

MINISTERIAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

SEMINAR IV

Theme: "The Pentecostal Minister and Relationships"

The Pastor and Conflict Management

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INTRODUCTION

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? (James 4:1 New International Version)

What place does a gun have in a church board meeting? The answer is—none! And yet, one pastor recently spoke of his personal experience during a confrontational board meeting where a member pulled a pistol out of his coat pocket and laid it on the table, explaining that he was not above using it. Such testimonies seem confusing and paradoxical. Living peaceably is supposed to be central to what it means to be a Christian. In fact, the very essence of the Gospel message speaks of forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity. Nevertheless, according to the Faith Communities Today survey (FACT—the largest survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States), conflict has become synonymous with church, with 75% of all congregations reporting some level of conflict within the past five years.¹

This article describes both from research and experience the struggle many Christians face in their attempts to manage conflict appropriately. Unfortunately, this inability, and the reality of subtle and devious tactics by antagonists, leaves in its wake shipwrecked people who are hurt and

discouraged; often calloused and hardened.² All around is evidence of this prevalent problem and because the health of the ministry is crucial to the health of a denomination, we must address the situation.

Therefore, this lesson begins by discussing the importance of understanding the “conflict in the church” issue. The second section invites the reader to examine optional ways of handling conflict and to reflect upon what may be his or her most prevalent conflict management style. Finally, the third division looks at relevant conflict management research specifically related to Church of God ministers.

I. The Importance of the Issue

What churches and their leaders experience in regard to conflict represents no exception. All groups experience frustrations and certain levels of conflict: corporations, governments, nations, families, nonprofits, hospitals, courts, or universities – all experience conflict, both with people inside and outside their specific organization. Even the first-century church experienced conflict (e.g., Acts 6:1-7; Acts 15:36-41 and Galatians 2:11-14), revealing conflict to be universal and a natural part of life wherever people are involved. The unknown variable is how each church or ministerial leader will attempt to handle conflict.

In regard to how well the church may be handling conflict, studies show that the church is not faring too well. The Alban Institute asserts that as many

as three quarters (75%) of all churches have their ministries reduced because of unproductive cycles of conflict.³ The same study argues that perhaps as much as one-fourth (25%) of all church conflict is so severe that the church cannot even function.⁴ Further research agrees, arguing that conflict is “a serious problem...wasting precious human resources that would be better directed to other activities, including the primary work of the organization,”⁵ which for the church is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). In fact, studies suggest that practicing managers spend more than 20% of their time dealing with conflict and its collateral damage.⁶ In comparison, research related specifically to Church of God state administrators report as much as 40% of their time being directed toward conflicted situations.⁷

Chris Thomas, professor of New Testament at the Church of God Theological Seminary, stated during a 1993 seminar on *Leadership and Conflict*, "Perhaps few topics are as relevant as this one for a movement which is facing the kinds of challenges as those which await the Church of God."⁸ Similarly, Paul Conn, president of Lee University, writes..."The core ingredient to maintaining leadership in ministry often becomes knowing how to cope with...and how to resolve conflict."⁹ In addition, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), an accreditation association for 243 graduate schools in the USA and Canada, reports: "Conflict management skills are second among the top six most needed leadership competencies."¹⁰ During his work with the Church of

God, Conrad Lowe, a consultant with John Maxwell's INJOY Group said: "Conflict management may be the number one issue for Church of God ministers."¹¹

Conflict issues are not just personal; they are in fact ubiquitous, frequent, and cultural. Many problems facing ministers involve scenarios saturated with destructive conflict. The sad part is that few colleagues are substantively prepared to help with conflict situations. There is a growing need for resources within the denominational structure of the church. These resources must aim at facilitating the development of skills designed to prevent conflict or its escalation. At present, pastors empathize and identify with the pain. But, empathy is not enough. Ministers need practical help with conflict management.

