

THE PASTOR AS A MANAGER OF CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

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Conflict, such a real part of everyday life, has not by-passed the church and its leaders. Traditionally, however, clergymen have not dealt effectively with it. Successful management of conflict requires administrative skills and a considerable knowledge of organizational strategies, neither of which has generally been given very high priority. Because the church is so vulnerable to conflict today, the creative handling of controversy is no longer an option but a necessity.

The formal study of conflict is a relatively recent academic undertaking. In fact, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* was first published in the spring of 1957. Although work has been going on in Europe since World War II to develop a science of peace and conflict research, it is generally true that there, as in America, "the findings of modern conflict analysis have not yet been applied to the church."¹

The turbulence of social change in the 1960s swept the churches of America into experiences of conflict which many were ill-prepared to handle. Out of necessity arose an eclectic search for appropriate coping tools, as inquiry was made of the behavioral and social sciences, organizational research, and labor-management-conflict studies. In recent years, a science of conflict management (moving beyond elementary human relations principles) has taken its first tottering steps in the church.²

¹Ingo Hermann, "Conflicts and Conflict Resolution in the Church," *Concilium*, March 1972, p. 107.

²Seminaries have introduced conflict-management courses into the curriculum, particularly in connection with Doctor-of-Ministry programs. A recent book which surveys the literature relating to application of conflict-management principles to the church is Donald E. Bossart, *Creative Conflict in Religious Education and Church Administration* (Birmingham, Ala., 1980).

The present article will survey in general terms (1) basic concepts for understanding and managing conflict, and (2) strategies for the management of conflict. A follow-up article will treat the matter of institutionalizing conflict management in the church so as to provide benefit to the congregation itself while at the same time reducing the pastor's load in this respect.

1. *Basic Concepts for Understanding and Managing Conflict*

Action training projects in conflict management appear to support the notion that attitudinal change is most influenced by an understanding of the nature of conflict and its development.³ We should admit the inevitability of conflict. For man, in his present condition of brokenness, controversy is a normal part of life lived in groups and communities. To assume otherwise is a mistake for which the church must pay a high price. Human beings are too varied in background, disposition, education, and expectation to respond in identical ways. Realistically, a measure of the health and effectiveness of a congregation would be, not the absence of conflict, but the way the congregation and its leaders handle it.

Precise definitions of conflict are difficult to formulate without aspects of delimitation or description. Synonyms such as "clash," "tension," "struggle," and/or "friction" are usually employed, but they do not stand alone, or are inadequate in themselves, in providing definitions. Is, for instance, the "tension" or "struggle" intra- or inter-personal, intra- or inter-group? And is the "tension" and "struggle" over one or more of the following general areas of conflict noted by John L. Hoff: "(a) money; (b) power (including authority and structure); (c) value and belief; (d) loyalty to persons and groups?"⁴

The varied nature of definitions that are given is illustrated by four that I have seen recently:

A struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, inspire, or eliminate their rivals.⁵

³John L. Hoff, "Conflict Management: An Organizational Principle," *The Christian Ministry*, January 1973, p. 18.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956), p. 8.

By "conflict" we simply mean a struggle for power by contending forces, a clash of views, or a difference of opinion.⁶

... the structure of a system within which there exist mutually irreconcilable concepts of the goal of the system, such that the achievement of one goal would exclude the achievement of the other.⁷

... the experience of pain or the threat of pain in interpersonal relationships. Conflict is ... a way of experiencing relationship.⁸

Pastors will probably relate readily to the last definition or even more readily to the simple, matter-of-fact observation by Paul Tournier that "it is not possible for people to work together at a common task without there being differences of opinion, conflicts, jealousy and bitterness."⁹ What is important for our purposes in this essay is that we approach the subject without ethical pre-judgment. If we think of conflict, not as warfare, but as the *appearance of difference*, or in psychological terms, as the *interacting of desires*, we eliminate the connotation of good or bad.

More useful, perhaps, than definitions would be an examination of the nature of conflict and conflict management by means of a series of analytic and contrasting dyads such as the following: (1) functional versus dysfunctional conflict, (2) substantive versus emotional issues, (3) integrative versus distributive strategy, and (4) control versus resolution in conflict management.

