

SURVIVAL GUIDE: TABLE OF CONTENTS

Mastering Conflict



CONTENTS

Click on the article you would like to read:

WAR AND PEACE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

How conflict gets baptized in theology, and what you can do to keep it healthy.
A Leadership interview with Lynn Buzzard

CONFLICT IN COMMUNITY

We can't stop conflict, but we can keep it healthy.
by Bill Hybels

SIX STEPS TO SETTling DIFFERENCES

After two failed attempts, I asked a pro to lead the meeting. Here's what he did.
by Steve Larson

SEVEN REASONS FOR STAFF CONFLICT

If you don't see eye to eye, it's not always because of stiff necks.
by Wayne Jacobsen

THE NINE MOST PREDICTABLE TIMES OF CONFLICT

Be better prepared for tension in your church by knowing when it's expected.
by Speed Leas

THE GOOD FIGHT

Four spiritual disciplines to keep fights from scarring your soul.
by Mark Buchanan

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books and resources to help you manage conflict in your church





War and Peace in the Local Church

How conflict gets baptized in theology, and what you can do to keep it healthy.

A LEADERSHIP interview with Lynn Buzzard

Lynn Buzzard was not yet out of Duke Divinity School when he faced his first political dilemma: the largest donor in his student pastorate quit giving. A third of the church's budget suddenly evaporated.

"My basic nature in those days was to run from conflict," he notes. "So I didn't say anything to the man; I just resented him and felt persecuted. I learned secondhand what the problems were: he found me too conservative ... and I hadn't visited his son in the hospital enough. (I've always suspected it was more the second than the first!)"

The little North Carolina church survived, gradually replacing the lost income, and so did Lynn Buzzard's ministry. Since then he has served in other pastorates, as a seminary professor, as the director of the Christian Legal Society, and as a law professor.

Here he discusses church politics and conflict with Terry Muck (professor of missions at Asbury Theological Seminary), Dean Merrill (a writer and former LEADERSHIP editor), and Marshall Shelley (editor of LEADERSHIP).

Is church politics an evil to be expelled, or an unfortunate necessity?

Your question almost assumes that politics is distasteful; I'd rather take an optimistic view. Politics, to me, is simply the means by which we govern ourselves, make decisions, allocate resources, and determine the sense of the body.

I know the word politics is used to describe the many abuses of the process, the back room wheeling and dealing. Politicking especially is used by anyone who doesn't like the result! It's a label for saying a decision wasn't spiritual or was the result of "power" (by which people mean they lost).

What's a nicer synonym?

I hesitate to choose one, because it might be a word just as loaded the other way—a very religious word, something soft and sweet. I'd rather have us recognize that decision making in the church is not just about sweetness; it is in fact about power, about choices, about competing values, self-interests, noble ideals, anger, and all the rest.

This is especially true if a church has any character of mission. If a church is more than just a koinonia group—if it in fact is moving toward something, then there's going to be debate about what that something is and how we get there and who's going to lead



us. These are political issues—questions of governance—and there’s no need to try to sanitize or spiritualize them.

Many leaders take it as a sign of personal failure when there’s a fight or hassle in the church. “If I’d done a better job, this wouldn’t have happened. Where did I go wrong?”

I disagree. In fact, I believe a certain level of ongoing conflict or tension probably ought to be part of the church—again, if it is attempting anything important, and if anybody has strong feelings about that.

I could almost argue that a church with no conflicts is the one suffering from weak pastoral leadership. Either the pastor is failing to inspire anyone enough to care, or he’s repressing conflict, or—the most common situation—he’s encouraging an avoidance of it.

Eventually, of course, the lid blows off such a church, and I grant that that is an indictment of leadership for not encouraging openness at an earlier level. The pastoral task is not to prevent but to intervene, to manage conflict productively. It’s what you do with conflict that counts most.

We haven’t developed a very good theology of conflict in the church. We’ve talked so much about unity and peace. Nobody ever says, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a few quarrels?” But when you look historically for the great moments of the church—the kind of things we make movies and write books about—they’re chock-full of angry, bitter conflict! No one ever hails those quiet times when everybody was having wonderful potluck suppers together.

But didn’t Jesus pray that we all would be one?

There surely must be a difference between the high goal of oneness and political unanimity. I was in a Bible study not long ago where we were discussing Romans 13:13—“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, ... not in dissension and jealousy,” and one lay person commented that dissension and dissent might in fact be quite different things. No dissension, we concluded, is where the body struggles with what it’s going to do and finally settles on a plan of action—and those who might not have chosen that plan decide not to be disturbers of the process from that point on. They may choose to wait to fight another day—which is legitimate—but they recognize that the body has made up its mind, and from that point on they do not create dissension.

This is one of the healthiest kinds of oneness, because it’s holistic. It’s not just a unity of those who remain after all the others have trotted off to other churches. And it is quite different from unanimity, which says, “We’re not going to do anything until everyone agrees.” It is a post-conflict kind of unity, based on more than just “Birds of a feather flock together.” Unity becomes precious when you walk through conflict in order to reach it.



So conflict is good for what it produces?

Yes—and I’m not even sure that conflict isn’t occasionally good in itself. In a sense, it expresses that something important is going on. It helps people clarify what they really believe. It causes people to realize, “Hey, there really are two ways to look at this, aren’t there?”

One person has said that conflict empowers. It gets us out of our lethargy and forces us to identify. Paul’s confrontation with Peter in Galatians 2 brought some very strategic issues to a head.

Saul Alinsky, the social activist, has a line that intrigues me: “Change means movement, and movement means friction, and friction means heat, and heat means conflict. You just can’t get the rocket off the ground discreetly and quietly.”

What about leadership through consensus? Many people are discussing it, yearning for it, trying it. Can they succeed?

I tend to be troubled by a view that says, “We won’t do anything unless everyone agrees,” or to put it in spiritual jargon, “until the Spirit has led everyone to a sense of peace about this.” I find no biblical warrant for it. Certainly the prophets didn’t reduce truth or action to the least common denominator they could get everybody to buy.

This view seems to impede the role of leadership and give the veto to the blocker, the most irascible person in the group. The theory, of course, is that such a person finally senses how the wind is blowing in the group and yields. Maybe so—but the blockers I’ve met are not usually impressed with what the 90 percent want! They seem to thrive on being dissenters.

If by consensus one means that people do yield to the will of the group and that, in turn, the group will not proceed so long as there are members who would be seriously disturbed by such action—that’s better. But I still say that the best church decisions are the ones about real values, real goals, and real differences. And these are not always compromisable.

If you are in a church business meeting and a vote comes out unanimous, the common interpretation is “Praise the Lord—we agree.” But are there alternate interpretations?

Certainly. Most of us know how to draft resolutions in such a way as to hide potential disputes. If we said, “Resolved, that we begin construction on a new building at Fifth and Main,” there might be a huge debate. So instead we say, “Resolved, that a committee be formed to study the projected space requirements of our ministry.” Of course, we intend to pack the study committee from the start.

Or we put the hot items last on the agenda, when everyone’s tired and has already expended their energy fighting over the drinking fountain. Some members may have already gone home.



My question is: Does unanimity reflect a substantive unity, or is it merely artificial due to the masking of issues?

Another scenario: You're in a business meeting, and a vote comes out 77 percent in favor, 23 percent opposed. A common interpretation would be, "Oh, well, you can't please all the people all the time. Jesus Christ himself couldn't make those diehards happy."

I think it depends on who the 23 percent are. They could be a group of angry, bitter people. But they could also be a group of frightened people, unwilling to venture into a new ministry, perhaps afraid the church will lose its beloved building, or something else. Maybe they reflect a serious, fundamental problem in the church that should serve as a caution light. You don't know until you talk to them, hear them out, find out the context from which their objection springs, understand their view of the issues.

I once worked with a church where the pastor was under considerable pressure from the lay leaders to resign. He wanted to go to the membership for a vote of confidence. The constitution required a two-thirds vote to kick him out. I talked with him ahead of time and said, "Please don't take a vote on this issue—what will it prove? If you get 40 percent of the vote, leaving 60 percent of the people opposed to you—is that a win? What if you even get 60 percent? Can you continue to lead the church if 40 percent of the people have the nerve to vote against you? Rather, let's finish the process of hearing one another and dealing with the issues that are bothering people."

What happened? Did the church take your counsel?

No. The conflict had gone on for a long time and had turned into a power struggle. The pastor knew he could "win" a vote, so he called for it. He got 55 percent.

A large portion of the lay leadership left the church as a result. I'm afraid the effectiveness of that congregation has been destroyed for a generation or more. And, given its location in a changing urban neighborhood, that may be enough to kill the church altogether. The tragedy is that there was no fundamental question here, no theology at stake.

What should they have done instead of vote?

The better way would have been to follow a process that leads to reconciliation. A process acknowledges the conflict and provides the means to clarify the various concerns, values, and ideals of the parties. The various formalities give people time and space to understand each other better.

That's what law does, by the way. We don't resolve our problems cowboy-style by shooting it out at high noon. The face-off still happens downtown at noon, but each party has a lawyer who goes before a referee, and at least everybody gets to shoot.



In the church, we haven't thought enough about the value of formalized process as a way to diffuse heat but also channel our energies. The point is not to stop people from having strong feelings ("Shame on you—why don't you love the brethren?") but rather to channel those feelings appropriately. That's why a number of people have written books on this subject, to show how to move from "Bill's always been a cheat" to "Bill took \$50 this week" to Bill saying, "Well, let me explain what happened."

Maybe at the end of the process, if the issue really is about mission, you do take a vote. But maybe you won't need to; maybe the people will have ventilated and then sought for middle roads so that a solution has become clear to all. You don't know until you try.

You've told us one of your failures in reconciling a church. How about a success story?

We dealt with a church that had some internal splits and, simultaneously, a conflict with the denomination. They were debating whether to pull out of the larger body, and if so, who would get the property. So there were elements of finance but also theology; everyone was running around saying who the true church was, and it was quite a mess.

Our first step was to say, "You know, it really is important to talk about your theological commitments—but it's not essential that you be in total agreement. Settling the current dispute does not require that you come up with a consensus statement on theology." That was a new thought to most of them. It was quite all right to have differing commitments; what mattered most was hearing each other carefully, grasping why each side valued what it did and how it felt the other side had lost an important emphasis.

We didn't get everyone to agree on who was right and who was wrong. We focused rather on how to move ahead in ways that would be least destructive to the community of believers. As it turned out, they actually didn't agree. There was no burst of enlightenment that said, "Hey, we actually do agree—I just didn't realize it." The congregation did divide—but amicably and with a sense of respect for each other. They worked out a process for talking about money, property, denominational loyalty, and the other issues.