Both research and experience describe *some* conflict as an organizational fact of life, nevertheless, testimonies from pastors around the country describe an alarming growth of negative church behavior. In fact, literature concerning the subject of conflict in the church refers to instigators of conflict by using terms such as "well-intentioned dragons," "antagonists," "clergy killers," "toxic churches," and even "toxic pastors." For example, twenty years ago, research conceded that one in four (25%) Catholics quit ministry while one in eight (12.5%) Protestants quit each year.¹² More recent estimates suggest that one in six (16.6%) or 50,000 of the nation's 350,000 protestant ministers leave the ministry each year due to conflict.¹³ If these statistics are accurate, more pastors quit the ministry each year than attended the historic 1996 Promise

Keepers pastors' conference in Atlanta, Georgia. No wonder many pastors refer to conflict situations as being similar to feeling like "a rowboat caught in a hurricane."¹⁴ Therefore, many church leaders today see conflict management as the most dominant problem Christian organizations face.¹⁵

Conflict management is a subject often talked about, but despite the growing recognition, it is seldom realized. One reason pastors may avoid attempting to resolve a conflict in the church is a fear that their actions will stimulate more conflict. While pastors are called as shepherds to watch over and protect their sheep (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Peter 5:2) the efforts of the shepherd are often misunderstood. For example, the actions of a pastor toward an unruly member may be construed by that member as harsh or unnecessary. Sadly, when this view spreads through the congregation, the conflict escalates. This may increase the tendency of both pastor and congregation to avoid healthy attempts at conflict resolution in the future.

Although conflict is evident in all of society, it is a sensitive problem for the church. In fact, literature points toward the growing concern for pastors and their families. For example, Larson, in the July/August 2002 edition of *Rev. Magazine* cites a survey published by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth. The survey involved 2,500 pastors and reveals some disturbing findings:

- 80% believe that pastoral ministry is affecting their families negatively
- 33% felt burned out within the first five years of ministry.¹⁶

The same 2002 issue of *Rev. Magazine* addresses the much too common collateral damage experienced by preacher's kids (PKs), stating, "Children reared in ministry families are more prone to disillusionment with Christians and Christianity."¹⁷ One adult PK who is now an attorney sadly confesses, "I see more integrity in the business world...than I ever saw on the missionary compounds where I grew up."¹⁸ Sadly, such confessions are not isolated. The *Search Institute* conducted a survey revealing that one in every two children raised in a pastor's home do not go to church as an adult. Again Larson reasons, "When children are exposed to the many conflicts and personal attacks that occur in the name of God and Christianity, it is no wonder so many conclude what one pastor's son did: 'I love you, mom and dad, and I love God. I just don't want anything to do with church.'"¹⁹

In addition, the winter 1996 issue of *Leadership* magazine cites results of their national survey of Protestant clergy, which indicates that approximately 23% of pastors were fired at least once, and another 43% said a "faction" (typically less than 10 people) forced them out. The same survey also revealed that 41% of the congregations who fired their pastors have done this to at least two previous pastors (toxic churches). The reasons pastors give for their terminations include:

- Personality conflicts – 43%
- Conflicting visions for the church – 17%
- Financial strain in the congregation – 7%

- Theological differences – 5%
- Unrealistic expectations – 4%
- Other – 19%²⁰

Others agree with the previous reports, explaining that “*The major problem facing sincere Christians...has little to do with theology, the occult, secularism, or humanism...Far more insidious...is our inability to work together, to function harmoniously and creatively, and to constructively manage conflict.*”²¹ Such reports clearly describe a conflict phenomenon that is exploding, increasing exponentially, and a problem that is now recognized as pandemic.

Understandably then, if the church of the 21st century is to be effective, it must be able to deal constructively with conflict. Thus, the problem becomes how to make ministers aware of constructive ways to address the conflict issue, along with ways to prepare pastors for conflict situations.

To accomplish this task, church leaders must understand conflict and be trained to use it in beneficial ways. Here again, *Leadership Journal*, reports that even though most pastors are formally prepared for ministry, a large percentage of pastors express they feel unprepared for certain actual ministerial experiences. In fact, the top three competencies thought lacking in Bible school and seminary training are:

- Leadership 12%
- Business administration/management 24%
- Conflict management 31%.²²

Thus, even a rudimentary look at research on conflict argues that it is in the best interest of the minister to understand the role of conflict in the pastorate and understanding begins by becoming aware of the basic facts concerning conflict. In fact, the critical responsibility for creating conflict positive conditions must fall disproportionately on the pastor, the formal leader, “for it is the leader who will...set the tone as to what types of behavior will and will not be tolerated.”²³ Daniel Goleman, in his best selling *Primal Leadership* agrees, explaining that “The leader.... more than anyone else...creates the conditions that directly determine people’s ability to work well.”²⁴ However, an alarming report originating from work with conflicted congregations, explains that as much as 90% of the time, whenever a congregation is involved in a highly destructive conflict, “The pastor is either the perpetrator or is deeply involved as one of the conflict parties.”²⁵ For these reasons, the minister represents the key to the creation of a conflict-positive context within the church.

