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Chapter 1

# Why Your Church Needs Conflict

*Consider it nothing but joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you fall into various trials. Be assured that the testing of your faith [through experience] produces endurance [leading to spiritual maturity, and inner peace]. And let endurance have its perfect result and do a thorough work, so that you may be perfect and completely developed [in your faith], lacking in nothing.*

—James 1:2–4 AMP

*When church leaders and members are willing to honestly accept, openly confess, and intentionally address the underlying causes of church conflict, God will repair and restore the church.<sup>1</sup>*

—Jim Van Yperen

“These kids need this money!” Jane’s voice revealed her resolve.

Everyone at the table watched for what would happen next. Jane represented a growing youth ministry and found herself in the middle of an emotionally charged discussion about how to use a large sum recently donated to the church.

“We really need to provide summer activities for this flood of new kids. God brought them to us, and we can’t afford to miss this opportunity. Our team has located a youth camp for sale that would be perfect. I say we act on this before it is too late.”

“Not so fast,” Brad, the trustee board chair, replied. “All those kids came with parents too!” He added, “Our sanctuary is bursting at the seams, and I say we use this gift to make room in the sanctuary for these new families—they’re the ones who will be paying for the future of our ministry.”

Wes, the adult ministry pastor, agreed. “Our classroom space is already stretched to the max, and unless we do something soon, this constraint alone will stop our growth. We need a master building plan that serves all our ministries equally.”

The debate continued with strong opinions and passionate pleas. Pros and cons were vigorously expressed around the table. As a guest observer—invited because of my experience in facilitating group problem-solving—my adrenaline was pumping and my mind was racing, and I wondered when it was all going to come off the rails. I’d been in too many meetings like this one, where tempers explode and relationships are irreparably damaged. But what happened next caught me completely off guard. After an hour of lively discussion, the elder leading the meeting indicated that time was up and that this debate would need to continue later.

Right when I thought people might stomp out of the room, something very different had happened. Jane sought out Brad and said, “Wow, you put up a pretty tough argument. Good job!”

Brad responded, “I haven’t seen you this serious in a long time. That camp sounds great; I’m sure we can get to the right decision with God’s help. We are going to need to minister to those kids and their parents too. I really appreciate your dedication to our youth!”

“Give my love to Denise, Brad, and thank the other trustees for me. You guys are doing an amazing job keeping our church looking beautiful and welcoming for visitors every weekend,” Jane said, smiling as she turned to head out the door.

This was the first time I had encountered church leaders who were able to fully debate emotional issues without becoming defensive or taking things personally. In the end, they managed to meet both sets of needs with the money that was available. Rather than build a new multimillion-dollar sanctuary, they worked with a consulting team to design some building and programming modifications that allowed the church to double weekend attendance

while using existing facilities. They were able to use another piece of property that the church already owned for a family and youth campground for summer ministry. And, as for these leaders' relationships, they are stronger than ever!

### Three Facets of Church Conflict

Church conflict is too often viewed from a negative perspective, which is too simplistic. The examples that follow illustrate three different categories of conflict: (1) unhealthy conflict, (2) benign conflict, and (3) healthy conflict.

Before attempting to resolve the church issues we face, two helpful questions need to be asked: What is at the root of the disagreement? And, How are the people responding to one another while trying to solve their problems?

Although it is true that all conflict can become unhealthy, it doesn't have to go that way. Depending on the underlying issues and how people respond, conflict can actually become a healthy platform for problem-solving and spiritual growth. Getting to the underlying factors—the root causes—provides important insights into how to do this. We will be exploring exactly how this process works.

*Unhealthy conflict* often goes unrecognized until interpersonal disputes and church factions begin to develop. *Benign conflict* pertains to those church disagreements that occur because of organizational deficits and oversights that are unintentional. *Healthy conflict* refers to disagreements that are recognized, acknowledged, and responded to in a biblically constructive manner.

The following cases show you how to recognize the differences between these types of conflict and how to inform leaders to both acknowledge and respond to these events in helpful ways.

## *Unhealthy conflict*

### EASTERN VALLEY CHURCH: THE CASE OF THE UNWISE LEADERS

“How quickly can we schedule to have you come and help us?”

