CONFLICT IN THE SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CHURCH

William D. Henard

Abstract

One of the most difficult aspects of dealing with any church is conflict. Because of humanity's fallen nature and because of the difficulty of initiating and accepting change, conflict is almost always inevitable. Conflict becomes detrimental when it is not handled correctly or when it remains unchecked and finds its source deep within the sinful nature and motives of people. Conflict in the church, though, does not necessarily have to be destructive. Many of those within the church reconciliatory ministry say that conflict is essentially neutral. When handled properly, it can actually result in some positive benefits for the church.

INTRODUCTION

When I first started doing research for a class I was teaching on change and conflict at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the areas that I tried to research was the number of pastors who leave the ministry every year. Most of us have heard the "1500 a month" statistic. In some of the statistics I quoted in my book on church revitalization, that number was repeated. LifeWay Research Group, however, has updated and corrected those stats. According to them, the original statistic came from an anecdotal question asked at a pastors' conference that took place at Fuller Seminary.

The information was never intended to be used as actual research, but it has been communicated as such nonetheless.

LifeWay researcher Scott McConnell has concluded that pastors are not leaving the ministry in droves. McConnell estimates a total of twenty-nine thousand evangelical pastors have left the pastorate over the past decade, an average of fewer than two hundred-fifty a month.[1] Reasons for pastors leaving the ministry and for their termination are varied. Brooks Faulkner offers these conclusions:

> The most frequently stated reasons for termination revolved around a lack of unity in the congregation. 66% stated: A small but powerful minority of members. 41% stated: Factions in the congregation. 16% stated: Differed with congregation over leadership style of pastor. 12% stated: Been at church too long. 12% stated: Too authoritarian or dictatorial. 10% stated: Couldn't get along with members. 10% stated: Not spending enough time on the job.[2]

When we examine the church as a whole, we recognize that evangelicals are planting 3,500 churches a year, but 3,500 to 4,000 churches are closing. About 80 to 85% of churches are plateaued or are in decline. By year five, 35% of church plants fail. While a number of reasons can be given for why churches struggle, a major problem within many of our congregations is conflict. When asked why they left their previous church, according to the LifeWay study, Most said they moved on because they had taken the previous church as far as they could (54%). However, 23% of pastors who changed churches say they left because of conflict in the church. Church conflict often took multiple forms in pastors' last churches, including significant personal attacks against 34% of the pastors.

Pastors also reported conflict over changes they proposed (38%), their leadership style (27%), expectations about the pastor's role (25%), and doctrinal differences (13%). Thirty-eight percent faced conflict with lay leaders, and 31% found themselves in conflict with a church matriarch or patriarch. More than a third of pastors (34%) say they left a previous church because their family needed a change. One in five found the church did not embrace their approach to pastoral ministry (19%). Pastors also cited poor fit and unrealistic expectations (18% each) as reasons for leaving. Some were reassigned (18%) or asked to leave (8%).[3]
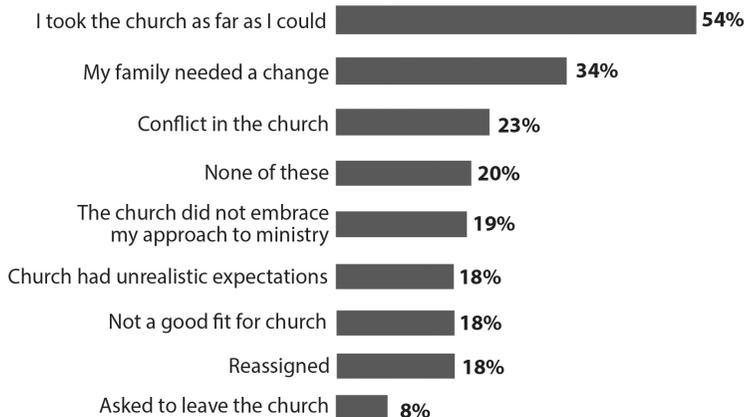
---

[1] Lisa Cannon Green, "Research Finds Few Pastors Give up on Ministry," http://www. lifeway.com/pastors/2015/09/01/research-finds-few-pastors-give-up-on-ministry/.

[2] Brooks R. Faulkner, "Leaving—Why Ministers are Leaving the Ministry," http:// media.mobaptist.org/public/pastoral ministry/LEAVING_Why_Ministers_leave_ ministry.pdf.

[3] Green, "Research Finds Few Pastors Give up on Ministry."

Why did you leave your last church?

I took the church as far as I could	**54%**
My family needed a change	**34%**
Conflict in the church	**23%**
None of these	**20%**
The church did not embrace my approach to ministry	**19%**
Church had unrealistic expectations	**18%**
Not a good fit for church	**18%**
Reassigned	**18%**
Asked to leave the church	**8%**

Notes: <1% Not sure | Respondents could select all that apply.

LifeWay — Biblical Solutions for Life

LIFEWAYRESEARCH.COM

The point is, conflict is real in the church, and if we do not understand why it happens, it will continue. Additionally, conflict does not necessarily reflect the age of the church. Many would think that conflict only occurs in congregations that are either older in the age of the congregants or at least older in the age of the church itself. Conflict, though, occurs even in new churches and young churches. Lyle Schaller has stated that the years four to seven are the crisis years for a pastor. Thom Rainer has said that years two to three are the years of conflict and challenge, while years four to five are the first of the crossroads years. He writes,

> This period is one of the most critical in the relationship. If the conflict was severe, the pastor will likely leave or be forced out. Indeed, these years, four and five, are the most common years when a pastor leaves a church. On the other hand, if the pastor and the church manage their relationship well, they can often look forward to some of the best years ahead.[4]

Therefore, regardless of where a pastor intends on serving, conflict is probably on the horizon at some point. Ken Sande reminds us of why it is critical for pastors to understand conflict and to confront it. He proposes:

1. 25% of the churches in one survey reported conflict in the previous five years that was serious enough to have a lasting impact on congregational life.

---

[4] Thom S. Rainer, "Five Stages of a Pastor's Ministry," http://www.thomrainer.com/2013/10/five-stages-of-a-pastors-ministry/.

2. There are approximately 386,000 churches in America.
3. There are approximately 19,000 major, scarring church conflicts in the U.S. each year ($386,000 \times 1/4 \times 1/5$).
4. 23% of all current pastors in the United States have been fired or forced to resign in the past.
5. 45% of the pastors who were fired in one denomination left the ministry altogether.
6. 34% of all pastors presently serve congregations that forced their previous pastor to resign.
7. The seven primary reasons for forced exits all involve some form of conflict.
8. The average pastoral career lasts only fourteen years—less than half of what it was not long ago.[5]

Finally, statistics reflecting the extent of church conflict are articulated in the following:

1. 24% of ministers experienced a conflict in the last two years that was serious enough to call a special meeting.
2. 25% experienced a conflict in the last two years that resulted in people leaving their congregations.
3. 9% experienced a conflict that led leaders to leave the congregation.
4. 7% were classified as "persistently conflicted."[6]

CHURCH CONFLICT DEFINED

How do we define conflict in the church? Precise definitions of conflict are difficult to formulate without aspects of delimitation or description. Arnold Kurtz explains,

> Synonyms such as "clash," "tension," "struggle," and/or "friction" are usually employed, but they do not stand alone, or are inadequate in themselves, in providing definitions. Is, for instance, the "tension" or "struggle" intra- or inter-personal, intra- or inter-group? And is the "tension" and "struggle" over one or more of the following general areas of conflict: (a) money; (b) power (including authority and structure); (c) value and belief; (d) loyalty to persons and groups? [7]

---

[5] Ken Sande, "The High Cost of Conflict Among Christians," http://peacemaker.net/project/the-high-cost-of-conflict-among-christians/.

[6] Donald Q. Hicks, *A Study of the Conflicts Within Churches That Lead to the Termination of Pastors Within the Southern Baptist Convention, Accompanied by a Proposal of Preventive and Interventional Solutions* (DMin project, Liberty University, 2010), 28.

[7] Arnold Kurtz, "The Pastor as a Manager of Conflict in the Church," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 (1982), 112.

