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Addressing Church Conflict

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Through two thousand years, from the New Testament to the present, churches have been prone to conflicts of all kinds. Pastors in the United States are involuntarily forced out of their ministries at the rate of once every six minutes (Rediger, 1997). From heated doctrinal wars to the color of the rug in the church's nave, conflicts can escalate from the loss of vitality for mission to congregational splits and even protracted and costly lawsuits.

While biblical reflection on conflict lies beyond the scope of this paper, the beatitude of "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9a, New International Version) is the foundational virtue underlying this consideration of conflict in the church. "Peacemaking" is rightly distinguished from "peacekeeping." The former is a proactive reality where peace and reconciliation is sought after and worked toward, the latter bearing the connotation of avoiding conflict, sometimes at any price. "Conflict," for the purposes of this paper, is considered an ordinary constituent of sublapsarian life and a dynamic that has as much potential for positive as negative consequences.

This paper will provide an introduction to some important aspects of conflict and peacemaking in the local church. First, there will be a discussion of general aspects of congregational conflict. Secondly, preaching and teaching will be discussed as ways to address and to encourage redemptive attitudes and peacemaking practices within congregations. Finally, assessment of conflict levels will be discussed with reference to when outside mediation may be most expedient and effective.

Pastors are to be ministers of reconciliation (see 2 Cor. 5:18b). That this ministry of reconciliation should have dramatic and sometimes difficult incarnation in pastoral work should not be surprising. As members of congregations disagree among themselves and with their

pastor, conflict ministry is inescapable. Such inevitability might suggest that the minister of reconciliation is a failure, but Willimon argues the converse:

Perhaps these manifestations of deep human feelings, these exposed nerves, are evidence that we are doing our job or that we are at least on our way to doing our job. Often the test of our ministry will be, not the avoidance of all conflict, but rather our response to inevitable conflict. Pastors sometimes complain that their churches are torn by conspiracies, conflicting factions, distrust, or unfocused anxiety. The tendency is to focus on these situations as the problem. Often they are only symptoms of the more important problem of poorly managed conflict. (1987, p. 10)

Indeed, conflict, while it has the potential to be destructive, can play a constructive role in community life. Conflict can be a catalyst to produce the energy necessary to overcome spiritual inertia. There is a natural tension that exists between the demands of scriptural imperatives and the actual situation in life of persons and congregations, a reality which itself produces conflict. Emotions may run deep in church conflicts precisely because of the concern that people bear for one another and their faith. The color of a carpet or the placement of the altar may produce life-and-death battles not because these choices are of such profound significance but because these disagreements take place within the context of a faith which is believed to hold life-and-death consequences (Willimon, 1987). Whatever the specific issues may be, varying levels of conflict are a constant of church life. This truth is the foundation of a popular saying of church conflict consultants Leas and Kittlaus (1973) that “conflict properly managed is conflict continually managed” (p. 48). Church “myth” holds that anger, hostility, and conflict are signs of failure which should be suppressed, leading people to repress emotions in such a way that when they finally do emerge, they are often expressed in destructive ways.

Leas and Kittlaus explain that there are three ways conflict is expressed in the church: intrapersonally (within oneself), interpersonally (between people), and substantively (disagreement over facts, values, goals, and beliefs). Willimon (1987) argues that intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict are deeply personal and are therefore best addressed through individualized and personal means, such as counseling, while substantive conflict can be appropriately addressed through preaching. Recognizing that the pulpit can be used and *abused* and that danger attends the addressing personal and interpersonal conflict sermonically, the author of this paper contends that *all* conflict at *all* levels can be appropriate for the pulpit, provided that the preacher places himself or herself among those to whom the sermon is addressed, remembering that most, if not all, conflicts are rarely simply matters of principle but bear the freight of complex human emotion, history, and frailty. A prohibition against thoughtful preaching in the context of all types of conflict leads one dangerously close to Willimon's own assertion:

Conflict is inevitable, and for the preacher to attempt to remove his or her preaching from that conflict is to imply that the Bible is irrelevant for the church today and that preaching is too timid and detached to be of great help when the chips are down and we desperately need a guiding word. (1987, p. 9)

One of the primary roles of the pastor is to “to prepare God’s people for the works of service” (Eph. 4:12a) through, among other things, teaching. The pastor can through preaching and teaching emphasize the virtue of peacemaking as well as teaching specific skills that are helpful in nonviolent negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation.

In contradistinction to theologies grounded in the “negative” anthropology of the “depravity of humankind,” Ury (2000) argues that the use of violence to resolve disputes is in

fact anomalous in human history, with only the last one percent, that is, ten thousand years, yielding clear evidence of warfare, while “little conclusive evidence [exists] in the archaeological record for the story of pandemic human violence during the first ninety-nine percent of human evolution” (p. 33). Early societies, formed of hunters and gathers, had what Ury calls an “expandable pie” (p. 39), where violence led to the loss of workers essential for survival of the group. Violence as a mode of dispute resolution developed, Ury contends, with an agricultural-based society, with its sedentary mode and population explosion leading both to limited resources and less importance of the survival of any particular individual. Ury optimistically argues that following the unprecedented violence of the twentieth century, the Knowledge Revolution, with its emphasis on information, returns humanity to an expandable pie, where information sharing takes place without personal loss. Ury posits that through the Knowledge Revolution, hierarchical power structures are increasingly flattened through what might be rightly called a “Negotiation Revolution,” with its egalitarian and cooperative, not coercive, model for conflict resolution.

From his interaction with Bushmen in the 1980s, Ury (2000) discovered that their system for managing conflict was the successful involvement of surrounding members of the community to push for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. With the Bushmen, disputes are often talked out over days. Ury explains that if “tempers rise suddenly and violence threatens, the community is quick to respond. People collect the poisoned arrows and hide them far away in the bush. Others try to separate the antagonists. And the talking begins” (p. 5). Rather than disputes being two-sided, they are, in reality, three-sided, with the community forming the third side:

The third side is *people*—from the community—using a certain kind of *power*—the power of peers—from a certain *perspective*—of common ground—supporting a certain

*process*—of dialogue and nonviolence—and aiming for a certain *product*—a “triple win” [the legitimate needs of the party and the needs of the wider community]. (p. 14)

Through preaching and teaching, the pastor can seek to develop this “third side” within the congregation, a community of persons that values the resolution of conflict through utilizing negotiation skills, sharing resources and knowledge, respecting the dignity of all, building tolerance, and working together to resolve conflict and make peace. The third side within a congregation could do much to prevent the deep polarizations that can quickly take occur over conflicts of either substance or perspective or, as is more commonly the case, both.

Through the pastor’s teaching office and support of qualified individuals within or outside the congregation, a program may be developed that teaches negotiation skills which is helpful for the continuous management of conflict, the fomenting of a third side, and the minimization of destruction in church fights. The development of conflict management skills, in addition to the obvious benefit for the church body, affords potential gain to the personal, professional, and familial lives of individual congregants. Much literature has been written in the last quarter of the twentieth century on negotiation skills. *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991) is generally accepted as the “bible of negotiation.” Since its original publication in 1981, this work has been widely used to address interpersonal, organizational, and international conflict. If one skill in *Getting to Yes* were isolated as preeminent and needing to be taught within church communities, it would be the need to move from positional bargaining to negotiation on the merits. Fisher et al. outline the following points that support this transition and help to produce “wise agreement[s], efficiently and amicably” (p. 4):

1. People: Separate the people from the problem. [Be soft on the people, hard on the problem.]

2. Interests: Focus on interests, not positions. [Find *why* something is wanted and what benefit will be gained if it is obtained.]
3. Options: Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.
4. Criteria: Insist that the result be based on some objective standard. (pp. 10-12)

The balance of *Getting to Yes* fleshes out these four areas and is especially suitable for group book study, class instruction, and individual study and coaching.

Ury (1991) in *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation* provides a significant resource for the further development of negotiation skills. He gives helpful antidotes to five common barriers in negotiation: reaction, emotion, position, dissatisfaction, and power. Citing Ambrose Bierce's dictum that to "[s]peak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret" (p. 31), the first Ury offers is "Don't React: Go to the Balcony," indicating the need to take some time to acknowledge, understand, and deal with one's feelings in the midst of conflict in order to avoid striking back, giving in too easily, and breaking off communication (sec. 2, chap. 1). A simple way of putting it is to take a "time out." A second maxim is "Don't Argue: Step to Their Side" in order to see the conflict from the perspective of the other person or group. This involves active listening, acknowledging points that are made and feelings that exist, and offering apologies, all of which will help build a working relationship and a favorable climate for negotiation (sec 2, chap. 2). "Don't Reject: Reframe" is the third maxim Ury offers (sec. 2, chap. 3). Reframing helps move beyond positional bargaining to the understanding of legitimate concerns and interests. To counter personal attacks and focus on past errors, one needs to work to focus on the problem and on future remedies and possibilities. To overcome obstacles to agreement, Ury offers a fourth maxim, "Don't Push: Build Them a Golden Bridge" (sec. 2, chap. 4). When the other side

