

## Conflict in Congregational Life

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Some things in life are unavoidable. One of the most dreaded and feared among these is conflict. Being human means that our ideas and expectations will eventually collide with others' and produce the sparks of conflict. An ancient Chinese proverb describes it well: "There is no dipper which never strikes the kettle." Conflict is inevitable both in our personal lives and in congregations.

The real question is not if you will have conflict in your congregation, but when. The question then becomes, how will the congregation manage the conflict? The bad news is that healthy conflict management skills are not something most people are endowed with at birth. They are skills that must be learned. The good news is that even if conflict itself is unavoidable and predictable, the outcome is not. When conflict is recognized and managed utilizing a healthy process, the results can be helpful and positive for a congregation.

The Center's approach to helping churches manage conflict grows out of our theology and philosophy of ministry. Our approach assumes and believes that God empowers congregations with the spiritual gifts needed to manage and resolve conflict. It incorporates two important Biblical models. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus described a basic approach for conflict management. This approach calls for clear, direct, non-accusatory communication with one another and a process that demonstrates love and respect for all those involved. The other model that informs our approach to conflict comes from the Apostle Paul. This approach is typified in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 4, Paul urges the congregation to resolve their conflict and anger with one another by letting go of bitterness and by exercising kindness, compassion and forgiveness.

The Center for Congregational Health® views congregational conflict as an opportunity to grow and mature spiritually. We help congregations manage and work towards resolving conflict in ways that strengthen the fabric of the congregation. Conflict consultants from the Center cannot solve a conflict for a congregation. Instead, they work with a congregation to create an environment in which the congregation itself can resolve the conflict utilizing its own strengths and resources.

Our approach to congregational conflict pays serious attention to *both* of the two key aspects of every conflict--the substantive issues, and the emotions and feelings associated with them. We have found that in a conflict, intense emotions often cloud or hide the substantive issues. Our approach to resolving conflict begins with helping congregation members to identify and express their feelings as an important first step toward identifying the substantive issues that lie beneath them. As a compassionate outsider, a consultant helps to create a safe space where feelings and ideas can be expressed in ways that can contribute to the resolution of conflict rather than its escalation.

Speed Leas (1985) developed a model for understanding the development and escalation of conflict in church congregations. This model proposes that conflict can be rated at any of five levels. Unresolved conflict at lower levels (e.g., 1 and 2) can, and often does escalate conflict to higher levels. With each ascending level, conflict becomes more emotionally laden, substantive issues increasingly fade into the background, and the difficulty in resolving the conflict positively increases. Here are Leas' five levels of conflict:

1. Problem to solve. Goal: Collaboration for a mutually beneficial solution
2. Disagreement. Goal: Problem solving regarding substantive issues
3. Contest. Goal: To win over the opponent
4. Fight/Flight. Goal: Hurt the opponent or to escape the conflict
5. Intractable Situation. Goal: Annihilate the opposition

Regardless of the level of conflict encountered in a congregation, our general strategy for resolving it is always the same. Our consultants attempt to help the congregation to move the conflict back toward level one, a "problem to solve." At the lower levels of conflict, conflicted parties have the best chance at finding a mutually beneficial solution that strengthens the body of Christ.

In a variety of circumstances, the idea of "de-escalating" conflict may not be possible. At times the core issue is not a single problem, but may be a complex set of factors that require the use of models beyond Leas' levels of conflict.

One final aspect of conflict is worth noting. It is not true that conflict will not go away by itself. It can and will to one degree or another. The problem is that avoiding and refusing to deal with conflict in healthy ways almost guarantees it will be resolved in unhealthy ways. There are never any guarantees that a good process will resolve a conflict positively. However, there is some certainty that without attention, a conflict will likely injure and diminish the body of Christ.

## **References**

Leas, S. (1985). *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute.