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# When Church Conflict Erupts, "What Do I Do?"

L. RANDOLPH LOWRY

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As soon as my assistant said the caller on "line two" was a minister from a particular church, I knew the call was a call for help in managing a very public and very real conflict. Identifying the church was almost like identifying the dispute. After initial greetings, the minister quickly and nervously explained how conflict had escalated in his church the previous week, causing changes in leadership, a great deal of destructive conversation, and placing the immediate future of the church and his ministry in doubt. The strain in his voice reflected the strain in his life as he pondered how he might respond to the difficulties. He soberly considered whether his ministry could be salvaged and thought hard about the congregation for which he had labored a number of years. After several extended minutes of conversation, during which we analyzed the conflict and shared a wide range of thoughts regarding how it might be addressed, he asked a riveting question, "What do I do first?"

The simplicity and focus of his question directed our conversation from the philosophical to the practical. The urgency of his question was a recognition of the intensity of the conflict. With that question he directed us from discussing what might be to what could be.

Have you ever been in such a situation? Without warning, someone walks up to you and criticizes your work. Without warning, an innocent statement in a meeting evokes an angry reaction. Without warning, the caller on the other end of the telephone expresses displeasure with something you have done. In every case, you may recognize the emergence of conflict and you too may ask, "What do I do first?"

**This article focuses on what to do first; not in the sense of a specific order of activities, but in the sense of early moves that can dissipate the emotion of conflict and begin addressing it in a productive way.**

This article focuses on what to do first, not in the sense of a specific order of activities, but in the sense of early moves that can dissipate the emotion of conflict and begin addressing it in a productive way. It is a collection of thoughts focusing on the early steps of conflict management that might assist you in responding to a difficult moment in church conflict.

1. *First, don't panic!* While conflict may not have been on your agenda for the week, it is not the end of your world. Recognize that while you might feel under siege and have an urgent desire to respond immediately, chances are what you are facing did not come about overnight and, frankly, it will not be resolved overnight. Again, don't panic!

I recognize that such advice goes against the emotion of the moment. When someone first senses strong difference or intense conflict, that person's emotions want to break out in defensiveness. The human side wants to lash back at what is confrontational. But most of the time, the initial emotional response is not the best response.



Several years ago, I was a passenger on a late night flight from Boston to Los Angeles. After being delayed in Boston because of weather conditions, our plane arrived in Dallas too late to make the connecting flight, which, regrettably, was the last flight to Los Angeles that evening. Immediately, there was conflict between those passengers who “had to get to Los Angeles” and the airline that had no plane and no crew to fly them. Several passengers panicked and became uncontrollably angry. They verbally assaulted airline personnel through a public display of indignation.

Finally, after the conflict escalated to a rage, airport police had to take them away! Those passengers did have good reason to be upset at their circumstance. Panicking and reacting in an uncontrolled, thoughtless way, however, only made their situation worse.

Typically, as churches experience conflict, there is a precipitating event—the firing of a minister, a decision by the leaders, or a charge made from one member to another. That precipitating event, regardless how intense, cruel, or upsetting, usually represents only the most concrete dimension of the conflict, not the conflict in its entirety.

Since it will take some effort to understand the dynamics, origins, and possible reasons for the conflict, one can assume it will also take some time to gather ideas, engage in appropriate planning, and begin to carry out a productive conflict resolution process. The resolution of conflict takes the best that we can offer in careful, deliberate, and wise thinking. When faced with conflict, *don't panic!*

2. *Recognize that your conflict is not unique.* Often as I engage in the first conversation during a conflict resolution process, I hear a description about a struggle in a church and I am asked if I can sense what is taking place. It is usually not difficult to do so. Conflict in churches is quite predictable.

The reality is that at any given time, there are a multitude of other churches dealing with the same kind of conflict that might be affecting your church. Most conflict is not unique; it is rather a common occurrence when diverse people gather to carry out a particular ministry or church agenda. It should be of some comfort to know others have moved through such difficulties not only to find a sense of peace again, but also to find the lessons that God intended for them to learn through it.

Look, for example, at the conflicts and differences in the New Testament church. They were as intense as anything imaginable is today, and, in some cases, they are not terribly different from those currently confronting us.

Is there conflict between those who are on the leading edge of change in your church and others who are defending tradition? Do they differ over expectations of each other? Try managing the conflict over circumcision described in Acts 15 in place of what you are facing!

Concerned about the role of women in the church? It has been a topic of discussion and difference since Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.

