mistaken. So watch for the messages about the message.

- *Flag unnecessarily provocative words.* Instead of telling someone, "You're wrong about that," learn how to say, "It might be viewed from this point of view." You could also say, "I've listened to our discussion, and it certainly helped me to see things a bit differently," or "While I was listening, it occurred to me that another way of looking at it might be...."

ABC'S OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Let me share a simple ABC formula for good communication when you are involved in emotionally charged and difficult meetings.

A—Accept each other. Whether or not you always approve of other members' ideas, you should still be able to accept each other as valued members of the local body and the body of Christ.

B—Become a good listener. Good listeners indicate they are hearing what is being said. They stop what they are doing; they don't doodle or skim through correspondence while someone else is speaking. They pay attention and indicate they are listening by facial expressions and appropriately responding with words or a nod of the head.

C—Choose your words carefully. Words that are thoughtfully selected and properly expressed can provide direction and healing. But if words are carelessly selected and thoughtlessly used, they can be incredibly hurtful and destructive.

Here are some suggestions to help you choose your words carefully.

1. Let the other person finish what he or she is saying before you attempt to answer. Don't interrupt.
2. Restate what you think the other person has said before you attempt to answer. You earn the right to respond by first proving that you have clearly understood what was

said. You could say, "If I understood you right, you said...." This gives the speaker a chance to clarify any misunderstandings.

3. Prior to the meeting—

a. Monitor your thoughts on the difficult issues you are going to be discussing.

b. Edit them for accuracy and clarity.

c. Mentally rehearse how you are going to present them to the group.

FOUR RULES FOR A "FAIR FIGHT"

When it becomes obvious that there are major differences of opinion and the road to resolution is going to be a long and difficult one, remember these four rules for a "fair fight." I most often share these with married couples who have communication problems; however, they are certainly applicable to such intense situations as difficult church board and committee meetings.

1. *Stick to the subject.* Don't dig up last month's garbage.

2. *Don't "fight" dirty.* Don't say things that are primarily designed to express your anger and hurt the other person. This makes your job more difficult and produces memories that are hard to erase.

3. *Learn how to negotiate.* Make the department, program, congregation, and the body of Christ the real winners. Put their needs ahead of your need to win. This doesn't mean you go 50/50 all the time. Sometimes you will have to go 60/40, 80/20, or even 90/10. Of course, not every decision can be reached through compromise, but be willing to use it whenever and wherever it works.

4. *Stay good humored.* Learn to see your disagreements in light of that little transitional phrase from the Gospels: "It came to pass." Remember, the vast majority of your differences will "come to pass."

By following these various guidelines, you teach people in your departments and on your board to express themselves in a way that allows for a variety of viewpoints without them being afraid they are offending God.

In this final article we will consider "the bottom line" in conflict resolution—a satisfactory *decision*.

Frequently, a compromise can be worked out. That's one way of creatively managing conflict, and it offers a win-win situation where everyone feels pretty good about the end product. But don't overwork compromise; it's not always realistic or even possible.

Remember Solomon. There was only one baby. When he sought to compromise by giving each mother half of the child, the real mother quickly realized this issue couldn't be resolved by compromise.

It is often necessary to require folks to pick a side and then require the winners to make it work. How should you respond? "OK, folks, this is how the group feels we should manage this situation—together." This outcome is more difficult; there are perceived "winners" and "losers." You will need to encourage those whose solutions weren't chosen. Let them know how valuable they are to the implementation of the group's decision. Reassure them that their ideas are worthwhile now and in the future because there are always going to be challenges which need open minds; you look forward to their contribution to future discussions on this or other issues.

Perhaps the most creative resolution is to try to find an integration of as many different points of view as possible. Creative integration would be the optimum way of managing conflict: devising a new approach that no one coming into the meeting had really seen, but that the whole group is helped to see as they look at the situation together.

This was the apostles' way in managing that first crisis of the New Testament church: the care of widows and orphans. None of the apostles—Peter, James, or John—had considered the possibility of having deacons. All they knew was that the widows were murmuring and complaining.

They allowed the widows to murmur until their complaints were aired and desensitized. Then they stayed with that conflict and deliberated different ways of resolving it. And out of the first major conflict of the church came the whole idea of lay ministry. That was an idea that none of them had when the widows first began to gripe. If there hadn't been the conflict, the creative dimension of lay ministry might never have been added to the church. For, out of the first major conflict came the office and ministry of "deacon." Brock Chisholm, former director of the World Health Organization, declared, "So far, in the history of the world, there have never been enough mature people in the right places." Maturity never shows itself any brighter than when it shines in the midst of conflict. The mature person sees that God specializes in managing messes. Instead of focusing on the mess, the mature person sees what good and creative things God can bring out of it. God is, after all, the master of peace...in the midst of chaos. Your crisis isn't the first one He's had to manage.

You may be trying to make an untimely decision—in the midst of a situation about which nothing can be done at the moment. Here is how to recognize such a situation and a healthy way to temporarily "table" it. It is a very practical application of the scriptural directive to come to God "casting all your cares upon Him."

First, determine whether anything at all can be done about the situation. Sometimes there is simply nothing that can be done. As a group, give the problem to God in prayer. Next...

If a resolution seems possible, decide whether this particular group can bring it about or if you need outside help. Remember God will never hold you accountable for things that are beyond your control. So, decide if this is something you will ever be able to do.

Then...

Can anything be done about it right now? By whom? If your group can manage the task, assign a member or members to tackle the problem and report back to you. If someone outside your group or committee is better suited to managing the situation, decide who among you should approach the person(s) who can bring about change. Set a date for completion of this contact. Or...

Determine when something can be done, if not now, and make note of it in your planning calendar to remind you of the appropriate time for action. Then, as a group, "cast" this problem on the Lord for the time being. These are the steps to "casting your cares" on the Lord—a process you will undoubtedly need to go through time and again. As you struggle with some of the difficult business of the institutional church, remember that this gorgeous planet came into existence as a result of an earlier catastrophe. When God looked at what Satan had made of earth, when it was "without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2), He was moved within His Spirit to restore it and create something beautiful. In the same way, when the enemy has stirred up conflict in His church, God's Spirit moves mature people to manage that conflict creatively. He will do it as often as necessary to protect and preserve His kingdom here on earth.

Step back and divest yourself of ego-involvement. Ask God to bring His creative will out of your chaotic situations. Ask Him to help you and the others involved in your church's decisions to bring open minds and mature attitudes to the desensitization and deliberation process—so that eventually His creative will is made manifest in the

decision you reach together. Reread the story of Acts 6:1-7 and marvel at the good that came out of the first major crisis in the Church. Make yourself as open as you possibly can to whatever good He chooses to bring out of your deliberations, and encourage others to do the same.

When this happens, everybody wins—especially the kingdom of God.