

# MINISTERIAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

## SEMINAR IV

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**Theme: “The Pentecostal Minister and Relationships”**

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### *Conflict Resolution*

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#### **Introduction**

This session will consider in depth the subject of how leading with integrity relates to conflict resolution. Conflict is universal, and one’s attitude toward conflict will affect its outcome. Consideration of this topic also includes how unresolved conflict escalates and why it should be addressed early; why poor communication causes conflict and how effective communication can help in resolution; developing an approach to conflict resolution; and consideration of the words of the Lord, “Blessed is the Peacemaker.”

#### **I. Relevance of Conflict**

Perhaps no subject is more relevant to preparation for ministry than the study of conflict resolution. The Biblical narrative is full of conflict in the lives of its characters. Not only are the Biblical stories filled with conflict, but the doctrinal books often were written in response to conflict. They raised issues that continue to be the source of disagreement and debate even today.

Conflict is not limited to the lives of evil or cantankerous people. Conflict is a reality in everyone’s life. So it follows that conflict is part of everyone’s ministry.

Since it is apparent that developing conflict resolution skills is extremely valuable to effective leadership, it follows that those who would lead with integrity need to develop ethical conflict-resolution skills. So the

question is not whether ordinary human beings or leaders will encounter conflict, the question is whether they will deal with conflict in a way that leads to growth and peace rather than alienation and bitterness.

## **II. What Is the Goal of Conflict Resolution?**

The goal of conflict resolution in a ministry context is always transformation for community. The prevailing emotion is always love. This discussion of conflict, therefore, will address these two vital questions: (1) Can leaders end a conflict with community? and (2) Can leaders work through conflict in love?

### **A. Definition**

Everyone has preconceived notions about conflict. Many concepts of conflict do not include the ideas of love and community. Therefore, conflict should be defined. The definition formulated by Ron Claassen is this: "A conflict exists when two parties perceive that their positions are incompatible; that there are scarce resources; and/or the actions of one person block, interfere with, or in some way make the achievement of the other's goals less likely."

The Chinese character for the world crisis, which is closely related to conflict, is said to be in two parts. One part stands for danger, and the other stands for opportunity. Many people see only the danger, become frightened, and shift into an avoidance mode. One's attitude toward crisis or conflict will be an extremely important factor in the eventual outcome. The path which a leader chooses in response to the conflict will lead to increased danger or to new opportunity.

## **III. Attitudes Regarding Conflict**

Most people fear conflict. And because of that fear, they avoid it at all costs. Fear of conflict may be rooted in a number of negative ideas. For example, a person may not trust his own emotions when conflict arises. He may tend to lose his temper in conflict, and he fears that he may not be able to control his responses. Others may not trust the emotions of the other parties who are involved. Perhaps they have been deeply hurt in past

conflict and fear to face more pain. Or, some may be self-centered and unwilling to lose what they feel that they, personally, have at risk.

As can be seen, there are many reasons why people may fear conflict. Conflict in and of itself need not necessarily be good or bad. But how one thinks about conflict and responds to it is critical. One should remember that the attitudes of a leader will affect the attitudes of the entire group. Since modeling is such a powerful influence on behavior, the pastor should remember the congregation will take note of the way pastoral leadership responds to conflict.

The Scripture says, “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Proverbs 16:7, NKJV). Does that mean conflict will never arise for the man whose ways please the Lord? No, but it does mean that attitudes and behavior that please the Lord will foster leadership styles and relationship skills that will help bring appropriate resolutions to the conflicts that inevitably arise.

Dudley Weeks, says that “Conflict is an inescapable part of our daily lives.” The seriousness of these conflicts may vary from mere nuisances to full-blown war. Weeks says, “Learning how to deal with conflicts effectively is increasingly an essential life skill needed by every person and every group regardless of one’s age, social role, profession, cultural background, or beliefs.” Skill in dealing with conflict is an essential skill for those who lead others.

Conflict is not something to be avoided or feared. In fact conflict, to some extent, is desirable. Progress cannot take place without it. In order for change to occur, some people must question the old ways of doing things. When the old ways are questioned, changes are facilitated. Inevitably, other people seek to protect the old ways, sometimes fiercely. Conflict develops. Only then, however, can solutions be reached, and growth achieved. That is the desired outcome of conflict spawned by change—a crisis development form of transformation.

Some of the fear of conflict may be dispelled by thinking of it, not as a swirling mass of uncontrolled emotion, but rather as specific, identifiable elements. This more specific way of thinking about conflict is in terms of people, problems, and changes. Conflict is first of all about people.