We managed to break the problem up into pieces and then look for solutions rather than consensus. In that type of conflict, consensus was impossible. But the two streams of conviction found ways to not only survive but prosper.

You mentioned not reconciling theological differences. Were these major issues of theology or just gnats and flies?

Well, I'm not sure if there's a saying about one man's gnat being another man's elephant (laughter) ... but that's the problem: to the dissenter, a critical item of faith, the touchstone of the whole issue, is perceived by the other side to be secondary and even "divisive." Majorities always label aggressive minorities "divisive." It's meant to be an insult.



In the church I mentioned, it was clear that theology—as loaded by their histories—was an unsolvable problem. So we moved on to what could be solved.

Is this kind of element unique to church conflicts, or does ideology play a similar role in other disputes you work with?

Not nearly as often. That's why church fights are usually the toughest to reconcile. You might think that personal spats are the worst—not true. It's fairly easy to deal with two businessmen who say one or the other hasn't kept his word or has done shoddy work. It is far harder to deal with people who speak not merely for themselves but for God! “This isn't a personal thing, you understand—I'm concerned about what Abner and Sophie Johnson had in mind when they poured out their life savings to build this church” or “I'm concerned for the future of evangelicalism” or whatever. (Abner and Sophie may have had in mind a whites-only church, too, but that doesn't mean we ought to respect their wishes.) The ideological load makes it much more difficult for people to yield. Compromise becomes a dirty word.

If someone was to flatly say, “Look, I've wanted to be chairman of the board for five years, and you're shafting me”—well, that's fairly easy. The guy is angry, and you know why, and so you can deal with it. But too often in the church, everything is loaded with ideological talk—“The Lord has led me to ...” The most minor kinds of human decisions get baptized. If you sit in a business meeting and pray for the Lord to guide a vote, what conclusion can you draw but that the result of the vote is God's decision, even if it's about the width of parking places.

But you still believe theology is important?

Absolutely. Look at the Christological conflicts in the early church. The lines had to be drawn. That's why sometimes churches do need to split. They have two different commitments, and they can't go in the same direction. Of course there are nicer ways to split than many churches do, but the need can be legitimate.

Sometimes the conflict is not really about theology but gets layered with it. For example: “Shall we stay here in the city or buy property in the suburbs?” That involves philosophy of ministry, but it involves a lot of other things. It involves letting Mrs. Jones say that she's worshiped in this place for fifty-three years in the pew paid for by her mother. Well, that's a legitimate feeling and needs to be expressed.

But other times, ideology has nothing to do with the conflict; it is merely a smoke screen.

Is church politicking as intense as secular politicking?

Worse! At least that's what employees of Christian organizations tell me. The reason is that nobody acknowledges its presence.



We had a debate in our church recently about whether to spend a considerable sum on a new organ. Since there weren't very many mechanisms for dealing openly with feelings and opinions, we suddenly had coalitions building all over the place. Wouldn't the money be better spent in the inner city? But what was wrong with using our hard-earned prosperity to the glory of God? Behind the scenes, the politicking was vigorous. We ended up buying the organ, but the process could have used a lot more airing.

A second factor is that church people can't seem to talk self-interest language. We don't say, "I'm hurt." We say, "I don't think it's the Lord's will that ..." or "God wouldn't be able to bless us if we ..." In the business world, if people are hassling about who's going to get the corner office with the windows, nobody hides it. In the church, we don't dare be so straightforward.

It's not that we make a conscious decision to beat around the bush. We have just grown up assuming we should rephrase personal feelings in religious language. In politics, it's tough to lose, but you make your concession speech, lie low for a few days, and then go on with life. In the church, you have to keep looking spiritual no matter what. Thus, a loss is not just a tactical defeat; it's an assault.

What are the most damaging kinds of strife in a church?

The quiet ones. The submerged, diffused, unacknowledged conflicts that smolder for years and years. If the institution is not willing to grab hold, debate, decide, reconcile, split, or whatever needs to be done, the issue becomes a cancer within. It eats at the body's vitality, consuming its energy, spreading until the case is terminal.

Give me a genuine theological donnybrook any day. At least you know what you've got and can set up a process to deal with it.

How do you draw out the silent, sinister things?

This is where pastoral leadership can model the idea that conflict is okay. I have a pastor friend who says it is really important for him to tell his board when he's angry about something. He fusses and argues with them, and yet he is loved. A few people can't handle his style and label him unspiritual, but by and large, the business types on the board understand his kind of language.

Even in the pulpit, pastors can acknowledge differences, treat them with a light touch, and let people know that even though we feel strongly about these things, they're not the end of the world.

One of the most delightful churches I ever pastored had fascinating conflict. We were an old "First Church" congregation that included the mayor, lumber company executives, and so forth—an easygoing group quite happy with a kind of restrained religion. Then the city of Seattle began to expand until we became a suburb, and all kinds of new people joined us. Many of them had a more vital faith; they were part of the lay witness



movement, and when they'd stand up in services and share what the Lord meant to them, the old guard would squirm, because they didn't have similar stories to tell.

Then one Pentecost Sunday we dug a ditch out in front and immersed people—a Methodist church! What had happened to our nice, sedate traditions?

And yet, this was one of the most lively, fun, diverse communities I've ever known. The other pastor and I had a commitment to view conflict as potentially good. We vowed not to get trapped with one side or another, but to keep the ferment going and not let people become overly serious about it. We'd smile and say, "Yeah, George, some of those folks really are crazy as loons, aren't they... I couldn't believe what he did the other Sunday... but everybody's different." We led the congregation in not only being tolerant but placing value upon diversity within the body.

How does a pastor acquire the skills to manage conflict?

Before getting to the how, a pastor has to acknowledge a prior premise—that ministry, in fact, includes managing. It's not all preaching; some of it is dealing with institutional reality, helping the institution make its decisions and develop its structures.

If one doesn't see this as legitimate ministry, if one crabs about not having time "to be what I'm supposed to be because I'm so busy managing," about being "stuck in the office," then managing conflict is off to a difficult start.

But once you see that this is part of equipping and enabling the saints, then you are ready to get into some of the how-to literature. Books on the subject of conflict management in the church teach how not to get co-opted, which is hard for a pastor. So many people come to him wanting to make sure he "really understands" (which means knowing why they're right).

Books also help with defining issues, handling confidences, managing rumor, and a host of other skills that don't require a graduate degree in conflict management but can be stored in the brain for the time when they're needed.

What do you think about the use of prayer in resolving conflict?

I'm against it! (Laughter) Seriously, it's almost a rule: The first person in a dispute to pray or to suggest prayer will be the most troublesome. I'll give you an illustration.

We were trying to mediate a problem between two families in a church. The pastor had worked with them, but the conflict was now spilling over into the rest of the congregation. The first lady who called me to get involved was full of religious language about trying to find the Lord's will, and when I arrived at the first meeting of the parties, immediately she wanted to pray—even before the other folks showed up. That was a clue.

I said, "No, I really think we really ought to wait until everyone's here."



“Well, I think we’re going to have some problems with them,” she replied. “We need to pray for them.”

“Well, we’ll wait for them,” I said.

Her husband then turned and said, “You know, you can pray on your own.” So very ostentatiously, almost like a little kid, she folded her hands and closed her eyes... while the rest of us sat around the same table talking about football.

When the hearing was all over, she turned out to be one of only two people in the entire history of our conciliation service who, although having helped pick the arbitrators, refused to abide by their decision. We went through the whole process and gave our best judgment—but the Lord allegedly showed her a verse somewhere in the Old Testament that indicated she ought not to go along.

Obviously, I’m not against prayer. The whole idea of Christian conciliation is that God will help us deal with conflict. But I must distinguish between genuine prayer and using religious ritual as a weapon. So often prayer is used to say, “I don’t think you’re understanding what I’m saying, and surely it must be because the Lord isn’t making it clear to you. So let’s stop and call upon him, so you can understand how right I am.”

The trouble with using prayer in the middle of a board meeting is that it is often suggested just as the discussion is getting honest. People are finally saying what they’ve been thinking all night (“You know, you really did lie to me, Jack”), and some nervous soul sees the Spirit slipping away and quickly wants to have a word of prayer. What people really mean is “I’m uncomfortable with how heavy this discussion is getting, and I want to retreat, so everybody bow your head.” And it’s very hard at that point to say, “No, let’s not.” The key moment is lost as the one side co-opts Jesus.

What we need to do in conflict is talk to each other. God is quite capable of listening to our debate; we don’t need to pause and say, “God, are you here?” He is also quite capable of informing our hearing and speaking.

What are the signs that a conflict needs outside mediation?

When the resources of the body itself are pretty much exhausted or disqualified. If everybody has chosen sides, who is left to be a peacemaker? If the pastor, for example, has been pulled off to one trench or the other, or is unwilling or unable to mediate, then outside help is called for.

Another time is when it becomes urgent to have a symbol of hope, a new lease on the possibility of making peace. Groups come to us saying, “We’ve been struggling with this for three years and cannot resolve it—can you help us?” Our simple presence brings a new burst of energy to try again.



Leaders often struggle with the financial implications of conflict. After all, if you offend the moneyed interests in a congregation, you can be in quick trouble.

That's right; it's a subtle pressure to maintain a false peace. A conflict can really dry up revenue, especially if there are substantial givers on both sides. My hope is that leaders can identify conflict early enough and deal with it so it doesn't turn into ultimate warfare that hurts the offerings.

If, however, the leadership delays taking action until funds start to be withheld, then a terrible message is assumed: "I got my way by using my checkbook." Once you begin making fundamental decisions on the basis of financial threats, you've got real problems.

But taking the initiative to deal with conflict can be frightening.

Absolutely. The truth is, you will get shot down sometimes, even if you're good at reconciling. John Adams, the Methodist minister who helped negotiate the crisis at Wounded Knee, said, "You can either make peace or get credit for making peace—but not both." It's awfully nice to win the Nobel Peace Prize. But peacemaking skills are by their very character quiet. You are entrusted with information and relationships that can be easily abused. And the instant you go public, you destroy the peace.

If pastors and leaders are going to deal with conflict situations in their churches, they need to study their own natures and determine whether they tend to avoid conflict or not. I know I do; I'm not a good fighter, and that affects how I initially respond to conflict. I'd rather run from it, quit my job, look the other way.