Jason Robinson had been pastor of Eastern Valley Church for less than ten months. The church, located in a small East Coast town, had a long and fruitful history. Until recently, its reputation was one of stability and community service as well as offering strong evangelism and mission outreaches. Pastor Robinson phoned a facilitator from the denomination for assistance, but was anxious and didn't offer much detail while answering the preliminary questions the facilitator asked. (Denominations differ greatly in the resources they can provide to help congregations in conflict. Some are great, but others may lack knowledge and skill and may even make things worse. Researching the historical effectiveness of such resources, along with evaluating outside conflict resolution specialists, is recommended before extending invitations for outside assistance.)

Arriving on a Thursday afternoon, the facilitator met with the pastor to discuss his concerns. Jason began by outlining his clear vision for the church. However, he quickly digressed into an angry diatribe aimed at what he perceived as resistance to his leadership. In fact, several long-tenured families had recently left and were attending other churches.

“I know what this church needs,” Jason insisted. “Why won't anyone listen to me?”

What this denominational official learned from interviewing members of the congregation was a disturbing picture of a very sick church. Churches can become unhealthy over time for many reasons. In this case, the presenting issues were vague in nature and revealed scattered symptoms of disunity, personal hurt, and

widespread distrust. Deeper inspection uncovered an ugly list of root causes related to:

- A new, inexperienced pastor who demonstrated immaturity, impatience, a lack of integrity, and a short temper.
- Leaders who were less than honest with him and with one another. Most of the people who had recently departed were, evidently, the more spiritually mature leaders and members of the congregation. They were exhausted from trying to help their new pastor turn the church around. Having failed, they gave up.
- The small group of newly appointed leaders, most of whom were new to the church, exhibited shortcomings similar to their pastor.

Eastern Valley Church was not beyond help. These conflicts could have provided opportunities to reveal needed changes that could lead to redemptive solutions. If the leaders humbled themselves and yielded to godly counsel, their best days could yet be ahead. But unfortunately, they did not. An unhealthy culture had developed and contributed to a downward spiral until the ministry failed and the church closed. The problems these leaders faced are not uncommon. What made this conflict unhealthy was the actions that were taken (or not taken) to address their problems.

In the pages ahead, we will demonstrate how conflict can serve to deepen discipleship and transform leaders.

#### MAIN STREET CHURCH: THE CASE OF THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY

“This is our church, and no one is going to take it away from us!” Carl said, almost shouting. The other elders in the room nodded in agreement. “Our church has been here for over fifty years; we were

here first, and we're not leaving. But, Pastor, if we do what you're suggesting, we *are* going to lose our church!" Carl's voice was quivering now, and everyone else sat in sober silence.

"But if we keep doing the same things that we've been doing, we're going to lose our church anyway," Pastor Sam said softly.

The pastor had suggested making changes to their outreach strategies—to reach a growing ethnic population in the neighborhood. This congregation was in decline and, while most of the churches in this part of town had long ago relocated to the growing edges of the city, Main Street Church had decided to stay. The building was paid for, but the congregation was aging rapidly. Sam had been pastor there for less than a year.

"Do you want to wait until the congregation is no longer able to maintain the expenses and we're forced to sell to whoever is willing to buy?" Sam asked. "This has happened to other churches that had been unwilling to change," he added.

Earlier in the meeting the elders had been enthusiastic about the new ideas for effective evangelism, with the goal of reaching the large number of minority families now occupying the surrounding community. But then the elder board chair suddenly seemed to realize some of the implications for this middle-class Caucasian congregation.

The conflict that followed revealed some unhealthy attitudes and perspectives about the mission of the church. This church had been vibrant fifteen years before. But, as often happens in cities, the neighborhood changed. High unemployment and shifting demographics were evident.

Most evangelical churches in the area had relocated to the outskirts of the metropolitan area to attract younger families. Some churches that stayed did so for the right reasons: to reach the many families moving in who needed loving congregations to welcome them. But Main Street was not one of them. Instead, the leaders



fought to keep things “the way they were,” and the result was to suffer the fate of an aging and dying congregation. Finally, desperate to survive, they changed pastors. And even then, it quickly became clear that it was for the wrong reasons. Suddenly, it seemed, they faced very difficult choices. Eventually, these leaders made the right decisions, but not before much conflict and loss came as a result.

