

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

PAUL CLARK

Introduction

During the next few hours we are taking a journey together and we will be looking at a topic that many pastors and elders would prefer to avoid. Conflict management does not seem to be the most popular topic on the Christian conference circuit, and it appears to me that most Pentecostals and charismatics prefer to discover greater insight into receiving power from on high, as opposed to gaining a deeper understanding of how to better handle the gritty, earthly issues of interpersonal conflicts in the local church. Pentecostals and charismatics pride themselves on their unique spirituality because they are “spirit-filled”, yet they, no less than other Christians, are continually being bombarded by a multitude of church conflicts.

One of my goals in this seminar is for us to not just think reactively, but proactively about conflict. When we look to the Lord we can be assured that He wants us to grow in our relationship to Him, and at the same time develop more effective skills in conflict resolution. There are many ways to define conflict, but I like the simple definition given by the renowned conflict mediator Bernhard Mayer.

As a practical matter, I find it useful to think of conflict as existing if at least one person believes it to exist. If I believe us to have incompatible interests, and act accordingly, then I am engaging you in a conflict process whether you share this perception or not.¹

If you do not believe that interpersonal conflict is pervasive in our movement, just take some time to listen in on the conversations of our pastors and other church leaders when they converse together at district or national meetings. You will note, as I often have, that their small talk will often turn into lengthy conversations about rivalries or discord in the local church where they minister.

I do not consider myself to be a great expert on conflict management, but rather a fellow traveler who is attempting to facilitate discussion about a topic that should be important to us all. There is not one approach that can be taken when focusing on conflict

¹ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 5.

management. If you do a Google search you will be surprised to discover how much material is available about conflict management. The topics that we will be looking at should be viewed as individual building blocks necessary for the construction of an edifice that will help us and other church workers to more effectively resolve conflict. The individual building blocks or topics of our seminar are by no way exhaustive, but should be seen as a starting point from where each one of us can develop and mature in his or her life.

The following is a brief overview of the topics we will investigate together. First of all, we must understand in our heads and hearts the normality of conflict within the church. If we are aware of the fact that conflict is bound to happen, I am convinced that the Lord will give us practical tools and the needed insight to deal with such reoccurrences in effective ways. Secondly, we will look briefly at interpersonal conflict in the Scriptures, since it seems that some misguided souls still live under the impression that our Bible heroes walked on silver clouds and put their cloaks or robes on in a different way than the rest of us mortal beings. Thirdly, we will investigate the most common causes of conflict in the church. It will be stressed that it is not enough just to deal with symptoms on the surface, but that we must get to the root of conflict.

Fourthly, we will look at what it means to be a true peacemaker, and how this life message can be a blessing to women and men who are entangled in the web of conflict. Fifthly, we will deal with the topic of confrontation, and the book *Caring enough to Confront* by noted Christian counselor and author David Augsburger will set the stage for this important area of study.² Sixthly, we will then approach the various possibilities and approaches in conflict resolution. With God's help we truly want to help men and women find solutions to conflicts they are facing.

Seventhly, we will take a close look at the significance of forgiveness in the lives and ministry of conflict resolvers. It seems like we have heard all there is to know about forgiveness, but I feel we are just at the beginning of our true understanding. Finally, we will take a look at improving our communication skills, which is always a must for those who are trying to help fellow believers grow in their Christian faith.

² Augsburger. *Caring Enough to Confront* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981).

We will never enjoy a totally conflict-free church, work place, or family, as long as we are pilgrims on this earth. However, we should be encouraged to know that one day all conflict will cease. The apostle John, at the end of his revelation, testifies to the eternal rule of the King of Kings:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4)³

But until that day let us be faithful, as we press on with the work that our Lord has called us to accomplish. As we diligently labor for the Lord, not giving up or becoming weary, we will reap a tremendous harvest in due time (Galatians 6:9).

The Normality of Conflict

Before we can manage conflict in a proper and effective way, it is expedient for us to accept its normality. It still surprises me to see how many Christians think that conflict is abnormal human behavior and it simply should not occur among mature adults. As spiritual leaders we must accept the fact that conflict is a given, and it will always occur in life situations whenever different personalities find themselves in various kinds of relationships. David Augsburger underscores this assessment as he writes:

Conflict is natural, normal, neutral, and sometimes even delightful. It can turn into painful or disastrous ends, but it doesn't need to. Conflict is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. Conflict simply is.⁴

People can be and will be very impassioned about their views and opinions. Bernhard Mayer encourages us to look at conflict management in a very in-depth manner.

Whether we are aware of them or not, we all enter conflict with certain assumptions about its nature. Sometimes these assumptions are very helpful to us, but at other times they are blinders that limit our ability to understand what lies behind a conflict and

³ *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (New York: Zondervan, 1978). All Scripture references in this paper are from the NIV Bible.

⁴ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront*, 11.

what alternatives exist for dealing with it. We need frameworks that expand our thinking, that challenge our assumptions, and that are practical and readily usable. As we develop our ability to understand conflict in a deeper and more powerful way, we enhance our ability to handle it effectively and in accordance with our deepest values about building peace. However, in order to simplify the task of handling complex conflicts, we need to complicate our thinking about conflict itself. This is an ongoing challenge for everyone concerned with conflict and its resolution.⁵

I remember that incredible feeling of being in love as a young married man. Who could ever imagine that a young couple like us who were sharing so much bliss and sleeping in the same bed would soon have their first marital strife? It happened one night when an uninvited intruder came into our bedroom which we tried to swat away. I kept calling the intruder a fly and Mechthild called it a mosquito. Actually, Mechthild vehemently admonished me for calling it a fly and insisted that I should call it by its only rightful name, that being a mosquito. I was not at all in the mood for my wife's teacher-like instruction, so I simply held my ground and continued to call the mosquito a fly. Needless to say, this conflict of words in a very emotional setting lasted even until the morning. Today Mechthild and I can both laugh about the mosquito incident, but believe me, at the time it was a serious matter. I think this situation highlights the absurdness as well as the intensity of many conflicts that we all must face.

In a church setting you often have one member that does or says something, hurting the feelings of another member. The offended member has negative feelings for a day or usually much longer, and the following scenario is repeated thousands of times over every week in our Pentecostal and charismatic churches:

She replays whatever happened over and over in her mind. She even talks about it with other group members. Eventually, she calms down and the intensity of the initial bitterness begins to subside. However, the offended does not talk to the offender about what happened. The feelings subside, but they never disappear completely.⁶

Conflicts among groups or church members can take several forms:

- Chronic bickering between two members.
- Verbal abuse or harmful "put-down" remarks that demean other opinions or ideas.

⁵ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 3-4.

⁶ Patrick J. Mckenna and David H. Maister. "Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts," (Online Newsletter, Posted August 2002, accessed November 7, 2006.); available from <http://www.itstime.com/aug2002.htm#tips>.

- “Faulting” publicly the performance, attitude, or almost anything another colleague (member) does.
- A coolness between members such that they eliminate all but the most formal of interactions, ignore each other and give each other the cold shoulder or “silent treatment.”⁷

As leaders we need to be aware of interpersonal conflicts that take place among our members and especially those occurring between our leaders. Obviously we should not be at all surprised when these conflicts occur or even reoccur. With God’s help and His guidance we should be able to find normal responses that are not emotionally charged. Some conflicts can help bring creativity and new ideas into our church. Some conflicts will bring us to our knees and spiritual renewal can be the result for the local church. Gary Allen’s analysis aids us greatly as we take a proactive approach in conflict resolution:

Church conflict can be minimized and better managed by building strong, healthy communities of faith. When courageous leaders and loving people learn to overcome the pain of destructive conflict and experience the tremendous joy of productive interaction, they will eagerly work to sustain a healthy church. Conflict management, then, becomes an intentional, ongoing interpersonal and organizational process instead of a periodic reaction to conflicting events.⁸

All leaders must learn to deal effectively with conflict, and often they may be the source of. Pastors are potentially always in the firing line, due to their public presence and the many decisions they make for all to see. As leaders we often have difficulty dealing with various individuals, certain personality traits or idiosyncrasies. We must also accept the fact that our own personality traits are difficult for some of our church members to handle. John Gardner, leadership scholar and presidential advisor, very accurately states:

Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gary R. Allen, “Minimizing Conflict By Building Healthy Communities Of Faith,” *Enrichment Journal* 9 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 50.