Functional versus Dysfunctional Conflict

It is essential to remember that conflict can be either creative or destructive, functional or dysfunctional. Controversy was, in fact, a part of the life of the early church. The NT gives clear evidence, for example, that there was dissension over whether circumcision was essential to salvation and that there were interpersonal disputes between Paul and Barnabas and between Peter and Paul, but that these were creatively handled and produced a

⁶Robert Lee and Martin Marty, eds., *Religion and Social Conflict* (New York, 1964), p. 4.

⁷Hermann, pp. 107-108.

⁸Hoff, pp. 17-18.

⁹Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York, 1956), p. 38.

good result (see, e.g., Acts 15:5-27, 36-41; Gal 2:9-14). Indeed, disputes of a nature to "tear apart," creating factions and broken relationships, are scripturally condemned (see, e.g., 1 Cor 1:10-13).

Among the positive values attributed to conflict are the following:

1. Conflict may serve as a stimulus. It may yield new ideas which might not have been conceived without this stimulus. Saul Alinsky insists that "Controversy has always been the seed of creation."¹⁰ It often stimulates participation and involvement in the decision-making processes by people who may have become inactive or passive in an organization.¹¹ Conflict may increase motivation and energy for the tasks of a social system as well as increase the innovativeness of individuals through the healthy interchange of viewpoints.¹² Growth is promoted by involvement in significant encounters in which people are free to make their contributions to the directions of change. It has well been said that "a non-controversial congregation is a dead one."¹³

2. Conflict may help to sharpen the issues and enable people to distinguish more clearly between two points of view. It provides an impetus for critical examination, and it generally supplies a floodlight of publicity to help expose all sides of an issue. Clearer vision results if we are free to test our convictions against opposing views.

3. Conflict serves to clarify and sharpen identities. Dean Kelley's thesis in the book *Why the Conservative Churches Are Growing* supports this point. Where church groups actively contend for their faith and at the same time resist pressures "to confuse it with other beliefs/loyalties/practices . . .," a high sense of identity is generally maintained.¹⁴

¹⁰Quoted in Stephen C. Rose, "Saul Alinsky and His Critics," *Christianity and Crisis*, July 20, 1964, p. 145.

¹¹Lyle E. Schaller, *Community Organization: Conflict and Reconciliation* (New York, 1966), p. 78.

¹²Richard E. Walton, *Interpersonal Peace-making: Confrontations and Third-Party Consultation* (Reading, Mass., 1969), p. 5.

¹³Dan W. Dodson, "The Creative Role of Controversy," *Social Action*, February 1963, p. 13.

¹⁴Dean Kelley, *Why the Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York, 1972), pp. 121-122.

Advocates of pluralism see a value in conflict in this connection. "If conflict between them [American denominations] disappeared, people would lose their identities and be blurred into a vague 'Americanistic' understanding of life."¹⁵ It seems generally accepted by sociologists that the distinction between ourselves (the "in-groups") and everybody else (the "out-groups") is established in and through conflict. As a corollary to this notion, there are those who argue that conflict is a primary way, perhaps the only way, to achieve and sustain intimacy.¹⁶ "It appears that it is primarily through conflict that we come to understand each other and are thereby enabled to push past the differences to the commonalities that link men."¹⁷

4. Conflict enhances the principles of democracy and freedom. The "cutting edges" of a democratic society are at its points of tension and difference. If freedom is to be real, the possibility of advancing new or old ideas must be present as well as the concomitant possibility of controversy. Free controversy is the only method known to man whereby the heavy hand of coerced conformity may be diverted and creative energies released. "Only a totalitarian society in practice knows—at least in appearance—that general agreement and unity, that grey single sameness, which is the mark of the *societas perfectas*."¹⁸

5. Finally, conflict has been ascribed positive value by social activists as a means of hastening change. The human tendency to cling to the status quo, it is argued, does not yield without struggle. Carefully managed, this kind of conflict can serve a positive use wherever change is planned.¹⁹

Churchmen generally, however, have not been very comfortable with the idea that conflict may have constructive consequences. It must be conceded that there are risks and liabilities. Insecurity, anxiety, hunger, bloodshed, and annihilation may be among them. Conflict can rend and destroy. Conflict which produces prolonged or permanent disruption of relationships, or conflict which, though

¹⁵Will Herberg as cited by Martin Marty in *Religion and Social Conflict*, p. 176.