## **A. People-Related Conflict**

The issue may be . . .

- Intrapersonal (within oneself)
- Interpersonal (between two or more people)
- Small group (a few people who have taken sides within the small group, e.g., a cell group)
- Large group (a lot of people who have taken sides within the large group, e.g., a large Sunday school class or a small church)
- Intergroup (groups of people who have taken sides against other groups of people)

Conflicts become increasingly difficult to resolve as the number of people increases. Therefore, intergroup conflict is the most difficult of all to resolve.

## **B. Problem-Related Conflict**

The problems very often involve issues from the following:

- Space
- Schedules
- Methods
- Procedures
- Personal preferences
- Traditions
- Customs
- Values
- Beliefs

The issues in this list are given in increasing order of difficulty to solve. For example, a conflict over how to arrange the chairs in a classroom is much more easily resolved than a conflict that arises

over the values and beliefs or doctrines that will be taught in that same classroom.

In looking at the increasing difficulty of the possible people and issues in the two lists, one can agree that a conflict within one's own mind or between two people over how to arrange furniture is much more easily resolved than an argument between the youth group and the Board of Elders over whether or not a certain tradition is still relevant in today's world.

### **C. Change-Related Conflict**

The catalyst for conflict is change. Most conflict does not begin with evil intent. Ordinarily, it begins with change or a perceived need for change. Conflict results when changes within one person's attitudes or actions interfere with the goals of another person. No relationship exists for very long without one or more of the parties' changes bringing disruptions to their expectations of each other. Changes are an inevitable part of life. These changes develop as . . .

- Individuals grow older.
- Individuals gain new insights.
- Groups get larger or smaller.
- Group members move away or die.
- Group leadership changes.

## **IV. Habits That Help or Hurt**

While change and conflict are inevitable, one can acquire habits that help or habits that hurt the situation according to one's response to change and conflict. Change causes conflict, yet change is inevitable; therefore, conflict is inevitable. The attitudes individuals take toward conflict, even before it ever occurs, can help determine the outcome. Attitudes affect responses. When the response is destructive, confusion and separation

follow. When the response is constructive, better understanding and deeper relationships result.

Individuals tend to develop habitual ways of responding to conflict. They develop rigid ways of thinking about it. Often, one's old conflict-resolution habits are destructive. For example, leaders who fear conflict may become authoritarian—ruling with “a rod of iron” in an attempt to prevent conflict. However, constructive attitudes to conflict with effective response habits can be developed. It is important for leaders to adopt a partnership model rather than an adversarial model of conflict resolution.

## **V. Adversarial and Partnership Models**

An adversarial model has the individuals who are involved in a conflict sitting on opposite sides of the table with the problem between them. In this setting, the two antagonists are likely to see themselves entrenched in an adversarial position, feeling that they must protect their individual positions at all costs.

A partnership model, on the other hand, has the individuals who are involved sitting on the same side of the table with the problem in front of them. Rather than an entrenched position to protect, they bring a list of needs and interests to the table. The needs and interests of each conflict partner are laid on the table. Each person works to meet as many of the needs and interests of both parties as can possibly be met. They are partners in conflict rather than adversaries in conflict.

Consider the following 10 contrasting habits in dealing with conflict. (These have been suggested by the Mennonite Conciliation Services.) This is a list of habits that divide people and habits that bind people together during times of conflict.

- People are divided when conflict is viewed as always being wrong or dangerous. People bond when conflict is viewed as being an opportunity, as being inevitable, but neither right or wrong, and as being evidence of involvement and concern.
- People are divided by conflict when those involved blur the issues and the people. For example, one might say, “You are wrong on this issue,

so you are a bad person.” People bond during conflict when the issues and those who raise them are separated. For example, one might say, “I don’t agree with your position, but I respect your right to express it.”

- People are divided by conflict when indirect communication and gossip flourish. People are brought together by direct communication even when it is difficult.
- People are divided by conflict when long lists of past wrongs are kept—grudges are abundant; forgiveness scarce. People are brought together when lists of past wrongs are short and taken care of promptly.
- People are divided by conflict when members spiritualize conflict in order to avoid it, while at the same time spiritualizing the issue in order to diminish those who disagree. (“I’m too holy to argue with those backsliders on the other side of the issue.”) People are brought together when members draw strength from having the spiritual depth to enter into conflict with a gentle spirit. The truly spiritual person does not evade the issue but is able to face the issue speaking the truth in love.
- People are divided when members vacillate between feeling too powerful and feeling too weak. For example, one day they are ready to fight the whole church to make their point, and the next day they refuse to meet with the pastor or anyone else. They withdraw, saying, “It won’t do any good. No one ever listens to me.” People are brought together when all members are willing to take responsibility to seek positive change.
- People are divided when the atmosphere is reactive and brought together when the atmosphere is interactive.
- People are divided when leaders forbid disagreements and ignore problems until they fester, but they are brought together when leaders encourage the respectful expression of all points of view.
- People are divided when group discussion focuses on opposing solutions from the beginning. For example, the opposing sides announce an entrenched position and refuse to consider any alternatives. People are brought together when group discussion is

