

The Escalating Stages of Unresolved Church Conflict

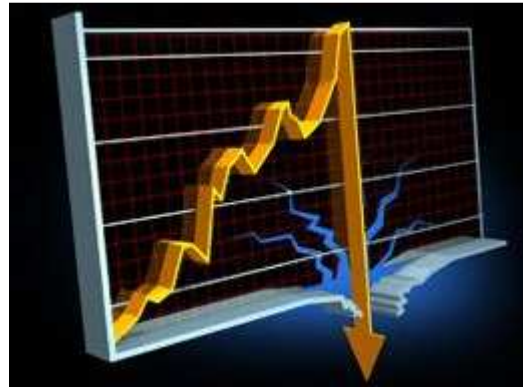
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The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing"

Edmund Burke

"No one would admit there was a problem until it was way out of control" Church member

"I did not act quickly enough. I acted alone for too long" Senior pastor



Here is a
Life Preserver.
At What Stage
Will You Grab It?

1. (Sometimes) An Uncomfortable Feeling

Something doesn't feel right. You can't quite put your finger on it. Nothing explicit has been mentioned.

2. A Problem To Be Resolved (issue-focused)

An identifiable problem has emerged and dealing with that matter is the focus. The participants are civil and respectful to one another as they each share their perspective. Solutions are proposed and, in most instances, issues are resolved in a calm and collaborative fashion to everyone's satisfaction. But if this is not the case....

3. A Person To Differ With (other person-focused)

The focus of conversation changes from what should be done and what is the best solution, to a debate of who is right and who is wrong. Frustration sets in because the attempt to achieve one's goals is undermined by another. Parties may become



more cautious in dealing with each other. The dispute can still be constructive if the parties make a greater effort to see the other person's point of view. On the other hand, if the matter is not resolved, the situation can easily deteriorate into destructive conflict.

4. A Dispute To Win (issue-focused, greater intensity)

Collaboration wanes. Other problematic issues often appear confusing matters. Disputing parties communicate less to each other and more about each other with those who take their respective side, increasing polarization in the congregation. And while there may not be an intent to hurt one's opponent, it often results. Because the overriding goal is for one's



needs to be met or interests to prevail, there appears to be less concern about how that affects others, further exacerbating the conflict. One side comes to believe that the other cares little about them. As one side seeks to achieve its goals, the other side feels like their interests are being all-too-readily dismissed or sacrificed. Action then begets counteraction.

5. A Person To Attack (other person-focused, greater intensity)

A power struggle emerges. Parties now see themselves as adversaries and "antagonists" (a Greek word that means "to struggle against" as in Hebrews 12:4). When people begin to struggle against each other, watch out! An invisible line is crossed that does not bode well for that relationship or for the church.

At this stage, original issues and context become secondary. The problem is now identified as a person. He is / she is / they are the problem. An "us against them" mentality sets in. Emotions adversely affect objective thinking. Selective perception confirms and fuels negative stereotyping. Once stereotyped, the other side can be "written-off" as _____ (fill in the blank). Parties avoid each other and assume the worst of the other. In the absence of direct communication, each faction views the other through an increasingly distorted filter of suspicion, false assumptions, exaggeration, misinformation, and misperceptions.

Moreover, whereas each side justifies its own hostile behavior as reactions to its opponent and to external circumstances, the actions of one's adversaries are attacks attributed to internal deficiencies in their character, competency, or spirituality. Public admission of having exercised poor judgment or of having made a mistake becomes increasingly unlikely. In this negatively charged environment, such an acknowledgment would likely open oneself to embarrassment and further criticism. The disputing parties protect themselves, their vulnerabilities and insecurities, by attacking.

Researchers have found that the usefulness of direct, head-to-head negotiations decrease as the intensity of the dispute increases. Resistance intensifies against an adversary's ideas often because it is one's adversary who proposed them. Negotiation may totally break down because of the apparent futility of further



effort. Unilateral acts become the next logical step which inevitably lead to an escalation of the conflict.

6. My "Face" To Save (self-focused, greatest intensity)

The term "face" refers to how a person is viewed by others. As long as someone is viewed as a respectable member of the community, all is well. But when one's public image is seriously challenged, watch out for a significant escalation of the conflict.

To have one's public image challenged is to be attacked on a very personal level. It is to be charged with maintaining a false facade. The attacker seeks to publicly "unmask" the other person's true and despicable identity. To the extent that this "insight" is believed, the prior course of the conflict is reinterpreted. With these new lenses, words or actions that may have been originally perceived in a positive light are now viewed as part of a larger, deceitful strategy. False motives are attributed throughout. The conflict is no longer understood in terms of shades of gray. It is perceived in terms of black and white and an ideological battle between the forces of good versus evil.

To "save face" against such an attack on one's identity, people will respond with an equally ferocious assault of their own. Disputants will unleash a torrent of negative descriptions against those who have attacked and maligned them, attempting in turn, to undercut and discredit them. They will label those on the other side as unreasonable, immoral, untrustworthy, mentally unbalanced, and/or sub-human. This conclusion justifies almost any action against the other side, exacerbating the cycle of conflict to dangerous levels.

7. A Person To Expel, Withdraw From, or Ruin (other person focused, greatest intensity)

The parties are locked in an all-or-nothing battle. The church is no longer big enough for everyone. The solution is either to drive out the problem person or people or leave. Or, the conflict may be so personalized, intractable, or irrational that the adversaries would rather suffer private loss or the church's ruin to see their opponent defeated. "Together into the abyss" they go, as one individual soberly described it.

8. The Aftermath

When the dust settles, the worship, fellowship, and the work of the church, as well as the individual lives of those involved are adversely affected, often for years to come. For some, winning the battle or driving a person from the church is still not enough. The ruination of a person's reputation may continue long after the battle is over. Another faction will express shame and bewilderment for what they have said or done. They may lose confidence in themselves for having lost control of themselves. Others will deny the depth or severity of their actions. Still others, acknowledging their embarrassing actions, will blame those who led them.

Pastor Joe McKeever, referring to his church that had split five ways in the two years prior to his accepting the call to pastor that congregation, commented, "I was especially careful during my first

four or five years here. We spent a lot of time addressing the issues of guilt and disappointment. Many felt guilty for their actions. The rest were disappointed - in their friends, their pastors, themselves, even God.”

Lesson to Be Learned

Two intensifying processes take place throughout the stages of unresolved church conflict: (1) an increasing personal frustration over the unresolved issue(s), and (2) an increasing negative perception of the character of the other person / people. **The lesson to be learned is if your church is experiencing ongoing conflict, don't dilly dally to get help. Make your inquiries starting today !**