Conflict may be defined to include any matter that terminates, limits, or prohibits Christians from acting or interacting with one another in a spiritually compelling way and, therefore, affects their ability to serve the Lord according to Scripture. Church conflict in the congregation is "a situation in which two or more members or factions struggle aggressively over what is, or appears to be mutually exclusive beliefs, values, assumed powers or goals."[8] Ken Sande says that "conflict is a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone else's opinion or purpose."[9]

THE REASONS FOR CHURCH CONFLICT

So why is there conflict in the church? The answers are not simple, and their resolve is even more difficult. The foundation for the inauguration of conflict does, however, have its roots in the biblical text.

The Genesis Account

One needs only to go to the account of Adam and Eve, and then subsequently to the encounter of Cain with Abel to find the beginnings of conflict. When Eve listened to Satan in the garden, the Bible says, "Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and a delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Ge 3:6).[10] The result of that action was conflict, both with God and with each other. Genesis records,

> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. So the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard You in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" Then the man replied, "The woman You gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate." (Ge 3:8–12).

That conflict then led to another that ended in death and the fulfillment of the promise God made to humanity of the consequences of sin. Genesis

---

[8] Quoted in Jim Wilson, "Church Conflict Can Prove Healthy If Handled Biblically, Speaker Says," http:// http://www.bpnews.net/702/church-conflict-can-prove-healthy-if-handled-biblically-speaker-says. The quotation comes from Lloyd Elder, professor and director of the Moench Center of Church Leadership at Belmont University, Nashville, TN.

[9] Ken Sande, "Christian Conciliation Procedures" (Billings, MT: Institute for Christian Conciliation, 1993), 9.

[10] All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, unless otherwise noted.

tells us that Cain and his brother Abel brought offerings to the LORD. However, the LORD had regard for Abel's offering but not for Cain's. Cain obviously did not know how to process the now released anger and jealousy that he felt and experienced, and as a result, he killed his own brother (Ge 4:8). The Bible explains to us that all of humanity sins because we are born with this same nature to sin. Scripture says that we are born sinners and that we are by nature sinners. Ephesians 2:2 declares that before conversion, we are "sons of disobedience." Ephesians 2:3 also establishes this thought, explaining that we are all "by nature children of wrath." To be a child of wrath indicates that we are separated from God because of sin. If we are all "by nature children of wrath," it can only be because we are all by nature sinners. We discover this same concept in 1 Corinthians 15:22, that says, "In Adam all men die," and Romans 5:12 that states, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all men, because all sinned." Thus, we are all sinners by nature, and we are sinners who respond to our nature by sinning.

From a soteriological standpoint, we understand that when we are saved, it is our spirits that are saved but not yet our flesh. Therefore, all Christians still wrestle with sin even though they are in Christ. It is why John writes,

> If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say, "We don't have any sin," we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 Jn 1:8–10).

Therefore, the reason that churches have conflict is because Christians sin. Through the ages, scholars have argued about the need for or the benefit of discipleship and spiritual formation. The reason that we need discipleship is because we are all struggling to become like Christ. That answer may sound simplistic, but our battle with sin leads us to make many poor choices and to fall into conflict.

Take a look at the New Testament church, and the battle with conflict becomes a very probable observation. Though not exhaustive, note these ten examples of conflict in the early church:

1. Religious traditionalism versus Christ (Jn 8:1–11)
2. Struggle of self-interest versus servant hood (Mk 10:35–45)
3. Diversity in membership and prejudice (Ac 6:1–3)
4. Partners in ministry split over disagreement (Ac 15:36–40)
5. Personal and spiritual immaturity (1Co 3:1–3)
6. Churches full of cliques (1Co 1:10–12, 11:17–22)
7. Individual responses to issues and values (Gal 2:11–12)
8. Prominent women could not get along (Php 4:2–3)
9. People treat rich believers better than poor believers (Jas 2:1–9)
10. Self-will along with rebellious spirit (Jas 4:1–3).

Thus, it can easily be concluded that conflict is not a recent development within the church. It is an age-old problem. Remember that many of the great men of God were confronted with conflict. The pastor of the small to medium-sized church is not alone in this dilemma.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

In addition to these ten examples within the corpus of the New Testament material on conflict is Paul's admonition for Christians to be aware of and engaged in spiritual warfare. He gives this challenge:

> Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by His vast strength. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand (Eph 6:10–13).