Is marriage, divorce, and re-marriage a controversial issue? It was in New Testament times as well.

Are church leader struggling to get along? Paul and John Mark could tell you what that is all about.

Do you have people who struggle to do what is right but fail and then find themselves in conflict with other servants? Peter tried and tried again to work that one out. Those biblical examples reveal a New Testament church filled with conflict.

While others may not have been challenged by a specific difference in quite the same way you have been challenged by conflict, the similarities are amazing, and therefore, perhaps reassuring. Those similarities help us to learn from others who have wrestled with the same issues and endured the same difficulties.

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Whether it is the Apostle Paul in New Testament times, a minister at another congregation across town, or a professional mediator, others can attest to the fact that what you are experiencing is probably not unique. Take heart, they too survived it!

3. *Recognize that it takes time for conflict to develop and it will take time for it to be resolved.* As alluded to earlier, rarely does conflict emerge in a vacuum. It may be related to latent feelings of disagreement or hurt. Its roots may reach back into the past, sometimes years past, and are fueled by a more current event. Circumstances never imagined may have converged to create unexpected difficulties.

The time frame of conflict was most vividly portrayed to me during mediation several years ago. Two brothers who had a multitude of serious business disputes were seeking to resolve them in a dispute resolution process. That process focused on a series of business events that had taken place in the previous few months. One day during a mediation session, one brother asked me, the mediator, if I knew how long the conflict had been in existence. I referred to the few moments of controversy in which I had been involved. He countered my assessment when he said, "This dispute started when my younger brother got the family name." As the older brother, he had been in conflict for more than three decades with his younger brother

who was named after his father. While an extreme case, finding latent conflict that was not previously resolved is extremely common.

In a church setting, it may be two families who have never gotten along. It may be residual bitterness from decisions made by leadership years before. It may be differences in theology that have been held privately for a considerable period of time. It is helpful to realize that when a triggering event occurs, the baggage of past-unresolved conflicts may come out. A long history may be revealed. It makes sense that if

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the conflict has its roots in past relationships, decisions previously made, or latent disagreements between the parties, the resulting conflict will not be effectively resolved in a matter of minutes. Settle in for what will probably be a lengthy but important process!

In the case of the two brothers described above, such was the case. It took dozens of meetings over many months to address the conflicts between them. It was an emotionally draining experience and a time-consuming effort to move from the anger of sharp differences to the deliberate settlement of the issues in dispute. Yet what are the choices if disputes are to be resolved and reconciliation to occur within the body of Christ? Settling it will take a while. One needs to recognize that there is a relationship between the time it took for the conflict to develop and the time it will take to resolve it.

4. *Focus on process.* Responses to conflict, including initial responses, need to focus on *process* as much as they focus on *substance*. As bad as the conflict may seem, one does not want to make it worse by procedural mistakes that escalate the conflict, bring others into the conflict or, in fact, create new conflicts. Even seemingly innocent moves can fuel conflict if they are the result of thinking that is not sensitive to the process—*how* the dispute is handled.

In one instance, a group of church leaders in an autonomous congregation came under fire from a small group in a congregation for abruptly taking a preacher out of the pulpit. When conflict over their action initially emerged, they felt very defensive and immediately reacted by sending all members of that congregation a letter detailing the reasons for their actions. While the intention of productive communication certainly is noted, the reality of that quick, not completely thoughtful move resulted in far more people being involved in the conflict. The focus also changed from whether or not the removal of the minister was appropriate to dissatisfaction with the *process* used to do it.



The letter was unnecessary, at least during those early days of the conflict. The letter could not possibly describe all the circumstances leading to the leaders' decision. It fueled the fires of animosity and resentment. It brought a much larger group into the conflict.

A careful, calm development of a process to manage the conflict would have been far more helpful. In order to define a correct approach, time and energy should have been focused on the *process*. Planning the battle may be as important as fighting it!

5. *Remember that the issue of the emerging conflict may not be the same as the interests of the parties to it.* Simply stated "issues" are those tangible items

over which we disagree. "Positions" reflect how we would like to see the issues resolved. "Interests" are those underlying needs, goals, and objectives that motivate us. Going beyond the debate of positions to understand the interests of the parties is critical in understanding conflict.

Assume for a moment that you are the education coordinator for your congregation and, as a small congregation, you recognize that different grade levels of students must be combined in order to have reasonably sized classes. Problems often occur when children do not come in the same numbers as the classes you envision. Say, for instance, as you assemble the third, fourth, and fifth grade classes, there is only one fifth-grade girl. Because of your knowledge of her friends, you quietly move her up to join the "middle school" group that consists of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. After doing so, however, a parent angrily complains because her daughter had to wait until sixth grade to join the middle school group, and she sees no reason for the fifth-grade girl getting special privileges!

