

Congregational Conflict

It Couldn't Happen Here!

Excerpted from *Congregational Conflict: A Guide to Reconciliation* by Robert N. Bacher and Judith L. McWilliams (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press 1983, pp. 16-19). Reprinted by permission.

“We should have seen this coming,” said a council member to another as they left a heated meeting. Their congregation was in turmoil because of differences between the pastor and the assistant pastor. The conflict seemed to have taken the council members by surprise. Looking back, they could identify certain little comments and actions that had been clues to the serious disagreement that had emerged. The clues had gone unnoticed at the time.

Watching for signs of conflict brewing makes some people uncomfortable. It's as if the looking for signs will cause conflict to happen. Furthermore, to look for conflict is to admit that a congregation is less than perfect and that it could have problems.

Conflicts have occurred in congregations that have a history of fighting as well as in congregations that have had no serious difficulties in the past. Some pastors find themselves in the middle of struggles less than six months after their ordination and others after thirty years in one pastorate. Conflicts can occur at any time.

Identifying conflicts in their latent period gives one a better change of managing them constructively. Issues will not be quite so exaggerated and sides will not be as sharply drawn in the early stages.

We can learn to read the signals, but it takes practice. An individual can do it by setting aside a little time for reflection after each council or congregational meeting. Better still, the whole council could allot the last ten minutes of their meeting to such a practice. Here are some questions to consider.

1. What are we hearing during meetings and fellowship hours that may indicate a rub, a bad fit, a disgruntled person, some disagreement?
2. Are there any misunderstandings to clear up?
3. Are there some needs being expressed that are calling for attention?

When church leaders ask such questions regularly and act responsibly on information that surfaces, people learn that it's all right to bring problems to their leaders. Once people are sure they will be heard, they'll speak up.

Keep in mind that problems are more likely to occur when other pressures are pushing in on the congregation; for example, when membership and giving are declining.

The decline might be the consequence of people leaving the community in search of employment, but when the survival of the congregation is threatened, expect tension to increase.

People from stable and growing as well as from declining congregations have offered these clues for recognizing conflicts that may be developing.

The Hit-You-Over-The-Head-Clues

People who are dissatisfied with something or someone demonstrate their feelings through their behavior. One member, at odds with her pastor, continued coming to worship but did not commune anymore. That behavior went on for several months and built up to a showdown between them. If we are alert to the kinds of things listed here, we may be able to find out what's causing the behavior when it occurs.

- Regular worshippers stop attending the services. They may or may not transfer their membership. They haven't moved or changed work schedules, and no one is ill. Why aren't they coming?
- The treasurer's reports show that income has dropped. The decrease in giving is greater than any decline in attendance. How can we explain that? The most dramatic form this clue takes is when individuals withhold their pledges. That's a powerful way to express dissatisfaction. Why are those persons who have stopped contributing unhappy?
- Votes at both council and congregational meetings are often divided. In one congregation this went on for years: 42 to 28 on items in the budget; 70 to 70 on a stewardship drive; 76 to 72 on a revote; 70 to 62 on the sale of a property. The divided votes led eventually to a divided congregation.
- A certain complaint is voiced again and again. The subject may be trivial, but if it is repeated more frequently than it used to be or if more people join the chorus, it may be a clue to a more serious issue. Typical complaints are—
 - The pastor doesn't visit.
 - We're not growing anymore; the old-timers can't carry the load.
 - There's too much change in worship.
 - The pastor is not spiritual enough.
 - We're losing our youth.
 - We need stronger leadership.
 - We don't have a planned outreach.
 - Our educational program is weak.

The complaint itself may be a problem, but it may also be a symptom of a deeper dissatisfaction that persons are not able to express. Sometimes, too, complaining turns into belittling remarks about other persons. The complainer is frustrated and may not know why, but the nasty comments leave wounds.

- Members are not satisfied with the pastor's personal life. They may not like the pastor's appearance, his or her language, or the pastor's personality. They may not approve of the way the pastor's children are disciplined or how the home and yard are maintained. If a male pastor's wife has gone to work or back to school,

the pastor-father may be suspected of spending too much time babysitting. A female pastor's husband may work, and his occupation is not beyond comment either. The *Approved Constitution for Congregations* [of the former Lutheran Church in America and current Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] says the pastor's life and conduct are to be above reproach. Lay people usually expect that of their pastors. Some of their complaints about their pastors may be legitimate and some may be entirely unfair, but they are all clues to some dissatisfaction and source of trouble.

- People often protest a new policy, program or decision. The council agrees that all students preparing for Confirmation are expected at worship each Sunday and that parents are to attend a series of classes prior to having their children baptized. Some people think the youth program has become too social; it should provide more leadership training and Bible study. When matters like these come up, they usually represent disagreement about goals within the congregation. Personalities may be involved, but issues about the nature of the church are involved too.
- People wonder about the way their money is being handled. Is it being spent only in authorized ways? Was the inheritance willed to the congregation invested properly? Why aren't quarterly reports sent out anymore? Isn't a carpet for the parsonage the pastor's personal expense?
- People use words for various purposes, some of which are hidden. Members of a church council debated the meanings of words in a motion for forty minutes one evening. They were actually in a power struggle, but they acted it out by quibbling over words. Occasionally someone pulls out the constitution and quotes words in it to prove a point. Listen for words used as absolutes:
 - "We **must** do this."
 - "There's **only one thing** wrong around here."
 - "Pastor **always** gets his way."
 - "Council will **never** do that."