The reason that we have conflict in the church is because it is a spiritual battle. Satan's desire is to destroy the church and to destroy believers. One of the most difficult realities I had when I initially graduated from seminary and headed off to pastor a church for the first time without the safety net of seminary and friends was this realization: Satan often uses God's own people to do his bidding. I was ready to fight the world, but what I was not ready to do was to deal with conflict in the church. These are God's people, and they are not supposed to act in godless ways. Yet, they do because the church is a contended place of spiritual warfare.

Power Struggles

Within the context of sin nature and spiritual warfare comes the issue of power struggles. While we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, and we realize that church people are not our enemy, spiritual warfare oftentimes manifests itself in battles over control and leadership.

Carl George, in the book he coauthored with Robert Logan entitled, *Leading and Managing Your Church*, presented the idea of a berry-bucket theory, drawing from a practice used by his grandfather in distributing his buckets of berries for consumption. George utilized this idea to categorize those investors in the church who hold claim to the power and future of the church. In this analogy, George identifies two primary groups, with two subgroups under each major grouping. The theory says that the makeup of the church's membership includes people both older and younger than the pastor who were members before the pastor began his service. With these former members, or *formerberries*, are older and younger people, or

what he calls *newberries*, who joined the church after the pastor's tenure commenced.[11]

What I have learned is that, within most churches, five groups of people will be present. While primarily all of the characteristics fit each grouping, exceptions do exist, especially among the ranks of those who are already members of the church. These groupings include:

1. Older Thirties: people who have been members of the church at least thirty years.
2. Younger Thirties
3. Older Tens: people who have been members at least ten years.
4. Younger Tens
5. Newbies: people who have joined the church during the current pastor's tenure.[12]

George calls these individuals "investors" in the church, and that designation is very true. What many pastors and new people fail to realize is the amount of investment people have in their church. Many times, it is a financial investment. They have given the money, built the buildings, and made sacrifices so that the church would survive. New people do not appreciate such nostalgia. Their investment is also in time and service. The church sits where it is because these investors have paid a significant price.

When those investments are not appreciated or are threatened, conflict arises. Among the thirties are families who have been in the church a long time. Parents, grandparents, children, and grandchildren all play a part in the stakeholder mentality. Therefore, when their family name or welfare is threatened, people become outraged.

This fact is especially true in the small to medium-sized church, along with churches that are more rural than suburban. Interestingly enough, many large churches also suffer from this same conundrum. The rural church has traditionally been, and continues to be, driven by family connections. People grew up on the family farm, and the church grew because families grew. In many areas, family farms, however, are disappearing, and children are no longer staying at home. Thom Rainer predicts that 100,000 churches are going to close their doors in the next decade, and most of these churches are rural in nature.[13] The problem, though, is much more rooted in

---

[11] Carl F. George and Robert E. Logan, *Leading and Managing Your Church: Effective Management for the Christian Professional* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 147–64.

[12] Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 30–42.

[13] Thom Rainer, "Autopsy of a Deceased Church," http://thomrainer.com/2013/04/24/autopsy-of-a-deceased-church-11-things-i-learned/. Rainer has also put these ideas into book form. See Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church, 12 Ways to Keep Your Church Alive* (Nashville: B&H, 2014).

the struggle for power than it is in church size or setting. When that power group is threatened, conflict results.

Glenn Daman offers additional insight into the family power struggle in his article entitled, "When Sheep Squabble," explaining that one of the causes of conflict is "tribal warfare." He writes,

> Quite often a person or family within a small church becomes the tribal chief. This individual or family, because of past involvement, possess significant authority and influence in the church. This person may be in an official position of authority such as on the board, or he may not hold any recognized position. His influence, however, significantly controls the decisions and direction of the church. The congregation looks up to him.
>
> Conflict arises in a small church when the tribal chief's authority and influence are challenged. Often the challenge comes from the pastor as he finds himself at odds with this individual over the decisions and direction of the church. The result is tribal warfare in the congregation.[14]

When conflict like this arises, it is oftentimes a "behind the scenes" conflict. It may play out in committee meetings or in the "meeting after the meeting." If the family matriarch or patriarch is well-respected, and if the conflict is with the pastor, it usually does not bode well for the pastor. This level of conflict, as well as others, is why many small churches never grow and why so many are dying. The struggle for power becomes more important than the future of the church, and in many cases, those involved believe that the struggle is for the future of the church.

