

CONFLICT IN CONGREGATIONS

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

Conflict takes on many forms. Consider the following. An historic downtown congregation is growing beyond the capacity of its building. It is landlocked with little available parking and no room to expand the facility. Congregational leaders' choices are limited. For almost two years they deliberate and debate whether or not to relocate.

Finally the governing board forces a vote. The congregation votes to relocate by a narrow margin. But the vote doesn't end the conflict. Some members are furious and circulate rumors that the vote was fixed.

A new church grows beyond the capacity of its sole pastor to provide the attention to individuals and families that they had come to expect during the early years of the congregation's growth. People feel neglected. Some members call a

secret meeting to discuss how they can "get rid of the pastor."

Expectations that a new pastor had of her congregation did not match the expectations of the congregation. Throughout the call process she was drawn to the congregation by the interest in community service that she perceived on the search committee. After her arrival, however, her attempt to initiate more community involvement from the congregation met with strong resistance. She felt tricked and didn't know how to handle the resulting discord.

Conflict in congregations is inevitable. All too often it is destructive; but it doesn't have to be. Conflict can be a healthy sign of a passionate congregation. It can provide opportunities to learn complex decision making and responsible behavior. The difference between a destructive outcome and a positive outcome depends upon the willingness and skills of congregational leaders and members to appropriately address disagreements that arise.

Because healthy management of conflict is so crucial for congregations, the Center engaged in an inquiry of this subject.



METHODOLOGY

The Center's resource inquiry began with the creation of an advisory team. Eight congregational and denominational leaders met to discuss congregational conflict. The first meeting, at the beginning of the

process, was intended to determine what was important to those who might benefit from the Center's learning on conflict. The second gathering of the advisory team was held at the end of the inquiry process. Its purpose was to discuss the preliminary report and implications for congregations. The advisory team members were candid about the pain that abounds in congregations, the need for effective resources, and the challenges of the work.

The Center's inquiry into conflict consisted of two phases. In 2004 we interviewed conflict consultants. Because of



limitations of time we decided to focus only on those organizations and/or consultants that offered conflict resolution strategies for congregations, thus excluding an array of organizations that offer conflict consulting to businesses and not-for-profit agencies. Furthermore, we were interested in the consultants' work with conflicts that are internal to a congregation, not among congregations or between congregations and their denomination.

Interviews were set up with eleven persons representing faith-based organizations, denominations, and individual consultants. These individuals are on the cutting edge of conflict work. Some have set the pace for decades and others are newer to the work and are bringing a new generation of ideas and prospects for the future.

During the second phase of the inquiry, conducted in 2005, we spoke with pastors of six congregations which had experienced conflict. These face-to-face interviews revealed how the congregations successfully navigated the conflict.

This report is offered with the hope that it will enable those who use it to better understand the nature of conflict. The possibility for transformation of congregational life awaits those who learn to meaningfully address these issues.

AN INTERVENTION PROCESS

Many of the consultants interviewed like to think their approaches to conflict intervention in congregations are eclectic, drawing from a variety of sources and dependent upon the needs



and circumstances of the congregations. Nevertheless, there is an identifiable process that describes, in general, what a conflict intervention looks like within a congregation. Not all consultants follow all steps. For example, not all consultants

furnish the congregation with a written report at the end of their consultation. Despite these differences, the general pattern includes:

Invitation to intervene

The consultant is asked by a clergy or lay person from the congregation to provide conflict consultation for them. A brief description of the conflict issue(s) is provided to the consultant. Sometimes the consultant is contacted so that the congregation's representative can explore the consultant's services prior to inviting them to intervene. In some instances the consultant participates in an entry meeting, either on-site or by conference call, to clarify the needs of the congregation.

Letter of agreement

Congregational leaders and the consultant sign a letter of agreement that details what the consultant will provide to the congregation, to whom he or she is responsible, the fees and payment schedule, and other details of the covenant.

Liaison group appointed

The congregation appoints a group to work specifically with the consultant, providing and/or organizing what is needed for the consultation. In some instances, this is a subcommittee of the congregation's governing body.

Information gathering

Information is collected about the conflict and other



congregational dynamics. Consultants collect the information in different ways. Small group interviews encourage congregants to speak their minds in front of others. Private conversations or personal interviews are conducted face-to-face or over the phone. Some utilize questionnaires for the entire congregation or personal summaries of the nature of the conflict written by the clergy and lay leadership. Consultants may also use online data collection surveys and review congregational documents, such as bylaws and board minutes.

Written report

Many, though not all, consultants provide a written report of their findings. The report may consist of a cataloging of the issues and identification of the patterns that were found in the data collection phase. Sometimes the report consists of a series of recommendations from the consultant about how the congregation needs to address the conflict. Sometimes the report is used as a discussion starter for engaging the congregation in a dialogue about what they want to work on. This negotiation between the consultant and the congregation can lead to leadership retreats and/or training, direct mediation, the development of behavioral covenants and/or systems for addressing conflict in the future.

