

THE PASTOR AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE CHURCH

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Reinhold Niebuhr is reported to have remarked at a meeting of the National Commission for UNESCO, "What the world needs is a social fabric so tough that it cannot be torn asunder or punched full of holes by conflicts or disputes."¹ Clergymen would probably like to know if there is hope that congregations, which often seem so vulnerable to conflict, might acquire such a healthy toughness.

Organizational theorists have concluded that the more socially mature a system is in its structure and interaction processes, the greater is the probability that conflicts within the organization will be solved constructively.² Indeed, this capacity of organizations to cope creatively with conflict between persons and groups has been identified as one of the signs of organizational health.³ Lewis Coser, in his analysis of social organizations, has noted that conflict "tends to be dysfunctional for a social structure in which there is no or insufficient toleration and institutionalization of conflict. The intensity of a conflict which threatens to 'tear apart' . . . is related to the rigidity of structure."⁴

In a carefully researched and documented management text, Rensis Likert and Jane Gibson Likert describe the shape and nature that a healthy social organization might assume.⁵ They

¹Cited in Rensis Likert and Jane Gibson Likert, *New Ways of Managing Conflict* (New York, 1976), p. 107.

²See, e.g., Likert and Likert, pp. 40-41. How structurally to create such an organizational system is a broad subject.

³E.g., Jack K. Fordyce and Raymond Weil, *Managing with People* (Reading, Mass., 1971), pp. 11-14.

⁴Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956), p. 157.

⁵Likert and Likert, p. 16. They have charted characteristics of management systems on a continuum of one to four—from structurally rigid to open, responsive systems. The basic principles used by managers of the most productive systems,

emphasize also the importance of leadership in building a mature social system, since the interactions occurring within such a system are profoundly affected by leadership. The principle of supportive relationships is, they indicate, fundamental:

The leadership and other processes of the organization must be such as to ensure a maximum probability that in all interactions and all relationships with the organization, each member will, in the light of his background, values, and expectations, view the experience as supportive and one which builds and maintains his sense of personal worth and importance.⁶

according to their findings, have been integrated into a general organizational system called simply "System 4." A brief description (ibid.) follows: "The human organization of a System 4 firm is made up of interlocking work groups with a high degree of group loyalty among the members and favorable attitudes and trust among peers, superiors, and subordinates. Consideration for others and relatively high levels of skill in personal interaction, group problem solving, and other group functions also are present. These skills permit effective participation in decisions on common problems. Participation is used, for example, to establish organizational objectives which are a satisfactory integration of the needs and desires of all the members of the organization and of persons functionally related to it. Members of the organization are highly motivated to achieve the organization's goals. High levels of reciprocal influence occur, and high levels of total coordinated influence are achieved in the organization. Communication is efficient and effective. There is a flow from one part of the organization to another of all the relevant information important for each decision and action. The leadership in the organization has developed a highly effective social system for interaction, problem solving, mutual influence, and organizational achievement. This leadership is technically competent and holds high performance goals."

Writers sympathetic to this management portrait who have made practical application of these principles to the church include the following: Robert C. Worley, *Change in the Church: A Source of Hope* (Philadelphia, 1971); idem, *Dry Bones Breathe!* (Chicago, 1978); idem, *A Gathering of Strangers* (Philadelphia, 1976); idem, *Experiences in Activating Congregations* (Chicago, 1978); Alvin Lindgren and Norman Shawchuck, *Let My People Go* (Nashville, Tenn., 1980); idem, *Management for Your Church* (Nashville, Tenn., 1977); Loren Meade, *New Hope for Congregations* (New York, 1972); and James Anderson, *To Come Alive!* (New York, 1973). An earlier book documenting the "Alinsky Controversy" of the mid-60s in the San Francisco Presbytery is Robert Lee and Russell Galloway, *The Schizophrenic Church* (Philadelphia, 1969). It profiles several churches in the midst of conflict and identifies leadership principles and organizational structures in those churches which manifested strength in coping creatively.

⁶Likert and Likert, p. 108.

In an earlier article I dealt with the pastor as conflict manager in the church, noting some basic concepts for understanding and managing conflict and suggesting some strategies for such management.⁷ The present article continues the topic, with focus on institutionalizing of conflict management in ways that will be beneficial to the congregation while at the same time hopefully reducing the pastor's own load in this respect. Specifically, I shall (1) describe the essentials for an organizational climate and context for churches in which the management and positive utilization of conflict might become "institutionalized," and (2) suggest procedures for equipping members through education and training to cope constructively with conflict.