Changes in the Church

Another issue that causes great conflict in churches is the need for change. Usually when a new pastor arrives, he comes with great visions of what the church can become. He immediately sees some of the shortcomings of the church, as he has been exposed to churches that are growing rapidly. Therefore, he promptly begins to implement changes that will benefit the church numerically and spiritually.

The problem is, however, everyone resists change. The small to medium-sized church is often criticized for not being willing to change, but that accusation is somewhat misguided. Resistance to change is true regardless of the size of the church. We might assume that the church is small because it has fought change, but there are many large congregations that are also opposed to anything that changes their polity, structure, or relationships. Size does not necessarily affirm a church's acceptance of or even need for change.

---

[14] Glenn C. Daman, "When Sheep Squabble—Dealing with Conflict in the Smaller Church," *Enrichment Journal* (Spring 2005), 4.

The reason that many pastors find an unwillingness in people to change is that they fail to examine, communicate, and strategize the need for and process for change. While church stagnation and decline are sources for conflict through change, so is church growth. When a church experiences growth, there are demands that the church changes in order to structure for the growth and have systems in place to accommodate future growth. Those changes cause conflict. Additionally, pastors sometimes make changes and then expect church members to follow without realizing that, in most cases, following that procedure is not only poor leadership, but also it is reckless at times. Pastors must consider the people, the personalities, and the past when looking at change. Just remember this adage: How many church members does it take to change a lightbulb? Change, what do you mean change? Change is possible, but change usually takes a lot of time and a lot of preparation.

Cultural Differences

Within the context of change, sometimes a pastor seeks to bring about a change merely due to cultural preferences rather than real need. Culture is a source of conflict within the church. Culture applies to polity, preferences, and personalities. In the realm of polity, churches behave the way they do or follow the particular procedures they do because is it a part of their cultural norm. Churches develop habits that lead to policy and procedure. Christians form certain biases or convictions based upon their upbringing or in reaction to perceived or real abuses. For example, for some Christians, it is accounted as sin to bring food or drink into the area called the sanctuary or worship center. They have been taught that this area is sacred. When newcomers or teenagers show up with sodas in their hands, it becomes a real source of conflict.

Conflict arises out of preference. Every Christian likes a certain style of music, worship, teaching, preaching, polity, order, and method. Oftentimes these methods are equated with Scripture. For instance, many churches conduct the same style of evangelistic outreach that they did twenty years ago, not because it is effective, but because they believe that the church would be accused of being non-evangelistic if they did not do it. If someone tries to change that methodology, accusations and suspicions begin.

Culture creates conflict when the culture of the church becomes significantly different from the culture of the community. This issue is not just a white or Caucasian issue; it is a factor that affects people of all colors and races. When the neighborhood begins to change from being a neighborhood that defines a different racial or cultural makeup, the church must decide if it will embrace the new culture or reject it. Regardless of the decision, conflict results. In small and medium-sized churches, these cultural differences are far more noticeable than in the larger church. Add one white person to a choir of one thousand Asian-Americans, and no one notices.

Add one white person to a choir of ten, and the picture becomes quite clear. The church either embraces and celebrates the cultural change, or conflict ensues.

Internal Conflicts

An interesting development within the church has been the creation of entities whose primary purpose is peacemaking among Christians. While some may accuse these entrepreneurs of exploiting a delicate situation, their rise demonstrates the level of conflict that has arisen in the church and the fact that churches in the past have not adequately dealt with the issue, especially as it relates to internal conflicts between believers. One such group is the Institute for Christian Conciliation. They list six reasons for conflict. The following is an adaptation of their findings:

1. Intrapersonal Conflicts—This type of conflict is within one's self, such as anger or bitterness.

   Spiritual warfare—moral, ethical, spiritual low
   Family crisis—marriage conflict, family unsupportive, health issues
   Calling conflict—Am I in the wrong ministry area?
   Ministry/church conflict—Do I need to be here?