Churches can also have a substantial ministry in teaching their own people about conflict and reconciliation. Some people are surprised to realize that the Bible is full of conflict. The disciples were repeatedly arguing and fussing, and yet Jesus loved them and made use of them. In fact, conflict may be one of the few loci for inserting theological convictions—reconciliation, forgiveness, confession, and many other great doctrines.

When we announced a series in our church on conflict between parents and teenagers, the response was amazing. Even people outside the church saw our little ad in the paper and showed up for the sessions. It was obvious that we had struck a felt need.

We must teach about this subject, and we must model our willingness to deal openly with the differences among us. Avoidance serves no purpose at all. It is true that at least one reconciler in the Bible got himself crucified, but we must not be afraid. We must be the agents of healing.

—Lynn Buzzard was executive director of the Christian Legal Society for 15 years. He is now a professor at Campbell University Law School in Buies Creek, North Carolina.



Discuss

1. How can we better encourage openness and deal with conflicts before they threaten the health of our congregation?
2. Do we have a formal process for dealing with conflict in our church? How can we improve in that process?
3. What is your natural response to conflict? How does that compare to other leaders in the church?

Confronting Conflict

Rate your church's approach to conflict by evaluating how you face the issues that call for conflict.

	Do this well	Do this adequately	Do this poorly
We see "politics" as part of the reality of leading an institution that has vision and goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We encourage disagreement that is honest and respectful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We seek unity, not necessarily unanimity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The goal in conflict is not "winning," but reconciliation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have a clear understanding of essentials and nonessentials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our church publicly acknowledges and celebrates diversity of opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We evaluate and begin to resolve conflicts before they are out of hand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We equip our congregation with resources for resolving conflict in their personal lives.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Conflict in Community

We can't stop conflict, but we can keep it healthy.

by Bill Hybels

At Willow Creek, we expect disagreement—forceful disagreement. *Unity* isn't the word we use to describe our relationships. The popular concept of unity is a fantasyland where disagreements never surface and contrary opinions are never stated with force.

Instead of unity, we use the word *community*.

We say, "Let's not pretend we never disagree. We're dealing with the lives of 17,000 people. The stakes are high. Let's not have people hiding their concerns to protect a false notion of unity. Let's face the disagreement and deal with it in a godly way."

The mark of community—true, biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit. I can have a rough-and-tumble leadership meeting with someone, but because we're committed to community, we can still leave, slapping each other on the back, saying, "I'm glad we're still brothers." We know no one's bailing out just because of a conflicting position.

Community is bigger than that. But developing community, true biblical unity, does not happen naturally; it must be intentional.

Non-Negotiables

Because of my commitment to community, there are several issues for which I'll go to the wall.

First, we at Willow Creek will not tolerate biblical infidelity, a discounting of the clear teachings of Christ.

Second, we insist on the enforcement of Scripture, the living out of the teachings of Christ. We'll defend not only the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, but also the indisputable importance of applying biblical teaching to our daily lives in practical ways.

Someone told me of a woman who is terrorizing a local congregation with her slanderous tongue. She's doing so in a church that holds high the Word of God. But the church leaders don't enforce it. They'll permit a loose-tongued woman to poison the body of Christ. They get an *A* for inerrancy and an *F* for enforcement. We want an *A* in both.

Third, we expect lay and staff leaders at our church to be on board with the basic vision of Willow Creek. We had a leader who, after several years of service, concluded that he could no longer agree with our vision. When we were a small church, he believed in our mission. But when we passed the 4,000-attender mark, he thought we should



start satellite churches and decentralize. The rest of us, however, didn't sense God's leading in that direction.

We had an oil-on-water mixture. He made a high-integrity move and voluntarily resigned from his leadership position.

The last non-negotiable is verbal discipline. Years ago, I took to heart what Scott Peck had to say about conflict resolution. Often what undermines the conflict resolution process, he says, is the lack of verbal discipline. When we attend a piano concert we expect the pianist to offer a disciplined performance, demonstrating that thought, skill, and practice were part of the preparation. A concert is not a "whatever I feel like" event.

In confrontation, however, too often our verbal discipline goes out the window. People make *always* and *never* statements. They exaggerate the truth or get careless with facts. Volume levels increase. And then we wonder why we're unsuccessful in finding resolution.

Through the years, I've reminded our church continually about disciplined verbal expression. If in a debate someone is losing verbal control, I'll call a timeout so people can settle down. Then we'll come back together for a discussion that is controlled, accurate, and constructive.

Preferred Risk

Verbal discipline is one facet of a commitment to fighting fair. There are several other ways that we teach people how to handle conflict in a Christian, redemptive way.

First, we acknowledge that conflict is inevitable. Then we go the next step and say, "When your nose does get bent out of joint—not *if* but *when*—you have a biblical responsibility to take the high road of conflict resolution."

That means going directly to the person with whom you're having this conflict rather than building a guerrilla team to ambush this person later.

We also teach a kind of reverse accountability. In staff meetings or in front of the congregation, we say, "If someone whose nose is bent out of joint comes to you for a 'Won't you join my cause?' conversation, you have a biblical responsibility to interrupt mid-sentence and say, 'I think you're talking to the wrong person. Please go to the individual with whom you're having this conflict and seek to resolve it in a God-glorifying way.'"

By expecting people to fight, and teaching them how, we have created more conflict in our ministry, but most of it stays above ground. Conflict that goes underground poisons the soil and hurts everyone eventually. We would rather have conflict within community than a mask of unity.

At Willow Creek we experimented for a couple of years with publishing a magazine, but the time came that we needed to shut it down. We didn't communicate that in the best way possible to those who had been working on the magazine, though.



In the aftermath several people asked, “Do you have any idea how hurt the volunteers were when you decided to close the magazine?”

That’s a fair question, but when one person asked me that in a public forum, the edge in the voice made me uncomfortable, so I said, “You’re probably one of those volunteers who’s deeply hurt over losing your ministry, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I feel terrible that you made the sacrifice and then it fizzled. Let me explain the original purpose of the magazine, why it folded, and the steps we took to close it graciously. If we can learn from the way we handled it, we’re open to suggestions.”

After several months had elapsed, one of the magazine’s writers and his wife attended a management team meeting and said, “I’d like to give this management team four or five ideas on how to shut a ministry down in a less painful way.”

And we listened. We were humbled, and we learned from their suggestions.

That kind of positive resolution can happen only in an atmosphere where conveying threatening or negative information is okay.

Fighting Fair

But while communicating that disagreement is okay, I invite people to speak openly with me. After speaking at a weekend service, I may receive 15 high-octane letters the next week, saying, “When you said thus and so, it wounded me deeply for the following reasons.”

On the surface, that can be discouraging. (For me, the 10-to-1 rule applies here: ten complimentary letters are needed to get over one missile.) However, when I’m feeling wounded, I always say to myself, *Aren’t you glad this person expressed his frustration to you rather than calling 15 people and holding a town meeting at your expense?*

And so when I write these people back—which I do—I always begin the letter by saying, “Thank you so much for the courage it took to express your displeasure with me. I don’t take lightly your willingness to follow the biblical injunction to come straight to me.” Then I delve into the issue at hand.

Once a month I stand in front of the whole congregation and emcee an open question-and-answer time for half an hour. People can ask anything and everything—financial questions, personal questions, rumor questions. If people feel hesitant to ask a question publicly, they can submit it in writing before the session. I address every question.

No matter how well you have coached people in the past, teaching people to fight fair is an ongoing process. Before one of these meetings, I reminded the congregation, “When you stand and ask your question, remember pastors have feelings, too. So, if you’re going to come after me, remember my heart is as fragile as your own.”



Sometimes, though, someone will ask a question that has an edge to it or that is mean-spirited. If that happens in a public meeting, I ask the person to restate the question in a more gracious manner. In a private setting, I'm more direct: "Is there a spirit of love behind that question? What's going on in your spirit right now? Are you only upset about the specific question, or is there something deeper you're concerned about?"

Often someone will respond, "I'm filled with rage." Or, "I'm so angry." Or, "I'm just upset about a lot of things."

If a question is mean-spirited, it's usually because another issue is interrupting the relationship. I've learned to deal with the underlying problem first.

Our congregation is learning. The people have even developed the habit of hissing—when I tell a joke they don't think is funny or make a statement they don't think is tactful. On occasion, they've hissed a careless questioner. It's their lighthearted but firm way of saying, "That's not the way to fight fair."

Preempting the Unnecessary

Certain people are more prone to create harmful conflict. People who are emotionally unhealthy are more likely to create the kind of conflict that is difficult to resolve.

Emotionally healthy people are less likely to internalize differences of opinion and less likely to assume the worst. For that reason, we are committed to placing healthy people into key leadership roles, both on a staff and lay level.

Of course, you can never be sure you're looking at a healthy person, but a person who has never wrestled with how his upbringing affects his adult relationships is a sure bet for a barrel of conflict.

In our interviewing process, we often ask, "Were you raised in a perfect family?" Most often, of course, the answer is no. Then we probe deeper. "How did your parents let you down? Have you worked through that?"

If someone says, "My family wasn't a safe place growing up," we'll ask, "What have you done about it? How have you worked through that?"

We're looking for self-aware individuals who are coming to grips with their pain and their woundedness. If someone says, "Actually, my family was just perfect. There were no problems," or, "My dad was an alcoholic, but it didn't affect me much," we know there's cause for concern.

People on the journey toward health generally can answer yes to two important questions: (1) Will you admit that you have baggage from your past? and (2) Will you do honest work on it so it doesn't distort your relationships and work around here?

A person's emotional health tends to express itself in hundreds of small ways. For example, we're in a leadership meeting and I'm passing out assignments. If I say, "Tom,



can you handle this project for me?” I expect Tom to give me an honest “Yes, I can” or “No, I can’t.”

Let’s say, however, that Tom doesn’t do that. Tom’s plate is full; he’s buried in work. But he’s afraid to say, “Bill, I can’t handle it right now.”

Though he told me yes, in reality the extra work overwhelms him. So he spends the next 18 evenings trying to finish my project and winds up feeling angry towards me.

Then through the grapevine, I learn that Tom is busy telling people that I overwork him, that I’m not sensitive to his family.

I have a problem with that kind of behavior. If I’ve asked an honest question, I should be able to expect an honest answer. Often, an unhealthy person will say yes when he should say no.

We look for people who have the emotional health to say, “I’m swamped right now. I won’t be able to get that assignment done by the due date. Can we discuss how the assignment can get done another way?”