initially problem- and process-centered followed by a discussion of all possible solutions until a consensus is reached regarding the best solution.

- People are divided when there is little or no tolerance of uncertainty during the conflict-resolution process—when a quick fix is demanded now. In contrast, if people are brought together in an atmosphere of calmness and confidence, members are enabled to tolerate the periods of uncertainty that are necessary in all good decision making.

## **VI. Thirteen Destructive and Constructive Responses to Conflict**

- 1.** It is destructive to define the controversy as a win/lose situation to be fought through by adversaries. It is constructive to define the controversy as a mutual problem to be solved by partners.
- 2.** It is destructive when only a few group members participate, censor themselves, and withdraw. It is constructive when there is participation by all group members.
- 3.** It is destructive when there is closed or deceitful expression of ideas and feelings. It is constructive when there is open and honest expression of ideas and feelings.
- 4.** It is destructive when the contributions of many members are ignored, devalued, not respected, and treated lightly. It is constructive when everyone's contributions are listened to, given attention, taken seriously, valued, and respected.
- 5.** It is destructive when quiet members are not encouraged to participate. It is constructive when quiet members are encouraged to participate.
- 6.** It is destructive when poor communication, characterized by poor listening and unclear speech, dominates the dialogue. It is constructive when effective communication, including active listening and assertive speaking, takes place.

- 7.** It is destructive when differences in opinions and ideas are ignored or suppressed. It is constructive when differences in opinions and ideas are sought out and clarified.
- 8.** It is destructive when underlying assumptions and frames of reference are not brought out into the open and discussed. It is constructive when underlying assumptions and frames of reference are brought out into the open and discussed.
- 9.** It is destructive when disagreements are taken as personal rejection by some or all group members. It is constructive when disagreements are seen as normal interchange rather than as personal rejection by some or all group members.
- 10.** It is destructive when differences are not clearly understood. It is constructive when differences are underlined and understood.
- 11.** It is destructive when emotions are ignored. It is constructive when emotions are acknowledged and recognized for what they are.
- 12.** It is destructive when the power among group members is unequally distributed. It is constructive when there is equal situational power among all members.
- 13.** It is destructive when the tension level is too low or too high for productive problem solving. When tension is too low, there is apathy. When tension is too high, there is no rationality. It is constructive when tension level is moderate, giving an appropriate level of concern while retaining reasonableness.

How does one know whether the members of the group will have good conflict resolution habits? While there is no guarantee that good habits will be formed within the group, it is the responsibility of the leader to teach positive attitudes and to model constructive habits. Serving as a skillful facilitator, in a conflict-resolution procedure, can transform a crisis from disruptive disagreement to cooperative community.

## **VII. Approaches to Conflict Resolution**

There are many approaches to conflict resolution, and numerous books available on the subject. Those who have been in ministry for any length of time have most likely tried some of them and most likely have created some of their own. Negotiators, arbitrators, and intermediaries of various titles who deal with conflict have been around for some time. In fact, it has been popular in the business world to employ conflict/crisis managers. These managers attempt to negotiate a settlement so that each party wins a little and loses a little or so that one party wins all and the other loses all. In the first case, no one feels terribly bad, but no one feels very good either. The “wins-it-all” party feels terrific, and the “loses-it-all” party feels horrible.

In 1992, Dr. Dudley Weeks, a professor of Conflict Resolution, and a professional solver of conflict, published a book titled, *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*. Weeks posits that it is possible and profitable to see the parties in a conflict as conflict partners rather than adversaries. He believes that conflict partnerships will empower all those involved to find solutions satisfactory to everyone. The results will be enhanced relationships in effective communities.

While Weeks’ book was not designed for church settings, its principles are applicable, and Weeks’ goals are compatible with Scriptural teachings about conflict and ways to solve them. These eight steps will enhance the probability of a church functioning like a healthy body. The body metaphor is understood in the church world, and can be effective in helping to understand how a church should function.