2. Substantive/Strategic Conflicts—Examples of this type of conflict are church budgets, committees, removal of pastor or other church staff, members, or church building projects.

3. Value and Belief Conflicts—This type of conflict deals with Bible doctrine.

4. Relationship/Interpersonal Conflicts—This type of conflict deals with the heart in the area of lacking forgiveness and making things right with an individual or a group.

5. Information Conflicts—The way information is given out to staff or the church on any issue.

6. System/Structural Conflicts—This type of conflict is how a church is governed, organized, and who is responsible for what.[15]

While some of their findings are overlapping with other findings already mentioned in this article, it is clear that much of the fault of conflict within the church finds its root in internal issues, not in external ones. While many pastors cite attacks by the world on the church, the real problem is far more internal than it is external.

Additional Sources of Conflict

While the above stated issues are the primary bases of conflict, many other sources exist. Kathryn Bartol and others wrote a book entitled, *Management: A Pacific Rim Focus*, in which they provide an excellent list of sources

---

[15] Adapted from The Institute for Christian Conciliation.

of conflict within an organization. I have adapted and shortened this list for the church, but the sources definitely apply. These include:

1. Communication factors. If we define communication as the building of a picture in the receiver's mind that is exactly the same as the one the sender intended, then perfect communication is rare. Misunderstandings can occur for many reasons.

2. Structural factors. Members may experience a feeling of discomfort with how things occur, or processes may seem cumbersome.

3. Size. Reviewing studies relating conflict to organizational size, Robbins found more conflict in larger organizations. Size increases led to a reduction in goal clarity and an increase in formalization, specialization, supervisory levels, and opportunities for information to become distorted.

4. Participation. It is reasonable to expect that greater participation by volunteers (for example, in decision making) will lower conflict. From the human relations perspective, it is argued that inviting volunteer participation satisfies a drive for involvement. Research, however, shows that conflict increases with greater subordinate participation, because participation raises the subordinates' awareness of individual differences. Greater conflict from increased participation, however, is not necessarily bad. If the outcome of participation and its associated conflict improve overall work-unit performance, then it is productive.

5. Reward systems. If the rewards for one person or group come at another's expense, conflict arises. For example, staff people are often rewarded for being innovative, identifying a need for change. Volunteers are rewarded for uninterrupted productive activity. The two can be in conflict.

6. Resource interdependence. Typically, groups compete for organizational resources. With greater resources, conflicts may be avoided. However, increased resources are uncommon in organizations, and therefore, lack of coordination and cooperation between groups and conflict are likely.

7. Task interdependence. Two types of task interdependence are very prone to conflict. One is sequential interdependence, in which one person or work unit relies on another. The second form of task interdependence is reciprocal, in which people or work units are mutually interdependent. When people have to depend on others, conflict arises.

8. Personal behavior factors. People disagree because people have different personalities. Conflict occurs if people interpret the rejection of their ideas as a rejection of themselves. Individuals turn the proverbial molehill into a mountain when they fight for their personal identity.

9. Communication styles. Conflict may arise from communication problems and interpersonal misunderstandings. For example, differences in linguistic style mean that some men in work teams talk more and take more credit for ideas than women in the same team. Conflict comes when men wrongly assume that because women participate less, they are uninterested or less capable; and women incorrectly assume that because men seem to talk more, they are bossy and uninterested in women's ideas.

10. Differences in goals. Oftentimes, conflict arises because different organizations or individuals have differing goals depending upon the need of the group at the time. Those committed to short-term goals may be in conflict with those who look at the bigger picture.[16]

MAKING APPLICATION TO CHURCH/PERSONAL CONFLICTS

A study of conflict would not be complete without at least a call for and process for reconciliation. How does the church or individuals within the church resolve conflicts?

Conflict Between Individuals

First, start by developing the right attitude and heart. This first step is the most difficult step because it involves the following characteristics:

1. Meekness (Galatians 6:1)
2. Humility (James 4:10)
3. Forgiveness (Ephesians 4:31, 32)
4. Patience (James 1:19, 20).

Second, lead the church and the offending/offended parties to evaluate their part(s) in the conflict. Adrian Rogers once said, "It's got to be an awfully flat pancake to have only one side."[17] While the offending/offended parties often believe it is always the other person's fault, rarely is it one-sided. Consider the passage of Scripture from Matthew 7:1–5 to remove the log from your own eye first.