⁹ John Gardner quoted by James A. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *A Leader’s Legacy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 27.

Conflict can be our teacher as we are forced to work through difficult situations in our life and in our leadership pursuits. In every conflict situation there is something we will learn about ourselves.¹⁰ Two questions follow that we should always ask in any given conflict situation:

- What is it that I need to learn?
- What is the person or situation trying to teach me?

Granted, most conflict situations are often very difficult to deal with, but through them we will often be forced to discover what is really important to us. In conflict situations the real priorities should come to the surface. In conflict situations we may also come to the realization about our own deficiencies and lack of capabilities. We need to become more self-aware - and self-awareness is still one of the most important predictor of successful leadership.¹¹

If friction is to result in fruit-filled lives, we must allow it to be our teacher, the one who shows me where I need to grow in wholeness and maturity.¹²

As we work through difficult conflict issues and major disagreements, we can be assured that others are watching closely to see if we persevere or just throw in the towel. If other workers in our church see us finding ways to resolve difficult conflicts as well as get along with difficult people, they too will be more apt to respond in the same way in their area of ministry when conflicts surface. In instances as just described, we as spiritual leaders are not just “talking the talk but we are walking the walk”. Being a good example in conflict management will enhance as well as strengthen our leadership position in the local church. Ronald Kaybill emphasizes the importance of intentionally managing conflict:

Manage conflict, or it will manage you. Whenever churches have faced conflict openly, the congregations have grown stronger in the process. But whenever they have hidden from conflict, it has emerged when congregations are the weakest and least prepared.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, 64.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joyce Huggett, *Creative Conflict: How to Confront and Stay Friends* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 43.

¹³ Ronald Kaybill quoted by Richard Dresselhaus, “Preemptive Strategies to Reduce Strife: A Study in Organizational and Management Systems,” *Enrichment Journal* 9 no. 3 (Summer 2005): 32.

As we develop a more thorough understanding of conflict and its resolution we will better understand human behavior and become more effective in our areas of ministry.¹⁴

Howard Markmann is extremely blunt when he defines what a good marriage is all about.

What keeps couples together or breaks them up is not how much they love each other or whether they have good sex, but how they handle conflict.¹⁵

Conflict in marriage and the church is a given, just as in the same way that paying taxes and death cannot be avoided. We may not enjoy conflict, but it is always just around the corner waiting for those who are active in ministry.

As we finish this unit let us break down into groups of two or three and respond to the questions on Handout Nr. 1. Your answers should be very spontaneous as each member of the group briefly expresses himself. Let us now pray: Lord we come to you in sincerity, and we are asking and also believing that we will receive. Give us the grace to accept the presence of conflict, and give us more grace to find a solution as spirit-led conflict resolvers. Our desire is to put you in the front seat as we minister to those in need. Amen.

Conflict in the Bible

The Bible describes conflict throughout its pages, yet interestingly enough the word conflict is never to be found. Words such as dispute, division, quarrel, strife, and contention are used in Scripture to describe interpersonal conflicts. In the first pages of the Bible conflict is depicted between God and His creation, as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience (Genesis 3). Adam immediately blames his wife for their precarious dilemma, and the "blaming others syndrome" enters into human history (Genesis 3). Let us try to imagine the interpersonal conflict that Adam and Eve must have felt as they were forced to leave paradise behind and begin a new existence in a life marked by

¹⁴ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 23.

¹⁵ Howard Markman quoted by Deborah Borisoff and David A. Victor. *Conflict Management: A Communication Skills Approach*, 2d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 3.

turmoil and pain, which up until then was unknown in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's two sons must also confront intense interpersonal conflict. Due to Cain's incessant jealousy, Cain puts his brother Abel to death (Genesis 4).

Throughout the Old Testament we are amazed to see how God's chosen leaders faced one conflict after another, and more often than not, they did not always make the best choices. A superficial overview of the Kings of Israel highlights with perhaps a few exceptions, the ineptness and often spiritual deficits of leaders, who were incapable of bringing about conflict resolution.

In the Gospels of the New Testament we are especially aware of the intense conflict that escalates between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. This conflict finally reaches its climax as the Jewish Sanhedrin encouraged Pilot to crucify Jesus instead of Barabas (John 18 & 19).

In the beginning of the early church we observe various conflict situations. In Acts chapter 6 there is much unrest amongst the Hellenistic Jewish widows, because they were being overlooked by the apostles as they waited on tables. In this conflict situation the Holy Spirit intervenes and grants wisdom to the church so that deacons are appointed who will oversee this ministry and the apostles will have more time to spend in prayer and preparation for teaching. Out of this conflict situation a resolution did evolve that very positively helped the early church to grow and mature.

In Acts 15, as the Council of Jerusalem convenes, the early church leaders wrestle with a major conflict that could have very easily divided the infant church if left unchecked. The question for debate centered on the question whether Gentile converts in other parts of the Roman Empire would also have to observe Jewish rituals before they could be considered true Christians? Once again we see the ministry of the Holy Spirit intervening in this heated matter and resolution is found. The decision of the Jerusalem Council is put in writing and is received with great joy by the Gentile churches.

Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:27-29)

As the first conflict is resolved in Acts 15, the interpersonal conflict between Paul and Barnabas reaches its climax at the end of the same chapter.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (Acts 15:37-40)

No doubt the brethren in Antioch tried to intervene as mediators in this dispute amongst two of their most highly esteemed spiritual leaders. It is interesting to note that the dispute could not be resolved, and still the brethren committed the two separate missionary teams to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:40). Over the years Paul's opinion of John Mark must have changed radically, as he requests Timothy to bring him to Rome since Mark has proven to be a help to Paul's ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

As we look at the epistles of Paul they are often written because of conflicts in teaching matters, moral questions, and interpersonal quarrellings that are taking place in the local church. Paul's letters are in themselves a type of conflict management excuse directed by the Holy Spirit to help the churches get past the different conflict that are holding the church back from spiritual maturity. The beginning of 1 Corinthians is a case in point:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:10-12)

Paul does an excellent job of putting the conflict issue on the table, so that it can be dealt with rather than avoided or ignored. In another incident we note Paul courageously addressing the fact that two of his co-workers in the Philipian church do not get along with each other and their conflict is having a negative effect on the church. Paul's approach is to be very proactive and get others in the body involved in helping these two sisters to find resolution.

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.

Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:3-4)

We will discuss later in more detail the effectiveness of Paul's approach to resolving conflict within the church.

Jim Van Yperen identifies five biblical truths about conflict that will help our further discussion:

- All conflict involves broken relationships.
- All conflict is in some measure about spiritual warfare.
- Conflict, like sin and death, is inevitable.
- Conflict is necessary.
- Conflict is an opportunity to trust God for positive change—to make peace.¹⁶

As we end this unit let us break down into groups of two or three and respond to the statements in Handout Nr. 2. Let us first pray: Lord, help us to be like the apostle Paul as he openly addressed conflict situations and was led by the Spirit to find an answer for those who are in conflict. We know we are your workmanship, created to do good works. Heavenly Father, please help us now. Amen.

The Causes of Conflict

One could assert that there are countless causes of conflict and thusly one will never be able to get a handle on them all. This attitude of resignation will not bring us further in our pursuit of effective conflict management. In this unit we will take a closer look at some of the typical causes of conflict, and hopefully, as we understand causes, our conflict resolution skills will improve. Before a medical doctor can accurately treat the symptoms that a patient is having, he or she must take the responsibility to understand the exact causes of the condition. When we are involved in conflict management, we too

¹⁶ Jim Van Yperen in "Biblically Understanding Church Conflict," (Posted October 19, 2005, accessed October 30, 2006); available from <http://www.fallennotforsaken.com/lenny/2005/10/>.

must do a diagnostic check-up to get at the root of the problem so we can better deal with symptoms of the conflict at hand.