Occasionally, **must** and **never** are accurate terms to use. But most times those words signal that the speaker's mind is closed to other facts or alternatives. People end up painting themselves into corners by issuing ultimatums and then having nowhere to go—at least until the paint dries!

Usually by the time signals of conflict begin flashing, one or two members go to the pastor with their concerns. Sensitive and wise pastors take the concerns seriously. And for the sake of the mission of the church and the welfare of its members, lay leaders need to speak up. Pastors may sense that problems are developing, but at times only lay people can know how deep the unrest lies.

The Maybe, Maybe-Not Clues

The pace of life today keeps us moving rapidly. We work out one problem and soon move on to a new crisis. This happens in a congregation too. One week a church faces a financial shortfall. The next week a member dies suddenly and the pastor cannot be reached. Then the basement floods during a heavy downpour and half the church council doesn't show up for a special meeting.

In the midst of day-to-day living, some clues to underground conflict appear, but we're too busy to note them. Some little things deserve a second look. For instance:

- Only a handful of members showed up at the last congregational meeting. Attendance had been slacking off but this last time it was really poor. Why? Do people feel that their opinions and votes don't count?
- Most people don't want to serve on the church council. At the last election not enough candidates could be found to fill the vacancies. Why do members hesitate to accept this office?
- All of a sudden there are a number of people on the council who are opponents of the pastor. How did that happen?
- The pastor has not received a salary increase for the past two years and no one seems to care. Why?
- Some members do not stay for coffee after church anymore, but they do stand in little huddles on the sidewalk or in the parking lot. Members talk over the telephone about things happening at their church, but only a few came to an open meeting on a proposal to purchase an adjacent lot for more parking. In other words, the informal grapevine is busy, but public forums are poorly attended. Why?
- Mrs. X (or Pastor Y) seems to need a lot of attention and recognition these days. The more you give, the more she demands. She becomes very distraught if things don't go her way. If Mrs. X (or Pastor Y) is gathering a devoted following, a powerful struggle may be developing.
- A member of the council surprised others with an angry outburst at last month's meeting. It was out of character and out of proportion to the situation. What brought it on?
- The pastor is spending more time in his study. Or, the pastor has withdrawn from her community activities or her membership on a regional church committee. Or, the pastor wasn't present for a debate on whether to open a day care center.
- Members of long-standing preface their remarks with "it's not my church anymore," or "I've been a Lutheran all of my life," and then bemoan some change that's taken place.
- The pastor talks about "*their* church" instead of "*our* congregation." Why the seeming distance between the pastor and the people?
- A major decision was made with few dissenting votes even though the subject was controversial. Was everyone convinced? OR did they feel they had no choice but to vote yes?

For example, a congregation had to buy a new organ. At an open meeting the members debated the type of organ they needed and how much they could afford to pay. The vote was 83 to 3, but people remember the vote as being very close. Had their feelings been counted instead of their hands, it may have been too close to purchase that organ.

If a proposal goes through easily after much opposition, think about it twice. Pay attention, too, when people try to divide motions before voting or when they request secret ballots. Are they expressing dissatisfaction with the proposal? Are they not ready to vote? Do they feel they've not been heard?

- Things just don't feel right. You've been avoiding Mrs. Q and Mrs. Q's been avoiding you. IN the past she usually supported your ideas, but she isn't doing that now. You don't know what's wrong and you're uncomfortable. You recognize some signs of stress. One pastor measured his stress by the amount of ice cream he ate after council meetings?

Don't expect to find a heavy conflict brewing behind each of these clues. Much of the time, incidents in the daily life of the church are over when the day ends. We can shrug our shoulders and move on. But occasionally we grab hold of the end of a string. If we trace it back, we find the spot where it became tangled and then have a chance to unravel the knot and let our kite soar free again.

If the Clue Fits . . .

[In beginning to respond to a conflict, the following are some possible steps:]

The first step is to understand the seriousness of the problem so we don't go charging off to tilt against windmills. Is the conflict moving from a latent to an active period?

If the conflict is becoming increasingly active, the second step is to decide what to do. The choices vary depending on the situation.

The third step is to consider possible effects before they happen. Too often we come up with what seems like a good plan, but when we try to put it to work, it backfires. We forget about an established custom or some person's feelings or perhaps we used poor timing. Asking "What will be the reactions to what we do or don't do?" helps us test our plans and actions to see if they have a good chance of succeeding.

The fourth step is to remind ourselves of the aftermath period. We'd like to believe that conflict is over when it's over, but we may assume too much and be disappointed. Or we may believe we can do little to promote healing instead of initiating acts of reconciliation.