Third, lead the offended party to the individual (not to others) to voice concerns, with the goals of reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration. Examine the following two passages: 2 Corinthians 5:11–21—the ministry of reconciliation—and Matthew 18:15—you have won your brother.

Fourth, remind those involved to look to others within the church, and especially in leadership, to help with mediation. Consider Matthew 18:16,

---

[16] Kathryn M. Bartol, David C. Martin, Margaret Tein, and Graham Matthews, *Management: A Pacific Rim Focus* (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2004), 258–61.

[17] Said at a meeting at Bell Avenue Baptist Church, Knoxville, TN, in 1983.

"But if he won't listen, take one or two more with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established."

Finally, be committed to the task that if the person refuses to reconcile, church leadership needs to determine the next step. Ask these two questions: Is this an offense of sin that needs to go before the church? Is it simply a matter that the two can "agree to disagree" but can walk together as friends?[18]

Church Conflict

In addition to the principles that apply to conflict between individuals, one must consider how conflict exists within the larger context of the congregation, how conflict flows out from individuals and affects the corporate body, and how one must deal with that level of conflict. Note these ideas:

1. Fortify your prayer life.
2. Engage in spiritual warfare.
3. Seek prayer support, accountability, and mentorship from a trusted fellow pastor or denominational leader.
4. Establish a practical strategy to resolve the conflict. Realize that time is of essence.
5. Involve the appropriate leadership group in the church.
6. Request consultation from another pastor or denominational leader to provide guidance for the leadership group.
7. If specialized help is needed, call upon others outside of the church to help.[19]

Conflict Prevention

Finally, wisdom teaches us to seek to prevent conflict before it starts. While some conflict is inevitable, especially when dealing with sinful people, some of it can be avoided or at least somewhat neutralized. Here is a short list of possible ideas:

1. Work with the leaders of the church. Remember that the tribal chief, or older/younger thirties, have considerable influence in the church. Avoid the temptation of running over the leaders or assuming that they are not spiritual, simply because they disagree with the pastor's desires or goals. Remember that they have seen pastors come and go and have heard all of the grand goals with no result. Be patient to work with them and to gain their trust.

---

[18] "How Should Conflict in the Church be Handled?" http://www.gotquestions.org/church-conflict.html.

[19] Greg Sumii, "Preventing Unhealthy Church Conflict Resolution" (Fresno, CA: California Southern Baptist Convention, 2002), 6.

2. Orchestrate change carefully. Determine which changes are triage changes and which changes are secondary. Conflict happens because new ideas often clash with old structures. Therefore, demonstrate care in bringing about changes that minimize the threat to the congregation.

3. Maintain communication. Pastors often assume that people hear and understand the goals and direction of the church. Note this standard of communicating vision: When the vision caster is absolutely tired of communicating the vision to the church, it is then that the church is just beginning to hear it. Do not make the mistake of implementing the "need to know" adage. Communication is essential in the small to medium-sized church.[20]

CONCLUSION

Pastors need to embrace the fact that conflict is inevitable in the church. Churches have problems because people have problems. Churches have problems because they still deal with the issue of the fallen nature of humanity. People are sinners by nature, and they respond to that nature by choosing to sin.

Conflict in the church, though, does not necessarily have to be destructive. Many of those within the church reconciliatory ministry say that conflict is essentially neutral. When handled properly, it can result in some positive benefits for the church. Consider these possible outcomes of conflict:

1. It can serve as a stimulus that stirs new ideas and processes for decision making.
2. It can help people distinguish better between two points of view.
3. It can help a church better define its identity or beliefs.
4. It can help hasten change.
5. It can stimulate productive dialogue and build new relationships.
6. It can encourage a healthy reexamination of assumptions and preconceptions.
7. It can lead to the discovery of new ideas, approaches, and methods.
8. It can stimulate personal growth.