Education component

Some, though not all, consultants provide an educational component in their intervention. These vary from workshops on biblical peacemaking, the practice of dialog, small group processes designed to reduce anxiety, problem-solving, communication styles, consensus decision-making; behavioral covenants, and so forth. Sometimes education events are seen as ways to open doors and build relationships in preparation for future intervention. Sometimes an education component is an option in response to the unique dynamics of the congregation's conflict.

Other components

Other components practiced by some consultants include a healing service, calls to confession, mediation, follow-up coaching and phone consultation.

While these steps are the general phases of conflict intervention in congregations, some consultants interviewed feel strongly that the specific design of the intervention be done in collaboration with the congregation.

CONGREGATIONAL TENSION

What do congregations fight about? The consultants we interviewed named the following issues that can embroil congregations in conflict:

- Pastoral or staff transitions
- Authority of the clergy to make decisions in the congregation
- Change in or disregard for deeply rooted values or traditions
- Worship styles and/or change
- Misunderstood expectations of clergy or congregation's leaders
- Clergy leadership style
- Misunderstanding of the congregation's mission
- Congregation's painful past – losses or previous conflict
- People leaving the church
- Interpersonal conflict
- Decision-making processes
- Tension between staff members
- Clergy misconduct
- Financial issues; changes in spending priorities
- Perceptions of clergy competency
- Building projects
- Unexplained behavior of an individual



CONFLICT DEFINED

The conflict consultants interviewed all agreed that conflict is an inescapable aspect of congregational life. The definitions below reflect the different ways consultants interviewed explained conflict.

- Conflict is when there is a difference, plus tension.
- Conflict is a dispute between two or more persons over values, goals, processes (the way things are done), and/or facts.
- Conflict involves uncooperative attitudes and unaccommodating interactions and exchanges.
- Conflict has three dimensions: (1) the dispute itself; (2) the unhealthy ways in which people interact with one another; and (3) the level of anxiety and ability of persons to talk in non-distorted ways about what is happening.
- In a conflicted congregation the goodwill is gone. People can no longer agree to disagree.

Commitment

Congregations need to commit to work at resolving their conflict over a period of time. There are no quick fixes. One consultant noted it takes 2-5 years for a congregation to work out of a major conflict.

Openness

The ability of a congregation to be flexible and open to options of change is important for conflict to be constructively handled. Openness to the use of resources beyond the congregation is also valuable. In contrast, rigid theology and/or rigid people is a barrier to conflict transformation.

Hope

Several of the conflict consultants view themselves as bearers of hope. Congregations who navigate through conflict believe that they can get well.

Understanding

Unanimity is not the goal of conflict transformation. The goal is that people learn to understand one another, whether or not they agree with each other.

Responsibility

Healthy, rather than destructive, congregational conflict requires that individuals recognize their own contributions to the conflict and accept responsibility for being peacemakers. They are willing to self-examine, move beyond blame and make changes in their own lives.

Behavior

Limiting destructive behavior is crucial for addressing conflict constructively. Several conflict consultants work with congregations to establish appropriate rules of behavior and/or a covenant.

A LOOK AT SUCCESS

All of the conflict consultants interviewed agreed that sometimes conflict intervention within congregations leads to more healthy ways of dealing with future conflicts and sometimes it does not. In each interview we asked, "What are the signs of success?" The responses can be summarized by the following twelve factors.

Readiness

Sometimes congregations are not ready to seriously deal with the conflict that besets them. They need to experience more tensions before they finally realize that it is important enough to take positive steps.



Structure

An important way to reduce the anxiety in a congregation is to establish a structure of procedures and policies for handling conflict and to consistently apply those strategies.

Spiritual maturity

One measure of a successful conflict intervention in a congregation is growth in spiritual maturity.

Leader maturity and motivation

Conflict around leadership is the most frequently mentioned presenting issue according to the consultants interviewed. The maturity and motivation of the leader is a significant factor in working through conflict.

Mission focus

Focusing on the congregational mission helps to inoculate a congregation against destructive conflicts.

Healing

Healing broken congregations in many instances remains an illusive goal for conflict consultants. But when congregations recognize their own brokenness and need for healing and develop rituals to initiate healing, transformation can occur.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING FROM CONSULTANTS

The experience and insights shared by the conflict consultants interviewed can be summarized by the following observations:

- Congregations in unhealthy patterns of behavior and communication wait too long to seek outside help. Conflicts escalate before consultants are called. There is some suggestion that there is an emerging trend for earlier interventions as

denominations, seminaries, and society talk more openly about conflict.

