

The people business needs people strategies



Conflict resolution can save churches from fatal rifts.

Popular speaker John Maxwell often warns leaders, "If they can't get along with you, they won't go along with you." Visitors to any online blog or discussion board for church leadership will inevitably find discussion on the topic of pastors and churches "getting along." So, what tools are available to church leaders to help them work well with their boards, staff and congregation? Can pastors and leaders prevent interpersonal conflict? If not prevented, how can intrachurch disputes and issues best be handled?

Do new pastors or people in new positions know what is expected of them? How will they know when expectations change? By failing to ask about expectations, they, their board, staff and congregation will default to operating on blind assumptions.

Dangerous to assume

Assumption-based expectations become a fertile breeding ground for conflict. A simple question to ask is: "What is the short list of items expected of me?" A great deal of freedom comes with clear lines of responsibility. Employees should ask their superior what is expected of them personally, and

continue to dialogue about those expectations on a regular basis.

In a new or young church, most disputes arise from opinions concerning which direction the church should take, not doctrinal or moral issues. These are conflicts over music, speaking and teaching styles, which cause people to confuse preference and method with right and wrong. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for these disputes to snowball, causing fatal rifts in leadership and the church.

Regardless of the issues, pastors should be cautious about who the players are, because as the risk level changes, so do the players. If the conflict is with an associate pastor, disgruntled congregants usually move past it. However, conflict with a senior pastor is more dangerous to the church or board member because in their eyes, the senior pastor will not be replaced and cannot be avoided. His fingerprint is visible everywhere, and he becomes a constant reminder of the "dis-ease" of the conflict. The risk here is withdrawal and disconnection with the church body.

It's not a time issue

Pastors often say, "I don't have time to deal with that," as an excuse to avoid what is usually a short, but unpleasant conversation. Quickly addressing disputes is one of the best prevention tools on the market. Jesus instructed us to move quickly when rifts arise for a reason. Many church lawsuits and divisions would never begin if a pastor would simply pick up the phone and deal with the problem head-on.

Conflict that gets out of hand in a church is usually rooted in the church's organizational structure or in the pastor. Not that a pastor necessarily did something morally wrong; it's that the pastor didn't address

How one pastor saw himself more clearly

By James H. Pluymert

I interviewed the senior pastor of a large church in Illinois who recently faced a board dispute.

"The conflict reminded me that my number one job is to control myself. As a leader, I set the tone. If I overreact, others will too," the pastor said. "If, on the other hand, I focus on facts and pay attention to my feelings, I can choose to respond in a way that promotes resolution of the conflict."

He pointed out that when anxiety and emotions rise, it is a natural tendency to seek out people who agree with him. Communication regarding the conflict should be limited to those involved, while including all necessary parties. Deal with both the substantive and relational issues, and focus on applicable Scripture and prayer. This pastor knows that effective conflict resolution follows the Matthew 18 process.

A final lesson learned? Advanced planning provides the context for handling future issues. Pastors can reduce conflict by guiding the church board in strategic planning on difficult topics such as divorce, church finances and difficult employees. Another tool is a conflict audit of the church's employment and other contracts to include effective Matthew 18 mediation and arbitration clauses.

A complimentary Conflict Management Kit on compact disc, with sample forms and clauses is available by e-mailing admin@mediationlawgroup.com.

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By Kelly A. Bennett and Robert L. Toolen

the problem when it arose. People choose to either take the time when problems arise, or ignore them. When they ignore them, they risk dealing with time-consuming, escalated problems down the road.

For example, in a recent California case a Christian pre-school teacher's wrongful termination lawsuit could have been prevented if the executive pastor had taken more time to hear the teacher's grievance, part of a conflict resolution process in the teacher's employment contract. In compliance with the school's grievance process, the teacher put together a detailed package of information for the executive pastor to consider. At the court trial, the pastor admitted that he didn't bother to read the materials submitted by the teacher, because he did not believe it was his job to second guess the school staff in employment decisions.

He abandoned his role as Christian mediator of the dispute, which was called for in the employment agreement. The jury later divulged that this fact angered them and provided the basis for a huge damage and punitive damage award. The financial consequences to the church were severe, and the dispute was made very public.

Without a game plan for handling difficult relationships most will default to a duck and cover strategy.

Have a people-based game plan

Whether church leaders have created a formal conflict strategy or not, they have one. The strategy everyone has, the one that comes standard when at birth, is the "avoid and flee" strategy. Despite how humans are pre-wired, developing a well thought out people strategy is essential for success. Sometimes, though, a people strategy gets lost in the business of the church.

Vision, vision-casting and being a visionary leader have become popular topics, and, undoubtedly, congregational growth happens as a result of God's activity. On the other hand, a tragic connection exists between church leaders chasing a vision, and people being forgotten along the way. Consider Solomon in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, chasing the fruits of his great works, while, of course, retaining his wisdom. Solomon got busy doing and building his vision, but curiously his capital improvements didn't include an investment in people. No wonder his final conclusion was that his investment in the great works was like "chasing the wind."

Compare Solomon's vision quest with Paul's charge to Timothy. Paul directed Timothy to center his vision on the message of the Gospel and the investment in loving and caring for God's people. Paul specifically addressed people problems and instructed Timothy to take time with them without quarreling, but rather by being gentle and patient throughout the dispute process.

A great coach doesn't send his team to the Super Bowl without a game plan, a great lawyer doesn't go to trial without a strategy, and a pastor of influence doesn't go into the people business without a people plan. Without a game plan for handling difficult



relationships, disagreements and points of contention, most will default to instinctive response: a duck and cover strategy.

Additional strategies to consider

Advisory group strategy: If a pastor is not accountable to a church board or congregation, a counteract to the "lone ranger" leadership model is helpful. Although it may be good for the sheep not to be able to replace the shepherd, that model places a heavy burden on the shepherd to maintain humility and connection. Some pastors may need more structure for talking through issues to avoid arbitrary decisions, such as an

advisory group comprised of trusted individuals representing a true cross section of the congregation.

Matthew 18 policy strategy: Establish an internal no-avoidance policy, where pastors, staff, board and volunteers are required to embrace the Jesus model of reconciliation. This means building the steps outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 into employment contracts and organizational grievance policies.

Facilitated dialogue strategy: When issues are not resolved internally, seek to resolve them through facilitated dialogue with a skilled mediator.

Private process strategy: An effective strategy requires a commitment to a culture of reconciliation. Churches can ensure that qualified Christians will resolve disputes privately by applying Biblical principles of dispute resolution, if their contracts and policy manuals require it and if their staff is trained to do it.

While conflict is inevitable and challenging, it is also a tool God uses to substantially mature us. Using advanced planning strategies to address problems is prudent stewardship of time and resources. **CE**

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