¹⁶George Simmel, *Conflict*, trans. Kurt K. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill., 1955), pp. 17-18.

¹⁷Hoff, p. 17.

¹⁸Hermann, p. 111.

¹⁹Lyle E. Schaller, *The Change Agent* (New York, 1972), chap. 6.

temporary, is of such intensity as to be disabling, is obviously “dysfunctional.”

Many Christians are especially uncomfortable with the deliberate use of conflict for social change. Critics of the conflict theory—conflict as a strategy for change²⁰—argue that God calls Christians to be reconciling agents whose every act must be performed in a spirit of love. “The role of the church in this age of alienation is to serve as a channel for God’s reconciling love as it flows from God to man to his brother. Clearly there is little room for the use of conflict in this argument.”²¹

An important philosophical argument against the deliberate use of conflict for change is based on the ancient question of ends and means. Is it possible for a “bad” method to produce a “good” end? If mild conflict can escalate into violence and hate, will the end product be corrupted by the means used to achieve the end? These are vital moral questions which the Christian must address.

Perhaps the best that can be said at this point is that, given the inevitability of conflict where persons exist and act in interrelationship and interdependence, as they do in the church, it is important to learn how to contain these tensions and to channel them to constructive ends. It is also necessary to distinguish between healthy differences and pathological differences—between disagreement which is to be encouraged because it enriches problem-solving and productivity and disagreement which disables a group.

Substantive versus Emotional Issues

Richard Walton draws a distinction between substantive and emotional issues in conflict.²² *Substantive issues* involve such disagreements as might occur over policies, practices, and role relationships—i.e., differences of opinion. *Emotional issues* involve negative feelings between parties such as anger, distrust, scorn, resentment, fear, and rejection.

²⁰As applied by Saul Alinsky in labor-management relations and later by civil-rights activists. See Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Westminster, Md., 1969).

²¹Schaller, *Community Organization*, p. 83. He adds, “On the other hand it can be argued that in many times and places neighbor-centered love *requires* the Christian to resort to the use of conflict.”

²²Walton, pp. 2, 73-75.

While it may be useful to sort out the issues in a conflict in this way, in actuality it is difficult to draw a neat line between the two. By nature, conflict involves emotion. Where a policy or opinion is held with deep feeling or conviction and where that policy or opinion is confronted by a threat of high magnitude, we have the occasion for conflict. Or again, participants in emotional conflict may point to substantive issues to dignify or justify their dispute.

A related view is expressed by Lewis Coser, who distinguishes between what he calls "realistic" and "nonrealistic" conflict. In the former, conflict is a means to an end with a rational basis, whereas in the latter, conflict simply arises from aggressive tendencies as an end in itself. In realistic conflict, *means* other than conflict are available (hostility is not necessarily involved), or there is a possibility of choice between various forms of contention. In non-realistic conflict, since it affords only tension release, the *chosen antagonist* can be substituted for by any other suitable target.²³ Realistic conflict can be "managed," but nonrealistic may require therapy. On balance, conflict that is based on nonrealistic interests or even unlimited conflict that is based on realistic interests can be regarded as more harmful than creative.

It is important for clergymen to understand the emotional factors involved in conflict. They must understand and deal sensitively with the "threat fields" of individuals—those areas of life in which people feel especially vulnerable and for which defenses and barricades have been built. There are times when the pastor must patiently serve as a blotter for the hostilities of troubled people. He endures, obeying the dictum of Spinoza: "Do not weep. Do not wax indignant. Understand."