As part of the teaching role of good leadership, these conflict partnership skills can be taught before they are demanded by a serious church or personal dispute. Such attitudes, knowledge, and skills among the membership would allow conflict to be dealt with at its earliest stages within the church and would empower the saints to be true peacemakers throughout the world.

Resolving conflict will always require hard work and perseverance, but the work will go better in the hands of those who are skilled. These steps

can be used by a leader who is serving as a conflict mediator or they can be used by individuals who are serious about solving their own conflicts in a manner that will lead to community and not division.

### **A. Step 1: Creating an Effective Atmosphere**

Creating an effective atmosphere for resolution can determine success or failure in conflict management. Since effective interaction depends on atmosphere, one should always attempt to think through this question: Does the atmosphere itself obstruct or facilitate communication?

The primary task in this step is transforming everyone's mind-set from an adversarial to a cooperative mode. That includes preparing the leader's attitudes. In an earlier discussion, the adversarial model was compared to having the parties sit on opposite ends of a table with the problems piled up on the table between them. However, the partnership model was compared to having parties sit side by side at the table with the problem in front of them both, to be solved by both in cooperation.

In private meetings before bringing the conflicted parties together, remind each side that, hopefully, this will become a partnership, working together for resolution. The leader should reassure them that conflict is not always negative and actually has the potential for improving relationships. The parties need to begin to see each other as problem-solving partners rather than as adversaries.

Finally, the leader, in preparing his or her mind-set, should avoid making decisions about what the solutions must be. The leader must enter the process with a few mutual-benefit options in mind but remembering that the conflict partners can develop solution options together.

While an appropriate atmosphere is crucial, timing, also, is important to the atmosphere. Sometimes conflicts dictate their own timing. When a choice can be made for confrontation or resolution, it is best to choose a time that suits all parties. Enough time should be

set aside to allow effective interaction. A time of day that maximizes concentration and communication should be selected where possible. It should be a time that does not give an advantage to any one party. The place should be nonthreatening to all parties involved. It is possible that the meeting place can make one party feel powerless and the other powerful. That should be avoided. For example, having the meeting in the office of one of the parties might put the other at some psychological disadvantage. Some settings tend to encourage partnership. If at all possible, it is important to provide a setting that is . . .

- without distractions,
- without a history of arguments,
- without tables in between the parties, and
- with chairs in a circular arrangement.

While a carefully selected time and place are important, they cannot guarantee success. Attitudes are critical to resolution.

Opening comments are extremely important. There are certain goals for opening comments:

- 1.** To establish an atmosphere of partnership, not battle.
- 2.** To improve the overall relationship, as well as resolving the conflict.
- 3.** To have each side open to suggestions from the other, as well as being open to suggestions for solutions which they generate together.
- 4.** To establish the belief that it is possible for people to agree to disagree on certain points while keeping the relationship strong.

One or more of these opening points might need to be reiterated during the course of the meeting. Other points to remember about openings are . . .

1. Keep in mind the specifics of the conflict, as well as the characteristics of the conflict partners when developing openings. A canned or memorized speech should not be used at the beginning of every meeting about any conflict. Certain principles are always covered, but they are set in the current context and are tailored to the people and problems involved.
2. The opening should feel natural rather than stiff and memorized.
3. The opening should be brief avoiding “preachiness.”

The atmosphere that is established can very well determine the outcome. If the atmosphere begins to deteriorate during the meeting, it is the responsibility of the leader or moderator to remind everyone of the goals and attitudes that have been set forth. The proper atmosphere must be maintained, as well as created.

## **B. Step 2: Clarify Perceptions**

As previously pointed out, perception is reality. At least, perceptions are lenses through which people see themselves and others, and what people perceive to be the truth influences their behavior. It is important to be open to other people’s perceptions, but it is not easy to do. Working on this premise, however, is essential to resolving conflicts in a partnership fashion.

Sometimes it may be helpful to demonstrate the concept of perception by having two people stand face-to-face and describe the room only in terms of what each can see at that moment without turning his or her head. It can be demonstrated that two people in the same room will see things and describe things very differently without either telling an untruth.

Clarifying perceptions is difficult because they come from many sources—family, school, social pressure, individual environmental factors, desire, interest, goals, among many others. However, people do have power to change their perceptions. People can will themselves to look at circumstances from another person's point of view. Good communication skills of active listening and assertive speech are helpful in making sure each party has a clear understanding of one's own perceptions, as well as those of a conflict partner.