Another tip-off that something might be amiss emotionally is when a person cannot subject himself or herself to loving, constructive evaluation. Obviously, if we’re evaluating with verbal assaults, then the process is the problem. But around here, we have a carefully thought out and regularly scheduled evaluation process that is normally done with sensitivity and tenderness. In a situation like this, if people are terrified of the evaluation process or hostile to it, there’s usually an underlying issue that needs to be explored and understood.

Another way to avoid unnecessary conflict is to sidestep anything that breaks trust.

Once a denominational executive called me, asking if he could bring a large group from his denomination for our presentation on seeker-oriented ministry. His only available night was a Tuesday. Our senior high ministry uses the auditorium on Tuesday nights.

I resisted the temptation to say yes and then deal with the logistical problem later. Instead, I called the director of the youth ministry and explained the situation.

“You make the call,” I said. “How do you feel about our using the auditorium that night? Can you make different plans for that evening without disrupting your program?”

He said, “No problem. With this much advance notice, we can easily work around that evening. Thanks for checking with me.”

Had I said yes before calling him, he would have felt devalued and taken for granted. It would have broken our trust.

Around Willow Creek we also talk about having “check-ins.” If we sense tension with someone, we sit down and say, “I just need to check in with you. Is everything okay between us?”



Once a month, we also have a question-and-answer time with the staff, and in addition, we have regular talk-back sessions with those who work in the sub-ministries.

The more interactive we are, the more we preempt serious conflict, because we get people talking before conflict goes underground.

Answering the Personals

At one point in my ministry someone questioned my motivation for being a pastor. “The reason Bill is in ministry,” this person said, “is because of Willow Creek’s size and all the perks that go with being its senior pastor.”

I was surprised how hurt I felt. I was devastated. I also felt defensive, which bothered me. After journaling and mulling over the criticism, I realized that part of what upset me was that the one making the accusations had been around Willow Creek for only two years.

He was unaware of the years I worked with no salary, when my wife and I took in boarders to make ends meet, when we paid for the birth of our daughter because the church couldn’t afford medical insurance.

In that case, I had to process his accusation, to figure out why it hurt me so deeply, not just accept or reject it. I also realized that in order to be freed in my spirit toward that person, I had to explain to him why his accusation hurt and why I felt it was unjust.

At other times, conflict energizes me. If someone doesn’t like a new venture I’m suggesting, I can respond as a competitor. *When the final gun sounds*, I think, *we’ll see who’s right*. It can make me work even harder. Or if it’s clear the other person has a better idea, I can jump on board. Conflict, I’ve learned, can be a constructive part of the creative process.

The difference between these two reactions is the difference between being attacked personally versus having my ideas attacked. About my ideas, I’ve always been able to say, “You got me. I was wrong; I blew it.” But when my motivations are questioned, I feel wounded, helpless. How can I prove the sincerity of my motives?

I think most people feel this way. When conflict reaches the level of personal attack—suspicion about integrity, trustworthiness, purity of motivations—it’s hard to handle.

Trying to convince people that our heart’s in the right place isn’t futile, but the conversation will require an enormous level of maturity—for the accuser *and* the accused. The person making the accusation has to be mature enough to sense the gravity of what he’s doing. And the one feeling stung has to be mature enough not to lash out in defense. Each has to enter into that discussion with a high degree of vulnerability.

Once someone questioned my motives in launching a new ministry at Willow Creek. I arranged a time when I could express my hurt and openly explain my vision for this new program. He received it beautifully and apologized for his broad accusation. He then brought up several legitimate points we discussed at length.



Some people say a pastor should never defend himself, but obviously I think differently.

When the apostle Paul felt that the church of Corinth did not understand his role, essentially he said, “Excuse me. Pardon what I’m going to do here for the next few minutes, but I’m going to tell you the price I’ve paid to carry out my apostolic calling.” And Paul proceeded to recount his shipwrecks and beatings for the sake of the gospel. I see that as a way of defending himself.

Sometimes we have to do that to keep our heart pure. At times certain accusations take root in my spirit. If resentment grows, I have to go to the individual and say, “As hard as I’m trying to ignore what you’re saying, you’re hurting me, and you need to know that.”

Many years ago, I heard from reliable sources that a local pastor had commented repeatedly that Lynne and I were unhappily married, headed for divorce. Included in his charges were accusations of unfaithfulness. Needless to say, Lynne and I were deeply saddened by these false reports.

After much discussion and prayer, Lynne and I drove to this pastor’s church and walked into his office, unannounced, and introduced ourselves.

“The things you’ve been saying are ripping our hearts out,” we said. “They’re not true. We’re wondering why you’re saying what you’re saying.”

“I thought my information was accurate,” he sputtered.

By the end of the conversation, he was apologetic. He appreciated that we had come to him and spoken the truth in a loving way. I think we all learned some valuable life lessons that day.

The toughest skill for me to learn in handling conflict is hearing. Not just listening, but really hearing. Once, a colleague and I experienced a serious break over a complex issue—philosophical and personal. We spent three, two-hour sessions attempting to resolve our differences. Though both of us had prayed and submitted to the Holy Spirit, we couldn’t put the issue behind us. Neither of us felt completely heard.

Finally, the other person asked if I would be willing to go to a Christian counselor to resolve our differences. I readily agreed. We spent two sessions with a Christian counselor who gave us tools to work through the issue more effectively.

I discovered I was listening only to 90 percent of what this person was saying. There was 10 percent I didn’t want to hear. The counselor helped me go the last 10 percent to get the issue fully exposed so we could move toward resolution.

Since then, I’ve worked on that skill in my marriage, with my children, and with friends in my accountability group. I’m becoming a better person for it.



Swimming with Sharks and Guppies

A man at our church once told me: “When you swim in the ocean, you get attacked by sharks and guppies. Don’t worry about the guppies.”

I’ve concluded that some of the potshots I take from the Christian community are guppy problems. If a Christian leader criticizes me for allowing drums in the church, I’m not going to worry much about it. Someday we’ll reach across the table at the marriage supper of the Lamb and say, “Wasn’t that silly? Those were guppy things.”

When our church was struggling in the late seventies, the outside attacks felt like shark attacks. We were renting a movie theater then, doing an unusual style of ministry that some considered liberal and others called fundamentalist. Many vocal critics never took the time to figure out who we were and what we were all about.

Careless media coverage, in which we were called a cult and linked with everyone from Reverend Moon to Jim Jones, threatened our viability at times. Many people became suspicious of us.

It was a frustrating and scary time. But we converted our anxiety into earnest prayer energy. It forced us to examine our motives. We asked ourselves a hard question: “Are we really doing what God called us to do?”

Such attacks forced us to become even more committed to pursuing God’s specific will for us, even if that meant being criticized or persecuted. We said, “Let’s quit complaining about the attack and get on with the ministry.”

Redeeming Criticism

My response to criticism has definitely changed through the years. In my early years of ministry, I rebutted people who wrote to me and said I had offended them or hurt their feelings. For years, I’d write back and say, essentially, “I’m sorry you took it wrong, but there really wasn’t anything wrong with what I said.” But then they’d write back, doubly hurt. They knew what I really meant was, “I’m sorry you’re so sensitive that you get upset about petty things.”

After several years of this, I thought, *What if I just said, “Thank you for writing me and expressing your hurt. I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to hurt you. Please forgive me.”*

Soon after implementing this approach, I began receiving letters saying, “Thank you for your letter. You don’t know how much that meant to me.”

Many people, I discovered, just want to know if their pastor is a safe person. Can he respond to hurt with compassion? Does he care as much about relationships as he does his sermon material?

I don’t mean that I apologize if I truly believe I have nothing to apologize for. But often the source of offense is a flippant remark or an insensitive stab at humor—something I thought was harmless, but that ended up being offensive to someone.



One time during Christmas vacation, my family and I visited a church where for special music the pastor played a song on an accordion. That was so contrary to the culture in which my children had grown up that they were choking back their laughter.

When I returned to Willow Creek the following week, I enjoyed the first half hour of our service so much—the orchestra, the singers, the drama—that in my pre-message remarks I said, “It’s so good to be home. Last week I was in a little church where the only thing besides the pastor’s message was the accordion solo.” Most people laughed. I went on to thank the people who planned and presented the music and drama that morning.

But then came the letters. Some were angry because they felt I had belittled pastors who don’t have staff and music programs. Then I received notes from people who played accordions.

I knew I had crossed a line. So after writing 10 or 15 apology notes, I decided the situation called for a public apology. So, at each of the weekend services, I said, “I really didn’t intend to make a disparaging statement about limited church staffs or accordion players. I just felt thankful for the people God has provided to minister so creatively here. But the way I phrased my comments was careless and conveyed negative values. I was wrong. I am sorry. So please forgive me.”

Such a response doesn’t hurt my credibility; rather, it builds credibility. People have sought me out, saying, “Knowing that you’ll apologize makes me feel safer accepting your leadership.”

Our people already know we make mistakes. What they want to know is whether or not we have enough integrity to admit them.

Kinder, Gentler Leader

Handling conflict well is essentially an issue of maturity, and leading a church to community, to true biblical unity, begins with its leader.

Due to my upbringing, one way I have handled hurt is to clench my teeth and say, “I’m not going to let that get to me.” I’d buck up, power through, put it out of my mind, and keep going. The problem was that each time I did that, my skin became a little tougher, my heart a little harder, my feelings deeper below the level of my awareness. I became another step distanced from the people around me.

With the help of my wife, Christian counselors, and other trusted friends, I’m learning a more constructive way to negotiate conflict. I’m learning to admit to the person involved that what they said or did hurt me, and slowly I’m learning to feel that hurt inside. I’m learning to say “Ouch” and talk about what that ouch means, rather than discounting relational wounds and powering past them.

As I get better at acknowledging the hurt that conflict causes me, I also become more aware of the hurt that conflict causes others. This has led me to approach conflict resolution with a much gentler spirit, both for my sake and for others’ sake.



That kind of vulnerability in relationships did not come naturally to me. But I believe it's a necessary part of obedience to Christ.

—*Bill Hybels is senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois.*

Copyright © 1997 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared in *Leading Your Church Through Conflict and Reconciliation* (Bethany House Publishers, 1997).

Discuss

1. Describe a time in your life when conflict was constructive.
2. What are some of the “sharks” and “guppies” we face?
3. What conflicts are on the surface and being resolved in our church right now? How can we keep those conflicts from going underground?

Facing Conflict as a Community

Place a checkmark next to each principle that your church teaches.