1. *Climate and Context*

Alvin Lindgren and Norman Shawchuck discuss three primary components of a supportive climate in the church—purpose, persons, and processes.⁸ The climate and context conducive to the institutionalizing of conflict management can be treated under those three headings.

Purpose

Organizations must have clarity of purpose if they are to be supportive of their members. People require that a sense of accomplishment and self-actualization derive from their involvement in organizational activity. In applying the principle of supportive relationships, the leader must help the members to keep firmly in mind the significance of what they and their organization are doing. The leader must see clearly the mission of the organization, be convinced of its importance, and radiate enthusiasm for it.

Unless congregations have a common and clear understanding of why they exist and what they are trying to do, confusion and divisiveness will reign; factions may develop and a smorgasbord of activities may strike out in all directions. Lindgren and Shawchuck discuss procedures for clarifying purpose and drawing up mission statements in the church.⁹

⁷Arnold Kurtz, "The Pastor as a Manager of Conflict in the Church," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 111-126.

⁸Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Let My People Go*, pp. 123-129.

⁹Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Management for Your Church*, pp. 45-49.

Persons

As Lindgren and Shawchuck describe it, a supportive climate in congregations is one wherein trust develops and persons relate to one another in mutual service to support and achieve their common purpose. As members are invited to share leadership with the clergy, the development of mutual trust and team spirit contribute to a supportive climate.¹⁰

Members of the congregation must feel needed and wanted; they must sense that they are a part of a caring fellowship. Wherever there is conflict, whatever the cause, threatened identity is usually a central factor. When people feel insecure, when their sense of personal worth is on a fragile base, tensions mount. On the other hand, where there is a climate of genuine concern and acceptance, where people are heard, where there is empathetic understanding, openness, and trust, there is also a basis for creative coping with conflict. Indeed, it is useless to present alternative solutions and diagnostic insights to people in conflict when they have no real psychic ground on which to stand in relationship to the conflict.

Where pastor and people have a negative self-image, spirals of failure and disaffection are activated. A pastor who has experienced and is able to convey the wholeness of the gospel ought to be able to ask, "How can I help these people feel better about themselves?" In asking the question, the pastor has taken the first step toward reversing those spirals. A supportive climate, a redemptive atmosphere, helps people to develop a personal power-base and frees them to think creatively about ways to solve the conflict.

The church, like any cultural institution, is held together by emotional bonds—a lesson difficult for rational administrators to learn. These emotions surface in times of group tension, as when change (always threatening to some) is introduced. Where change involves a loss of status for certain persons or groups, the sensitive pastor recognizes the emotional factor, understanding that people feel especially emotional about gains and losses, rewards and costs. The pastor's sincere expression of affection and due deference (and pastoral calling) can help to redress the "feelings" imbalance.

¹⁰Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Let My People Go*, pp. 124-125.

Processes

The final component of a supportive climate is the use of processes and procedures that facilitate planning, deciding, and carrying out the activities and experiences required to achieve the organization's purpose. Among the most significant processes are communication, decision-making, and reality-testing.¹¹

Communication. The quality of communication in a system is crucial. "Communication is the cement which holds organizations together. Only communication enables a group to think, see, and act in common."¹² Because information control is power, pastors need to recognize that their control of information flow places them in a position wherein it is possible to create an imbalance of power. Alienation can result. Robert Worley has observed:

The easier it is for *all* groups in an organization to have their messages heard, to actually have the power to send messages and have them openly received by other groups, including ruling, elite groups, the better the organization functions. All groups including ruling groups, have more power to communicate and, hence, greater capacity to influence decisions and more willingness to act on those decisions. One of the tragedies of our time is that we do not work to make one another powerful.¹³

Worley concludes that as power expands with more people sharing it, the possibility of overcoming alienation occurs. "There is never reconciliation between unequals, between the powerful and the powerless. True reconciliation occurs only between equals."¹⁴

The foregoing should make it obvious that true communication is of a two-way nature. Communication must not only flow downward (through pulpit pronouncements, bulletins, and church newsletters), but up—and across. Where these channels are blocked, frustrated feelings build and misunderstandings multiply.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 125-126.

¹²Ingo Hermann, "Conflicts and Conflict Resolution in the Church," *Concilium*, 3 (1972):107.

¹³Worley, *Change in the Church*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 88.

Closely related to the quality of communication in the congregation is a climate of openness. There are many barriers to openness in our culture, particularly in the church. For instance, it is especially hard for Christians to handle hostility. We are supposed to love each other, and when we feel angry it is difficult to admit this. Yet hostilities arise in the church, and the only way to handle them is to bring them out into the open.

