

## Navigating Church Conflict

**Equip Principle #1** – Understand, anticipate, and respond to the conditions that contribute to congregational conflict.

Congregational Major Occurrences and Chronic Conditions that Contribute to Conflict

### Major Occurrences

- Departure of long-time minister
- Mismanagement of financial resources
- Minister sexually acting out
- New building program
- Forced resignation of a staff member
- Steady loss in membership
- Downturn in financial contributions
- Important changes in the lives of leaders
- Intense staff conflict
- Catastrophe destroying physical facilities
- Informal, nagging complaints
- Sudden, violent death of children
- Economic depression in larger society
- Rift between congregation and judicatory
- Group of members leaving congregation

### Chronic Conditions

- Decision making residing in hands of a few people
- Griping as a normative way of behavior
- Pastor dominating almost every aspect of congregational life
- Little accountability
- Perennial shortage of money
- Nothing really getting done
- A sense of boredom or depression
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Small group dominating
- Differences ignored, not discussed
- “Viruses” enabled (secrets, blame)
- Poor or inadequate facilities

**Equip Principle #2** – Accept the fact that the desire for the absence of conflict is unrealistic. It is best to engage conflicts in the earliest stages with the appropriate strategy.

- Reference “Conflict Intensity Scale”
- Conflict is always present at Levels I and II, and most of our churches are healthy enough that it is resolved by amicable leaders and people who learn from the event and improve their relationships. It may progress to Level III if there is a lot at stake for the persons involved, or if key influencers and their closest followers are invested in the issue. In those cases, avoiding the issue will not make it go away. Churches can absorb Level III for a long time, but the spirit of the congregation will be undesirable. Resolution of high Levels III and IV will always result in loss, no matter what shape the resolution takes, and turbulence can be handled best with objective, competent outside help (which, unfortunately, is rare).
- Churches are the most conflicted institutions in society. Always have been. Every N. T. letter addresses some form of conflict. Every period of church history is named fundamentally by the conflicts that were being addressed.
- There are two types of conflict avoidance, *anxious* and *strategic*. For most conflicts, avoidance is not the best route. Expand your repertoire.
- Key resources: Speed B. Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1985, <https://amzn.to/40n2IUm>). Read alongside Speed B. Leas, *Discover Your Conflict Management Style* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998, <https://amzn.to/3WqaATZ>). These texts are meant to be read together and alongside the Alban Conflict Intensity Scale. *Moving Your Church* can help you assess the stage of conflict

and suggest the best path toward resolution. *Discover* helps you assess your default pattern of conflict engagement, shows you how that may need to be adjusted depending on the situation, and then instructs on how to activate the appropriate style for the situation. These two texts were written several years ago and are still the standard. They have not been improved upon. Most conflict materials written today are boutique and market-based. Leas' material is standard, universal, and perennial.

### **Equip Principle #3 – Practice the Core Disciplines of Soulful Engagement, Philippians 4:2-9**

#### **1. Obedience to the biblical standards of relational integrity, 4:2-3**

Recommendation: Ken Sande, *Biblical Peacemaking*, <https://rw360.org/biblical-peacemaking>

#### **2. Balcony perspective based on God's redemptive presence, 4:4-5**

Recommendation: Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing World will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*

Over every wilderness, chaotic environment, and gray zone, the Spirit hovers. The presence of God is always present, offering us the pattern of heaven. The plans, the heavenly blueprints that signal the renewal of any moment, and the reordering of the most chaotic environments. Every moment, every action, every thought, every problem contains the renewal potential of remaking that moment according to the pattern of heaven. This is hope.

You are not created to remain paralyzed in anxiety. You were not created to offer an anxious crowd quick-fix solutions and a panacea for their lostness. You were not patterned after heaven to retreat into a comfort zone. You were made in the image of God to bring chaos into order, as you act as a channel of God's will on earth. The Spirit manifests the pattern of heaven in the world, and we mediate that pattern as God's workers in creation.