The pastor will recognize that the church like all "conviction communities" (i.e., where a certain commonality in beliefs and endorsement of human values is assumed), is particularly vulnerable to conflict. The likelihood of an admixture of nonrealistic elements is greater, according to Coser, "in groups in which the members participate in their total personality than in groups in

²³Coser, pp. 48-50, 156. For instance, displaced father hatred may attach itself to the boss, policeman, or board chairman.

which they participate only segmentally.”²⁴ Church fights and “holy wars” have always been embarrassingly difficult to handle. The worst of our “fallings out” are those in which each protagonist contends that “the Lord” is on his or her side. There is no more dogmatic position than that of an individual who claims the Lord’s support.²⁵

Distributive versus Integrative Strategy

Often, conflict is of such a nature that the simple or obvious way to deal with it is to make a distribution of the goods or values involved. Frequently, however, the distribution is such that if I get more, you get less; or if you get more, I get less. We have, then, a win-or-lose situation. Such win/lose-conflict situations tend to make people cautious, secretive, insecure, and belligerent. Hasty voting in the church on business items or other issues is among the more common practices that tend to produce these win/lose confrontations.

Integrative strategy, by contrast, aims at a win/win situation in which, if I win, you win too. The church, like a school, is an integrative social situation, not a distributive one. In it there may exist the positive conflict of a healthy interchange of ideas, friendly competition to produce the clearest analysis of a situation, or the zest of determination to do the best possible job for the group—forms of conflict which cause all to win.

Integrative strategy involves a quest for consensus and cooperation. As early as 1925 Mary Parker Follett was advocating this approach for labor-management conflict.²⁶ She describes three

²⁴Coser, p. 58.

²⁵If it is any comfort, research indicates that emotional levels in conflict are often cyclical. After experiencing the consequences of open conflict for a time, the antagonists may back away, the conflict becoming latent for a time. If they remain in interdependence, manifest conflict will tend to recur at some point. The issues or the form of the conflict may also change from one cycle to the next. A group might openly resist a proposal when it is first introduced, then move into a period of latency on that issue, only to reconsider it favorably at a later time. See Walton, pp. 72-73.

²⁶H. C. Metcalf and L. Urwick, eds., *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* (New York, 1940), chap. 1, “Constructive Conflict,” pp. 30-49.

main ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise, and integration. The first and easiest way is the win/lose approach. Under compromise, the most common approach, each side gives up a little in order to have peace, but conflict can be expected to rise in some other form because only part of the desired objective has been achieved and the sides are not content to let it rest there. When two desires are *integrated*, however, then a solution has been found in which both desires have found a place and neither side has had to sacrifice anything.²⁷

Some contemporary ecclesiologists are advocating consensus decision-making as particularly appropriate to the nature of the church. The vote approach, it is argued, tends to divide: "... it must force individuals to argue and attempt to convince, rather than help them work together to reach mutually agreeable solutions. The vote just is not an option for the Church."²⁸

E. L. Mascall, in a penetrating analysis of the foibles of ecclesiastical assemblies points to an instance where an important issue involving historical church tradition hung on two votes. "No one would hang a cat on such a vote as this." Is it sufficient, he asks, to justify the abandonment of a historic tradition of Christendom on such a basis?²⁹ It is contrary to the nature of the church, he contends, to rely simply on numerical voting for the conduct of the church's affairs. "Every religious community is familiar with the fact that, unless it is to be maimed and frustrated, contentious issues have to be settled not by snap votes but by humble and persistent dialogue in the spirit of faith and charity until a common mind is formed."³⁰

²⁷Follett explains that under this cooperative approach a "revaluation" of desires takes place on the part of the participants so that neither party is really "giving in." This is discussed further in the next section as the strategy of "working in the overlap."

²⁸L. O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1970), p. 189. Perhaps it is true in the church, as in the contemporary controversy over the political separation-of-powers doctrine in America, that if somebody wins, the game is over. If nobody loses, everybody wins.

²⁹E. L. Mascall, "Some Reflections on Ecclesiastical Assemblies," *Theology*, January 1971, p. 209.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 210-211. Elton Trueblood describes this process as it was employed by the Quakers: "In the characteristic business meeting of Quakers all over the world, the decisions are made without voting, and without adherence to ordinary

It is not being suggested here that integration is possible in all instances. There are cases where competing desires appear to be mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, clergymen, who have so often been habituated by the way of life in modern society to a win/lose approach to conflict, should experiment, where feasible, with integration as a strategy. The advantages are compelling. Certainly, in a consensus situation, resistance forces are seen in a positive light; indeed, members are urged to express doubts and problems. The likelihood is greater, therefore, that resistance forces will be handled without destroying either the unity of the group or the group's mutual commitment to its goals.³¹