The *issue* in that conflict is which class the girl should attend. It is the focus of the disagreement and conversation. The *interests*, however, are much more complex. They are those needs or motivations that drive the dispute. On one hand, the parents of the fifth grade girl might be interested in her best education as well as an acceptable social situation. The other parent may be interested in protecting her child from a decision inconsistent with the practice that was applied to the other child. The interests, while real, are not completely incompatible. Understanding them, however, is essential if the very real conflict is to be resolved.

Without understanding the power of the interests that drive the conflict, we rarely will resolve the conflict. Without understanding the existence of such interests at the beginning of the conflict, we will be severely handicapped in the reconciliation process. Interests must be sought out, and a focus on them must be an explicit part of the process from the earliest moments. Seeking interests early is high on the agenda of what to do first.

6. *Pray.* At the risk of suggesting what is often ignored, it is important immediately to begin working with God as you are working on the conflict. Prayer is the avenue to do so. In the context of the church and its relationships and ministries, the immediate involvement of divine guidance will impact the attitudes and actions of people as well as the entire reconciliation process.

It is through prayer that the human emotions of anger and revenge can be managed. Personally connecting with God, who was also there when the first-century Christians addressed their interpersonal and

religious differences, can be a stabilizing influence. Seeking the patience and commitment for a long-term reconciliation is important. Asking for guidance on the right answer and also on the process to find it can provide the basis for subsequent work. Seeking to gain a clear understanding of the needs, interests, and

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motivations of the other parties will result in wiser judgments about them and the problem. All of those directions can most easily be obtained through the earliest communication with God. As the simple scripture, now familiar as a chorus sung in churches, suggests:

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you, Allelu, Alleluia.  
Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find, knock and the door shall be opened unto you, Allelu, Alleluia.

While such applies to all of life, perhaps it is even more critical at a time when differences have emerged, perspectives have clashed, and relationships are at risk. God is most interested in helping in such times. Our challenge is to invite God into the process of resolution and reconciliation.

7. *Seek Help.* Even as a professional mediator, rarely do I try to manage conflict alone. After a long day of mediation, I will often call a professional colleague who may be half way across the country, share the progress of my day with him, without violating any confidences, and seek his advice on what might be a helpful strategy for the remainder of the process. I regularly make such calls, even after spending more than a decade in the dispute resolution field!

What I have always found in discussing my conflict with another experienced dispute resolver is that my understanding of the conflict becomes clearer, my management of it more refined, and my creativity in helping the parties to reach solutions is enhanced. That is the natural result of just talking it over with someone who joins me in my quest for resolution and reconciliation.

While the context of a minister, church leader, or church member seeking help may be a bit different, the results of seeking assistance may very well be the same. In discussing the conflict and its dynamics, there is likely to be a greater understanding of it. In strategizing with someone else, the options for dealing with the conflict will be developed. In thinking creatively about options to resolve it, more alternatives will become apparent. In short, talking it out with someone who can be helpful just helps!

8. *Get on with it.* Finally, if you believe any of the above about conflict, good counsel suggests that you get on with it! By that I mean, if conflict is real and it cannot be avoided (and usually it cannot be), it probably will be better to deal with it now than to deal with it later.

A short time ago I received a call from a desperate church leader asking that I come and try to assist in the resolution of an acute conflict in his congregation. The desperation of the leaders and members of his congregation was such that they were open to any idea, any approach, any activity that might be helpful. Unfortunately, the conflict he described was too developed for even the most creative and well-intentioned intervention. The conflicts were several years old; about a third of the congregation had already left. Many members had so focused on their differences that they had ceased all sense of ministry. In my estimation, the call came four years too late! While I readily acknowledge the importance of letting people resolve their own conflicts if at all possible, ignoring the reality of conflict and delaying action to address it rarely proves to be helpful. Get on with it. With God's help, you can be an instrument of God's reconciling love.

These initial suggestions are not intended to provide a comprehensive approach for effective conflict management in churches. They are intended to focus attention on some early reactions to conflict in the hope that the right response in the early stages will contribute to the entire reconciliation process. They seek to provide some answers to the question posed by the minister of the church when he asked, "What do I do first?" May God help us as we seek to respond to conflict in ways that honor God's kingdom.

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