II. Conflict Management Styles

The first understanding a minister needs concerning conflict and its management involves recognizing the various ways people deal with conflict, and more specifically how he or she typically deals with and responds to conflict. In other words, ministers must be aware of their own conflict management style.

Conflict management styles are behavioral characteristics describing the ways individuals handle conflict. These styles originate from observation of others and thus represent, to a great extent, learned behavior. The good news is that since these conflict management styles are learned, it is possible through training and education to encourage better and more effective conflict management behavior.

Persons typically pick from among five general styles when handling conflict. While different terms are often used for the five, they generally pertain to the same five conflict styles.

- **Avoiding** (withdrawing - lose/win) - concerns a passive, nonassertive style.
- **Competing** (forcing - win/lose) - a conflict style manifests itself in terms of aggressive, uncooperative behavior since the goal is to win at all cost.
- **Accommodating** (smoothing - win/lose by choice) - involves nonassertive but cooperative behavior, making the concern of the other its goal.
- **Compromising** - represents the intermediate position within which there is some gain and some loss. Finding an acceptable settlement that only partially satisfies both concerns.
- **Collaborating** (consensus - win/win - synergism). In collaboration, the conflicting individuals try to find a solution that is satisfactory to all parties. Collaboration differs from compromise in that compromisers look for only partial satisfaction while collaborators work on solving the problem until solutions are found that meet each party's need.

The second thing to understand about conflict is that some styles are situationally better than others. In fact, Jay Hall in his popular *Conflict*

Management Survey points out that there is a preferred order to these styles, preferring use of collaboration with the other four styles representing skill sets which one uses within a specific situation.²⁶ From a scriptural perspective, collaboration is the style of choice.²⁷ Christians should develop the ability to collaborate and understand it as first choice in most situations. Collaborating represents the theoretically best mode, while avoiding represents the theoretically worst type of conflict management behavior under most circumstances (see Figure 1). There are occasions, however, when styles such as avoidance are absolutely appropriate. Collaboration, therefore, should not be viewed as the “white hat” of conflict management in every situation. The dysfunction occurs when less than appropriate conflict management behavior (i.e., use of a style that does not “fit” the situation) becomes habitual.

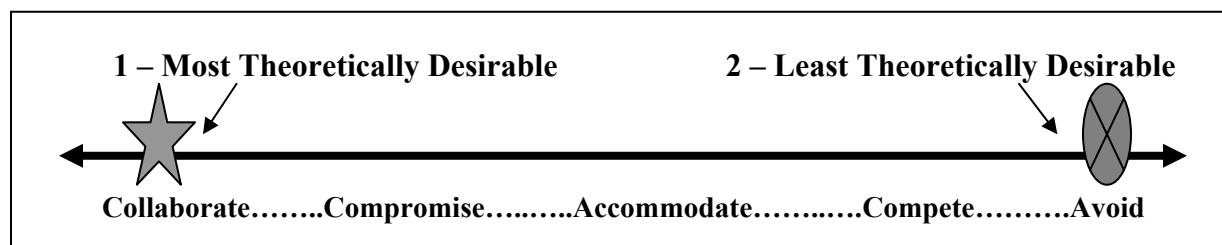


Figure 1.
Preferred Order of Use for Conflict Management Styles

Thus, across the board, collaborating is the most preferred style for conflict management because of its concern for everyone involved and because it encourages a win-win situation for each side. In fact, a leader’s effectiveness is associated with his or her abilities to convert conflicts of interests (differences) into consensual agreements.

III. Relevant Research Regarding Church Conflict

As noted above, there is consensus concerning the preferred order of conflict management styles, with collaboration being most preferred and avoidance being least preferred. However, one survey involving 200 church leaders reported disturbing results concerning the order of preference *actually used* by Christian workers.²⁸ Compromising was found to be first, followed in order by avoiding, accommodating, collaborating, and competing (see Figure 2). As might be reasoned, such findings are not ideal representations.