The apostle James in his Epistle speaks very pointedly to the cause of conflicts that take place among Christian believers.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (James 4:1-4)

Ken Sande points out that church conflicts center around the desires of people. Some desires such as that of power and control are inherently sinful. On the other hand there are many good desires or ideas that can take on a controlling nature.¹⁷ It is sad to say, but many times these good desires, if unchecked, may cause major division in the local congregation.

There is nothing wrong in itself when a church member prefers red carpet in the fellowship room as opposed to tile covered floors. He may express his opinion and even try to influence the church board to make a decision to his liking. The real test will take place when the red carpet proponent does not get what he wants, and he now has to enjoy fellowship with his brothers and sisters on a tile covered floor. What does he do now? Will he accept the decision that has been made and simply move on? Norman Shawchuck points out several causes of conflict, which are unique to churches, since they are volunteer organizations.

In volunteer organizations most people believe they own the organization. This can be positive. If people in a volunteer organization do not feel ownership, the organization will not be effective. Conflict erupts, though, when one or two people or a particular group believe they should be in charge. A hotbed for trouble exists when 25 or 100 people feel they own the programs and personnel of the church.¹⁸

Shawchuck goes on to explain another source of conflict that is also unique to church congregations:

¹⁷ Sande, "The Peacemaking Church," *Enrichment Journal* 9 no. 3 (Summer 2005): 56.

¹⁸ Norman Shawchuck, "Staying Cool When the Heat's on: Causes and Cures for Conflict," *Enrichment Journal* 9 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 32.

Another factor that can intensify conflict is what I call an overlay of God. When I believe or cause you to believe that God has told me how or what I should do in the church, then God has also told me how you should behave. This creates an unusual kind of conflict where a God-dimension is introduced. Conflict in religious organizations can be brutal when opposing sides both claim God is on their side. When this happens, people often question each other's motives and spirituality. It is also difficult to deal with conflict when various people claim, "God told me."¹⁹

Shawchuck also points out that many churches become a haven for disenfranchised individuals who have great difficulty fitting into society in general.

People who do not function well in society often migrate to volunteer organizations because they believe the volunteer organization will care for them. It is one thing to work alongside people who are emotionally healthy, but it is another thing to work with people who are emotionally unhealthy. How do we structure our programs and our goals when we are working with people who can sap hours of our time and energy? In a straight-line organization — a non volunteer organization — they fire them; the church cannot do that. It is important, then, that pastors be trained to understand volunteer organizations.²⁰

Richard Mayer takes a secular approach and stresses that we as individuals are extremely vulnerable because we carry the "seeds of conflict within our storehouse of thoughts."²¹ Mayer asks the students who attend his conflict management classes to answer some very personal questions that no one else should see. I believe that when we honestly answer the following questions, it will greatly facilitate our effectiveness in helping us to resolve our own conflicts as well as the conflicts of others. Also, as we answer these questions, we can see how multifaceted the seeds of conflict can be for us as human beings these questions help to underscores the fact that there are no easy answers in conflict resolution.

1. What expectations do you have of your spouse or a close friend that has not been fulfilled?
2. What expectations does your spouse or a close friend have of you that you believe may not have been fulfilled?
3. What things do you feel guilty about?
4. What regrets do you have?

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Richard Mayer, *Conflict Management: The Courage to Confront*, (Columbus: Battelle, 1995), 152.

5. What pet peeves and things about others are difficult for you to tolerate?
6. What attributes or traits do you have that you are not happy about?
7. In what areas of your life do you sense a lack of confidence?
8. List any grudges you may be holding?
9. What Stereotypes or prejudices do you hold on to?²²

We, who know the Lord personally, are very confident in bringing these very challenging areas of our lives to the Master. We can have the confidence that He will help us to resolve these very personal areas.

Bernhard Mayer sees conflict rising from basic human instincts where there is competition for resources and power. Even the societies and institutions people create result in inevitable interpersonal struggles.²³

At the center of all conflicts are human needs. People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have (or believe they have) needs that are inconsistent with those of others. My major point for now is that people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or settled unless these needs are addressed in some way.²⁴

Richard Mayer believes that we build walls to shield ourselves from the irritating mannerisms of people, and when these mannerisms or idiosyncrasies are repeated over time, the walls will become higher.²⁵

Once they are in place, they are very difficult to deal with because of their complexity and/or the behaviors that have contributed to their construction. Once a wall is up, the builders usually need help to tear it down.²⁶

The following is a list of mannerisms and behaviors which Richard Mayer has observed as expressions of walls which have been constructed. For those of us in pastoral ministry we can easily say that these irritations continually occur in our congregations.

²² Ibid. I have revised Mayer's questions so that the wording is more appropriate for church pastors and church elders.

²³ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Richard Mayer, *Conflict Management*, 45.

²⁶ Ibid.

dirty looks	snub	argumentative
bypass	irritation	mind reading
assumptions	misunderstanding	analyzing
stereotype	attributed motives	them vs us
appearance	jumping to conclusions	jargon
type cast	personal style	not listening
habit	mistake	misperception
mannerism	interrupting	“he said”...not being recognized... ²⁷
expectation	wrong word	

It is important that we pay attention not to build these walls for others. We should also pay close attention to avoid conflict in that we help others to take down such walls. Better yet, we need to be aware when others are still building walls, as these walls are much easier to take down before they are fully erected.

As pastors and elders we need to be aware of the typical causes of conflict in most church settings.

Power struggles - People will take sides with the leader or worker that they personally support. It seems everyone wants to be a part of someone’s fan club. This cause of conflict is highlighted by Paul’s admonition to the Corinthian church, which still runs rampant in many of our churches today.

You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:3-4)

Different perspectives - Everyone sees the world a little bit different. Ten people can observe the same occurrence and often see ten different things.

Different goals - This is one of the things occurring in so many churches. People think they are saying the same thing, yet they have very different goals. Some people have hidden agendas which makes things even more difficult.

Different values - It is amazing how believers of one church can have such diverse and different values. Our leadership team and the various ministries in our church must continually work at developing unity in our value system. This type of unity does not happen by itself, but in being consistent over time the Holy Spirit will give us clear direction.

²⁷ Ibid, 46.

Personality clashes - There are certain personalities that just cannot function together. We need to accept this fact and move on.

Unrealistic expectations - Here is where the greatest disappointments take place. I expect my church to be a center for prayer, and then I discover most people are not interested in seeking God in prayer. Joyce Huggett summarizes what many people feel when expectations are not being met.

Unclarified expectations in fellowships, as in marriage, frequently result in disillusionment, frustration and despair, because when we nurse unrealistic hopes of another person or relationship, there is only one thing that person or relationship can do. Fail.²⁸

Sin - When people intentionally disobey God in gossip and other sins of the flesh there is no question that the church will be hurt and conflict will take place. Ultimately those who do not repent of sin must be dealt with according to the guidelines found in Mathew 18.

There are several additional sources that we can identify when dealing with conflict in the church.

Personal issues - So many people in our society today are insecure due to growing up in dysfunctional family settings. Many times people who are causing conflict in the church are simply reacting to a set script, because this is the role that they have learned in their upbringing. I have personally observed that individuals who have a difficult time relating to their father as an authority figure will also have more of a challenge to submit to male leadership in the local church. Men and women who deal with insecurity often get caught up in comparing themselves with others on a personal and even spiritual level. Usually these individuals are unaware of this behavior and it is necessary that we have continuing teaching in the church regarding the secure position of the believer in Christ.

Material issues - This is one of the major areas over which churches and their members can become divided. Anytime a church must cut its budget and salary cuts follow or staff are let go, conflict is bound to follow. Here the blame game takes place as to who must take responsibility for the lack of finances. Churches are not like other institutions where budgeting and funding take place. Every department and department head desires that he or she gets their fair share of the funding pie. Often intense struggles occur when one

²⁸ Joyce Huggett, *Creative Conflict*, 31-32.

group in the church feels they are getting the shorter end financially. Church members are very sensitive as to how money is properly spent as well as improperly spent.