The kingdom breaking out is when the heavenly pattern is initiated on earth. That is where you are called to be, at the point where heaven kisses the earth. At that intersection, the ways of the kingdom are revealed. We access a different power source to lead from. (Sayers, 164-166)

#### **3. Non-anxious presence through prayerful reflection, 4:6-7**

Recommendations:

- Table: Pete Steinke's comparison of self-differentiated and undifferentiated leadership (next page)
- Classic (has not been improved upon): Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*
- Recent: Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs*.

#### **4. Staying connected through principled relationships, 4:8**

Pete Steinke’s comparison of self-differentiated and undifferentiated leadership<sup>1</sup>

<b>Undifferentiated</b>	<b>Self-differentiated</b>
1. Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover,	1. Self-managing, shapes the environment, resourceful.
2. Reactive, instinctive, automatic.	2. Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
3. Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark.	3. Open, light-shedding, aware
4. Demanding, willful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending	4. Resilient, has sense of proportion
5. Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing.	5. Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
6. Blame, criticize, displace, fault-finding, have poor discrimination	6. Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
7. Uptight, serious, defensive	7. Relaxed, at ease, sensible
8. Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous	8. Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
9. Vague, non-specific, cloaked	9. Clear, objective, purposeful
10. Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions	10. Create space, options, and common goals

**Equip Principle #4** – Seek help and resources on the specific challenges in your leadership and church setting

**Understand and adapt your conflict style to the situation.**

- Go back to Speed B. Leas, *Discover Your Conflict Management Style*.
- Supplement with Kraybill, *Style Matters Inventory*, <https://riverhouseeepress.com/index.php/en/order/as-user>. There are a few differences between Leas and Kraybill. Kraybill shows how your style tends to shift from calm to storm. Leas nuances the styles in an interesting and helpful way that I think is fairly unique to church leadership. Both are useful in comparison.

**Difficult people**

- Kenneth Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church* – Still the gold standard in understanding those who go out of their way to make things difficult for appointed church leaders, especially the “employed” (i.e., ministers) who are more vulnerable. These people are manipulative and will appear to most others as being among the most exemplary believers in all matters. But they have a shadow side that can be selectively vicious and crazy making to leaders and members who frustrate their agendas. They must be dealt with forthrightly.

**Difficult Conversations**

First level:

- Cloud and Townsend, *How to Have That Difficult Conversation You’ve Been Avoiding* – The most accessible resources on planning a hard conversation. Literally step-by-step applied to several common conflict scenarios. Originally entitled *Boundaries Face-to-Face*.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, pp. 11, 91-92.

Second level:

- Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*, also *Leadership and Self-Deception*
- Any of the special series such as the Harvard Negotiation Clinic's *Difficult Conversations*, Susan Scott's *Fierce Conversations*, and the Crucial Learning Group's *Crucial Conversations*
- See on LifeandLeadership.com: <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-criticism-difficult-people-conversations/>

See my website, LifeandLeadership.com resources for special challenges in church conflict:

- Understanding Church Conflict, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-conflict-education>
- Conflict Resolution and Management, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-strategies-for-managing-and-resolving>
- Communication, Healthy Behaviors, and Forgiveness, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-communication-healthy-behavior-forgiveness>
- Communication Competence, Leaders, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/leadership-development#leaderdevcommunication>
- Congregational Trauma, Minister Misconduct, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-congregational-trauma-minister-misconduct>
- Criticism, Difficult People, Difficult Conversations, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-criticism-difficult-people-conversations>
- Leadership, Preaching, and Worship During Conflict, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-leadership-preaching-worship-in-conflict>

**Note:** A pdf copy of this presentation may be found at [LifeandLeadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-introduction/](https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/church-conflict-introduction/)

## Conflict Intensity Scale (Alban Model)

- Each level calls for a different resolution strategy.
- Parties may be at differing levels although in the same conflict.
- If conflict is not resolved at one level, it is likely to move to the next higher level.