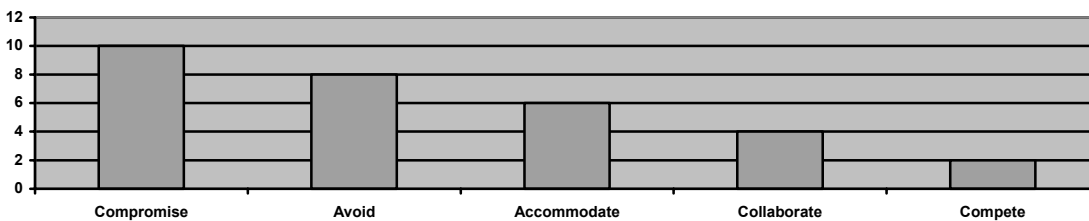


Figure 2. Robert Dale, Research Findings Concerning 200 Church Leaders Conflict Management Style According to Actual Use

The results of research specifically examining Church of God ministers show reason for concern as well (see Figure 3).²⁹ Church of God ministers typically use the theoretically worst conflict management mode, avoidance, as their predominant conflict management behavior (avoidance behavior, 38.5%; collaborative behavior, 4.6%). As noted above, avoidance typically represents a lose-lose style of conflict management.

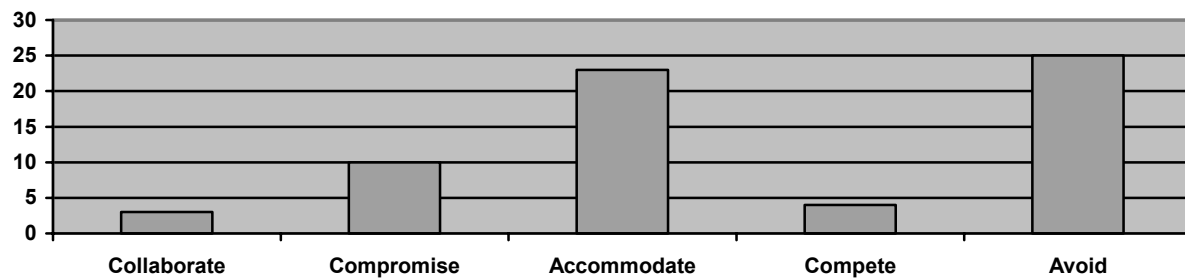


Figure 3.
 Conflict Styles Chosen by Church of God Ministers (October, 2001)

Further assessment of Church of God pastors explored those who *have* and those who *have not left* a church due to conflict; there was a difference. Those who *have not left* a church due to conflict typically use an accommodating mode of conflict management as their initial conflict management behavior, followed by avoidance, compromise, collaborative, and finally, competing conflict behaviors (see Figure 4).



Figure 4.
 Actual conflict management behavior.
 Church of God pastors who HAVE NOT LEFT a church due to conflict.

In contrast, Church of God pastors who *have left a church* due to conflict typically use avoidance behavior (the theoretical worst style) as their initial response to a conflict situation. Avoidance is then typically followed by accommodating, competing, compromising and finally, collaborating (see Figure 5).

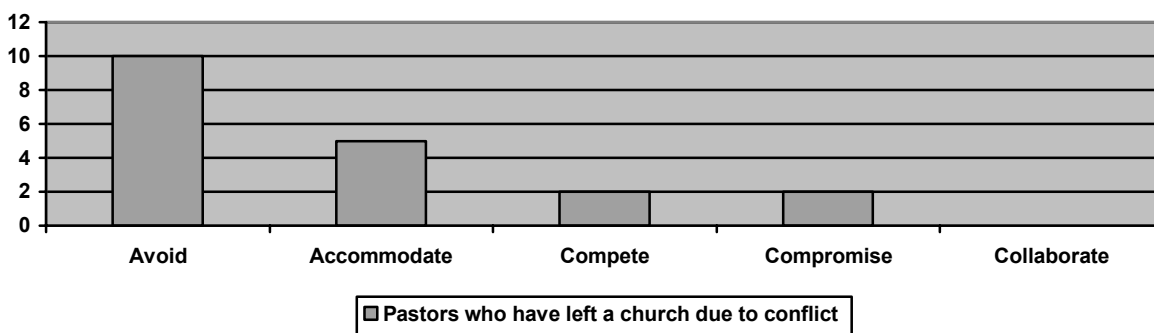


Figure 5.
Actual conflict management behavior.
Church of God pastors who HAVE LEFT a church due to conflict.