Ideological and theological differences - Pentecostal churches are very easily prone to division due to these types of issues which can become very divisive. We must face the fact that there is an “over glut” of theological information in the Christian media, be it on television, in print, or on internet websites, all offering our church members an overfilled plate of ideas and theories. Every pastor knows the challenge of trying to satisfy the theological itch that strikes different member from time to time. It is very difficult dealing with those who want to transplant spiritual renewal from one geographic setting to another. With all the extreme teachings and ideas available, it remains imperative that we preach a message that focuses on the whole counsel of God.

We cannot be naive about the causes of conflict that have already been mentioned. It is important that we get our leadership teams on board who can lay a foundation for sound teaching. There are those who speak of great spiritual insights, yet, if left unattended, they can cause destruction in the body. Jesus teaches us to be aware of such people and their teaching (Matthew 7:15-23).

As we come to the end of this unit let us ask the Lord to give us wisdom and insight as we watchfully shepherd the flock entrusted to us. We are not alone, the “chief shepherd” is leading us and we can be confident that He knows where green pasture is to be found. The words of the apostle Paul give guidance as we deal with the causes of conflict.

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:14-15)

Being a Peacemaker

As spiritual leaders we need to grasp more fully how to develop a peacemaker lifestyle. Peacemakers do not simply put their hands in their laps, but often are in the

middle of conflict, seeking to reconcile church members and workers. Peacemakers are often risk takers, willing to enter the fray with an expanded heart. David Augsburger describes the peacemaking task in ministry as being very multifaceted.

Peacemakers risk, stepping into moments of conflicts to do curative peace work, to heal torn relationships, and even to do a bit of surgery where needed. And they're also concerned about preventive peacemaking. They look for building hostilities – and help to relieve them while they're still forming before they reach the explosive stage.²⁹

It is absolutely necessary that we allow the Lord to touch our heart in such a way that we can minister to people caught up in conflict in a edifying manner as well as encourage those who have little hope due to the conflict they are facing. I am personally very touched how Ken Sande portrays the ministry of a peacemaker.

Peacemakers are people who breathe grace. They draw continually on the goodness and power of Jesus Christ, and then they bring his love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom to the conflicts of daily living.³⁰

The lifestyle of a peacemaker will leave a pleasant fragrance or sweet aroma that is enjoyed and greatly appreciated by those who come in contact with us. In Ecclesiastes 10:4 we note that, “calmness can lay great errors to rest”. When people realize that we are at peace with ourselves and more importantly at peace with our Lord, we will be able to lead them through the ministry of reconciliation in a more meaningful way. Also when people are aware of the gentleness given to us by the Lord they will acknowledge that the Lord is near (Philippians 4:5). Gary Allen highlights the ministry of reconciliation as an expression of the presence of Christ:

Jesus described the ministers of reconciliation as peacemakers. In the Beatitudes, Jesus placed peacemaking high on the list of Christian characteristics when He said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). James described the harvest of those who sow in peace: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17, 18).³¹

²⁹ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront*, 137.

³⁰ Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 11.

³¹ Gary R. Allen, “Minimizing Conflict By Building Healthy Communities”: 58.

It is our sincere desire to bring in a harvest of righteousness. God is able to give each one of us a deep peace that passes all human comprehension (Philippians 4:7). I do want to be a servant of peace for the living God. Ken Sande presents a checklist of four prerequisites for those who desire to be a peacemaker in a conflict ridden world. These four prerequisites or principles are the heading for the four divisions of his excellent book. I need to continually question myself concerning these following principles in any given conflict situation.

1. Am I glorifying God?

This remains our highest pursuit as men and women of the Kingdom. The Psalms present to us a beautiful picture of what true adoration and worship should be. Every peacemaker needs to be worshipping the Prince of Peace. Every believer who is looking for conflict resolution must raise his eyes above this earthly plain. The apostle Paul encourages men and women to rejoice in the Lord continually (Philippians 4:4). We need to personally experience and practice the rejoicing life even as we are assisting others to find solutions in their conflicts.

2. Am I getting the log out of my own eye?

It is so much easier for us to focus on the other person and their misdeeds. These misdeeds are right out there for me to see. As peacemakers and those who are always seeking peace, we need to take a very close look at ourselves from the inside out.

We encourage people to take responsibility for their contribution to the conflict before pointing a finger at someone else. Usually the whole complexion of conflict changes dramatically when one person says, “Here is what I did wrong.”³²

3. Am I gently restoring?

Again it is so easy for us for us to become harsh when a brother or sister happens to fall into sin. God help us to be men and women with a gentle spirit who can help those who have left the track to get back on the track. Let us not forget that we too are fellow sojourners who are prone to every sin imaginable, except by the grace of God. As we

³² Ken Sande, “The Peacemaking Church”: 58.

cling to God, He will help us. The apostle Paul gives us clear direction about what attitude we need when a brother or sister falls:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1-2)

4. Am I seeking forgiveness and reconciliation?

I have heard various Christians aptly say, we are not perfect but we are forgiven. The two points of this statement are so very true. I need to seek forgiveness from that brother or sister whom I have hurt. Even if I believe I have not done anything wrong, I will go to them and with God's grace make things right.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-23)

As we finish this unit Paul's words should gently remind us that we must always be in the pursuit of peace. When our lives remain in the peacemaking mode, this will result in blessings for those we minister to and well as for ourselves.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

Caring Confrontation

When we observe one of our church members or workers struggling in some way or maybe even caught up in sin, we do have a God-given responsibility to caringly confront them. Our goal must always be the ministry of restoration. Many times people exhibit behaviors or mannerisms that are not sinful but in their outward expressions do cause irritation in the congregation. Often people may not be aware of their behaviors and its effects on others, and it can be very beneficial indeed when someone confronts them in a spirit of love.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)

In caring confrontation we are speaking the truth in love with the goal of helping our brother or sister to grow in faith. The word caring is perceived by many Christians as a very good word, yet for many Christians the word confronting has only negative connotations. Putting these two words together provides the balance of love and power which lead to effective human relationships.³³

Through caring confrontation, we often discover something that lies deeper than what we are seeing at the surface of the brother or sister we are trying to help. Initially, many people recoil or do not respond well to caring confrontation. As humans we are constructed in a way that we usually prefer to go it all alone in our personal conflicts as opposed to seeking the help of another person. Abraham Maslow points out that once people know and realize the truth about themselves, it can be a very liberating experience.

After you get over the pain, eventually self-knowledge is a very nice thing. It feels good to know about something rather than to wonder.³⁴

I remember one time confronting a woman in the church I pastored about a particular matter in her life, and afterwards she was positively different. Each time she saw me during the next few times at church she would run up to me and embrace me. She felt so blessed to experience caring confrontation, since it was a help for her to deal with a difficult issue in her life. Of course I could relate other situations, where my caring confrontation, did not bear this kind of fruit. McKenna and Maister state the following:

However, unhealthy dysfunctional behavior so often results, usually due to chronic reluctance to air the issues. We all are prone to chronic avoidance in our important relationships. When two (or more) professionals are in conflict, if you, as group leader, don't intervene to help them talk out their problems, negative feelings may intensify to the point of seeking release — the psychological equivalent of a toxic spill.³⁵

M. Scott Peck points out two very different ways at our disposal to confront individuals:

There are, then, two ways to confront or criticize another human being: with instinctive

³³ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront*, 9.

³⁴ Abraham Maslow quoted by Richard Mayer, *Conflict Management*, 93.

³⁵ Patrick J. McKenna and David H. Maister, "Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts".

and spontaneous certainty that one is right, or with a belief that one is probably right arrived at through scrupulous self-doubting and self-examination. The first is the way of arrogance ...The second is the way of humility.³⁶

Here are a few points to consider before we do confront someone about a particular issue.³⁷

1. Timing is critical.

We do not want to move too soon or nor do we want to wait too long. By waiting too long additional problems may occur. It is always better to call the fire department when we see smoke coming from a house than wait until the flames are rising up through the roof.