- The consultants interviewed share the goals of listening to all voices in an even-handed way, establishing a relationship between the consultant and congregation and creating a safe space.
- Resolving conflict is an art rather than a science. Consultants' approaches are adaptive and fluid.
- All consultants understood the congregation to be responsible for their own work. Quick fixes are not promised by any consultant.
- All consultants understand their presence to be a resource for all parties in the conflict. The consultant takes on roles of facilitator, coach and/or mediator rather than an expert who defines the solution for the congregation. In most cases the consultant serves to neutralize the situation or provide a "safe" place for constructive conversation.
- A major presenting issue related to congregational conflict centers around the leadership of the pastor and the lack of clear and mutual expectations between the members and the pastor. The consultants interviewed all understood leadership to be the key to approaching conflict. All respected the pastor's place as central and would not go into a situation without the pastor's knowledge.
- A consultant's goal is to help congregations understand conflict as an inevitable part of growth rather than to deny or run from it.
- Most consultants weave theological reflection or spiritual discernment into the process. This is effective in helping congregations understand the presence of God in the situation. Scripture plays a central role in several approaches.
- Some consultants utilize adult learning theory by tapping into members' existing skills, knowledge and experience



around conflict. Building from this foundation fosters clarity and ownership of the situation.

- Several approaches are changing the language from conflict resolution to conflict transformation, peacemaking, or reconciliation.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING FROM CONGREGATIONS

Every conflict situation is distinct in its nature and approach. In the second phase of our inquiry we sought to learn how a number of selected pastors handled real life conflict situations in their congregations. The stories we heard bring to light how conflict theory and practice meet in the congregational setting. Viewed collectively the stories reveal several notable observations and some common themes.

Here are a few things we learned as a result of our interviews with clergy.

Be mindful of behavior

Several conflict incidents revealed unhealthy or destructive behavior by individuals. Several pastors noted that unprovoked outbursts at meetings, sudden mood swings, passive aggressive behavior, and even physically aggressive behaviors are dangerous areas to address unless you are a professional counselor or therapist. Indeed, individuals displaying these behaviors are beyond the capacities or expectations of any pastor or group to address. These individuals need professional help.

In one particular case, a pastor encountered unhealthy behavior by a highly visible member of the congregation. After several private conversations with the individual the pastor knew professional help was needed. Immediately the pastor redirected his energies by providing pastoral care and counseling to the individual. Unaware of the true

nature of the situation, the congregation assumed that the pastor and the individual had personality clashes. As one pastor stated, "Human emotions are very volatile, making it difficult to predict the steps to take in resolving human differences and divisions. When this is complicated by unhealthy behavior, the best strategy—the only strategy—is to seek or encourage outside help."

Seek support, avoid isolation

When the pastor is at the center of a conflict, an internal (or external) support system is essential to his or her ability to navigate the conflict with confidence and to survive. Support groups or individuals provide a safe and neutral space where listening, conversation, and prayer can take place. In some cases, these support persons can become partners in crafting effective strategies for addressing conflict situations.

One pastor interviewed used a small subgroup of the church's governing body. He believed it was important to "stand close to the leaders of the group." This ensured that the governing body not only understood the complexity of the conflict issue but was kept informed of the pastor's actions. Another pastor sought solace with trusted parishioners while another pastor used his covenant group of local pastors. One pastor maintained communication with the bishop throughout the ordeal and received advice and counsel from the bishop's office. In another situation, the pastor removed himself from the conflict by asking the governing body to intervene. All of these strategies avoided deterioration of the situation to "he said, she said" accusations.

If the pastor is seen as the "problem," in most cases he or she will be asked to leave. Without an internal support system, especially from the governing body, the pastor will not survive.



Trust your instincts

Without exception, each pastor in our study relied on the use of family systems theory in navigating conflict. Family systems theory guided pastors in terms of their own personal response and actions. Several pastors commented that family systems provided some very helpful “coping strategies.” One pastor stayed focused on “affiliation, affirmation, and differentiation.” Other family systems strategies that proved most useful included:

- Move toward the conflict, not away from it.
- Maintain a non-anxious presence.
- Avoid triangles.
- Provide pastoral care.
- Don’t take the conflict personally.
- Be positive – language frames reality.

Realizing the severity of a conflict, one congregation brought in an outside consultant grounded in family systems. The purpose of this intervention was to equip the governing body and pastor with the skills and knowledge to confront the conflict in a constructive manner. This engagement resulted in the group creating a “covenant of common values” that was communicated to the entire congregation.

Beware of ghosts from the past

Unresolved conflicts from a congregation’s past will oftentimes re-emerge during new conflicts and will influence patterns of behavior and communication. These unresolved conflicts will “get in the way,” adding greater complexity to new conflicts. A congregation attempting to resolve the conflict at hand is wise to acknowledge and bring closure to the conflicts of the past as well. If not, a congregation will continue to remember the previous grief and revert back to unhealthy patterns of behavior and communication.