### ***Benign conflict***

#### **NORTHEAST COMMUNITY CHURCH: THE CASE OF THE PAPER CALENDAR**

Steve sat in his church office, reflecting on his last meeting. *Something else has to be going on here! This is the third time I've had to conduct a mediation session with the same leaders. And one person has been involved in all three conflicts! Maybe he is having trouble at home or work . . . but three times?*

The first disagreement was over room assignments. The next was about office supplies. And now it was about volunteers . . . Steve wondered what was next.

Each mediation session seemed to be successful at the time, with apologies exchanged and parties agreeing to reconcile. So why the repeated incidents?

No question the church was having growing pains. After a major split, the attendance had dropped from 500 to 150 on an average Sunday. Then the church once again reached the 200 mark, and a second service was added. In that first week the attendance jumped from 200 to 300, and the church never looked back.

Northeast Community Church had been operating in the “family style” of governance. Everyone knew everyone else. Formal infrastructure was rarely needed. For example, the church calendar was literally a paper desk calendar in the office, used to reserve rooms for ministry events. People were invited to pencil in their reservations week to week. But because some of the church’s core

ministries were so well established, those particular events were not written on the calendar—“because everyone knows not to schedule that room at that day and time.”

As the church continued to grow, additional ministries formed, and the new leaders were unaware of these unwritten rules. Rooms were now being scheduled by more than one group at a time. Although these leaders were being directed to the write-in church calendar, conflicts occurred regularly because of unclear communication. On paper, an area looked available to meet in, but in practice it was not! Hence conflict. Other informal practices yielded similar results.

These conflicts had root causes that were not intentional or personal. They were the result of organizational deficits that could be corrected only through organizational changes. (We will be referring to these types of deficits as *structural* root causes.) Once the needed changes were made at Northeast, the conflicts virtually disappeared overnight.

The interpersonal disputes that were recurring were merely *presenting issues* or symptoms of the root causes that were less visible but still critical to understanding and resolving the conflicts. They are referred to here as *benign* because they do not represent *intentional, malicious, or sinful* acts. Rather, they are unintentional oversights due to the inexperience or ignorance of the people involved. And although it is true that sinful responses often follow such incidents, these reactions are secondary to the underlying causes that are organizational in nature. Reconciling the individual relationships is important but insufficient to correct the underlying issues.

#### PARK HILL MISSIONARY CHURCH:

#### THE CASE OF THE LEADERS WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE

“Let’s keep praying. I know it’s late and we have been here a long time, but this is just too good to miss!” Tony pleaded. The

elder board and pastors were enjoying prayer times together like never before. The new focus on reaching the lost in the 10/40 Window had this leadership team more excited than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Tony found no opposition to his plea, and they prayed past the usual allotted time. This deep sense of unity and tremendous satisfaction was getting better and better!

It had not always been this way at Park Hill. After a brief period of division and conflict on the board a year before, this spiritual renewal was refreshing indeed. The fellowship and prayer was having a positive impact on the entire leadership team. Stirring messages from several visiting missionaries only added to their passion!

However, not everyone in the church was happy about these new outreach priorities. The people were growing concerned about decisions made regarding spending and leadership, and some of these concerns got back to those in charge.

“The board is having long meetings into the night, and many of us wonder why all the secrecy,” one trustee said.

“The preaching has changed too. It’s a diet of missions and evangelism every week now,” complained a longtime church member.

How could the climate among leaders be so different from that in the congregation? The more people talked, the more discontent they became, and the disgruntled feelings were affecting a good number of people in the church.

The chasm between these excited leaders and their worried flock was not because of any intentional or malevolent actions by the leadership team but was instead because of a failure on their part to recognize how important good communication and collaborative decision-making is to developing ownership and unity in congregations.

In the chapters ahead, we will demonstrate how to recognize the symptoms of structural conflict and provide the tools needed to address them.

## ***Healthy conflict***

### THE CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

“Pastor Bob, we need you to say something!” one of the elders said anxiously.

What started out as a transparent and friendly conversation among church leaders had become painfully awkward. And yet moments earlier, there had been amazing signs of unity and loyalty, and a surprising level of trust and camaraderie, between the leaders in this small-town Southern church.