resists, there is a natural temptation to push back, an action that can easily engender more resistance. The antidote to this, Ury proposes, is reframing what appears to be a retreat from a particular position into an advance toward a better solution, by seeking to involve the other side, building on their ideas, offering them choices, and avoiding dismissal of their views as irrational. The final maxim for negotiation that Ury gives is “Don’t Escalate: Use Power to Educate” (sec. 2, chap. 5). Ury points out that “[t]he harder you make it from them to say no [to a proposal], the harder you make it for them to say yes. That is the power paradox” (p. 131). When one gets caught up in the escalation of a win-lose power battle, the chances dramatically increase for a lose-lose outcome, as demonstrated in Mahatma Gandhi’s dictum, “An eye for an eye and we all go blind” (p. 131). Ury explains that power ought to be directed toward a solution that offers mutual gain: “Use power to bring them to their senses, not to their knees” (p. 133). Focusing on “reality-testing questions” that explore the possible consequences of failure to reach agreement can be helpful, as can the demonstration of one’s own options in the face of failure to reach a wise and fair agreement (p. 138).

In addition to more advanced skills of negotiation, it is important to teach and remind adults, youth, and children that there are simple rules that should be followed in “fair fighting.” Many age-appropriate resources exist on the World Wide Web and in other places that provide these commonly accepted rules of engagement. Leas offers the following six rules for fair fighting that were developed by a congregation with which he had worked:

1. Conflict can be healthy and useful for our church. It is okay for people to differ with one another.
2. Resolutions for the sake of quick agreement are often worse than agreements that are carefully worked out over time.

3. Fair conflict management includes: dealing with one issue at a time; if more than one issue is presented, agreeing on the order in which these issues will be addressed; exploring all the dimensions of the problem(s); exploring alternative solutions to the problems.
4. If any party is uncomfortable with the forum in which the conflict is raised, it is legitimate to request and discuss what the most appropriate forum might be.
5. Inappropriate behavior in conflict includes, but is not limited to name calling; mind reading (attributing evil motives to others); inducing guilt; rejecting, deprecating, or discrediting another person; using information from confidential sources or indicating that such information exists.
6. Fair fighting always allows people who are charged with poor performance or inappropriate behavior to know who their accusers are; learn what their accusers' concerns are; respond to those who accuse. (Dobson, Leas, & Shelley, 1998, p. 40)

Much, representing a wide variety of theological traditions, has been written on church conflict over the past quarter century. A seminal and frequently cited work is Leas and Kittlaus' *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (1973). Leas and Kittlaus provide guidance for the decision to deal with the conflict internally or to seek a mediator, whom they refer to as a "referee." They argue that it is helpful to use a referee who is outside the conflict and hence a "third party." Leas (2001, *Basics*) also defines the goals of church conflict management as (a) helping to make decisions clear, (b) increasing tolerance for differences, (c) reducing aggression, (d) reducing passive behavior or withdrawal, and (e) reducing covert, manipulative behavior (pp. 33-35).

Newberger (2003) provides a specific resource for teaching conflict resolution and developing skills for peacemakers in his evangelically based *The Proactive Peace Plan for Churches*. In addition to providing bible study curriculum, the author provides lesson plans for persons who will serve as peacemakers within congregations to help manage congregational disputes. In assessing the costs of unresolved church conflict, Newberger offers the following liabilities: (a) loss of congregational vitality; (b) loss of integrity and reputation in the community; (c) evangelism curtailed, as members do not invite others to church, (d) numeric losses, (e) personal losses from severed relationships, (f) ministry strain; (g) program curtailment, (h) financial losses, (i) degraded decision making, (j) ministry ineffectiveness, (k) spiritual, emotional, and physical debilitation, (l) personal regret (p. 16).

