

HOW TO DEAL WITH CHURCH CONFLICT

The governing board met to make their final decision about hiring a new pastor. Having narrowed the field to two candidates after a long discussion, a board member moved for a vote. As expected, another board member objected to the motion. During the discussion, this member made clear that she strongly opposed hiring one of the candidates. Equally clear from the discussion was that the remaining board members favored the candidate that she vehemently opposed! She stated that she would leave the church if the board voted to hire the candidate she disliked. When a final vote was taken, the board unanimously (minus the opposing member, of course) voted to offer the position to the candidate she opposed. What the board did not know at the time was that she was leaving the church because of a job transfer. Was winning an argument more important to her than what was best for the congregation?

Becoming Comfortable with Constructive Conflict

The first step is to accept that conflict is normal. Conflict and disagreements have been part of the church since the days of Paul, Peter, and Barnabas. Christians often disagree on strategies and goals. Whenever people work together on something important, they will see things differently. Research shows that growing congregations exhibit and deal with more conflict than declining churches. Thus, conflict can coexist with growth and lead to positive results.

Discovering the Key Issues behind Conflict

At a regularly scheduled meeting, ask members of the governing board or other decision-making group to individually answer the short list of questions below. Ask people not to sign their names. At the next meeting, distribute the compiled answers and request each board member to silently read the document. Discuss the results together and begin to develop some posi-

tive next steps regarding how your group will approach future conflict.

- During the past two years, have we usually disagreed about the same issue or a different issue each time? If the same, what is that issue?
- If you had to name only one cause behind our disagreements, how would you describe that cause?
- If you had to make a list of secondary causes, what would you put on that list?
- Regarding how our congregation handles conflict, please state in one sentence what you specifically *want* to see happen.

Creating a Healthy Church Culture

The more comfortable we become with discussing differences of opinion, the more we are able to find constructive ways to resolve differences. In a healthy church environment, those conversations are characterized by these traits:



1. Decisions are made by the input and involvement of most members. Damaging conflict brews in churches where too many decisions are made by only a few members and the rest are in the dark.
2. The pastor and other church staff are treated with respect and fairness. There is a process in place (such as a personnel committee) for dealing with complaints.
3. There is a system in place for making decisions and assuring accountability. Effective polity—the operational and governance structure of any church—ensures that the system doesn't become an instrument for those willing to take advantage of ambiguity about the exercise of authority. Leaders refrain from making unilateral decisions and process decisions through the appropriate committees and governing board.
4. The church consistently uses a fair process to put the best-qualified persons in positions of leadership. Regular rotation of office holders is part of that process. This allows new people to become involved and prevents any individual from wielding too much influence over a long period.
5. The congregation is outwardly focused and genuinely welcomes new people.
6. The church has a clear mission focus and direction for ministry that is widely shared. Without such unity, destructive conflict flourishes in the vacuum.¹

Promoting Positive Member Behaviors

Every church member should share in the responsibility for more constructive church conversations and effective decision making. Leaders who follow these guidelines can help make that happen.

Assert that every member's view is equally important. Do not tolerate bullying behavior that is so overbearing or aggressive that it leaves no emotional room for other people to disagree.

Keep disagreements public and on the table. Sometimes people fear discussing difficult issues in a meeting because it might cause disunity or hurt feelings. But when conversations go underground, disagreements intensify and make matters worse. Unfortunately, leaders choosing this strategy later regret that they didn't do everything they could to resolve the conflict.

Always talk directly with others. Avoid the temptation to substitute this positive approach with talking *about* others. Speak only for yourself, not for others. For

example, do not tolerate the phrase “people are saying.” Insist on facts and the names of specific people if someone purports to be speaking for others.

Do not rescue people who try to exert power and control through threats. Common threats are “I will leave this church” or “I will withhold my financial contributions.” When a church yields to such threats, it is never a positive outcome.

Beware of barking dogs. Sometimes churches have one or two members who seek attention and want to win any church fight just for the sake of winning. They are like barking dogs behind the fence when you are walking down the sidewalk. The more you acknowledge their negative noise outside of meetings, the more you encourage it. Don't jump the fence and join them!²

*Don't be a rabbit or a skunk.*³ Skunks stand their ground and fight in odorous ways. They use negative comments, label persons or groups with whom they disagree, or challenge personal motives and character. Most of us are rabbits that would rather run away from such personalities. We need to assert our right to express an opinion or viewpoint that is constructive. By speaking up for ourselves, we guarantee all opinions are part of the discussion.

Hope for Positive Outcomes

The opening example illustrates several factors detrimental to preventing and resolving conflict. The church did not have a process in place to vet and select pastors. One individual had a long-established habit of using threats to get her way. Only when other members finally called her bluff did she realize she could no longer get away with such behavior. Her last vote was her parting shot.

When leaders and members faithfully fill their role as equal participants, set clear boundaries about acceptable church behavior, and create a culture where differences of opinion are expected, congregational life moves toward peaceful decision making.⁴

1. Thom Rainer, “Nine Traits of Mean Churches,” <http://thomrainer.com/2015/03/nine-traits-mean-churches/>.

2. This analogy was part of a comment left anonymously on a blog post.

3. Herb Miller, “Become Comfortable with Conflict: Step One to Moving Beyond It!” *The Parish Paper*, January 2010.

4. Congregations can create formal covenants (see examples at <http://www.covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2011/02/Behavioral-Covenant-Samples3.pdf>; or Gil Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).