2. The place.

There is a right place and a wrong place for a caring confrontation. It is always advisable to find a place where you can speak together without any interruptions. Email and telephone calls are very impersonal and limit the care you can show. Try to find the most relaxed situation possible. Avoid sitting across from your desk with the person you are confronting.

3. Get the facts.

What we perceive as truth is often very different from reality. Appearances can be very misleading and that is why it is important to ask caring questions to the person you are confronting. Here are a few ways to frame your questions:

- Use open, not closed questions.
- Use leading, not loaded questions “What makes you feel the way you do now”?
- Use cool, not heated questions.
- Use planned, not impulsive questions.
- Use treat, not trick questions
- Use window, not mirror questions.³⁸

³⁶ M Scott Peck quoted by Richard Mayer, *Conflict Management*, 48.

³⁷ Lori S. O’Dea, “Know When and How to Confront” (class notes for Managing Conflict and Change at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Mo., 17 October 2006).

³⁸ Lori S. O’Dea, “Asking Good Questions” (class notes for Managing Conflict and Change at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Mo., 18 October 2006).

4. Depersonalize the issue.

Do not try to make the issue into some kind of great personal problem. Always separate the issue from the person himself. You do have to point out to a person if there is sin in her or his life, but you can do it in such a way that the person knows he or she is genuinely accepted and loved by you as fellow believer.

5. Don't prolong the confrontation.

In other words, don't drag it out and make it to be a bigger deal than it really is. Theatrics can be very detrimental when you are trying to help someone find the right way to go. Caring confrontation does not need to last for hours at a time.

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny et al, talk about a pleasant surprise that can take place in caring confrontation.

At the foundation of every successful confrontation lies safety. When others feel frightened or nervous or otherwise unsafe, you can't talk about anything. But if you can create safety, you can talk with almost anyone about almost anything—even about failed promises. People feel unsafe when they believe one of two things: 1 You don't respect them as a human being (you lack Mutual Respect). 2 You don't care about their goals (you lack mutual Purpose).³⁹

Creating safety is the underlying notion for effective caring confrontation. Caring always comes first, which is then followed by confrontation. It is necessary that we create a context of caring that shows the other person that we are genuinely and sincerely concerned about them as a person.⁴⁰ David Augsburger summarizes in a very plausible manner the groundwork for caring.

- A context of caring must come before confrontation.
- A sense of support must be present before criticism.
- An experience of empathy must precede evaluation.
- A basis of trust must be laid before one risks advising.
- A floor of affirmation must undergird any assertiveness.
- A gift of understanding opens the way to disagreeing.

³⁹ Kerry Patterson and others, *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 90-91

⁴⁰ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront*, 52.

- An awareness of love sets us free to level with each other.⁴¹

David Augsburger also provides spiritual leaders an excellent overview of the balancing of caring and confronting that takes place in any given situation. It is imperative that we always ask how are we doing as we minister to people in need.

Caring

Confronting

I care about our relationship.

I feel deeply about the issue at stake

I want to hear your view.

I want to clearly express mine.

I want to respect your insight.

I want respect for mine.

I trust you to be able to handle my honest feelings.

I want you to trust me with yours.

I promise to stay with the discussion until we have reached an understanding.

I want you to keep working with me until we've reached a new understanding.

I will not trick, pressure, manipulate, or distort the differences.

I want your unpressured, clear, honest view of our differences.

I give you my loving, honest respect.

I want your caring-confronting response.⁴²

As we conclude this unit it will be profitable for us to look at John Maxwell's Ten Commandments of Confrontation. Please take a few minutes to recall a recent caring confrontation that you imitated and answer the questions in Handout Nr. 3. These answers should be for your eyes only. Of course, you have the option to discuss your responses with a close friend or your mentor. With God's grace we can all improve our caring confrontation skills. The following guidelines have proven to be practical and very effective.

1. Do it privately, not publicly.
2. Do it as soon as possible.
3. Address one issue at a time.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 15.

4. Avoid unnecessary repetition.
5. Deal only with actions the person can change.
6. Avoid sarcasm.
7. Avoid words like “always” and “never.”
8. Present criticism as suggestions or questions if possible.
9. Don’t apologize for the confrontational meeting.
10. Don’t forget the compliments, but be sincere – communicate value (appreciate, correct, encourage).⁴³

This is my prayer. Dear father help me to confront those whom you have chosen only with a spirit of love and compassion. Help me never to be condemning or condescending. Just as you have forgiven me so many times let your forgiving spirit be evident to the brother or sister I am ministering to. Amen.

Conflict Resolution

In this unit we want to look at several practical ways to bring about conflict resolution. There are a multitude of approaches that can be taken but it is imperative for each conflict resolver to discover the approach that best fits her or his personal style. When we mediate in a conflict it is of utmost important that we maintain friendly relationships. Norman Shawchuck underscores the importance of this cordial approach:

A person who manages conflict well will engage in conflict in such a way to ensure persons are not hurt by the conflict and that relationships are not damaged — even at the expense of his personal goals and interests, if necessary. This is the foundation of the accommodating style. Those who use this style want to take care of other people even at the expense of taking care of themselves.⁴⁴

Conflict resolvers need to be led by the Spirit and also need to pray that the fruit of the Spirit will be experienced in their personal lives as well as being made evident to the people we are trying to assist.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

⁴³ John Maxwell, John, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 124-125.

⁴⁴ Norman Shawchuck, “Managing Strife with Style,” *Enrichment Journal* 9 no. 3 (Summer 2005): 67.

As conflict resolvers we should be continually attempting to grow in wisdom so that we will know which questions are to be asked. In most conflict situations we have the task of asking questions that have not as of yet been raised. Joyce Huggett has come up with a set of appropriate questions that need to be carefully addressed by those individuals who are caught up in a conflict situation. We as conflict resolvers should help the individual or parties to answer this set of questions. Sometimes the questions can be approached with the two parties being together, but more often than not, each individual will probably answer the question alone.

- What am I expecting from this fellowship/relationship?
- What can I give to it?
- Are my expectations realistic?
- What do I appreciate about the person with whom I am locked in conflict?
- What is it about me that refuses to acknowledge the good in him/her?
- What is it about me that finds it hard to voice his worth?
- What is it about me that does not want to support him?
- What is it about me that needs to change?
- What is it about me that cannot cope with this relationship?
- Are we for each other or against each other?
- Do we want this relationship to glorify God?
- Is there something in me disrupting the unity of God's people?
- Lord show me where I have failed. Bring me to place of repentance.⁴⁵

Shawchuck has presented five essential elements for conflict resolution. I will list each element and then comment on each one individually.⁴⁶

1. Learn to recognize and address a conflict in its earliest stages.

This is something we all know intrinsically, but emotionally we find difficult to practice. We have the notion or the hope that the ensuing conflict will go away by itself or at least the disputing parties will simply let the issue rest. Conflicts that are postponed will usually reappear at a future time that is even more inconvenient than the beginning. Jeffery Mayer expresses the benefit of being proactive from the beginning when solving problems.

⁴⁵ Joyce Huggett, *Creative Conflict*, 43-44.

⁴⁶ Norman Shawchuck, "Managing Strife with Style": 68.

And what happens to a little problem that doesn't get resolved when it's little? It gets bigger and bigger until it becomes a real problem that's going to require a lot of time, energy, and resources to be solved. It's much easier to confront problems early, while they're still small and manageable. When a problem isn't addressed quickly, it can easily spin out of your control.⁴⁷

We procrastinate in this phase of conflict management because most of us simply do not enjoy conflict of any kind. We prefer to be teddy bears and enjoy cuddling time rather than times of tension and division. However, we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead and direct us in the same way that Nathan was instructed of the Lord to confront David (2 Samuel 12). An unknown person has said there are two rules for procrastination. 1) Do it today. 2) Tomorrow will be today tomorrow.