It is important to clarify that the conflict is only one small part of the relationship. People need to be reminded of the things they have in common, the things they agree upon, the positive aspects of their relationship in the past, and their potential for the future. Emphasize that the relationship is almost always larger, longer, and more valuable than the current conflict.

It is important to clearly state the problem so that all partners understand the issue. Clarifying perceptions of the conflict involves sorting the conflict components to understand if the parties involved are dealing with true needs or just desires, values or mere preferences, goals or methods. Only then can they discover the most effective starting points in the resolution process.

Prayer can help differentiate between needs and wants. Since the Lord has promised "to supply all our needs," one may make unreasonable requests of the Lord, calling them needs when they actually are only wants. For example, one may pray for a new Mercedes automobile and call it a need. The Lord may recognize the Mercedes as a selfish desire and send a dilapidated pickup truck to supply the actual need, which is transportation.

Clarifying perceptions of the self includes taking an honest look at one's own needs and goals, as well as what one has done to contribute to the conflict negatively. All conflict partners should be willing to admit their negative behavior and take responsibility for it. Partnership includes admitting that the cooperation of all partners is needed for good resolution.

Here are several suggestions to aid individuals in clarifying perceptions of the conflict partners. One must . . .

1. Avoid stereotypes,
2. Make a genuine effort to understand the partner's needs,
3. Understand why they might be behaving as they are,
4. See their positive potential,
5. Ask clarifying questions to help avoid defining the other person only by his negative behavior,
6. Endeavor to see the other partner as a person rather than someone in a role, and
7. Recognize vulnerabilities in oneself and others and avoid using them as weapons.

In this stage of Claassen's approach, each party verbally summarizes the other person's point of view until the other person says, "Yes, you have heard what I have said."

### **C. Step 3: Focus on Individual and Shared Needs**

Individuals tend to think only of their own needs in a conflict. In the partnership model, it is important to be concerned about the needs of the partner and the needs of the relationship, as well as one's personal needs. Needs are part of the foundation of a relationship, but unless the needs of all parties in a relationship are met to a reasonable degree, the relationship most likely will not continue.

It is important to separate needs from desires. Understanding the difference is crucial. For example, when carpet on the floor of the sanctuary is needed, it does not have to be a certain color. Color is a desire. Also, it is not just personal needs that are important but the needs of the relationship as well. Needs that have been ignored or

blocked and needs that are incompatible are at the root of much conflict.

In considering personal needs, each party should answer these questions about . . .

- Whether or not their needs being met would solve the conflict.
- How damaged they will be if their needs are not met.
- Whether their needs have been clearly expressed.
- Some ways to meet these needs.

Regarding the conflict partner's needs, one must ask, with integrity, the following questions:

- "What do you need from our relationship?"
- "What do you need to come out of this resolution in order for our relationship to have been improved?"

Once these questions have been answered, it is time to think about the partner's needs in these terms:

- "Would I have the same need if I were in his or her shoes?"
- "Will I be damaged if he gets this need?"
- "Will getting this need met help the relationship?"

All of these considerations about self and others must be asked and answered with integrity. The process is not to be manipulative, nor is it to be self-destructive. This last point is very important. It is not true conflict resolution when one side becomes passive and gives in all the time. That is domination, not relationship. In the discussion on assertiveness, it was said that true resolution occurs when the needs of both parties and the needs of the relationship are

met to a satisfactory degree. Being a doormat is not synonymous with being a peacemaker.

The needs of the relationship itself need to be clarified. Quite often, one or more of the personal needs may seem insignificant when the overall needs are made clear and considered carefully. Personal needs might be reduced or delayed in the interest of the relationship.

Shared needs are a critical part of any relationship. A relationship has many interrelated threads or components, and where those threads connect are the shared needs. They hold the relationship together. There is a question one should ask regarding shared needs: "In what ways do the partners need each other in order for both to be strengthened and the relationship improved?" Only by focusing on personal needs, the partner's needs, the relationship needs, and the shared needs can transformation from conflict to community occur.

#### **D. Step 4: Build Shared Positive Power**

Relationships involve power, but power does not have to be a negative concept. People choose whether to allow power to corrupt. Individuals can use power in a positive or a negative manner. Weeks says, "Conflict partnership is an active, creative, persevering, powerful process" (p. 147).

Power might be defined in a number of ways. Many dictionaries say power means "the ability or capacity to exercise control; authority; strength or force capable of being exerted; might." Again, Weeks writes, "Power consists of the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors that give people and groups the ability to act or perform effectively" (p. 148).