- We require people to discuss conflict with control over their words and the way that they are spoken.
- We teach people to take conflict directly to the person with whom they have a disagreement.
- We remind people that conflict is to be approached in a spirit of love.
- We select leaders who understand their emotional baggage and are working through issues in their past.
- We avoid situations that violate (or seem to violate) trust between leaders.
- We promote question and answer sessions, regular check-in meetings, and a spirit of openness and honesty.
- We admit mistakes.
- We acknowledge the pain caused by conflict.



Six Steps to Settling Differences

After two failed attempts, I asked a pro to lead the meeting. Here's what he did.

by Steve Larson

Six months into our church plant, the two most influential families had a fight. Nasty words were exchanged, battle lines drawn. Both sides began recruiting people to their cause. Something had to be done, but what? I held separate meetings with the two parties, but that just made things worse.

“Lord, help me,” I prayed desperately. I set up another meeting with both families.

Then I witnessed a divine intervention. As I fretted over the coming confrontation, Ron knocked on my office door. Unlike others, however, he didn't come to complain.

“Would you like some help holding a peace conference?” he asked. Ron is a school principal, well versed in conflict resolution. I gratefully accepted his offer.

Ron led the meeting gracefully, compassionately, and thoughtfully. It was a great success. At the beginning of the “peace conference,” the two sides wouldn't even look at each other. Afterward, they were laughing and hugging. Not only did he help resolve the biggest conflict we'd ever had, he taught me skills on how to deal with conflict.

Here's how he did it:

1. Ice-breaker

Ron started with a conversational tone, not a confrontational one. “We all know why we are here today,” Ron began. “There is hurt in our hearts and misunderstanding in our minds. For the good of the church and the kingdom of God, we must reconcile. Before we dive into the issues, let's open with a question. I would like each of you to break up into groups of two, and discuss this question, *What is your favorite hobby and why?*”

I know it sounds silly, but it worked. There were eight people at that meeting. After the first pairings discussed the question, he broke us up again and again, until everybody got a chance to converse over a non-jugular issue.

2. Information

Ron shared some ground rules. Without rules, meetings often do more harm than good.

Norm Shawchuck in *How to Manage Conflict in the Church* offers three ground rules for “peace conferences”: permission, potency, and protection. People are given permission to disagree. Each person is allowed to share their views strongly as long as they do it with respect. No one will be allowed to inflict intentional pain on others.



3. Illumination

Next Ron prayed. His prayer was full of grace and love. He prayed that the Lord would bring reconciliation, understanding, and restoration.

4. Issues

“What are your concerns?” he asked. After each person spoke, Ron would clarify what they said. “Correct me if I am wrong, but you feel used?” “If I am hearing you correctly, you are saying that she was disrespectful in what she said?” “I am trying to see it from your point of view, and if I do, you feel that you were intentionally hurt?”

When one side spoke, the other filtered their claims through anger and hurt. But when Ron paraphrased what was said, the opposing sides listened. Why? He was a “neutral” party. You could see the tension subside.

Behind him was a giant Post-It note on the wall with a line drawn down the middle and the sides marked “A” and “B.” After he clarified an issue, he would write it down. He then asked the other side to comment on that issue.

This step took about two hours. Its objective was to help the parties “unload their files” from memory.

5. Implications

Ron asked two questions: *What is the worst thing that could happen if we don't resolve this conflict?* and *What is the best thing that could happen if we resolve this conflict?* Again, he wrote their answers down. It became clear that the outcome of this conflict would either make or break the church.

Then he asked, “Which scenario do we want to shoot for?” Ron moved the group from defending adversarial positions to unanimously voting to seek a mutual position.

6. Ideas

“What are some ideas for reaching that goal?” Ron asked. As a team, they brainstormed and agreed on an answer. Finally Ron returned to the first large notes and, one by one, reviewed their original concerns. “What are we going to do about this concern?” he asked, making sure every concern was dealt with. Later I typed up my notes from the meeting, and sent a copy to everybody involved.

After that meeting, enemies became friends and peace was restored in our young fellowship. I have used these techniques many times since to mend marriages and heal friendships.

—Steve Larson is a pastor in Rochester, Minnesota.



Discuss

1. How have you seen these principles at work in your experience resolving conflict?
2. Who are some people in our church that may have experience resolving conflict?
3. In the steps above, what do you see as the turning point? Why?

Putting It to Work

Consider a conflict that you helped resolve. Which elements of the process above did you follow? After each step, check either “I did this” or “I did not do this.”

	I did this	I did not do this
1. Use an ice-breaker to bring people together	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Set ground rules for discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Pray for the conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Clarify and rephrase the concerns of each group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Help each group to consider the implications of the conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Brainstorm together resolutions for the disagreement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Seven Reasons for Staff Conflict

If you don't see eye to eye, it's not always because of stiff necks.

by Wayne Jacobsen

“Tension and conflict in multiple-staff churches are caused either by the ego of the staff member or the incompetent management of the senior pastor.” I wish to expose that statement for what it is—a myth. Staff members are just not that rebellious nor senior pastors that incompetent. Assigning blame at either point misses the real issue in most cases and only perpetuates conflict.

The vast majority of staff pastors I've spoken with, though they admit the reality of conflict, find it neither overwhelming nor ever-present. Deep joy in ministry and affection for their pastor undergirds their labor. Personally, leaving my staff position was the hardest decision I ever made, knowing how much my relationship with my pastor would change once I was fifty miles down the road instead of fifteen feet up the hall.

No management system or technique can ensure an absence of conflict. In fact, I'm not so sure eliminating conflicts is desirable. Conflict often indicates healthy growth processes are at work. Too often, however, failure to recognize the source of conflict and to handle it appropriately leads to far more destruction than healthy growth processes are worth.

In conversations with pastors and staff members, seven major areas of conflict continue to surface, none of which has anything to do with staff submission or pastoral mismanagement. When seen for what they are, each can be easily handled and the conflict turned to constructive ends.

Generational Differences

“I've tried to get my pastor to use contemporary choruses in worship with more spontaneity, but he is too locked into old traditions.”

“These young kids think they know how everything ought to run. Don't they think we've learned anything after years of ministry?”

“When I was their age, I was pastoring the smallest church in my section and working a second job to pay expenses. They don't know how good they have it.”

Generational realities—differences in age, cultural background, and experience—consistently surface as contributing factors to staff conflicts. Failure to appreciate generational distinctives presses minor differences into major conflicts.

Background differences are further compounded by changes in church life. In the last several decades, people have gravitated to larger churches. In an earlier generation, pastors fresh out of seminary usually took small-town pastorates, whereas today many



begin as staff members. As a result, many senior pastors have never been staff members and can't empathize.

These barriers are not insurmountable. Joel envisioned a community where the visions of sons and daughters would fit side by side with the dreams of old men. His prophecy pictures a community able to draw on the wealth of God in each individual. The idealism of youth can be tempered by the wisdom of experience, and the routine of tradition can be energized by the exuberance of youth. The end product need not be either idealism or cynicism, but biblical realism.

Theological Disagreements

Differences in biblical interpretation produce conflict even where love abounds. A youth pastor from the Midwest shared his dilemma. His church had voted to build a new gym and youth activity center at considerable cost. Though grateful, he was growing in concern for the needy, both for those in the third world and those across town. Is it right to go to such expense for the recreation of some believers, with others in such need?

It's easy either to support him or cry "ascetic," but his crisis is real. Theological concerns affect daily ministry.

Certainly each congregation holds theological essentials, and I'm not talking about these. I'm referring instead to differences in applying theology to twenty-first century living. History proves that theological differences among people who seriously study the Word are a virtual given. The only churches I know that are one-minded in all matters of theology are churches where only one mind is allowed to function.

The importance of these differences cannot be underestimated. Yet they do not have to divide people; instead they can become steppingstones to personal growth and biblical enrichment. Growing in theology with coworkers is a great benefit of serving on a ministry staff.

To negate the destructive possibilities of these kinds of disagreements, staffs must cultivate an atmosphere of freedom. I've been fortunate to work on two staffs I would consider exemplary in this regard. In our staff meetings, any of our theological concerns (and generational differences) could be discussed and evaluated without people being threatened, hurt, or asked to resign. This freedom fostered growth whether we were discussing how to handle marriages of pregnant couples or what we were learning about worship.

This freedom requires two understandings. First, decision-making authority must be clearly defined. Honest, open sharing cannot be conducted in a political setting where manipulation, compromise, and infighting reign as tools of decision making. The security of knowing who makes the final decision (the pastor or the board) can open the way for free discussion. The most important gift a pastor or board can give staff members is to be secure enough to offer this freedom without being threatened.



Second, differences must never be paraded before the congregation or made an element of corporate contest. Let growing pains be stamped “Staff Members Only.” Cooperation even in the face of differences must be the result of such discussions, or freedom becomes destructive. Your personal growth must never become someone else’s bondage.

Miscommunication

“All conflicts are communication problems” may be a bit overstated, but miscommunication accounts for its share.

Many staff members burn with vision as they begin their new vocation, not understanding they were hired simply to perform certain tasks. Conversations before their hiring and the announcements surrounding it may have been laced with phrases like “becoming part of the team,” “freedom to carry out your calling,” and “it’s not what you do but who you are that counts,” which always mean more to the hearer than the speaker.

While the pastor sits in the church office wondering why staff members can’t settle into their responsibilities, the staff members are frustrated trying to reconcile reproducing tapes or cleaning the kitchen with the ministry they envisioned.

Honesty is the critical element here. The blunter the better. Worry more about your staff members understanding what you will expect of them than trying to make them like their job. Perhaps the pastors and boards who recruit new staff are in denial, but it’s easy to make a position sound greater than it is. It may help in recruitment, but it leads to trouble in the long run.

Daily miscommunications—not sending the right information or the same information—create the same potential for conflict. Working together effectively requires lots of communication. Questions. Memos and e-mails galore. Make sure people understand what is going on, especially when it will affect, no matter how distantly, something in their field of ministry. Get your information from the right sources.

Demonstrating your loyalty can also negate miscommunication. One staff pastor told me how he looks to do things his pastor cares deeply about even though they may matter little to him (picking up a gum wrapper on the carpet). He likened it to bringing his wife flowers. Find ways to visibly demonstrate your love and support (a note of thanks or offering to handle some busywork you weren’t asked to handle). It will cover a multitude of miscommunications.

Diversity in Perspective

I earned spending money in college as an Oklahoma state football official. Most games I worked with three other officials. On the occasions when I was head referee and responsible for everything that happened on the field, there were six other eyes watching the game with me. Many times we would see a call differently. One would rule a pass



complete, another that it had been trapped. My task was to decide who had the best perspective to make the call.