While negotiation and mediation skills are beneficial in the managing of conflict, there are types of conflicts that fall outside a generally accepted range of “normalcy.” Haugk (1988) and Rediger (1997) have provided important studies in dealing with what they respectively call “church antagonists” and “clergy killers.” The actions of antagonists, according to Haugk, must be not be confused with healthy criticism and normal conflict:

Antagonists are individuals who, on the basis of nonsubstantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in leadership capacity. (p. 22)

Rediger builds on Haugk’s work and distinguishes six characteristics related to “clergy killer” behavior:

1. Destructive. They do not just criticize, they seek to inflict pain.
2. Determined. While they may pause or go underground for a time, they will not stop.

3. Deceitful. They manipulate and misrepresent.
4. Demonic. They are evil and may be mentally disordered, scapegoating spiritual leaders.
5. Denial. The church often colludes by denying the reality of their existence.
6. Discernment. There is a need to discern, confront, and exorcise this evil. (p. 18)

Rediger explains that this abnormal conflict is generally unresponsive to the commonly used methods of conflict management, while normal conflict is responsive. Both Haugk and Rediger suggest appropriate ways to engage these difficult persons in the church. The determination of a “church antagonist” or a “clergy killer” and the employing of tactics to deal with them should be made with caution, in the context of spiritual guidance, and in collaboration with ecclesiastical superiors.

Church conflict, like conflict in other areas, may be assessed at varying degrees and levels. Leas (2001, *When conflict erupts*) provides helpful indication of five levels of conflict:

1. People disagree while staying focused on the problem, using specific language and working toward problem solving.
2. Self-protection becomes the primary agenda, language becomes vague, and issues of trust and communication are raised.
3. Winning becomes a priority. Through various political means, they seek to get their position adopted by the organization. The world is viewed dichotomously, speaking of “us and them.” They read minds and perceptions are taken as facts.
4. No longer do they seek to just win, they want to get rid of someone. There must be a divorce; the pastor must leave. The language is further distorted.

5. Religious fanaticism over positions is evident: “They feel themselves called by God to eradicate from the earth those to whom they are opposed. The pastor must be simply fired; he must be prevented from getting another church. Or if he is called by another parish, that congregation must be warned.” (p. 16)

About these levels, Leas makes the following observation: “The first two levels are easy to work with; the third is tough; the fourth and fifth are very difficult and impossible” (p. 16). Thomas (1998) found that 70 percent of pastors who employed conflict mediation consultants found them to be “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful,” and most said that they wished they had used these resources earlier in the conflict (p. 65). Leas (2001, *Harvesting*) provides statistics on his “success rate” in over thirty years as a church consultant and mediator according to the following criteria:

1. People made decisions that stuck for 18 months.
2. There was a reduction in tension.
3. People used problem-solving strategies for at least 18 months.
4. If there were losses of members, the numbers were regained within 18 months. (p. 5)

Accordingly, Leas judges his success rate as follows:

1. 42 percent of the time there was some progress and all criteria.
2. 22 percent of the time there was some progress on some criteria.
3. 28 percent of the time there was no progress on any of the criteria.
4. 8 percent of the time the conflict got worse. (p. 6)

The use of a mediator is obviously not a panacea, and Leas (1982) notes that while the term “management” can suggest overseeing, directing, and controlling, this may be quixotic in terms of dealing with conflict. Leas says he often uses the word “manage” in the “sense of a skier who was having his broken leg set and was asked how he was going to get to the office on Monday. He replied, ‘I haven’t figured that out yet, but I’ll *manage* somehow’” (p. 12).

The developing of negotiation skills, the building up formally or informally of peacemakers who can form a “third side” to conflict, and the consulting an outside mediator are all ways in which conflict can be directly and appropriately addressed within the church. Moreover, they are ways that constitute salutary alternatives to other methods of dealing with conflict, such as avoidance, polarization, power plays, appeals to higher authority, lawsuits, and violence. Teaching of conflict management skills and the Christian imperative to seek reconciliation is essential to the development of healthy church communities. With appropriate training in conflict management skills, the pastor, as a minister of reconciliation, can work to build up the church and equip the “saints” for their own ministries. Further, the employment of mediators, who have additional training and expertise, based on their experience in dealing with congregational conflict, can provide an invaluable assistance to prevent damage and to further growth through the exploration of the genuine needs and interests of those engaged in conflict. As these interests are clarified to the disputing parties, potential solutions and agreements can emerge which honor these interests and thus have a greater probability of being upheld by those involved. The teaching and implementation of conflict management skills will encourage peacemaking in the congregation and the lives of individuals. It may even reduce the frequency of involuntary termination of pastorates in the United States and certainly has the potential to do *less* damage to congregations, pastors, and pastors’ families.

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