Conflict, on the other hand, becomes detrimental when it is not handled correctly or when it remains unchecked and finds its source deep within the sinful nature and motives of people. Ken Sande writes, "It can lead to alienation, anger, pain, humiliation, defensiveness, physical illness, and can lead to broken families, friendships, and businesses, and drastically diminish the witness and outreach of the church."[21]

---

[20] Daman, "When Sheep Squabble," 7–8.
[21] Sande, "Christian Conciliation Procedures," 21.

Eric Reed echoes much of this sentiment through a survey of 506 pastors conducted by *Leadership*. Pastors responded with the following negative outcomes of conflict:

1. Damaged relationships 68%
2. Sadness 58%
3. Decline in attendance 32%
4. Leaders left the church 32%
5. Loss of trust 31%
6. Bitterness 29%
7. Loss of communication with congregation 3%.[22]

Therefore, when conflict is something that causes or could cause destruction or decline, it must be addressed and nullified. Conflict is not the end of the church, but it certainly will facilitate a church's death if left unchecked and allowed to fester.

Finally, conflict is not necessarily a characteristic of the small or medium-sized church alone. There are churches within these size ranges that are healthy and growing. There are also large and mega-churches that are overwhelmed with conflict and are now on the decline or have even ceased to exist. Thus, the Scripture gives an excellent challenge and reminder regardless of the size church that we serve, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1Pe 5:8 ESV).

Bibliography

Bartol, Kathryn M., David C. Martin, Margaret Tein, and Graham Matthews. *Management: A Pacific Rim Focus*. Columbus: OH, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2004.

Daman, Glenn C. "When Sheep Squabble—Dealing with Conflict in the Smaller Church." *Enrichment Journal* (Spring 2005).

Faulkner, Brooks R. "Leaving—Why Ministers are Leaving the Ministry." http://media.mobaptist.org/public/pastoral ministry/LEAVING_Why_Ministers_leave_ministry.pdf.

George, Carl F. and Robert E. Logan. *Leading and Managing Your Church: Effective Management for the Christian Professional*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987.

Green, Lisa Cannon. "Research Finds Few Pastors Give up on Ministry." http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2015/09/01/research-finds-few-pastors-give-up-on-ministry/.

Henard, Bill. *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization*. Nashville: B&H, 2015.

Hicks, Donald Q. *A Study of the Conflicts Within Churches That Lead to the Termination of Pastors Within the Southern Baptist Convention, Accompanied by a Proposal of Preventive and Interventional Solutions*. DMin project, Liberty University, 2010.

"How Should Conflict in the Church be Handled?" http://www.gotquestions.org/church-conflict.html.

Kurtz, Arnold. "The Pastor as a Manager of Conflict in the Church," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 (1982).

---

[22] Eric Reed, "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict," http://www.Christianity Today.com/go/conflict.

Rainer, Thom S. "Autopsy of a Deceased Church." http://thomrainer.com/2013/04/24/autopsy-of-a-deceased-church-11-things-i-learned/.

———. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church, 12 Ways to Keep Your Church Alive.* Nashville: B&H, 2014.

———. "Five Stages of a Pastor's Ministry." http://www.thomrainer.com/2013/10/five-stages-of-a-pastors-ministry.

Reed, Eric. "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict." http://www.ChristianityTodaycom/go/conflict.

Sande, Ken. "Christian Conciliation Procedures." Billings, MT: Institute for Christian Conciliation, 1993.

———. "The High Cost of Conflict Among Christians." http://peacemaker.net/project/the-high-cost-of-conflict-among-christians/.

Sumii, Greg. "Preventing Unhealthy Church Conflict Resolution." Fresno, CA: California Southern Baptist Convention, 2002.

Wilson, Jim. "Church Conflict Can Prove Healthy If Handled Biblically, Speaker Says." http://www.bpnews.net/702/church-conflict-can-prove-healthy-if-handled-biblically-speaker-says.

About the Author

Bill Henard serves as the executive director-treasurer of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists and as adjunct professor of evangelism and church revitalization at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Previously, he served as senior pastor of Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, KY, for 16 years and as a professor at Southern Seminary for 8 years. Henard has extensive service as a denominational leader, serving as president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, as first vice-president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and as chairman of the board of trustees for Life-Way Christian Resources. He holds memberships in the GCRN, ETS, and EHS.