Control versus Resolution in Conflict Management

One can distinguish between resolution and control as different goals of conflict management. Sometimes, however, all that is possible is a temporary de-escalation of conflict forces to a level where work can go on.³²

Control of conflict can also be said to be achieved in an anticipatory way—what Mary Parker Follett calls *anticipation of response*. Referring to labor management, she states: "It isn't enough merely to study the actual reactions of your employees; you

parliamentary rules of order. The hope is that the clerk will be a highly sensitive person who can find the 'sense of the meeting' without a show of hands. He is supposed to try to search for essential unanimity and to judge by 'weight,' rather than by mere numbers. When there is a clear division, the usual practice is to postpone a decision for at least a month or to settle into a time of worship and prayer. Frequently, the effect of such waiting verges on the miraculous. It does not always succeed, but it succeeds so often that there is no serious doubt concerning the wisdom of the method. One beneficent effect is the avoidance of 51-49 decisions which almost always leave a residue of bitterness. The Quakers method of reaching decisions is slow and outwardly inefficient, but the results are often healing. That it has not always been faithfully followed is evidenced by the few unhappy divisions which Quakers have experienced in the course of more than three centuries" (D. Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* [New York, 1966], "Appendix A, Quaker Organization," p. 285).

³¹For practical guidelines for this method, see Caesar B. Moody, *Preparation for Cooperative Decision Making*, Association for Student Teaching, Bulletin No. 12, 1960. See also Richards, pp. 187-191.

³²Walton, p. 5. See also his discussion on pp. 90-93 of coping techniques where the goal is the de-escalation of conflict to the point of eliminating some of the symptomatic issues.

must anticipate their reactions, beat them to it." Comparing this method to a chess game, she points out, "As the real conflict between two good chess players is a conflict of possibilities that would be realized if they played them out, so in business you do not have to make all the moves to make your integrations; you deal with antecedents, premonitory symptoms, etc."³³

The pastor needs to develop an early warning system by means of which he can recognize a situation before it flares out of control. Among the simple indices of tension change which might serve as clues are the following: voting patterns indicating rise of opposition, open protests of policy or decision, change in attendance or revenue (both up and down, but mostly down), a persisting issue of an abrasive nature, increasing polarization of groups, and withdrawal of key persons or groups from communication.³⁴

Anticipation of response includes an awareness of the circular nature of response. In the game of tennis, "A" serves the ball. "B's" return depends in part on the way it was served; A's next play will depend on his own original serve plus the return of B, and so on and on. "The conception of circular behavior throws much light on conflict, for I now realize that I can never fight you, I am always fighting you plus me."³⁵

The leader of a group is in a position to control whether the behavior cycle shall be malevolent or benevolent. The question as to whether emotional remarks are responded to emotionally and thus made self-perpetuating, or whether they are to be taken as evidence of the need to think through a problem, depends upon the leadership. Leadership determines the balance.

Resolution of conflict comes with the complete elimination of the conflict issues and the achievement of agreement and trust. Little needs to be said about this objective since it is obvious and straightforward, although it is often the most difficult to reach.

These, then, are a few of the directions toward which a pastor's search might lead him in an attempt to build a foundation for understanding and managing conflict.

³³Metcalf and Urwick, p. 44.

³⁴Charles A. Dailey, "The Management of Conflict," *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, May 1969, p. 3.

³⁵Metcalf and Urwick, p. 45.

2. *A Strategy for the Management of Conflict*

Turning more specifically to guidelines for monitoring conflict, we begin by proposing the obvious—that one's strategy must fit the nature of the conflict. It is clear that where conflict is confined largely to substantive issues, interventions will be more of a problem-solving character with cognitive processes prevailing. Where the emotional level is high, such conflict will require a restructuring of perceptions and the working through of feelings between the principals. Conciliative interventions here are of an affective as well as of a cognitive nature.