That concept of power is quite different from commonly held views. It is a positive rather than a negative concept. It is a definition that gives the conscientious leader influence if the leadership role includes becoming a teacher during the conflict resolution process. Teaching during this process can affect attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, and in so doing, affect behavior.

## **1. Negative power has four characteristics**

- 1.** It tries to take power away from others in order to gain power for self.
- 2.** It tries to gain the advantage while ignoring the negative effects on the relationship.
- 3.** It wants power over, rather than power with.
- 4.** It uses seesaw power. “Seesaw power” is the attitude: “If you are up, I am down. I must pull you down so I can go up.”

## **2. Positive power promotes**

In contrast, the conflict partnership approach seeks to give positive power to both parties and to the overall relationship. Positive power promotes “the constructive capabilities of all parties involved in a conflict” (p. 151).

- 1.** It is power with, not power over.
- 2.** It seeks to lift both parties up rather than put one down in order to lift the other.
- 3.** Positive power can work on all three fronts, self-power, partner power, and shared power.

Positive self-power is enhanced when . . .

- 1.** There is clear self-understanding.
- 2.** There is clear understanding of values.
- 3.** There is consistency between values and behavior.
- 4.** There is responsibility for self and one’s own behavior.
- 5.** The person learns and applies relationship and conflict resolution skills.

Obviously, the leader who teaches can be very influential in these areas.

Leaders can affirm and help to activate the positive power of the conflict partners. To do so, they must help the conflict partners to . . .

- Focus on the other person's positive potential.
- See the benefit to themselves and to the relationship for the other to use positive power; and help create a process in which the partner, as well as the self, can exercise positive power.

The shared needs of the relationship can be the building blocks for the process. Shared positive power moves the process toward conflict resolution. Conflict partners share their positive power when they are willing to work together.

#### **E. Step 5: Look to the Future, Learn From the Past**

It is important to gather wisdom from the past without remaining stuck in the past. If a conflict is to be resolved, neither side can be controlled by the past. But if individuals will reflect objectively on the past, the lessons learned can be applied to the present problem in a way that has great potential to affect the future positively.

Remembering past conflicts that were poorly resolved must not be allowed to make one feel that current conflicts cannot be resolved. Hurts and grudges from the past should not be allowed to interfere with the present need for cooperation. Moreover, since everyone should be aware that people can grow and improve, as well as learn new relationship skills, one must be careful not to hold the conflict partner's past history against him. Nor should one live in guilt and blame for past mistakes and lose faith in his ability because of earlier blunders and slip-ups.

A common power that the past holds over some people is their refusal to let go of a particular demand or behavior that they have

expressed in the past. Just because they said it in the past, and perhaps argued over it in the past, they are unwilling to change their views now. It becomes a matter of saving face.

Then, there are those who just fear a new way of doing things—stuck in the past simply because of wanting to do things the way they have always been done. That could be based on a false notion that one could make good choices in the past but cannot in the present.

Many individuals consider tradition sacred. Traditions are not inherently good or bad just because they are traditions. But Christians do not rely only on tradition, they rely primarily on Scriptural truths, on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and on effective skills. They must be willing to let go of a romanticized past when it is time to let go.

Another temptation is to go for the “quick fix” without considering the long-term consequences. It is important to understand all aspects of the present problem without being so determined to obtain a quick solution for a present need that one fails to consider how a quick solution might affect the future. Leaders seek to understand the role which past events have had in creating the present conflict, then they can focus on, what Weeks calls, the “present-future.” He uses the term *present-future* to point out how the present and the future are inseparably linked. The concern is that current decisions will affect the future in a positive manner. Conflict resolution is a process, not an event.

The ultimate goal of conflict resolution is to maximize the positive potential for the future of the relationship and the community. It is the responsibility of leaders and conflict partners to decide what practices of the past are appropriate for the present and the future. Leaders should make clear to all parties involved how important the present and future are in order to avoid allowing the past to obstruct the best resolution.

It is helpful to remind all conflict partners how important the relationship itself has been in the past. They should recall times of

unity and periods when conflict has been successfully resolved. The positives of the past give hope for the present and the future.

Forgiving past negative behavior can provide the best foundation for building the present and the future because forgiveness acknowledges everyone's shortcomings. It does away with grudges. It encourages everyone to reach for their most positive potential and move from the past to the present-future. It enhances the influence of the one who forgives.

Again, Weeks writes, "The process of a relationship involves the past, present, and future, and the process of effective conflict resolution involves learning from the past and using shared positive power to take steps of improvement in the present and future" (p. 181). The thrust in step five is developing solutions for the long-term good, not just finding relief from the present discomfort of a conflict.