Through early intervention in a conflict situation we will probably have less damage control to deal with as opposed to waiting until it is too late. Early intervention may prevent the interpersonal destruction that often ensues as problems go unattended.

2. Keep everyone focused on the conflict issues.

It is important that we clearly define the issue that each party is concerned about. There is a tendency for people to focus in on too many areas or issues which in the end brings greater confusion and even more conflict. As individuals it is so easy for us to get side tracked or bogged down by matters that do not pertain to the priority issue at hand. As a conflict resolver we will need much wisdom and fortitude to keep the individuals or parties focuses on the conflict we are trying to resolve. We will continually have to remind the participants about what the issue is and in this way we will avoid chasing rabbits.

3. Provide the three “Ps” of conflict management.

a. Permission: Give the parties permission to disagree without feeling guilty.

This is one of our most important tasks as conflict resolvers because we truly want each person or party to communicate openly, even when an issue is tension-filled. We can take the pressure off the individual by reaffirming that conflict in itself is neutral

⁴⁷ Jeffery J Mayer, *Success is a Journey: 7 Steps to Achieving Success in the Business of Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999), 108.

and everyone experience conflict in his life from time to time. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, even as they share their deepest hurts and fears that have resulted from a point of contention (Romans 8:1). We are the coach who helps team members to express their emotions when things do not go as they were planned in the game.

b. Potency: Enable each one to state his position with strength and clarity.

Even as individuals are sharing their feelings and opinions in a conflict situation we can help them to more clearly express what they mean. Asking questions as, “you mean to say you felt slighted when Tom did not invite you to his house for Judy’s birthday”? As the Lord grants us wisdom we will help the various parties to more readily express the issue at hand. Too often people beat around the bush when they are trying to discuss their deepest personal differences. Conflict resolvers do a great service as they help to get the real issues on the table so that a solution can be found.

c. Protection: Keep each one from being needlessly hurt and from needlessly hurting others.

People are already emotionally experiencing hurt when they ask for our help. It is important that we do all in our power to protect them from becoming even more hurt. We can determine the guidelines about how the parties will deal with various conflict issues. We may have to ask one party to speak more gently or even ask someone not to bring up that issue, since it does not relate to point of discussion. It is good for the individuals in a conflict to know that we are there to protect them, as well as the other individuals who are involved.

4. Enable the parties to see a way out of the conflict situation by suggesting options to their present policies and/or behavior.

The alert conflict resolver will recognize possible points of agreement even as the two parties communicate their areas of concerns. Being a neutral mediator presents us

with unique solutions that often cannot be seen by those who are entangled in a heated conflict. Again as conflict resolvers we can pray to the Lord for wisdom and strength.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

5. Work to turn every conflict into a problem to be solved — and involve all parties in searching for solutions to the problem.

As conflict resolvers we do not resign ourselves to failure but take a proactive view that problems can lead to very creative solutions. As mentioned before in this seminar, the first deacons were appointed in the early church due to a major crisis that was taking place amongst the Hellenistic widows. (Acts 6:1-4) The ministry of deacons then and until now has been a wonderful ministry in the church. At this juncture we want to take the collaboration approach which Shawchuck describes in his pictures of the wise owl.

The owl is concerned about the group at large and places equal emphasis on the goals of each member of the group. The goal of the owl is to safeguard the interests of the group as a whole. He does this by getting all the parties fully involved in defining the conflict and in carrying out mutually agreeable steps for managing the conflict. He believes conflict can be managed in such a way as to strengthen the organization and relationships. He sits above the petty scimmages in the congregation and observes, ponders, and remembers. When the owl speaks, people listen because they know the owl seldom speaks, and when he does speak he always offers wise counsel.⁴⁸

The National School Board Association offers some very helpful guidelines for finding consensus. This is an approach that can easily be applied to a church board or other committee that is engaged in a conflict situation. These guidelines will aid us as we help a group navigate through difficult waters.

- Avoid arguing over individual ranking or position. Present a position as logically as possible.
- Avoid "win-lose" statements. Discard the notion that someone must win.
- Avoid changing of minds only in order to avoid conflict and to achieve harmony.
- Avoid majority voting, averaging, bargaining, or coin flipping. These do not lead to consensus. Treat differences of opinion as indicative of incomplete sharing of relevant information, keep asking questions.

⁴⁸ Norman Shawchuck, "Managing Strife with Style": 68.

- Keep the attitude that holding different views is both natural and healthy to a group.
- View initial agreement as suspect. Explore the reasons underlying apparent agreement and make sure that members have willingly agreed.⁴⁹

As conflict resolvers we must be aware that we cannot solve every problem. The individuals we coach must ultimately find the solution themselves. We must also accept the fact that sometimes the parties we try to help will make bad decisions, which they do have a right to. We must be faithful to that task which God has called us to and we must leave the results with Him.

Improving Communication

Whoever desires to improve conflict management skills must also work diligently to improve his or her communication skills. We do not just want to better communicate the vision God has given for our ministry, but desire to speak in a clearer way which will bring more edification and encouragement to the people of our congregation. Through God-given communication skills, men and women will be brought to a closer walk with the Lord. Solomon expresses what the goals of our heart-felt communication should be:

Pleasing words are like honey. They are sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
(Proverbs. 16:5)

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)

Language is a very delicate instrument - it can cause a conflict to escalate or take the very wind out of its sails. Whoever speaks loudly, always repeating himself, will only help to escalate the conflict rather than find a solution that each person can live with. The two disputing parties should always agree to a “wishful language style” as opposed to taking the “blame one another” approach.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “Dealing with Conflict,” (National School Board Association, accessed 6 November 2006); available from <http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html>.

⁵⁰ “Wenn schon streiten, dann richtig,” (Focus Online, accessed 28 October 2006); available from <http://focus.msn.de/jobs/karriere/konfliktmanagement>.

As one of the most important elements in effective communication, especially in light of conflict resolution, one must be a superb listener. An Argentinean proverb expresses it this way, "We sow by speaking, we reap by listening." Jeffrey Mayer also emphasizes the importance of listening:

You'll go further in life by being a good listener than being a good talker. When was the last time you heard someone say: "I *listened* myself out of a sale?"⁵¹

Another proverb of unknown origin expresses the priority in listening, "The world is divided up into two types of people: Those who love to talk and those who hate to listen." The real art of listening can best be described by someone who feels sincerely listened to:

- When I was with B... I found myself saying things I've never allowed myself to say before.
- I felt really heard.
- I felt affirmed and acknowledged.
- We had a great conversation – even though the listener didn't say much.⁵²

Active listening is occurring when the listener allows his own opinions and reactions to be put on the backburner, concentrating his efforts to fully understand what the person is saying as he speaks. At this moment, the listener is giving the impression to the person speaking, that he the listener wants to hear even more. Always summarize briefly the words of the speaker before you respond. "Have I understood you to say?" or, "Is this especially important to you?" The reaction of the speaker will now let you know if you have adequately understood what has been said.⁵³ Steven Covey sheds further light on effective communication:

The crucial dimension in communication is the relationship. Many troublesome knots develop in communication lines because of poor interpersonal relations. When relationships are strained, we must be very careful about the words we use or we risk giving offense, causing a scene, or being misunderstood. When relationships are poor, people become suspicious and distrustful.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jeffrey J Mayer, *Success is a Journey*, 173.

⁵² Dale Hunter and others, *The Zen of Groups*, (Gower Publishing, Hampshire, England, 1998), 56.

⁵³ "Wenn schon streiten," Focus Online.

⁵⁴ Steven Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 112.

Bernhard Mayer addresses as one of the key difficulties in communication our lack of understanding or comprehension.

Many factors may contribute to communication problems. Culture, gender, age, class, and environment significantly affect individuals' ability to communicate effectively. People often rely on inaccurate or incomplete perceptions, tend to form stereotypes, and carry into their communications conclusions drawn from former interactions or experiences. They are also inclined to try to solve problems before they understand them. The greater the duress a person is under, the harder it is for him or her to communicate (and often the more important it is as well).⁵⁵

For those of us in ministry leadership it is imperative that we help our members and workers understand the gender differences in our congregation, as well as work toward a greater understanding of one another. Whether we are talking about gender, different cultures, or different age groups, the following points should help us to work through any differences.