An important function of the mediator is to divest conflict situations of their nonrealistic elements of aggressiveness. Only with the restoration of rationality can contenders deal realistically with the divergent claims at issue.³⁶ "There can be no resolution of conflict without rationality."³⁷

The strategy outlined below calls for *confrontation* with a view to (1) making visible the issues involved, (2) examining the prevailing assumptions, and (3) exploring the alternatives available for controlling or resolving the conflict.

Differences between persons or groups in organizations can be handled by avoidance, withdrawal, or coercion, but a more useful approach involves confrontation. By confrontation we mean the process in which the parties directly engage each other verbally in focusing on the conflict between them. The belief is that "the most constructive ways to handle conflict are generally verbal rather than nonverbal—somatic disturbance, withdrawal, physical violence, murder. In other words, it is more socially contributive to talk out an aggression than to act it out."³⁸

The tendency of the present-day church has been to "smooth over" its difficulties, rather than to take the direct approach. Our culture has taught us to be ashamed of feelings of anger or resentment and, in any event, not to express them. Furthermore, confrontation makes demands in emotional energy, and there are risks. The costs of suppression, however, may be much greater.

In confrontation, an important objective is to make visible the issues involved. This may be done in three steps or stages: (1) Sur-

³⁶Coser, p. 60.

³⁷Hermann, p. 115.

³⁸Hoff, p. 18.

face the issues, (2) examine the assumptions, and (3) explore the alternatives.

Surface the Issues

Follett refers to surfacing of the issues as the first step in conflict management:

If, then, we do not think that differing necessarily means fighting, even when two desires both claim right of way, if we think that integration is more profitable than conquering or compromising, the first step . . . is to *bring the differences into the open*. We cannot hope to integrate our differences unless we know what they are.³⁹

Although frequently *one* specific event or issue initiates a conflict, a proliferation of issues may follow.⁴⁰ The important question that needs to be raised is, What are the conflict issues in the view of the different parties? They should be made public. It may be well to list them, even ranking them in the order of their importance to the parties involved. Where emotions are high, this very exercise itself helps to restore rationality. As the conciliator guides the disputants in identifying the key issues, they are diverted from possible personal vendettas and instead are able to look at "the facts of the case."

Examine the Assumptions

Numerous assumptions are always present in conflict and these must also be made visible and then "filtered," or reality-tested.⁴¹ People act, not in response to objective reality, but to their perceptions of reality—to their picture or image of the situation.

³⁹Metcalf and Urwick, p. 36.

⁴⁰Walton, p. 96. Some writers suggest that it is especially important to focus on the precise issue that sparked the conflict. However, a good case is made for moving from the basic historical issue to those issues involving goals and objectives. Douglass Lewis of the Hartford Seminary Foundation states, in a mimeographed paper: "Asking tricky questions about the cause of a conflict often leads to more conflict, since you are not able to agree on what has caused the conflict. It is much more productive to ask what the objectives of each of the participants of the conflict are." See also his book *Resolving Church Conflicts* (San Francisco, 1981), pp. 60-68.

⁴¹My attention was first drawn to the importance of assumption-testing by Douglass Lewis.

These perceptions may be described as an experiential screen through which the raw data of light and sound waves enter the nervous system. This perception mechanism has a tendency to distort the mental images or pictures of the individual, who tends to perceive reality in a manner compatible to previous personal experiences and to inner needs and motivations.

Ross Stagner views these personality dynamics as crucial in understanding social conflict. "Man's craving for a stable, predictable environment," he says, "tends to force ambiguous data into the existing perceptual structure."⁴² To the participants in conflict, their actions are rational, granting the way in which they perceive the issues. The irrationality of a war may be obvious to a detached observer, "but if we learn to look at the matters in controversy as they are seen by the participants, it becomes clear that perceptual distortion was a fundamental process. Once given these misperceptions, given a distorted reality, the behavior of the participant was reasonable."⁴³

Reality-testing of the inevitable assumptions people bring to a dispute is an essential skill for conflict management. If there is a conflict, for instance, between a senior pastor and the minister of youth, the senior pastor's assumption that the young man is after his job and the youth minister's assumption that the older man resents the younger man's popularity must be checked against reality.