Diversity in perspective is often a major factor in staff tensions. Whether in matters of methodology, facility, personnel, crisis resolution, or budgets, staff members view the body from different angles. “How will this decision affect the people and ministries I’m involved with?” That’s not wrong. That’s being responsible. It becomes wrong when a staff member seeks to compel his perspective over the perspectives of others and expresses dissatisfaction with them, their viewpoints, or the final decision.

The church must seek to move not by the opinions of people but by the will of God. Listening to many perspectives with a whole-hearted search for God’s mind is a powerful combination—a process laden with occasional conflict, but pregnant with power.

It is a process only for the mature, for those who have lost the need to use pressure and manipulation as tactics for change. It’s for staff members who are willing to be only a part of the solution, for those who can practice submission, which Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) defines as “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.”

At the same time, staff members must avoid self-protectionist tactics like apathy. Withdrawing denies the larger reality of the relationships between various segments of the body. It does not avoid conflicts; it only delays and compounds them.

Majoring in Minors

Society’s preoccupation with power and control often creeps into staff relationships, distracting us from our primary task—serving people—and turning our energies to secondary things such as buildings, budgets, and recognition.

Recently someone told me how snobbish he used to think I was because I would scurry past hurting people on my way to handle some pressing matter of church business. How painful to hear, but how healing to misguided priorities! I felt the parable of the Good Samaritan was pointed directly at me.

Jesus never grabbed for institutional control, either in the Roman Empire or in the Jewish hierarchy. Yet the fire he ignited in eleven men changed the world. Putting too much emphasis on program distracts from personal ministry. What if I don’t get all the space I think I need in the new education wing? Does ministry hang so precariously on such externals?

A good test of whether or not you are majoring in minors is to look at what is frustrating you. Does it have to do with institutional questions or serving individual people? Nothing can really hinder the latter. If it’s merely an institutional matter, give input where you are invited and defer to the decision makers. Conflict over minors isn’t worth whatever you hope to gain.



Environment

It is impossible to examine staff conflicts without looking at the environment of staff relationships themselves. What kind of hierarchy allows for both accountability and freedom to minister? A system based entirely on the power of position can't flourish in a setting where the highest order of personal motivation must be leading of the Holy Spirit.

Is faithfulness to God challenged when you are asked by a superior to do something you don't fully agree with? How can people be freely released when "I felt God wanted me to" is an oft-used excuse of the immature?

These questions complicate the usual employer-employee model. The church isn't just another business, and answers won't be found at the extremes. Freedom to the point of anarchy is destructive. Authority that chains the church to one person's will may find less outer conflict but breeds it far deeper inwardly.

Obviously the problem calls for more extensive discussion than is appropriate here. The stress between individual conscience and submission to authority, however, does contribute to staff conflicts. Until we reconcile these competing values, they always will. The answer lies not in an ideal management system but in compassionate, personal cooperation that seeks to allow Christ to lead the life of the church.

Lack of Relationships

"I could count on one hand the number of times we as a staff really prayed together other than to cover church prayer requests."

"In six years I have never been invited to my pastor's home for anything but church business."

"I want to share with him what I'm going through, but my struggles are always misunderstood as a lack of personal support."

I've heard these comments from staff pastors who hunger for strong personal relationships. Without them, conflicts become major obstacles to ministry. With them, conflicts are more easily resolved.

Key terms in disarming conflict are respect, understanding, freedom, submission, deference, honesty, and openness. These words describe personal relationships, not institutional systems. Management systems don't create destructive conflicts. People do. Where conflict destroys ministry, you can be sure that relationships have deteriorated. And preventing deterioration requires maintenance.

Relations must be familial. It is easy to let ministry relationships slip into mere professionalism. Relating only on the basis of the organizational chart forces us into an agree/disagree response to each other's ideas and actions. Once that happens, staff relationships become contests of influence, typified by suspicion, hurt, and independence.



The most productive staff relationships I've observed are where love was expressed in personal friendship. I'll never forget the morning my pastor came by on his way to the office to sit and talk with my wife and me after our small apartment had been burglarized.

Relationships must be supportive. If our goal is to minister to people and extend the kingdom, then we must work at encouraging one another. As a staff member, can you still support your pastor even if he opts for a different action than you suggested? As a pastor, do you care about helping your staff member go on when you know he or she has been disappointed?

You can't work in God's kingdom with others and ignore their needs. One pastor described the degeneration of relationships among his elders: "Being right became more important than being right with each other."

"You are my friends," Jesus told his disciples. And he cared deeply for their needs. "Familiarity breeds contempt" is a battle doctrine for the world; it has no place in the church.

Relationships must be mature. Being people's friend means saying more than just the things they want to hear. Leaders must also have enough maturity to accept correction without being hurt or angry.

Jesus' closeness with Peter did not keep him from rebuking him when he sought to keep Jesus from the cross. James and John were blasted for wanting to destroy an entire village.

These relationships do not spring up overnight. They are cultivated. Fear of committing time to personal relationships is the greatest deterrent to a healthy staff environment. Maintenance is too time-consuming, some argue. While they do take time to establish, good friendships are not inefficient in the long run. There is no way to measure the time and energy wasted on conflicts that tear people apart, leaving them seething beneath the surface, or requiring endless meetings to resolve.

When you are truly someone's friend, conflicts need not be feared or hidden. They are not seen as the result of incompetence or rebellion but as the natural result of people working together who see through a glass darkly. Even with imperfect people in imperfect environments, the work of God can forge ahead.

—Wayne Jacobsen, a former pastor, is the founder and director of Lifestream Ministries.

Copyright © 1983 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared in LEADERSHIP.

Discuss

1. What are some theological differences that we allow to exist in our church? How have we benefited from this?



2. How can we encourage better relationships among our staff or board members?
3. Compare the generational differences in our staff and board members. What values do the different generations share? What values do they not share?

Disarming Conflict

Do these characteristics define how your staff approaches conflict? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 (we do this well in the face of conflict) to 5 (we do not do this well when we face conflict).

	Do this well			Do not do this well	
We show respect to those we disagree with.	1	2	3	4	5
We seek to understand divergent perspectives.	1	2	3	4	5
We give others freedom to differ in opinion.	1	2	3	4	5
We submit to our leaders for the good of the church.	1	2	3	4	5
We defer “winning” for the sake of unity.	1	2	3	4	5
We offer honest feedback to one another.	1	2	3	4	5
We openly discuss differences and disagreements.	1	2	3	4	5



The Nine Most Predictable Times of Conflict

Be better prepared for tension in your church by knowing when it's expected.

by Speed Leas

Pastors have learned not to be discouraged the week after Christmas or the week after Easter. Those Sundays are traditionally the lowest in attendance. Coming as they do immediately after high points in the church year, the unprepared pastor sets himself up for despair if he doesn't recognize the pattern.

In the same way, pastors are better prepared for church conflict if they know when it's more likely to come. Certainly, pastors know that church conflict is coming—it has been part of the church since day one. Knowing *when* it's apt to come is a different matter and one that pastors and leaders are wise to be alert to.

“For everything there is a season,” intoned the author of Ecclesiastes. He didn't mention it in his list, but he could have included church conflict. In my work with churches, I seemed to get more calls for help during ten particular times in a congregation's life.

1. Easter

During Lent and just after Easter the number of calls for help received by the Alban Institute rises substantially.

Easter is usually the busiest time of year—even outdoing Advent and Christmas. Usually during Lent, a church offers more programs and worship services, and attendance is up. All that creates more stress and tension, and any underlying or submerged conflicts more easily surface.

In addition, when Easter arrives, church leaders realize that there are only a couple of months, before the summer slow-down, to take care of problems that have developed in the program year.

Perhaps the youth sponsors have been sporadic in their efforts with the high school group. The associate pastor doesn't want to ignore this problem until the fall—otherwise he may end up letting it go another year. Better to nip it in the bud and start the next year's program in a fresh way.

So he asks another couple to become youth sponsors and encourages the present sponsors to retire when summer comes.

The present sponsors are hurt, and use the occasion to complain about the work of the associate, about which they've not been happy for some time. Pretty soon, the problem of high school sponsors becomes the entire church's problem—another Eastertide conflict.



2. Stewardship Campaigns/Budget Time

In November and December of each year, I receive several calls from pastors and lay leaders about what they discovered during their annual stewardship campaign: when the church callers spoke with the members of the congregation about their pledges, they not only received less money than was expected, they also learned that members were unhappy. The every-member canvass has uncovered some deeper problems in the church, and the problems may have little to do with money.

In a Michigan congregation, giving had dropped off markedly, and the position of some staff members was in jeopardy. So the board decided to call on all of the members of the church to request their financial support. They trained a cadre of leaders to visit every member: they wanted to listen to each member's hopes and concerns for the church and then tell them what the church was doing, inviting them to increase their pledges.

When they asked for volunteers to make the calls, few people at first responded. When they finally did get enough callers and made the calls, the board was surprised at the response: the callers heard a great deal of dissatisfaction from the members—about the pastor's preaching, the staff's sloppy work in religious education, and the general dreariness of the worship services.

The board had been unaware of members' feelings because, in general, church members usually did not speak directly to one another, let alone the board, about their dissatisfaction with the church. The every-member canvass provided a channel for their complaints.

3. Addition of New Staff

The most frequent type of conflict in congregations is between the pastor and key leaders in the church. This is particularly true when a new pastoral staff member is called.

New staff means not only changes in relationships and procedures but also changes in directions and priorities.

I worked with one congregation that had two interim pastors during its two-year search for a pastor. The interims were passive leaders, who seldom interfered with the leadership of the church. As a result, eight laypeople emerged to carry the church through the interim.

These eight people were delighted when the new pastor arrived—at last they wouldn't have to spend so much time at the church; they would get a rest as somebody else handled all the details.

But when the new pastor started to handle the details, the eight leaders found themselves sorely disappointed. The pastor made decisions all right, but differently than they would have. What was worse, he tended to listen to the views of others more than he did theirs!



4. Change in Leadership Style

In another congregation, the pastor was introverted—quiet, reserved, bookish, but thoughtful and caring. The problem was he followed a highly extroverted pastor, who loved being with people, in the church and in the community.

Members felt awkward having to take the initiative in conversation with the new pastor, and they became impatient for the new pastor to warm up to them. In fact, the pace of his interaction was simply different than what they were used to, and that took some getting used to.

When a congregation hires, either deliberately or by mistake, a pastor whose leadership style differs from his predecessor, conflict is a near certainty.

Leadership problems are often “followership” problems. For a leader to lead effectively, people must follow effectively—people must actively cooperate with the pastor’s style of leadership.