#### **F. Step 6: Generate Options**

Now is the time to put to use the five steps of conflict-partnership skills which were discussed previously. This is the time to use everyone's creativity and place all possible solutions on the table for consideration. In preparation for generating options, everyone needs to be again reminded that those involved are partners and will enhance their partnership by working together.

It is good to start by tracing the conflict back to its earliest stages and see if any possible unexplored solutions were lost or rejected as the conflict escalated. In addition to considering the options not used earlier, it is time to think about all possible solutions. This exercise is similar to brainstorming, and as in brainstorming, all ideas are acceptable. The goal is to collect as many ideas as possible without immediately evaluating, criticizing, and eliminating them. Creativity is the goal. One of the positive effects is that this process helps people give up narrow choices that might be stubbornly held.

The options generated during this stage are only starting points for reaching a solution. So the various ideas should be allowed on the table without criticism and rejections. They are merely starting points. A crucial requirement in this step is to find a balance between the viable options that one side has generated and the viable options the other side has suggested. The goal is to find and adopt solutions all sides can agree are positive.

It is difficult sometimes to move beyond preconceived answers. Dr. Weeks makes three suggestions in trying to accomplish this.

1. "Look more deeply to see if there might be some commonalities hidden within seemingly incompatible options" (p. 187). This should help open up closed minds.
2. "If no commonalities appear within the seemingly incompatible options, clarify where the disagreements are and then set aside those options and work together to generate other options around other parts of the relationship or conflict" (pp.188-189). This does not avoid the conflict; but it does acknowledge that an impasse has been reached on one part of the conflict or relationship, but not on the whole. The parties agree to disagree on part of the conflict in order to find areas of agreement on other parts.
3. "Try not to lead with those preconceived answers you suspect might be unacceptable to the other party" (p. 190). Leading with the same rigidly held option will only turn off the other party.

In generating a variety of options for consideration, all parties should feel free, similar to participating in a brainstorming session. One party should offer to hear the other's options first. If one party is perceived as being weaker, it is helpful to invite that party to offer the first options for consideration. As one party offers options, the other should sincerely listen for shared needs, shared power, commonalities, and mutual benefits being expressed. This is not the time to concentrate on one's own feelings and rigid opinions.

It is helpful if the listening party will respond positively to parts of the options that seem viable. Perhaps the positive parts can be woven into an option expressed later by a conflict partner who has held an opposing opinion in the past. This is the time to explore the “what if” possibilities. The atmosphere must be free-flowing as in brainstorming. Everyone sets aside old ideas and makes new ones. All suggestions are recorded in a visible place. Wait until several new ideas have been suggested before beginning to discuss the merits of each.

When all suggestions are in, group those ideas that have commonality. Make a new list of those with common threads. Then begin to discuss the possible outcomes, if the solutions on the “common-threads” list are adopted. The free-flowing atmosphere in this step brings hope instead of impasse. It fosters a feeling of optimism rather than a feeling of futility and frustration.

When all parties feel empowered by making suggestions, tense moments are relieved by a reminder that this is a creative process in which all ideas are considered. It gives a chance to emphasize commonalities, shared needs and power, and the goal of improving the overall relationship. It focuses on the present-future rather than the past. It moves the process toward the formation of “doables” in step seven.

After a number of possibilities have been listed and commonalities have been noted, it is time to identify the key options or those with the most potential for solving the conflict. A key option can be any one of the following:

- 1.** It meets one or more shared needs.
- 2.** It meets one or more individual needs that are not incompatible with another party’s individual needs.
- 3.** It requires mutual positive power to be implemented.
- 4.** It has potential for improving future relationships.

5. It is a “doable” option.
6. It can be accepted or supported by all parties.

It is interesting to note that Weeks urges conflict partners to realize that when this process is used, each person individually, and the parties in conflict together, have empowered themselves with effective skills they may not have had in the past. Therefore, a solution that would never have worked in the past when rigid positions were defended, now has a possibility of succeeding.

### **G. Step 7: Develop “Doables”—The Stepping-Stones to Action**

The caution was given early in the process to avoid the temptation to jump directly into arguing for preferred solutions. Now that step seven has been reached, the parties are ready to develop “doable” solutions.

A “doable” is a solution that has a good chance of working. It is built on the firm foundation of the previous six steps. Each of the previous steps has taken the good of the relationship into account. A doable not only stands a good chance of being accomplished, but also it does not favor one party at the expense of the others. It usually requires the participation of all parties in order to work, and it meets one or more shared needs and one or more individual needs that are not incompatible. Ideally, it involves shared power in which the partners need each other, and also it helps build trust, momentum, and confidence in working together.