Assumption-filtering involves asking certain important questions:⁴⁴

(1) "What assumptions are the people who are involved in this conflict making about it?" List them. Each assumption in turn is addressed by the question:

(2) "Is this assumption valid, invalid, or uncertain (unknown)?" If it is deemed valid it is retained as a working assumption to be dealt with; if it is invalid it is crossed off. If the

⁴²Ross Stagner, "Personality Dynamics and Social Conflict," *Journal of Social Issues*, 17 (1961): 28-44.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 102. Stagner illustrates this point by suggesting that the behavior of the Communist is rational once we grant his way of perceiving Western democracy, and the behavior of the white supremacist is rational if we accept his way of perceiving the black man. Hence the importance of examining the assumptions.

⁴⁴Suggested by Douglass Lewis in class materials presented at McCormick Theological Seminary.

assumption is uncertain, a third question must be asked about it:

(3) "Is it constructive or destructive for me to work with this assumption?" That is, will it be useful in the problem-solving process? If not, it is treated as invalid and no action is taken based on that assumption.

Where emotions are high, sensitive and defensive people operate with a very narrow perceptual apparatus. By means of assumption-filtering, the perceptual base can be broadened, but the expectation that people can be brought to total objectivity is an illusion. However, emotionally-based conflict (where substantive issues are minimal) might well be resolved, or at least might be brought under control, by the above-mentioned confrontation strategies. When participants are free to "own up" to their feelings in a psychologically safe environment, they increase the authenticity of their mutual relationship and they individually experience a sense of enhanced personal integrity. Even if there should be no total emotional reconciliation, if the parties are equipped better to cope with their relationship, they tend to feel more control over their situation and less controlled by it.

Explore the Alternatives

We have been exploring processes by means of which a leader "enables" the conflict—that is, helps people to discriminate between irrational forces and rational principles, thus moving them toward creative options. Where the basic issues in a conflict are of a more substantive nature—over policies, procedures, money, power, role relationships, loyalty to persons or groups, values and beliefs, or whatever—the next logical stage is to explore the alternatives for a solution to the problem.

Pertinent to this search is the critical question, "What is it we are trying to accomplish in this situation?" An essential element in conflict management is the identification of the goals of the person, group, or organization in a dispute. It is important to realize, however, that homogeneity of values and goals of the participants is not essential. What is important is that a sufficiently broad description of the total objectives of the persons involved be achieved so that an area of "overlap" (those points at which the objectives correspond) can be created. Herein is another reason for bringing the desires of each side into the open for evaluation, because evaluation often leads to a reevaluation. It creates the

possibility for reaching that particular "moment when there is a simultaneous reevaluation of interests on both sides and unity precipitates itself."⁴⁵

The concept of "working together in the overlap"⁴⁶ is an important one. Too often we begin at the point where people differ, rather than focusing on those things held in common. Where the integrity of each person's goals is respected, where there is an absence of coercion and manipulation, there trust, acceptance, and understanding grow—and the area of overlap grows, as well. People change each other by focusing, not on their differences, but on their commonality. Once the goals are clarified and defined (within the area of the overlap), the search for creative alternatives for reaching the goal can begin.

There is also too frequently an unfortunate tendency to limit alternatives. By whatever method (a good brainstorming session, perhaps), *all* the alternatives which can be imagined or invented need to be identified. After the alternatives have been listed, evaluated, and tested and screened for reality and commitment, decisions can be made; the implementation can carefully be worked out, and evaluation procedures can be scheduled so as to insure continuing effectiveness.

With processes such as the foregoing—where there is a conscious effort to depersonalize the conflict, where the focus is on facts and issues, and where the emphasis is one of problem-solution—, there is the promise of less heat and more light. There will also be more growth.

A further problem needs attention: In the pastor's busy routine, how is there time for meeting all the conflict-management needs that may arise in the congregation? Is there perhaps some means whereby the pastor's load may be reduced in this respect and the area of conflict-management somewhat distributed or "institutionalized," as it were? As noted at the outset of the present article, I shall explore this matter in a follow-up article, and will there provide some suggestions as to how such institutionalization may indeed be achieved successfully and helpfully, with positive results for the congregation.

⁴⁵Metcalfe and Urwick, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁶Described in unpublished course materials, Douglass Lewis.