

## Resolving Church Conflict

Written by Steve Marr

Tuesday, 06 November 2001 17:00

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Tom was the pastor of counseling in a growing suburban church. Because he wanted to protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals in the congregation, who often came for counseling about marriage problems and other personal difficulties, he would frequently schedule appointments away from the church office. Often, these appointments would stretch to several hours, during which time he was absent from the office. Unfortunately, he also struggled with his personal time management, occasionally arriving late for appointments and appearing unorganized.

Over time, the administrative pastor and the church secretary, who usually had to "cover" for the counseling pastor, became angry. Although they both agreed that something should be done, neither one was willing to confront Tom about his absences nor other practices.

Finally, after nearly a year, the senior pastor stepped in to investigate the increasing number of complaints. When Tom defended his habits as "part of the job" and seemed unwilling to change, the situation quickly became heated. Ultimately, the only "solution" was to dismiss Tom.

Too often, even within the church, unresolved conflict creates workplace tensions. Issues that should be dealt with between individuals become staff-wide or church-wide problems. And when the principal parties won't "face the music" and resolve the situation, the senior pastor or board of elders has to get involved. In the end, failure to resolve such conflicts affects everyone, pastors and staff, as well as parishioners.

Handling a situation like Tom's may never be easy. On-the-job confrontations seldom are. However, if a biblical pattern of conflict resolution had been followed, the church would not have encountered such severe difficulties, and the pastor of counseling could have remained as a productive team member.

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Conflict in any organization is inevitable. Everyone has his own perspective on the events and people that make up the workplace. These different perspectives don't always mesh. The key to growth and progress, in spite of conflict, is to ensure that, whatever the conflict, it is resolved in a positive way. The process is just as important as the end result. Even if the ultimate solution is not pleasant, the process of resolving the conflict can be a positive experience.

Three biblical principles govern the conflict resolution process. Implementing these principles can avoid the potentially divisive course of having the conflict spread throughout the congregation.

**Principle #1: Deal with conflict quickly.** Jesus was attacked many times by the Pharisees. Each time, His strategy was to confront the issue immediately. He never let anything slide for the sake of "keeping the peace." With wisdom and enviable precision, He faced each confrontation when it occurred.

Act quickly, while the memory of an incident is fresh, because time has a way of rewriting the "facts." When we hold an offense or delay in confronting wrongdoing, our minds build on the foundation of frustration until the whole situation becomes distorted. If we fail to act promptly when we have been wronged, we give our anger an opportunity to grow, thereby increasing the chances that we will act inappropriately when we finally confront the issue. Most importantly, when we fail to act quickly, we lose the opportunity for immediate improvement in the circumstances. Had either the administrative pastor or the secretary acted quickly to resolve the conflict, the misunderstandings would likely have been alleviated and the scheduling problems would have improved measurably.

**Principle #2: Deal directly with the person who has offended you.** Jesus tells us that "if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private" (Matthew 18:15 NASB). We must develop the biblical habit of going to the person who has erred or wronged us. Who else can immediately change the situation?

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Explain your perspective of the issue clearly and calmly. Stick to the facts and explain the consequences that have caused the problem. Recommend a solution. Stay positive by focusing the conversation on solutions and by not attacking the person or the problem. Avoid stating how you feel and how you are personally affected, or you and your colleague could easily digress into a personal conflict.

If you are unsuccessful in dealing directly with the person, continue to follow the scriptural model and "take one or two more with you" (Matthew 18:16 NASB). Talk to your associate pastors or staff members and request a meeting so the issues can be openly discussed. Remember, the only one who can effectively change the person's behavior is the person himself. The purpose in bringing others into the discussion is to establish the facts of the case and bring a balanced perspective, not to exert additional pressure. Do not fall into the temptation to discuss the issue with others just to let off steam#which is gossip and will only make the situation worse.

Principle #3: Deal with an issue completely. Don't leave loose ends or wiggle room. Make sure each person involved understands the issue. Ask everyone to "play back" his or her understanding of the issues. When a solution is determined, ask each person to clarify his understanding. Have everyone verbalize agreement with the next steps to be taken, then set the time frame for their responses. If future actions are to be different to avoid problems, clearly confirm the future change. It is a good idea to document the conversation in a memo to avoid future misunderstandings. Often a great meeting is ruined by failure to follow through.

When you are determined to deal completely with your challenge, so that it will not resurface, a deeper issue may emerge. Only when the real issue is addressed can conflict be fully resolved, so be alert to the possibility of a deeper issue.

Tom's desire to protect his counselees was admirable, but his methodology wasn't. Setting limits early on, through appropriate confrontation, might have averted the yearlong problem he caused. Sadly, someone like Tom can create a division in the church if he is not properly confronted.

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As long as imperfect people are involved, the church will never be a perfect place, but your efforts to resolve on-the-job conflict can make it a better place for everyone. The next time difficult issues arise, remember: deal with the issue quickly- speak only with the people directly involved- and make sure the situation is resolved completely. Then sit back and watch your church grow.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

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