

CHURCH CONFLICT

Introduction

One inevitable reality for every person, even every church is conflict. Job 14:1 says, “Man, that is born of a woman, Is of few days, and full of trouble.” (ASV) According to Job, every human can expect shortness of life and misery. Trouble is a clear indication of conflict, and if one’s life is full of trouble, somehow conflict becomes normal. Conflict is a regular uninhibited reality in a person’s life. In the normal process of the day, there is car trouble, plumbing problems, and co-worker confusion. The phrase full of trouble denotes constancy—it alludes to a repetition of agitating occurrences. Conflict could possibly occur from one or all directions of basic human existence. Job’s expression is directly connected to the losses—the conflict he personally experienced. He lost his children, property, and his health. Personal conflict and problems seemed to fall within his life like dominos. He experienced a moment-by-moment account of crisis and disappointment. His life appeared to be a few days and full of trouble. Trouble and conflict are normal but they can cause traumatic experiences similar to those that Job had in his life.

Although trouble and conflict exist in the lives of individuals, the normalcy of trouble also exists in the local church. When there is gender, ethnic, age, class and vocational differences people will assuredly misunderstand and normal conflict will ensue. What is not normal in the church is incivility and abuse. Conflict is traumatic enough; however when relationships deteriorate and people are no longer civil towards one another, stringent experiences occur. Also, as confusion persists, abuse is likely to take place, and the pastor is often the target. G. Lloyd Rediger, author of *Clergy Killers Guidance for Pastor and Congregations Under Attack* says, “Abuse of pastors by congregations and the breakdown of

pastors due to inadequate support are now tragic realities.”¹ The pastor’s survival in the local church would be predicated upon how he or she becomes equipped to handle normal conflict, abnormal conflict, incivility and abuse. This process can begin with an understanding the basic structure of a church.

Types of Conflict

Rediger suggests there are three types of conflict. They are: normal conflict, abnormal conflict and spiritual conflict. He asserts that those who experience normal conflict respond positively to methods for managing such conflict. Abnormal conflict is dispensed by persons who have a mental or personality disorder—with such factors being true, medications would be helpful when managing these circumstances. Spiritual conflict results in the perpetrators being dismissed from the group in order for peace and unity to occur. As clergy experiences conflict, the results are sometimes destructive. The parishioners attempt to inflict pain and cause significant damage. Some other times clergy experience conflict that is demonic, where there minister becomes the target for someone’s internal pain and confusion.

The article *The Escalating Stages of Conflict* lists the following stages of conflict. They are: (1) An Uncomfortable feeling, (2) A Problem emerges, (3) A person to differ with, (4) A dispute to win, (5) A Person to verbally attack, (6) My face to save, (7) A person to expel, withdraw, or ruin, and (8) The aftermath.²

Churches function with a large number of volunteers. These persons come from various backgrounds and they have different expectations of clergy and of each other. In most instances, the expectations are unspoken, yet they are still expected. There are also many groupings of persons in the congregation who have unexpressed expectations. When each of these

¹ G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers Guidance for Pastor and Congregations Under Attack* says, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1997, 1

² www.resolvechurchconflict.com/the_stages_of_unresolved_church_conflict.htm

expectations comes to bear, there will be a definite clash of wills, and one of the aforementioned types of conflict will occur. As the conflict erupts, individuals and groups will defend their positions, while sometimes hiding their real feelings. Darrell Puls, author of an article entitled *Peace Bridge Mastering the Storm of Church Conflict* says, “They often don’t realize they are doing it. They then become entrenched in their positions and feel fully justified in their actions.”³

Church Family Systems

Charles H. Cosgrove & Dennis D. Hatfield, authors of *Church Conflict The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights* say, “As leaders and followers in the church family, people replicate family patterns that they learned while growing up. But present or concurrent family systems also influence how they relate to one another in the congregational family.”⁴ Church families resemble the biological families of which they are comprised. Church conflict can be best understood and corrected by understanding the methods and dynamics people use to interact with others.

The church is comprised of family systems which create dividing lines between personalities, individuals, and groups. The Scriptures even describe the church’s usage of terms that relate to family. They are: family, household, brother, sister, children, infant, and babe. (1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Thess. 2:11; Philemon 10; 1 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 Corinthians 14:20) God calls Himself Father, and Jesus Christ His Son. Along with these terms, one of the common practices of the early church was to meet in the homes of families. The family made a definite imprint on infrastructure of the local church.

³ www.churchhealers.com/church%20conflict.htm

⁴ Charles H. Cosgrove & Dennis D. Hatfield, *Church Conflict The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 12

The groups within the local church are subsystems—they are personalities, families, or small groups that possess the power to make the decisions. They are the ones whom all other members of the congregation defer to when deciding on simple or complicated matters.

Cosgrove and Hatfield say that the church family structure is often more powerful than official boards. The systems consist of informal family structures that are actually behind the official structure of the church.⁵ This approach asks what there is about the congregational family system that encourages and sustains the problem person's objectionable behavior, whatever it may be.

The Structure of Authority

The dynamics of the local church proceed from a basic structure of authority. The concept of structure would be quite encouraging if it only related to church polity. Although polity is significant, it does not cause the constancy of conflict. Structure in the context of this discussion has to do with boundaries. The family systems perspective sets the premise for the existence of boundaries in the local church. One aspect of boundaries in the local church relate to divisions of persons—those who defer to the power brokers, and those who follow them. Another aspect of boundaries is the quality of communication. Quality refers to the degree and clarity of communication across a boundary. Quality also refers to boundaries within the congregational family, which are defined by patterns of communication. Each boundary defines both structure of relationship and quality of communication between the parties who interact across it. Structure can be further described as subsystems. Subsystems are groups of persons who are affiliated with one another. (Sunday school class, fellowship group, auxiliary, etc.) Some groups have authority, which the members defer to.

⁵ Ibid., 24

