

Time to call a mediator when focus turns from problems to personalities

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DALLAS—When church members who disagree stop looking for solutions to problems and start focusing on personalities, it's probably time to call a mediator, said Sonny Spurger, a church mediation specialist with the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#).

Sonny Spurger

Spurger points to five levels of conflict, identified by Speed Leas of the Alban Institute, as helpful markers for identifying how problems escalate to church fights.

- **A problem develops that needs to be solved.**

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Some people may have conflicting goals or values, and interaction may be uncomfortable. But at this point, the conflict still is problem-oriented, rather than personality-centered. If the problem is not solved at this level, it likely will escalate to the next level where it becomes personal.

- **Differences of opinion become personal disagreements.**

Issues become identified with the people who hold conflicting opinions, and participants in the conflict become more concerned about protecting themselves than in solving problems.

- **Disagreements become contests with winners and losers.**

“This is when people start taking sides,” Spurger said. Factions form around personalities, and the emphasis becomes winning the conflict rather than solving the original problem.

- **Fight or flight.**

At level four, factions are solidified, and participants in the conflict believe the church isn’t big enough for the two parties to coexist.

“If I don’t win, I’m out of here,” characterizes the attitude at this level, Spurger said.

- **Conflict becomes in-tractable.**

“At level five, people no longer even understand the issues. Personalities have become the issue,” Spurger said. “The focus moves from getting rid of people to their absolute elimination or destruction.”

At this point, church members are not content with driving away people in the opposing faction. They want to ruin their reputations.

Instead of allowing conflict to escalate to that level, Spurger believes, churches should enlist a third-party mediator when any dispute stops being about issues and becomes focused on personalities. A mediator can help church members work through root causes of conflict and deal with real issues.

Better yet, Spurger said, churches should head off destructive conflict by developing workable problem statements. The statements provide clear, agreed-upon guideposts for discussion and problem solving.

“Early on at the beginning of an issue, when a committee or a task force meets, members sit down and write a statement of ‘why we are here,’” he explained. “Everybody agrees to it. It doesn’t blame anybody for anything. It doesn’t deal with old history. It deals with the issue at hand, and they all sign it.

“A group that can adopt this kind of workable problem statement—and that has a chairman who can remind them of it when needed and bring them back to task—can in large measure circumvent conflict before it becomes destructive.”

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