In the months leading up to this meeting, the congregation has shown signs of unrest, and serious accusations had been made against these leaders. David Smith, a pastor from a neighboring community, had encouraged these elders to carefully investigate the list of complaints, many of them against the senior pastor. David stopped by this Sunday afternoon to observe their meeting.

As each elder reported on his assignment, the atmosphere in the room grew heavier by the minute. Although many of the accusations were unfounded and eventually dismissed, several were serious.

Pastor Bob sat in silence, making no eye contact with his leaders. A response was needed, but none was forthcoming. After what seemed like an eternity, the elders reluctantly closed the meeting.

The visiting pastor was stunned. He thought, *I've never witnessed such a failure to lead at such a critical moment.* As David got up to leave, Bob asked him to come over for dinner. They drove to Bob's house in silence. The meeting's end was so confounding that David wasn't sure how to reengage Bob in conversation.

As they sat down in the living room, Bob said, “Thank you for coming over. I think God knows that I need a friend right now; I couldn't talk about this before.” He went on to describe how devastated he was to hear these accusations from his parishioners. He spoke slowly. “I'm so hurt that I don't even know what to say.”

David waited and listened and soon began to realize just how deeply this man was wounded. Clearly it had taken Bob some time to process what he had heard. David thought, *I misread Bob's silence as an admission of guilt.*

Bob then unequivocally stated that the most serious accusations made against him were false. David prayed silently, *Thank You, God, for this opportunity to talk.* David subsequently was able to encourage Bob, assuring him of his continuing friendship and support.

What followed was a series of events that illustrate just how important healthy conflict can be in the life of a church. Because of a history of conflict avoidance, minor offenses and misunderstandings had festered and undermined relationships. For years, unhealthy responses to disagreement had created a toxic environment. It was clear that Bob's humility and integrity were changing the culture and uniting the hearts of his elders.

The next Sunday, Pastor Bob humbly stood before his congregation and asked forgiveness for those things for which he did feel responsible. This act set the tone for the entire congregation, and a spirit of contrition, repentance, and reconciliation followed. Those who had been untruthful and sinful in their actions and words toward the church leaders either repented, left the church, or lost all credibility. The church began to heal, and God blessed it spiritually and numerically. Now, a number of years later, disagreements are viewed as an opportunity to dig deeper. Conflict is no longer avoided but confronted biblically and redemptively.

#### GREENWOOD BIBLE CHAPEL:

##### THE CASE OF A DIVIDED SEARCH COMMITTEE

"We've had an interim pastor long enough; it's time to call a new senior pastor!" Erica said.

The six members of the search committee were clearly

frustrated. Their last two meetings had ended in a deadlock. Half of the members felt that the church was losing valuable time. The other half felt as though more work was needed with the interim pastor before interviewing candidates. The founding pastor had retired three months previously after twenty years of successful ministry.

“We need Skip’s help,” said the committee chair.

Skip Baylor’s service as an interim pastor was proving to be a big help during the transition. He preached each week and also met with ministry leaders to help them maintain focus and momentum. Skip was invited by the committee to their next meeting. After hearing their plight, he suggested another meeting the following Sunday afternoon. He explained that he would pose as a mock pastoral candidate and asked the committee to interview him as they would an actual candidate. Skip made a list of likely questions a prospective pastor might ask regarding the church’s vision, mission, leadership, future plans, church values, philosophy of ministry, living arrangements, expectations of the pastor’s family, and so on.

For more than an hour, the committee struggled to answer these questions in a satisfactory manner. At the end of the exercise, the chair called for a vote. The search team voted unanimously to work together to clarify the church’s position on important issues before moving forward in the process.

Choosing to ask for help and working together likely avoided a church split. Skip’s work with this congregation for another year resulted in clearly articulated ministry values and a successful pastoral search. The conflict served as a platform for asking important questions, and the leaders seized this opportunity to engage in healthy dialogue.



It is important for church leaders to recognize the differences and symptoms between healthy and unhealthy conflict. Helpful responses depend on gaining a good understanding of the conflict and conducting an accurate analysis of a number of factors. Unfortunately, all too often, any conflict is viewed through a single lens. In the next chapter, we will look at some common mistakes church leaders often make. Then, moving forward, we will set a course on how to avoid these mistakes and make the kind of decisions that can potentially transform your church!