It is worth noting that the Christian faith supports a "non-avoiding" theory of conflict. In his teachings, Jesus made it plain that conflict was to be openly confronted, with no time lost quibbling over who should move first—the aggrieved or the initiator of the dispute (Matt 5:24; 18:15-17).

The pastor should seek to create a climate conducive to freedom of expression. Appeals to "Christian love" as a means of pressure to secure conformity must be rejected, and all fear of recrimination must be removed. There must be the belief that people of integrity differ, that they can admit that they differ, and that these differences count, but that the persons involved can and should discuss the substance and bounds of their disagreements and learn to disagree as agreeably as possible.

Decision-Making. Another process related to building a supportive climate pertains to decision-making in the organization. Lindgren and Shawchuck observe that "nothing can make the development of a supportive organizational climate more difficult than 'vest pocket' decisions made by a few behind closed doors."¹⁵ Persons and groups affected by decisions must be involved in making them.

Skills in group decision-making, including the use of consensus, are teachable skills.¹⁶ There is evidence to indicate that churches would be well advised to move away from competitive win-lose, majority-vote decisions toward the consensus model of decision-making. This model has been called to attention in my earlier study.¹⁷ Suffice it to reiterate here that consensus constitutes a cooperative effort to find a solution acceptable to everyone rather

¹⁵Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Let My People Go*, pp. 125-126.

¹⁶See, e.g., David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982), pp. 100-121.

¹⁷Kurtz, p. 119 and n. 30 on pp. 119-120.

than a competitive struggle. With consensus as the pattern of interaction, members need not fear being outsmarted or outmaneuvered by parliamentary procedures. As a rule, when parliamentary procedures are rigidly adhered to, interaction is structured into a win-lose relationship, which may, in turn, transform well-intentioned, intelligent people into warring camps.

As an increasing diversity and pluralism in society spills over into the church, decision-making becomes more difficult and conflictual. Skills in group problem-solving and decision-making are indispensable for congregations that would build a social fabric strong enough to deal creatively with conflict.

Reality-Testing. Finally, an essential process in developing a supportive organizational climate is reality-testing. As stated by Lindgren and Shawchuck:

Every organization needs to know how it is doing. If it is not meeting real needs, sooner or later it will find out, perhaps by having to close down. Reliable feedback evaluation is essential and depends upon an honest, open response by those within and without the organization.¹⁸

Worley reminds us that persons and groups in the church, as in any organization, have "feelings, perceptions, knowledge and evaluations of conditions, programs, persons and groups which affect their participation in congregational life whether such feelings are justified or not."¹⁹ People act, react, and evaluate on the basis of these perceptions.

Processes to aid congregations in the work of self-assessment have been developed and tested. Worley describes the use of survey instruments by means of which members can surface and process their feelings and perceptions.²⁰

Another feed-back method involves home-meetings under trained member-conveners who lead small informal groups into a discussion of hopes and concerns which members may have with respect to their church.²¹

¹⁸Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Let My People Go*, p. 126.

¹⁹Worley, *Dry Bones Breathe!*, p. 68.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 68-84.

²¹Lindgren and Shawchuck, *Let My People Go*, pp. 73-78; 135-138.

Self-assessment and reality-testing are particularly useful as tools for the anticipatory management of conflict. Wise church leaders have an early warning system to note signs of discontent and to provide for structures and processes to work through potential problem situations.²² Worley points out:

When leaders of congregations note apathy or ill will among members, low attendance at meetings, expressions of frustration, resentment, and hostility by individuals and groups, self-assessment processes can identify reasons for such behaviors and suggest alternative responses and conditions to that which is producing negative behavior.²³

The carefully planned use of questionnaires has been found to be helpful not only as a tool for the anticipatory management of conflict, but also in de-escalating conflict that has already arisen. By involving as large a portion of the conflicting parties as possible in designing the questionnaire and deciding upon its use, the "warring" factions are given an experience of successful collaboration. Such an experience helps the parties see each other as competent, human, and able to work with others in a noncombatant role.²⁴

The foregoing, then, are in general terms, some of the characteristics of organizational life in churches in which conflict management might become institutionalized. We turn now to the possibilities of freeing a congregation for self-conscious control of conflict through education and training.

2. Equipping for Conflict Through Education and Training

In an appeal for more openness to conflict research, Ingo Hermann insists that any practice for coping with conflict "must depend to a great extent on enlightenment and a desire for emancipation in the groups involved." Resolution of conflict demands

²²Rolla Swanson, in *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 59/4 (May 1969), p. 26.

²³Worley, *Dry Bones Breathe!*, p. 68.

