

Voices: Positively navigating church conflict

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Conflict is part of life. We all experience conflict somewhere, yet conflict often has a bad reputation. We often stigmatize conflict by avoiding it or blowing it out of proportion.

Visible conflict seems to indicate a bad marriage, a failed parent or a hostile work environment. Political conflicts have escalated to astronomical levels, resulting in broken families and split churches. Conflict can be bad, but does it have to be?

The business world recognizes conflict can lead to healthier, happier and more productive environments. Psychology has known for some time [some conflict is not only healthy](#), but is necessary even for growth and self-development.

Conflict is complicated. It is not always good, but it can have benefits if addressed in a healthy way.

Ministry is navigating conflict

Everything Christians do can be and, in many traditions, has been framed as spiritual conflict. From the earliest days, Christianity has understood itself to be in conflict with the world.

“We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12).

The basis of our faith is someone who experienced conflict and died to it.

Jesus always seemed to walk among conflict. His public ministry started only after conflict in the desert. Salvation is the rejection of an old life and old master; it is the death of the old person and birth of the new.

Ministers encounter a lot of conflict. The entirety of our job is to handle conflict. Our job necessitates navigating conflict within ourselves and conflict within our congregations.

Two models of conflict

Of the different models addressing conflict, I will mention two.

The [Thomas-Kilmann model](#) describes five modes of conflict resolution: competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating and compromising. A person typically handles conflict according to their levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness, which corresponds with one of the five modes.

As ministers, we likely will recognize each of these categories within our churches, and we should recognize and respect people's different responses. Once we understand people's motivations, we take a step toward hearing their voice.

Bowen Family Systems Theory is a complex model that explains anxiety and stress inherent in family relationships. Individuals are part of a family unit in which each individual constantly is exerting their emotions on others in the family, while also being exerted upon. Each person impacts and is impacted by the family.

For instance, a bad day at work doesn't affect mom only, but affects everyone at home, increasing their stress levels. This goes for every member of the family and applies to congregations, as well. One congregation member experiencing tension due to life circumstances brings that tension into the church. This tension can spread further.

Robert Creech, author of *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*, has written several books relating family systems to ministry.

Addressing congregational conflict

The communal nature of anxiety and tension is important. Our conflicts don't exist in a vacuum. They often impact those outside the immediate conflict. Realizing this will help us navigate complicated situations.

Language

To navigate conflict, I recommend we begin with our language. Conflict often is associated with shame and guilt, two emotions modern Americans struggle to understand. Instead of preaching conflict as a grievous sin to be ashamed of, we ought to preach healthy conflict as a way to restoration.

When reframing conflict, we should take it out of the privatized sphere and remind our congregants of the broad effects. Jesus encouraged his disciples to go and make right with their brothers before going to offer a sacrifice.

Direct honesty

Next, we should encourage our congregants to be direct and honest with one another. Seek one another out, and do not leave grievances hidden to fester. Tell someone honestly how you have been hurt and why it hurts, while being prepared to hear the same.

Come to conflict humbly and genuinely seeking to understand the other person, while being ready to admit our own faults. Only when communication is open, honest and kind can conflict be resolved healthily.

Penance

Third, we should embrace penance. Penance can have a bad reputation among Protestants, yet it was essential for the ancient church. Tertullian

and Cyprian talked of daily penance that included prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Penance was a communal effort intended to repair one's relationship with God and relationships between congregants.

Penance was a means of restoration and forgiveness. In cases where a congregant harmed another, the guilty party would beg for forgiveness outside church while those inside the church would offer intercessory prayers on their behalf, thereby maintaining fellowship with the penitent. Eventually, the wronged person would forgive, and the penitent would be welcomed back into service.

I'm not suggesting we make people beg at the door. I'm suggesting we adopt this mentality: going and begging for forgiveness, spending hours in prayer, fasting as a physical sign of lament, and performing genuine acts of love—such as washing the feet of our enemies.

If we approached conflict this way in our personal and congregational relationships, our spiritual lives would grow astronomically and our churches would be healthier and happier places.

Conflict happens. Our lives and churches are full of it. When Jesus came with good news, it was good news for our relationship with God and good news for our relationships with one another. The church should be at the forefront of conflict resolution as we claim to be a people of peace and love.

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