- Communication differences
- Relationship-building differences
- Power struggle
- Stereotypes of both⁵⁶

Our ultimate goal is to eliminate as much stereotyping as possible in our local congregations. I remember riding in the back seat of a car driven by one of our church elders in Germany who began complaining about the way the person was driving on the boulevard in front of him. His comment was, “that must be a crazy woman driver.” When we got to the next corner, the elder’s wife sitting next to him said, “Look honey, that crazy driver is a man.” I feel that there is too much gender stereotyping being accepted by our churches. Typical stereotypes would be: women are more likely to gossip than men or women are more emotional than men. My prayer is that men and women will have a higher respect for one another as they lovingly acknowledge gender differences. As Paul so beautifully addresses the differences we may have as he writes to the church in Galatia.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized

⁵⁵ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 10.

⁵⁶ Lori S, O’Dea, “Cultural Conflict Issues: Men vs. Women” (class notes for Managing Conflict and Change at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Mo., 18 October 2006).

into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 26-28)

For the most part people are curious about other cultures even though there may be some conflict involved. They want to better understand how people live and look at life. It is very stimulating getting to know how other cultures view life and even how those different than ourselves express themselves in their own families.

The more people understand their own culture, the deeper their understanding of others can be. The more they work with other cultures, the greater their sensitivity and understand.⁵⁷

Genuine understanding is needed in a world where so many people feel like they are being totally misunderstood. Here is an opportunity for improving human communication and understanding that the local church often overlooks or ignores. George Barma describes communication as an art that is founded on some core principles. These principles can be applied to dealing with an individual or a group caught up in a major conflict situation.

1. Effective communicators understand how an audience absorbs information.
2. Effective communicators understand what an audience will pay attention to.
3. Effective communicators convey a meaningful message to the audience.
4. Effective communicators seek and evaluate feedback so that subsequent communications will continue to hit the mark and have the desired influence.⁵⁸

These are questions that we will need to answer in a thoughtful way as we walk men and women through the conflicts that they face. Are we as spiritual leaders adequately communicating that what we really want to say? We do not want to close the gate to good communication, but rather we desire to be those who open the gate wide for all to enter. Bernhard Mayer makes it absolutely clear that there are many challenges and hurdles to be faced along the way toward open communication.

Sometimes communication takes more energy and focus than someone is able or willing to give at a critical point, and it is easy to become discouraged or hopeless about communicating effectively in serious conflicts. Despite all these problems, people can and do muddle through when they communicate, and they can work on improving communication, even in very intense conflicts. Communication is one of the

⁵⁷ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 88.

⁵⁸ George Barma, *The Second coming of the Church*, (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998.), 57.

greatest sources of both difficulty and hope in dealing with serious conflicts.⁵⁹

It would be beneficial for us to investigate some of the most common barriers in communication. As such barriers are eliminated, communication will become more effective for those who are trying to resolve conflict situations.

- Sender has poor knowledge of the subject or is inadequately prepared.
- Sender does not believe in the message or support the policy behind it.
- Receiver has poor knowledge of subject or is inadequately prepared.
- Receiver is not interested in the subject.
- Sender or receiver is temporarily preoccupied.
- People unintentionally fail to say what they mean.
- Sender and receiver have different vocabularies.
- Cultural differences exist between communicators.
- Professional differences exist between communicators.
- Communicators have different assumptions.
- Status differences (leader-member) exist between communicators.
- One of the communicators has negative or hostile reactions to the other.
- One or both parties are unintentionally mis-communicating.
- Outside interference or distractions have occurred.
- Pressure of time does not allow effective communications to occur.⁶⁰

At the closing part of this unit please take a few minutes to fill out your response to Handout Nr. 4. After each statement write a few words depicting a situation that correlates with the statement being made. For example, “When Bob met with his Superintendent last year.” You can write about yourself or someone else. After each statement, write about a separate situation. Your answers should be for your eyes only.

Now that we have filled out the handout let us ponder the following words of the Psalmist David:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalms 19:14)

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus, please help us to utilize the words of our mouth to glorify your name. It is so easy for us to speak degrading and unkind words. We seek your help and divine intervention. As we have prayed many times before, please change our heart

⁵⁹ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, 10.

⁶⁰ “Communication Style,” (National School Board Association, accessed 28 October 2006); available from <http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html>.

so that its natural expression can only be words that encourage and edify those whom you bring our way for ministry. Amen.

The Power of Forgiveness

At the beginning of October 2006 the American public was once again confronted with another horrible school slaying. Five Amish school children in Lancaster County Pennsylvania were mercilessly gunned down by Charles Carl Roberts, who then took his own life. What also shocked the American public after this brutal killing was the willingness of the parents of the slain children to offer sincere heart-felt forgiveness to the murderer's family. Gertrude Huntington, a Michigan researcher and expert on children in Amish society was quoted as saying, "The hurt is very great, but they don't balance the hurt with hate."⁶¹

Forgiveness is an integral part of the Christian life that every true believer should experience, as well as demonstrate to others. Some of Christ's very last words spoken on the cross focus on forgiveness. Jesus extended forgiveness to the thief who recognized that Christ was the true Messiah (Luke 23: 43-44). Also we see the love of the Savior being demonstrated as he unconditionally forgives those who have put him through tremendous anguish and unimaginable pain (Luke 23:34). Here we see a clear picture of the reconciliatory work of Christ in action as preordained by the father.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Jesus as well as Steven forgave their murderers in the hour of death, even when their attackers were unwilling to consider forgiveness and reconciliation (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:59, 60). Even though Christians hear so much teaching about forgiveness, still forgiveness as a life concept remains very difficult to get your arms around.

⁶¹ "Amish Forgive, Pray and Mourn," (CBS News Online, October 4, 2006, accessed 7 November 2006); available from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/10/04/>.

As we are engaged in assisting others to find conflict resolution we cannot ignore this blessed fruit of Christ's redemptive work on the cross. It is sad to say, but too few church conflict situations end with true forgiveness as demonstrated by Christ. David Augsburger asserts in a very poignant manner the dilemma that we find ourselves in.

In a world of flawed communication, community is possible through understanding others. In a world of painful alienation, community is created by accepting others. In a world of broken trust, community is sustained by forgiveness.⁶²

Being in ministry for over 30 years I can easily identify with the insight of R. T. Kendall through his experience when people repent of their harmful ways:

If we wait for those who have hurt us to repent first, we will almost certainly wait for a long, long time. We also give ourselves a justification to stay bitter the rest of our lives.⁶³

David Augsburger writes that we do not need to become too theological about whether repentance or forgiveness comes first when Christians make wrongs right with one another.

Is this merely a chicken and egg riddle? If both repentance and forgiveness are needed to renegotiate relationships with integrity and openness, what does it matter which one comes first as long as both occurs.⁶⁴

The writer to the Hebrews admonishes us to never allow a bitter root to grow because it will "cause trouble and defile many". (Hebrews 12:15) Only a few people that have hurt or offended me have actually come and ask for true forgiveness. Once at the end of a church service a lady came to me representing a man whom I had not seen for years, who asked her to ask me to forgive him. Of course I did forgive him, but I thought it might have been better to hear from my brother's own words. Concerning forgiveness, most people who have hurt me never say anything and simply try to relate to me as if nothing ever happened. This behavior I do not generally find offensive because I have forgiven them. Kendall goes on to say:

⁶² David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive: True Forgiveness and Caring Enough to Not Forgive: False Forgiveness*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 78.

⁶³ R. T. Kendall, "Forgiving the Unrepentant," *Christianity Today*, March, 2005, 78.

⁶⁴ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, 68.