In developing doables, the partners must avoid quick solutions that are actually only Band-Aids. They must avoid steps that are really delaying tactics, favoring only one party. Doables are not ends in themselves; they are steps that can help move the parties closer to mutually healthy decisions on major issues. They can create a path to capabilities formerly thought impossible. Once the doables have been formulated and, perhaps, one or more of them accomplished, it is time to move to the final stage.

## **H. Step 8: Making Mutual-Benefit Agreements**

The final step is the goal toward which the first seven steps have been leading. It is time to make mutual-benefit agreements. They must be agreements that have a good chance of enduring. They are built on clarified perceptions of the conflict, the partners involved in the conflict, and the specific steps each partner has agreed to take to improve the relationship. They are built on individual and shared needs, as well as individual and shared power.

Mutual-benefit agreements replace the old demands that were part of the conflict. The old demands are no longer on the table. The conflict partners are not seen in relation to their old demands. Mutual-benefit agreements are built on the doables, but leaders cannot assume that a mutual-benefit agreement has been reached just because one or more of the doables have been accomplished. Mutual-benefit proposals usually deal with the most difficult issues and combine steps of improvement into a comprehensive agreement.

Through the process of the first seven steps, formerly intractable issues can become more manageable and eventually addressed. Lesser issues are often taken care of in the doables. These out of the way, the larger issues may begin to seem manageable as well. Dr. Weeks writes: "One of the critical elements of mutual-benefit agreements is that all conflict partners serve as caretakers for the welfare of the self, of the other partner, and of the relationship" (p. 228). Each person is concerned about meeting not only his or her own needs, but the needs of the conflict partner as well.

Mutual-benefit agreements must consider givens. These are the situations, needs, values, goals, core beliefs, and so forth, that are so important to one or both of the parties that they cannot be compromised.

There is a caution flag here. Leaders must be careful not to label all the demands as "givens." Only true unchangeables can legitimately be called "givens." These are the principles on which it sometimes becomes appropriate to agree to disagree. An example of

this might be matters of doctrinal understandings or ethical postures that cannot be compromised.

Once a basic agreement has been reached, it is important to clarify specific responsibilities. It is important to go over exactly what each party is going to do in order to make the resolution work. One should make sure that is clear and is agreed upon, if necessary, put it in writing.

Leaders should remember that while the uniqueness of each party will continue to be expressed, and that is good, diversity does not rule out unity. As new conflicts arise, the value of the relationship must continually be emphasized. At some point, successful resolution gives hope that future conflicts can be successfully resolved as well. After all, conflict-resolution skills are relationship-building skills.

It is a good idea to review the eight essential skills from time to time, and consider self-evaluation. One should answer this question: “Which step or steps do I tend to ignore or violate?” Every time these eight steps are implemented, the relationship is strengthened and so are the individual members.

In the future, one should use step two, clarifying perceptions, as soon as the first signs of a conflict appear. A responsible leader will teach conflict-resolution skills on a regular basis—before, during, and after a conflict situation.

## **Conclusion**

This particular approach holds great promise. It stands in stark contrast to approaches that seek to bargain. In bargaining or negotiating approaches, the goal most often is to keep wins and losses in some semblance of balance. In even sharper contrast, the eight-step method is not the winner-take-all approach, which is used in a lawsuit type of approach to conflict resolution.

While this method of resolution does not purport to be an overtly Christian approach, it is compatible with the principles of Scripture and holds great promise to be effective in conflict resolution between individuals or

groups in the workplace, the home, the church, or elsewhere. The concepts that stand out in the eight-step approach are those of partnership and the value of the relationship itself. These ideas are entirely compatible with the Scriptural metaphor of the unity of the human body and the unity of the church.

Paul used the body metaphor when he wrote these words in Romans 12:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. . . . Let love be without hypocrisy. . . . Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another (excerpts from Romans 12:3-10, *NKJV*).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul again used the body metaphor to speak of unity in diversity. He wrote:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many (vv. 12-14, *NKJV*).

In the next several verses, Paul explains how the various parts of the human body have their specialized functions, yet how interdependent and important each part is to the other. The survival of the entire body is dependent on the survival and proper functioning of each part. Paul continues:

There should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually (12:25-27, *NKJV*).

It is not by accident that the very next chapter (1 Corinthians 13) is much quoted, because following this beautiful dissertation on love, conflict resolution can be realized.