For example, some families experience more turmoil when their children become teenagers. It’s not that the parents have changed, but the children, now teenagers, have. They no longer want to follow the style of leadership the parents have been exerting for years. Leadership is only as effective as the followers.

Often congregations will choose a new pastor with the express intent of picking someone who offers a style of leadership different than the previous pastor—let’s say the last pastor was an authoritative leader and the new pastor participatory (a not unusual occurrence in congregations).

In this scenario, things may go well until there is a congregational crisis or major decision. Then people become anxious, and they revert to old patterns of behavior—and they expect others, like the pastor, to follow suit. They want the pastor suddenly to become decisive and bold. At this point, everyone becomes confused.

5. The Pastor’s Vacation

While the pastor of one Presbyterian congregation was away on his honeymoon, the Session (the church board) met to discuss his leadership. They decided it was serious enough to phone him in the middle of his honeymoon; they told him a delegation was being sent to the presbytery to ask help from the committee on ministry.

Ouch!

Is this typical? No. But if serious problems are festering in a church, it’s not surprising that the dissatisfied group will gather to discuss them while the pastor is away.

Also, some churches depend unduly on their pastor, so that when he or she does take a vacation, the people subconsciously panic. One group begins squabbling with another, or the associate says something offensive from the pulpit (“If you’re not giving a tithe to this church, you’re not fully committed to Christ!”) and people react. Before long,



someone feels compelled to phone the vacationing pastor to tell him things are falling apart.

6. Changes in the Pastor's Family

Often changes in a pastor's family, even for the better, will cause conflict in the congregation.

One pastor for years devoted his primary energy and attention to the congregation. The congregation got used to his seventy-and eighty-hour weeks.

When the pastor's daughter reached her teens, he and his daughter began quarreling more. She began to get into trouble at school. The pastor was concerned.

So he started to spend a great deal more time at home, and he began attending a weekly therapy session with his wife and daughter.

Well, the church started feeling neglected. Even though the pastor still put in some fifty hours a week, the congregation complained about his flagging interest in the church.

7. The Completion of a New Building

When the Alban Institute researched pastoral firings, it discovered that after the completion of a new building, clergy were vulnerable to firing. Several factors are involved:

The leadership (including the pastor's) has centered on a focused and specific task. Once completed, a new kind of leadership is required—usually leadership focused on program.

If the transition is not made, the church, which had experienced itself as successful, now feels it's drifting. It wants the kind of energy and focus it had during the building project. Unless it finds a new focus, the frustration gets directed into a conflict.

8. Loss of Church Membership

Conflict is more likely when a church endures significant drops in membership. Membership is a scarce resource for many congregations; as resources—money or people—dwindle, tension increases.

Members of declining congregations often pin the blame for their problems on a person or group, even though the people they blame may have done little if anything to contribute to the difficulty.

In upstate New York, a downtown parish had suffered a slow, regular, and significant decrease in attendance for ten years. The pastor, who had been with the church for fifteen years, knew that part of the decline was due to urban renewal, which had removed much of the housing near the church. In addition, two new congregations of the same denomination had been started not far away in the suburbs.



Still, he was convinced that the real reason the church had been losing members was three older women of the congregation: They had controlled the church for twenty years. They resisted everything he tried. They were hostile and forbidding. They intimidated anyone who wanted to try something new, whether it was a new church school class, a program for the homeless, or innovations in worship.

While many of the members agreed that the problem was this formidable troika, an equally large group thought the problem lay with the pastor: he didn't pay enough attention to the older members, he didn't call on the members frequently enough, and he was too involved in controversial social issues about the poor.

Which group was "right"? Both and neither. But the pain of membership loss was so great, each felt the need to blame someone.

I pointed out to both sides that although the women and the pastor could each improve how they worked in the church, the membership problems were largely caused by factors beyond the control of any individual or group. Consequently, I encouraged them to identify ways they might strengthen their church's work in their community and discouraged their attempts to improve each other.

9. Increase in Church Membership

On the other hand, an increase in church membership can also trigger conflict, because as congregations grow, their personalities change. People happy with the old personality usually don't like the new personality that emerges.

As do others, I classify congregations into four sizes: family, pastoral, program, and corporate.

- *Family size.* These congregations average less than 50 on Sunday morning. They tend to be single-cell organizations with only one dominant leader—usually not the pastor, rather a long-term and active member of the congregation. Family-size congregations tend to look to the past, to what has or has not worked, to guide their decisions.
- *Pastoral size.* These churches average 50 to 150 people on Sunday morning. They have several cells, or primary groups. These cells tend to relate to each other through the pastor.

The pastor links the congregation. Usually it is the pastor who calls on newcomers and acquaints them with others in the congregation. He orients them to congregational life and helps them find a place to land—a committee, a Bible study, the choir. Furthermore, the pastor is about the only person who attends every church function.

The pastor, then, wields more authority in a pastoral-size congregation than in the family-size church. People look to the pastor for information and advice.



Planning in pastoral-size congregations is still determined by what has happened in the past, although not as much as in the family-size congregation.

As a church moves into the pastoral-size category, the matriarch or patriarch will lose his or her power to the pastor, and this transition will not be easy.

Also, as the congregation swells, it begins functioning in distinct groups. Those who formerly liked the unified, family feel of the church are likely to complain.

- *Program size.* These congregations have from 150 to 350 on Sunday morning. Since duties exceed the physical capabilities of a single pastor, the church hires other staff and delegates more work to boards and committees.

Not everyone in the congregation works directly with the senior pastor, but some relate to the music personnel, others to the Christian education director, and others still to the associate pastor. Thus, to some the congregation feels like an “organization” rather than a church.

Exigencies often determine planning. Members get in trouble with one another for scheduling two events in the same room on the same day, or attempting to take the young people on a weekend retreat on the Sunday of the all-church picnic. Planning worship is more complex, since the interests of the music personnel, the preacher, and the worship committee all have to be coordinated.

(Actually, congregations with more than 150 on Sunday morning can function like a pastoral-size church. Such a church usually has few committees and offers few programs. The church essentially revolves around the Sunday morning worship service.)

The shift from a pastoral-size congregation to a program-size congregation is likely to be more disquieting still. The changes will be more visible, thus threatening to more people.

For example, changing from one worship service to two will likely be the most disturbing change for the church: “The church will no longer be unified.” “We won’t be able to see our friends if they attend another service.”

Usually congregations restructure their boards when they move from pastoral- to program-size congregations. The governing board no longer works as closely with all aspects of the congregation’s life. Some committees report less and some not at all to the governing board, and consequently many people feel increasingly alienated from church leadership.

The pastor restructures his schedule as well. He or she can no longer visit everyone who is sick and shut in and meet with every committee. That is felt as a real loss to everyone, including the pastor.



- *Corporate size.* These congregations, with more than 350 people on Sunday morning, are even more hierarchically organized than program-size churches. The pastor now relates only to program staff, certainly not all staff. Often the pastor focuses more on his unique ministry (usually preaching), and others have the administrative and program responsibilities.

Often cadres, groups, special ministries, or even pastoral-size churches emerge within the corporate-size congregation. The pastor becomes a symbol who holds the entire congregation together.

Planning now is more complex, but in addition to responding to the needs of the moment, corporate-size churches have the time and staff to base their decisions on future contingencies.

Many of the same tensions experienced in the previous size change are felt here as well.

What can be done to better deal with these predictable times of conflict?

Knowing the stages of grief helps; after all, nearly all of these occasions have something to do with letting go of something past.

Also, knowing that conflict and stress, at low levels anyway, are helpful for congregations, helps reduce some of the tension brought on by these transitions.

But in any event, just knowing what may come helps.

A football receiver often knows he's going to be hit immediately after he makes a catch. Knowing that doesn't lessen the impact of the hit, but it does help him to hold on to the ball and sometimes even maintain his balance, elude the tackler, and gain some extra ground.

Likewise with pastors: if they know when the church is likely to be hit, they'll more likely be able to turn up field for a few extra yards.

—Speed Leas was, for 39 years, a church consultant specializing in conflict management; now in his retirement, he is a part-time consultant for the Alban Institute.

Copyright © 1992 Christianity Today International.
Originally appeared in *Mastering Conflict and Controversy* (Nelson, 1992).

Discuss

1. What direction is our membership going and what kinds of conflict should we prepare for?
2. How does our senior pastor's leadership style affect the leadership style of other pastors or our board? How could this create conflict if he or she were replaced?
3. How can we remain healthy through conflict by knowing when to expect it?



Time for a Conflict?

Based on the specific makeup of your church, rate the likelihood of experiencing each type of conflict in the next 12 months. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 (We are likely to experience this conflict) to 5 (We will not experience conflict in this situation).

	Likely to experience			Will not experience	
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Problems related to holiday seasons	1	2	3	4	5
2. Problems arising during a stewardship campaign	1	2	3	4	5
3. Problems related to adding new staff	1	2	3	4	5
4. Problems related to changes in leadership style	1	2	3	4	5
5. Problems while the pastor is out of town	1	2	3	4	5
6. Problems because of the pastor's changing family situation	1	2	3	4	5
7. Problems after the completion of a new building	1	2	3	4	5
8. Problems related to the loss of members	1	2	3	4	5
9. Problems associated with an increase in membership	1	2	3	4	5



The Good Fight

Four spiritual disciplines to keep fights from scarring your soul.

by Mark Buchanan

Why are Christians so fractious? In 15 years as a pastor, I've seen a lot, and heard more: deacons in fisticuffs, screaming matches at business meetings, gossip-mongering that borders on lynching.

I know a church once teeming with 400 joyful members. In less than six months they dwindled to a few bedraggled survivors. Years later, they've still not recovered. The issue? A small faction wanted to push through a children's program too hard and too fast.

In another church one home group came to believe the rest of the body was apostate. The issue? The group deemed the child-rearing practices of most church families to be slack and indulgent. They made a crusade of it. They circulated petitions, they called clandestine meetings, and denounced the leaders. They harassed any who disagreed with them. Soon all the energy of the church was consumed by the issue, and eventually the board and pastor resigned.

From the first disciples on, it's been civil war and rumors of civil war. The house of prayer has often been a bazaar for bone pickers and axe grinders.

We have a fondness for cat fights.

How do we turn them into good fights?

We have four disciplines, four spiritual orientations, to cultivate for such a time as this.

1. A spirit of heartbreak

War, even when its cause is noble, can swiftly descend into pettiness and spite. Righteous indignation can turn, on a whim, into puerile fantasies of vengeance.