Nine out of ten people I have to forgive don't think they have done anything wrong to me, which suggests that I, too, have hurt people without knowing.⁶⁵

So here we are again, coming full circle around, being totally dependent upon the Lord's forgiveness as we help men and women navigate through difficult conflict situations. Ken Sande paints a picture for us to see, what true forgiveness is all about.⁶⁶ Our desire as leaders should be to experience more of this "full forgiveness" in our own lives so that we can lead those to whom we minister to this higher plateau of knowing things are right. For Sande, true forgiveness makes four promises:

- I will not dwell on this incident.
- I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.
- I will not talk to other about this incident.
- I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.⁶⁷

Allen makes an accurate assessment concerning the fact that not everyone involved in a church conflict will forgive or find forgiveness.

While most people will probably not face conflict unto death, destructive conflict can be one of life's most painful experiences. There are times when conflict may not be resolved, and forgiveness is necessary for the wounded person to bring closure to the situation and begin again. Some people willfully hurt others and have no intention of healing the relationship. Those who are wounded in such situations need to learn to forgive those who have hurt them and move forward with their lives.⁶⁸

Kendall lists several points that indicate whether we have truly forgiven those who have severely offended us. These are points that we need to reexamine with our local church leaders from time to time, as we want to assure that an atmosphere of love and acceptance dominates our fellowship in the local church. The following are sign posts that indicate that you have truly forgiven the person who has offended you:

- You do not tell anyone what they did to you (this would be like trying to punish the one who hurt you).
- You do not try to intimidate them.
- You do not let them feel guilty.

⁶⁵ R. T. Kendall, "Forgiving the Unrepentant", 78.

⁶⁶ Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 209.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Gary R. Allen, "Minimizing Conflict By Building Healthy Communities," 57.

- You let them save face.
- You accept the matter of forgiveness as a „life sentence“ - you have to do it, indefinitely.
- You pray that they will be blessed and let off the hook.⁶⁹

David Augsburger makes a very challenging statement that no spiritual leader dare ignore.

Any community is only a year away from estrangement. All that is needed is for forgiveness to end, for acceptance to break down, for trust to turn to mistrust and understanding ceases.⁷⁰

We who are the defenders of the faith must also rise to facilitate forgiveness and acceptance in the ministry where God has placed us. The apostle Paul makes no bones about the importance of forgiveness.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Let us end this unit with prayer. Dear Lord, when we ask your forgiveness, you give it right away. Strengthen us with your kindness and your tender heart toward others so we too may be quick to forgive. Thank you for the example you have given us. Amen.

Conclusion

We have been on a journey together investigating the reality of conflict in the local church. Someone has said that a church without conflict is probably a church that is dead. This being true, we should be rejoicing in the Lord that the church facing conflict is very much alive. My prayer is that we have been able to rediscover insight from the Scriptures as we approach future conflict situations.

These insights should be passed along to others. I have always found it helpful to share with my spouse or a close friend the points that have spoken to me personally after attending a seminar or conference. You may want to preach a message relating to one or more of the topics we have discussed. You may want to have a special meeting with the

⁶⁹ R. T. Kendall, “Forgiving the Unrepentant”, 78.

⁷⁰ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, 80.

leaders of your church where they too learn to take a more proactive stance toward conflict. Some churches have set up an official peacemaking committee that deals specifically with church conflicts.⁷¹ When we rediscover Biblical truths we become more confident that the Good Shepard will help us when difficulties arise.

One of the major problems in the local church is that the offended member does not usually take the first step and go to the individual who has hurt them. This behavior is detrimental because the offending party cannot explain the rest of the story (Mathew 18:15-20).

It is not necessary to share one's position and emotions with others before attempting reconciliation. Only when this process fails are we to take one or two other believers with us as witnesses to the dispute.⁷²

Finally, Gary Allen makes it absolutely clear that conflict management is not something we will ever get a complete handle on. In other words, we will never completely arrive at the point of having everything under control.

Conflict management is an ongoing process. In the pain and anger of conflict, pastors often want to resolve the situation immediately. This is understandable. But in reality, conflict management is a leadership lifestyle. A pastor minimizes and manages conflict by using ongoing leadership skills and abilities. Conflict cannot be completely *prevented* but pastors must be as *preventative* as possible in intentionally leading and training people.⁷³

Joyce Huggett supports Allen by pointing out that Christians who are committed to one another are also committed to treating conflict resolution as homework to be done. They will learn, grow and benefit from the experience of conflict resolution.⁷⁴ I believe this is one of the most important concepts that we need to grasp as pastors and elders; conflict resolution leads to personal growth as well as spiritual growth. That which the Lord has begun in our lives will be brought to completion. Peacemakers who have experienced the

⁷¹ Bryan H. Sanders, "Forming a Peacemaking Committee in the church," (Enrichment Journal Online, spring 2005, accessed 11 November 2006); available from http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200502/200502_conflict_7.cfm.

⁷² Bryan H. Sanders, "Resolving Conflict in the Church," (Enrichment Journal Online, spring 2005, accessed 11 November 2006); http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200502/200502_conflict_2.cfm.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Gary Allen, "Conflict Management as a Lifestyle," Enrichment Journal 9 no. 3 (Summer 2005): 1.

forgiveness of God and truly forgive others will make a great difference in the lives of men and women who are battling the raging storms of conflict. You may be tempted to think, even after our time spent together, that you are incapable of being an effective conflict resolver. The words of the apostle Paul should be an encouragement as we go back to the church where God has placed each one of us:

I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)

Not only will the Lord help us, but we have brothers and sisters that we are in accountability to, who will pray for us and counsel us in our pursuit as conflict resolvers. We are not alone, but we are a connected part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). We are so blessed to have brothers and sisters who will teach and encourage us as we travel together on our leadership journey.

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Breaking down into groups of two or three, please respond to the following questions. Your answers should be very spontaneous as each member of the group briefly expresses himself. It would be good that each person writes down his response.

1. How do you generally view conflict?

2. Each person should respond to the follow statement. "Manage conflict, or it will manage you." What experiences have you had that can support this statement?

3. Give an example from your own ministry experience where an initial conflict turned out to be a very positive occurrence.

4. What have you personally learned from recent conflict situations in your life or ministry?

Please break down into groups of two or three. Each person should respond to the following statements by Jim Van Yperen. Each person should relate an example out of the Bible or from her or his ministry to the statements being made.

1. All conflict involves broken relationships.
2. All conflict is in some measure about spiritual warfare.
3. Conflict, like sin and death, is inevitable.
4. Conflict is necessary.
5. Conflict is an opportunity to trust God for positive change - to make peace.

Please recall a recent caring confrontation that you initiated and answer the following questions. These answers should be written alone for you to see. Of course, you have the option to discuss your responses with a close friend or mentor at a later time. With God's grace we can all improve our caring confrontation skills.

1. Did you confront the person privately or publicly?

2. Did you do put the confrontation off?

3. Did you address one issue at a time?

4. Did you avoid unnecessary repetition?

5. Did you only deal with actions the person can change?

6. Did you avoid sarcasm?

7. Did you avoid words like "always" and "never?"

8. Did you present criticism as suggestions or questions if possible?

9. Did you apologize for the confrontational meeting?

10. Did you bring up the complaints or issues in a correct and encouraging way?

Please respond to the following statements. After each statement write a few words that depict a situation that correlates with it. You can write about yourself or someone else. Each statement that you write about should depict a different situation. Your answers should be for your eyes only.

1. Sender has poor knowledge of the subject or is inadequately prepared.
2. Sender does not believe in the message or supports the policy behind it.
3. Receiver has poor knowledge of subject or is inadequately prepared.
4. Receiver is not interested in the subject.
5. Sender or receiver is temporarily preoccupied.
6. People unintentionally fail to say what they mean.
7. Cultural differences exist between communicators.
8. Communicators have different assumptions.
9. Status differences (leader-member) exist between communicators.
10. One of the communicators has negative or hostile reactions to the other.
11. One or both parties are unintentionally mis-communicating.
12. Outside interference or distractions have occurred.
13. Pressure of time does not allow effective communications to occur.