²⁴Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 94-95.

rationality, and there can be "no rationality without enlightenment, and no enlightenment which does not lead to the emancipation of man."²⁵

Under the doctrine of an "equipping ministry" (in which every pastor sees himself as "dean of a seminary" where members are equipped for ministry), congregations have a right to expect help in developing skills to minister creatively in church conflict. Specifically, sermons and adult-education classes could be employed to instill basic concepts regarding conflict.²⁶ Workshop materials and kits for skills-training in peace-making and creative utilization of conflict are available to those pastors equipped to use them. One such resource, offered by the United Methodist Church, was developed under the leadership of Charles P. Jaeger of the Board of Discipleship, and is called the "Utilizing Conflict Learning System." Trained leaders help persons in congregations to learn how to utilize conflict. Four three-hour learning modules comprise the system.²⁷

An excellent adult education program entitled "Resolving our Differences" has been prepared by Lynn and Juanita Buzzard.²⁸ The Mennonite Conciliation Service makes available a practical manual entitled, *Repairing the Breach: Ministering in Community*

²⁵Hermann, pp. 114-115.

²⁶That congregations are ready seriously to look at church conflict is indicated by the interest they manifest in the topic. James Glasse notes a wide and enthusiastic response to his sermon, "Learning to Fight Like Christians in the Church," in which he has popularized "Communal Conflict" (Coser's term) that is fought out according to guidelines accepted by both sides (as in the settling of labor-management disputes). He describes it as a "conflict game" for local churches based on four principles: containment, clarity, consideration, and commitment. See James Glasse, *Putting it Together in the Parish* (New York, 1972), pp. 106-121.

²⁷Charles P. Jaeger, ed., *Utilizing Conflict: A Learning System* (Nashville, Tenn., 1976). I have also found very useful the workbook and leaders' guide for *The Art of Christian Relationships* prepared for the American Lutheran Church (Minneapolis, Minn., 1967) as resource material in the training of laymen in the art of Christian interpersonal relationships.

²⁸The curriculum is published in workbook form (along with duplicating masters and overhead transparencies and tape) by the David C. Cooke Publishing Co., 850 North Grove Avenue, Elgin, IL 60120.

Conflict, by Ronald Kraybill.²⁹ Another good source of materials, of interest particularly to evangelical Christians, is the Christian Conciliation Service. This is a recently formed service of the Christian Legal Society, a network of evangelical lawyers which provides Christian lawyers as mediators or arbitrators in several metropolitan areas nationwide.³⁰

Classes in group process are especially useful for church congregations. A wealth of guidance is becoming available to this field, including such books as Philip Anderson's *Church Meetings That Matter* and David W. and Frank R. Johnson's *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*.³¹ Most church groups are largely task-oriented. Anxious to push the agenda through, there is little or no awareness of the critical need for the "maintenance" or group-morale functions of the "Harmonizer," "Encourager," or "Conciliator" which, under the shared leadership concept, can be performed by any member as the need arises.

3. Conclusion

My previous article and the present one have endeavored to call attention to understandings, principles, strategies, and resources that will be helpful to pastors toward positive church growth in this important area of conflict management.

The science of conflict management is a field of interest and relevance for pastors. Because of its contact with a wide variety of disciplines, a study of it has synthesizing value, for it provides a practical focal point for many of the elements in that body of knowledge to which the professionally trained minister would have already had exposure.

²⁹Conciliation Services, Mennonite Central Committee U.S., Akron, PA 17501.

³⁰Christian Conciliation Service, P. O. Box 2069, Oak Park, IL 60303. The Christian Legal Society recently conducted a national conference at Wheaton College in which the biblical emphasis was placed on reconciliation and the church's duty to handle disputes between Christians apart from the secular courts.

³¹Philip Anderson, *Church Meetings That Matter* (Philadelphia, 1967); and the work by Johnson and Johnson cited in n. 16, above. The former is a well-written book prepared for the lay leader, and the latter is a textbook from which training courses can be developed.

Like all who bear responsibility for groups of people, pastors have special reasons for informing and equipping themselves for intelligent action in relationships. Their task is to see and to depict creative elements in both cooperation and conflict. It is their duty to develop a sense of faithfulness in the face of inevitable conflict where the choice is between obedience to God or to man. It is also their task to depict forms of legitimate conflict and to develop the wisdom which discriminates between that to which God calls and that in which only man's pretense is at stake.

Administration is demanding an increasingly larger portion of the pastor's time and energy. Conflict management is a fundamental administrative skill, and one basis for measuring the progress of pastors as administrators might well be the nature and resolution of the conflicts in their organizational systems. As individuals develop spiritually, their conflicts rise to a higher level, and pastors might well test their administrative progress by asking, "What conflicts am I experiencing in my church, and how am I coping with them?"