Trust will never be fully restored because healing and reconciliation never occurred.

A case in point is the congregation that invited an outside consultant to come and facilitate a conflict situation. Many members of the congregation were convinced that the pastor was the “problem.” The consultant interviewed a number of people, issued a report and made a series of recommendations, none of which were accepted or acted upon. The consultant noted several times in his report the lack of closure or resolution to conflict situations from the past. Because the congregation refused to address the issues and recommendations expressed in the report the pastor left. Some months later a new pastor was called. One day as he was going through some files he came across the consultant’s report. He found it both interesting and provocative. Without mentioning the report to anyone, the new pastor began implementing the consultant’s recommendations. Within months the new pastor had begun to restore the trust, spirit and vitality of the congregation.

Know when to ask for help

Conflict that is focused on the pastor, deep seated values and/or significant change may require the help of an outside consultant. Consultants can provide a neutral viewpoint and create safe environments for conflict situations. Consultants can help a congregation see and learn about their situation by providing theoretical frameworks and biblical images that mirror their concerns. A good consul-



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- Pastor

tant will ensure that every person in the congregation has an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of and resolution of the conflict. A skilled consultant can provide a practical roadmap for navigating the conflict and restoring hope and trust to the community.

One congregation invited in a team of five consultants. This approach had the benefit of five people contributing their best thinking and wisdom for moving forward. Yes, consultants come with steep price tags for many congregations. However, one needs to measure the tradeoffs (the potential of navigating the conflict alone versus the investment of outside help).

Seek reconciliation

Congregational conflicts are moments of intense pain and in some cases irrevocable destruction. However, these moments can be opportunities for community learning and spiritual growth. Helping congregations reflect upon and locate their stories in scripture will result in greater awareness of the presence of God in the community. True reconciliation will produce lasting goodness that will strengthen faith communities, deepen relationships, redefine boundaries, and crystallize visions. Conflict is never erased from a congregation's institutional memory. Rather the conflict becomes woven in the historical tapestry of the congregation serving as a reminder how faith can overcome the greatest of trials and challenges.

One congregation grappling with intense internal conflict found its leadership taking things into its own hands. The group decided to read and discuss several books on conflict in congregations.

Afterwards, taking its cue from one of the books, the leadership composed a covenant and then read and signed the document in the presence of the congregation during services one

Sunday. Through this formal ritual the leadership group made a "promise" to itself, the congregation and to God to abide by the normative rules of behavior that reflect the essence of who they are as people of faith. Using the ancient language of covenant in the context of worship and prayer provided a true expression of faith and the recognition of God's presence in the faith community.

One pastor reported that after finally bringing closure to a year of conflict within the congregation, the pastor and congregational board agreed to a retreat that would focus on group development and spiritual formation. The retreat had such a profound effect on the members that it is now an annual event, an expectation of membership.

CONCLUSION

Conflict can occur at any time, any place and for a multitude of reasons. No congregation is immune to conflict. Human nature alone ensures that conflict is inevitable. It transcends culture, socio-economic groups, faith traditions, and size of a congregation. However, conflict, if not handled well, is destructive, painful and can shatter the heart and soul of any faith community. More often than not a conflict will place the pastor in the center either as the target or as the mediator/facilitator.

Yet at the core of any conflict is how a congregation recognizes, listens to, and honors the differences within. In congregations, members care deeply about their faith and values. This is their spiritual home. The manifestation of that faith, however, can take on different interpretations and perspectives whether it's about the style of worship, use of resources, or change in pastors to name a few.

Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith in their book,



Practicing Right Relationship, define conflict as “. . . a creative moment where God can help new things happen. Conflict signals that people care. It indicates that people are alive and invested in what is happening and are willing to expend energy on it.”

As such, conflict offers a unique invitation for a community to deepen its relational capacity both with itself and with its God.

USING THIS REPORT

Following are discussion questions for clergy and governing bodies.

- What part of the report resonates with you?
- What did you learn?
- How has your congregation typically addressed conflict in the past?
- What systems are in place to constructively deal with your congregation's conflict?
- How satisfied are the leaders with your current approach to addressing conflict?
- What are the typical resources your congregation turns to in times of conflict?
- What are some resources and/or steps your congregation might take to explore this issue further?



Conflict in Congregations presents findings from the Center's resource inquiry on congregational conflict. This report is intended to help lay and clergy leaders understand the nature of congregational conflict. This resource inquiry involved interviews with congregational conflict consultants and leaders from congregations who have experienced conflict.

Center for Congregations staffers and interviewer Claudia Grant contributed to this report.

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For more resources on this topic

CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

<http://thecrg.org/>