Produced by the Task Force on Pastor/Congregation Conflict: Mary V. Atkinson, Margaret Bruehl, Alan G. Gripe, Jill Hudson, Roy Pneuman, Allan Swan

### Level Five: Intractable

<b>Issue</b>	1. No longer clear understanding of issue; personalities have become issue. Conflict now unmanageable.
<b>Emotions</b>	2. Relentless obsession in accomplishing the objective(s) at all costs. Vindictive. No objectivity or control of emotion.
<b>Orientation</b>	3. Sees person(s) as harmful to society, not just to the offended.
<b>Information</b>	4. Information skewed to accomplish the objective at any cost.
<b>Language</b>	5. Focuses on the destruction and/or elimination of the other.
<b>Objective</b>	6. To destroy the offending party/persons, i.e. to see that the fired minister does not get a job elsewhere.
<b>Outcome</b>	7. Highly destructive. Use of compulsion to maintain peace. May be necessary to remove members from church.

### Level Four: Fight / Flight

<b>Issue</b>	1. Shifts from winning to getting rid of person(s). No longer believe others can change, or want them to change.
<b>Emotions</b>	2. Cold self-righteousness. We will not speak to other side.
<b>Orientation</b>	3. Factions are solidified. Clear lines of demarcation. Last place for constructive intervention by third party consultant.
<b>Information</b>	4. Limited only to the cause being advocated; will not accept/listen to contrary information.
<b>Language</b>	5. Talk now of "principles," not "issues." Language solidifies into ideology.
<b>Objective</b>	6. No longer winning; now eliminate other(s) from the environment. Hurt the other person/group.
<b>Outcome</b>	7. High probability of split within church which signifies number of persons leaving the church.

### Level Three: Contest

<b>Issue</b>	1. Begin the dynamics of win/lose. Resistance to peace overtures. Focus on persons representing the enemy.
<b>Emotions</b>	2. Not able to operate in presence of "enemy;" however, admire worthy opponent. Not willing / able to share emotions/feelings constructively.
<b>Orientation</b>	3. Personal attacks. Formation of factions/sides. Threat of members leaving. Need third party consultant.
<b>Information</b>	4. Distortion is major problem. Information shared only with factions.
<b>Language</b>	5. Overgeneralization: "You always...," "We never..." Attribute diabolical motives to others.
<b>Objective</b>	6. Shifts from self-protection to winning. Objectives are more complex and diffuse; clustering of issues.
<b>Outcome</b>	7. Decision-making, mediation, compromise, vote. Possible some will leave the church.

### Level Two: Disagreement

<b>Issue</b>	1. Real disagreement, mixing of personalities and issues, problem cannot be easily defined.
<b>Emotions</b>	2. Distrust beginning. Caution in association; less mix with "other side."
<b>Orientation</b>	3. Begin personalizing problem; shrewdness and calculation begin.
<b>Information</b>	4. Selective hold-back of information occurs on both sides.
<b>Language</b>	5. More vague and general; "some people...," "they...," hostile humor, barbed comments and put-downs.
<b>Objective</b>	6. Face-saving; come out looking good. Work toward consensus. Not yet win/lose conflict.
<b>Outcome</b>	7. Attempt collaborative solution; or negotiate acceptable agreement; win/win with real effort.

### Level One: Problem to Solve

<b>Issue</b>	1. Real disagreement; conflicting goals, values and needs, etc.
<b>Emotions</b>	2. Short-lived anger, quickly controlled; parties begin to be uncomfortable in the presence of other(s).
<b>Orientation</b>	3. Tends to be problem-oriented rather than person-oriented.
<b>Information</b>	4. Open sharing of information.
<b>Language</b>	5. Clear and specific.
<b>Objective</b>	6. Solving the problem. Move toward unanimous agreement. Utilize collaborative style.
<b>Outcome</b>	7. Collaborative agreement is possible. Win/win resolution w/ mutually acceptable, agreed solution.