

The Good Steward's Toolbox

Five Toolbox "Essentials" to Prevent and Protect Against Church and Christian School Conflict

By Kelly A. Bennett, Esq.

"Stop the world, I want to get off!" Christian rock-n-roll artist Randy Stonehill sang in the 1980's. I think that's the way most of us feel when the pressures of personality clashes and other problems arise within our churches and Christian schools. The most common question I am asked by church and school leaders is, "How do we *avoid* conflict altogether?" The bad news is there's no avoiding it. The good news? It's not all bad. Like a wildfire, unproductive conflict can usually be contained and minimized if addressed early, and if you've got the right tools.

So as the steward of church or school resources, what's in your conflict toolbox? Are you prepared? Here are the essentials:

1. *The Toolbox Itself: A Conciliation Ethic*

The overriding essential element to conflict prevention and management is an organization's adoption of a conciliation ethic. The conciliation ethic is the big red toolbox that holds all the right tools. This is an ethic that says, "As an organization, we value and are committed to working through conflict the Jesus way – where we prioritize forgiveness and reconciliation with one another above programs, projects and agendas."

The conciliation ethic is the Good Steward's best defense to unproductive conflict. Without it, our ministries won't help people on the deepest level possible. Without it, unresolved conflict handicaps our ability to achieve results for the Kingdom and seize opportunities to advance God's agenda. Without the conciliation ethic, our opinions of right and wrong, concern for order, details and control over emotions will result in a failure to actively extend and receive grace, and prevent openness to change and improved ways of doing things. Without the conciliation ethic, our ministries may lose flexibility. Without the ethic, our ministry environment becomes discouraging and the team dynamic falls prey to tension and resentment.

How is the conciliation ethic adopted on both an organizational *and* personal level? Through the tools in the toolbox (see below).

2. *The Hammer: Contract Clauses*

The use of contract clauses will ensure confidentiality, economic feasibility, and keep the ministry out of court. Clauses should require the contracting parties to attempt dispute resolution first informally (per Matthew 18:15), then through confidential mediation and then, if necessary binding arbitration (Matthew 18:16-17). Examples are dispute resolution clauses in employment contracts, consulting services agreements, architects and building contracts, service provider contracts, and school tuition agreements. Where mediation and binding arbitration are included in a contract signed by all parties, the courts rarely allow

a party to disregard the mediation/arbitration agreement and proceed to court.

For Christian schools (and ministries that provide paid services), it makes sense to consider a streamlined approach when the organization finds itself frequently trying to collect smaller dollar amounts. A prime example is in the area of tuition disputes. These disputes are typically under \$7,500 and usually do not warrant the expenditure of large amounts of time or money in collection lawsuits, or even in mediation. Schools should look to a dispute resolution provider who offers a low-cost, small-claims court-style, biblical arbitration service for lower dollar disputes. For an example, see www.mediationlawgroup.com/christian/planb.

Contract clauses provide the biggest “bang for the buck” when it comes to cost containment and preserving reputation. This tool nails conflict into a contained, confidential box. For sample contract clauses see www.mediationlawgroup.com/christian/contractclauses.

3. *The Drill: Training*

The importance of training staff, ministry and lay leaders should not be underestimated. On a grass-roots level, every ministry leader and volunteer should attend an in-house training by church leadership on personal conciliation skills. This grass-roots level training is where the church can build a culture of conciliation and encourage lay ministers to embrace a personal conciliation ethic.

At the paid employee level, instillation of the personal and organizational conciliation ethic comes through professional training. This is where employees participate in biblical dispute resolution and workplace communication training, designed to prevent unwarranted conflict and increase departmental productivity through better communication skills. The optimal training teaches skills on prevention and intervention, how to relate to co-workers in a way that prevents negative conflict, how to glorify God when faced with conflict, how to use the Jesus model of resolution/reconciliation in the workplace, and uses effective exercises and hypothetical conflict scenarios, based on the organization’s employee handbook and policies.

4. *The Flashlight: Clear Grievance Process and Reconciliation Policy for Employees*

Employees need to have a clearly outlined process for dealing with workplace conflict, based on the Jesus model. It is easy for us to assume employees in Christian ministry know what scripture says about conflict and know how to apply it. But as leaders and stewards of people resources, we need to clearly define the expectations of what appropriate conduct through conflict looks like. This tool illuminates the way to productive conflict conduct.

When a grievance and reconciliation process is put into place and employees are *trained* in it, the conciliation ethic is cultivated. A clearly defined process eliminates a lot of wasted time for supervisors. For example, when an employee complains and asks the supervisor to intervene and “fix” a co-worker issue, the

supervisor promotes the Jesus model by declining to intervene until the employees have first attempted to work it out among themselves (first step in Matthew 18 :15-17).

A simple approach to implementing the Grievance/Reconciliation Policy tool is to draft the policy and include it in the organization's employee handbook, along with a separate acknowledgment form for signature by employees. For a sample grievance/reconciliation form, go to www.mediationlawgroup.com/christian/grievancepolicy.

5. *The Level: In-House Conciliation Team*

This tool helps keep a church or ministry well balanced, and prevents conflict from snowballing. It is helpful to form a team of people who have the gift of peacemaking and who are trained in Christian conciliation. Start small, with a few people who can assist in non-legal, non-complex matters. An example of in-house conciliation work might look like this: Members of the worship team have personality clashes and disagreements over who gets the solos during the weekend services. If they fail to work it out themselves, feelings get hurt and resentments fester. This is where they need the assistance of a conciliation team member. The in-house conciliator helps the parties examine their contribution to the dispute, seek and offer forgiveness, formulate a solution to the problem, and take steps toward reconciling.

This conciliation team model has been very successful at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Formed in 1999, Willow Creek's Conciliation Ministry now includes 18 fully trained conciliators (in addition to the church elders, who have received training) who assist church staff and congregants in a wide variety of disputes. Willow Creek's Conciliation Ministry leader (and Mediation Law Group mediator) James Pluymert suggests that churches provide conciliation team members with training in Christian conciliation, and start their conciliation teams with small, non-complex matters to ensure early successes and encourage the team as it grows.

Incorporating the five essential tools above will prepare your ministry for the wintery seasons of conflict. It is possible to experience positive outcomes if you are well equipped before walking through those difficult moments. It has been said, "In our present-day civilization, people are not often well prepared for cooperation. Our training has been too much considering what we can get out of life, rather than what we can give to it." May your toolbox be full, and may you be well prepared for a lifetime of cooperation.

Bio:

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