In all, 70.8% of the ministers surveyed answered *NO* to the question—*“Have you ever left a church due to conflict? If yes, more than once?”* However, further investigation into this particular phenomenon brought about another interesting discovery. 29.2% answered *YES*, and of that 29.2 % (the *pastors who left a church due to conflict*), a significant number will repeat the incident (42.1%).

- 57.9% left one church due to conflict
- 31.6% left two churches due to conflict, and
- 5.2% left four churches because of conflict, while another
- 5.2% actually admitted to leaving five churches because of conflict.

These may not appear to be staggering statistics until one begins to generalize these figures to the total Church of God population. Consider the possibility that 29.2% (2,044 of the 7,000) of the Churches of God in the United States are presently involved in such intense conflict as to cause a minister to resign.³⁰

With this larger picture taken into consideration, one can quickly see that it should not be acceptable to allow every three out of ten Church of God ministers (4,404) and churches (2,044) to be involved in conflict so intense that it forces a minister to move and a congregation to experience the turmoil of a pastoral transition. Furthermore, these statistics report that of those who change churches due to conflict, 42.1% (861 ministers) will move again for the same reason (i.e., conflict).

Such possibilities point back to a previous concern: what about the pastors who never make the transition to another pastorate? As already noted—a large number, referred to as “silent deaths” (MIAs – missing in action), leave the ministry every year due to unmanaged or mismanaged conflict. As one colleague so aptly observes, “Maybe this represents the ultimate avoidance, leave the church, and then leave the ministry.”³¹ Such conflict has direct bearing on the spiritual and psychological well-being of the minister, his family, the congregation, and the denomination (i.e., collateral damage).

Conclusion

At issue is the hard fact that all too often conflicting scenarios are public and ugly. Obviously, this witness does not accomplish the intended Biblical objective of being an attractive witness to the world (e.g., Matthew 5:14). In fact, as we have seen, the type of behavior needed for effective conflict management does not simply occur. The ability to appropriately manage conflict necessitates awareness, education, and training. Obviously, behavior resulting in the possibility that 30% of the Churches of God in the United States struggle with intense conflict, seems to mandate attention.

Once again, appropriate conflict management in the church fundamentally begins:

- By understanding the importance, enormity, and pain of the “conflict in the church” issue
- By being aware of the various ways one can handle conflict and by reflecting on what may be one’s most often used conflict management style³²
- By understanding that while dysfunctional conflict management is disinvesting in the future, becoming skilled at dealing with conflict is investing in the future health of the church.

Therefore, even though conflict in the church may *go with the territory*, so should the development of the skills needed to help ourselves and others. Here, too, Scripture speaks...Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed (2 Timothy 2:15 NIV).

End Notes

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Conrad Lowe is a Church consultant working for John Maxwell's INJOY group out of Atlanta, Georgia. The consulting group was working under a leadership development contract for the Church of God denomination and had just finished its first year with the church.
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- ¹³ Umidi, Joseph. (2000). *Confirming the pastoral call: A guide to matching candidates and congregations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications. Professor of Practical Teleology, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA
- ¹⁴ McCorkle, S., & Mills, J. L. (1992). Rowboat in a hurricane: Metaphors of interpersonal conflict management. *Communication Reports*. 5, no. 2, Summer: 58-59.

- ¹⁵ Compare G. Lloyd Rediger's (1997) estimate arguing that a pastor is "fired" (forced out) every six minutes in the United States. *Clergy killers: Guidance for pastors and congregations under attack*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky. 6.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 72.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p. 72.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 72.
- ²⁰ LaRue, Jr., J. C. (2000). Profile of today's pastor: How prepared were you for ministry? Online source: October, *LeadershipJournal.net*.
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- ²² LaRue, Jr., J. C. (2000). Profile of today's pastor: How prepared were you for ministry? Online source: October, *LeadershipJournal.net*.
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- ³² The Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument represents the most popular conflict assessment tool on the market. Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). *Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument*. Palo Alto, CA: Xicom Inc., & Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.