I'm not immune. Conflict makes me irritable and anxious. I might turn the other cheek, but usually with clenched teeth. I can worry a bruise into a hemorrhage. I have acted in cowardice here, belligerence there. I've been wishy-washy one moment, rash and churlish the next.

The only antidote is to open myself to genuine grief. I need to taste God's heartbreak, to know his sorrow over the tragedy of his children fighting one another.

I have three young children, Adam, Sarah, and Nicola. I take no joy in their battles, their exchange of taunts and insults. I don't secretly or openly side with one against the other.



It breaks my heart, is all.

Paul tells us that bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander—all our incivility toward one another—grieves the Holy Spirit.

It breaks God's heart, is all.

I try to let it break mine, too.

A year ago we completed and moved into a new building, the culmination of years of work and prayer and sacrifice. It felt like crossing the Jordan into Canaan. Then the “troubles” began. The leadership came under heavy criticism, fed by hearsay. The mood of celebration turned sour. People murmured. They grew nostalgic for “the good old days.” Oneness broke into tribalism.

I became discouraged and defensive. It crept into my preaching—a shrillness, a mounting note of sanctimony and scolding. Every Monday I mentally composed my resignation letter. It was a masterpiece of wounded pride, a last testament of martyrdom.

Then God gave me a glimpse, through one woman, of his heartbreak. She came into my office with an armload of grievance. I heard her out. Then I asked, “Now is there anything that gives you joy?” She looked at me, stricken. She started to weep. She told me about how much pain, physical, emotional, relational, she suffered daily. She couldn't remember the last time she tasted joy.

At that moment God reminded me of the story of the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. That boy is bitter, accusing, scolding. His mouth is full of ashes, accumulated by years of rancor.

And the father? He goes out to him and pleads. *Don't you understand*, he says to his son, *that your brother, the one we thought dead, is alive?* Everything here depends on one thing: that the older son understands the father's grief over the one who was lost. Without that, no invitation to joy makes sense. He needs first to share his father's heartbreak.

To be a minister of reconciliation begins when we grieve with the One who grieves.

2. A spirit of giddiness

And yet we need joy, too, especially in conflict. And here is a catch-22: maybe the first casualty of war is joy.

I live by the ocean, and often I walk the rocky coast, exploring its intricate tidal pools. These teem with life—scuttling crab and slinking snail, spiny urchins and skittering flat fish—but one of the prettiest and most exotic creatures is the sea anemone, a flower-like polyp with a brilliant garland of tentacles waving atop its thick white stem. Here's the rule with anemones: look, but don't touch. They're highly sensitive, and will close up into a tight fist at the merest brush with anything hard.

Joy's like that: it wilts when hard things touch it. A brawling church is a joyless one.



Even so, Paul tells the Philippians, just after he's instructed them to step in and help resolve a cat fight between two leading women in the church, to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:2–4). Rejoicing, *again and always*, is integral to the ministry of reconciliation.

The counsel seems frivolous. Think how annoying it is when, in the midst of grim and tense matters, someone cracks a joke. Laughter at such moments grates. Doesn't rejoicing trivialize the gravity of the situation?

But maybe the situation is trivial. Maybe those in conflict have inflated a minor misunderstanding into a church-wide altercation, nursed hurt into grudge and magnified it into vendetta. Animosity is a great exaggerator, able to turn the smallest thing—a gesture, a tone, a single remark—into injury. It traffics in rumors and hunches. Pettiness like this doesn't deserve the dignity of serious response. Someone ought to have the guts to guffaw.

At any rate, trivial or otherwise, all conflict calls for the peculiar joy Paul speaks about: *joy in the Lord*. Conflict within the church almost always stems from a failure to live by faith and not by sight. Taking our eyes off of Jesus easily entangles us in sin and distraction, and quickly we lose heart. Thus, rejoicing in the Lord is reality therapy. It jolts us out of our preoccupation with "these light and momentary troubles" and reminds us of the "eternal glory that far outweighs them all" that awaits those who trust in God (2 Cor. 4:17).

"A cheerful heart is good medicine," Proverbs 17:22 reminds us. Joy is a restorative. It gives us the sturdiness and health we need to fight the good fight and end the catfight.

3. A spirit of hardness

When Jesus started his journey to the cross—that great personal and cosmic battle—he "set his face like flint toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51, KJV). Conflict takes this as well, this hard resolve, this toughness. A leader in battle cannot be thin-skinned.

I'm a terrible baseball player. It stems from an accident in childhood. I was pitching, and the batter (my brother) hit a line drive into my mouth, bursting my lip and leaving me a skewed front tooth as a lasting souvenir. Ever since, an airborne ball—even a lazy fly ball—triggers a flinch in me. My every instinct is to duck.

We can be like that with conflict, too. We can flinch and avoid it at every turn. I've done that enough times to learn a hard lesson: it only gets worse. Combatants, left to themselves, rarely come to peaceful resolve.

So I've learned to set my face like flint. The results almost always surprise me. Most people want someone to step in, though almost always their first reaction is to balk. But deep down they long for someone who refuses to mince words or hang fire.

I think "the spirituality of hardness" has spared our church a split more than once. Not long ago, some tradesmen in the congregation got into a disagreement that



threatened to spill its banks. I called them all together. The last thing I wanted to do was go in that room myself. But I set my face like flint.

I went in, read to them Psalm 127—“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain”—and called them to stop behaving like children and start acting like men of God. Their hackles bristled at first. But I held my ground. I painted for them a picture of the likely outcome if they carried on the way they were heading. They listened and repented.

We all grew stronger, more devoted to each other. I watch those men now. None are best friends, but they hold each other in high regard. There is nothing any of them must leave at the altar before they can worship together.

I shudder to think what softness might have left behind.

4. A spirit of humility

I have rarely stepped into a conflict without someone—maybe one of the combatants, maybe the devil—reminding me of my own shortcomings.

And it’s true. I don’t just live among a people of unclean lips: I am a man of unclean lips. Rather than deny this, which is what I’d like to do, I confess it. In fact, I know of nothing like a season of conflict to purify and refine me, to prune my wild wood and remove my dead wood. Over and over, I have learned the cathartic power of David’s prayer: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

I see this quality in the Apostle Paul. Maybe the church that gave Paul the most grief was the one in Corinth. They attacked his integrity, his giftedness, his appearance. In their eyes he didn’t look right, speak well, or talk straight. Paul’s two letters to them, especially the first, are thick with a defense of himself and his ministry.

Only, it’s an odd defense. It’s cruciform. Paul doesn’t bellow or hammer. Instead of countering their accusations, he admits most of them. Yes, he’s unimpressive in speech. Yes, he’s physically frail. Yes, he’s unwise by human standards. Yes, he’s shoddy-looking alongside those swaggering “Super Apostles.” He preaches in weakness. He ministers in brokenness. He has nothing to boast about except the cross.

This is no disingenuous rhetorical ploy. It’s true, and its overall effect is to disarm his opponents. It’s hard to keep pressing an attack when your target refuses to fight back.

Recently, Carol, one of my pastoral colleagues, sought my counsel. Every time Carol approached a particular ministry leader about a certain matter, she’d throw it back in Carol’s face, reminding her of her own shortcomings.

“Well,” I said, “she’s right, Carol. This is something you struggle with. Tell her you’re thankful for her honesty, and that you’ll continue to seek God’s grace and power to



change. You're working to remove the log in your own eye. But plead with her to also remove the speck in hers."

"A gentle answer turns back wrath," Solomon told us. Such gentleness is the fruit of humility.

About a year ago I was given one of the highest compliments of my 15 years in pastoral ministry. Eight months prior, I tried to resolve a messy dispute between two men. One of them saw my intervention as intrusive and blundering. He left the church.

But he came back. At first, he slipped in, skittish and cagey. He avoided me, and when he couldn't, he kept the conversation vague and evasive.

Then one Sunday he waited for me at the door.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, "wanted to say—well, thanks. What you did last year was hard for me. I resented you for it. But I know now why you did it: you want the best for me."

Apart from heartbreak, giddiness, hardness, humility, I might have missed that.

—Mark Buchanan is pastor of New Life Community Baptist Church in Duncan, British Columbia.

Copyright © 2004 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared in LEADERSHIP.

Discuss

1. Why is it important to be prepared spiritually for conflict?
2. What are some other disciplines that you would add to Buchanan's list?
3. Describe a time when you observed these disciplines at work. What did that look like?

Take the First Step

Consider the four spiritual disciplines that Buchanan sets out. Which is the hardest for you? Assign each of them a number (1–4) in the order that you need to prioritize developing them.

- ___ A spirit of heartbreak in the face of conflict.
- ___ A spirit of joy despite conflict.
- ___ A spirit of hardness to confront conflict.
- ___ A spirit of humility in the face of personal shortcomings.



Further Resources

Books and resources to help you manage conflict in your church

BuildingChurchLeaders.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- “[Handling Conflict](#)” Assessment Pack
- “[Overcoming Criticism](#)” Assessment Pack
- “[Conflict & Healing](#)” Case Study Pack
- “[Dealing with Difficult People](#)” Practical Ministry Skills
- “[Avoiding All-Out Church War](#)” Survival Guide
- “[Smoothing Conflict Over Worship Styles](#)” Survival Guide
- “[Church Discipline](#)” Training Theme & PowerPoint
- “[Handling Conflict](#)” Training Theme & PowerPoint

LeadershipJournal.net: Our sister website offers practical advice for pastors and church leaders, including articles on dealing with conflict.

Church Conflict: from Contention to Collaboration by *Norma Cook Everist*. This book, written by a seminary professor, proposes a collaborative approach to facing and resolving conflict. (Abingdon, 2004; ISBN 978-0687038015)

Conflict Management in Congregations *David B. Lott, ed.* Gathers the wisdom and advice of many conflict-management consultants. (Alban Institute, 2001; ISBN 978-1566992435)

Discover Your Conflict Management Style by *Speed Leas*. Lays out the various types of leadership styles for conflict management and explains how to improve your style. (Alban Institute, 1998; ISBN 978-1566991841)

Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts by *Ron Susek*. Addresses the causes and impact of church conflicts, how to get them under control, and how to bind the wounds they create. (Baker, 1999; ISBN 978-0801090912)

The Peacemaker by *Ken Sande*. This book provides advice and options for Christians who want to address interpersonal conflict in a way that honors God. (Baker, 2003; ISBN 978-0801064852)

The Peacemaking Pastor by *Alfred Poirier*. This is a guide for pastors to help them lead their congregations through periods of conflict and church discipline and develop a culture of peace in their churches. (Baker, 2006; ISBN 978-0801065897)