



Conflict in the Parish: How Bad Is It?

SPEED LEAS

The Alban Institute, Northville, Michigan

When conflict occurs in a local parish it is often the case that the church leadership is in disagreement not only about the issues involved but also about how bad it is. Some will say, “This is trivial; it will blow over; pay no attention, and it will go away.” Others will be greatly concerned about any tension in the congregation and will complain, “This is just terrible; if we don’t do something right away our church will be split down the middle; we will lose members and income.”

This problem of determining a conflict’s level of difficulty is not much helped by the literature on the subject. Almost all of the organization development literature on conflict management (which in the last fifteen years has become extensive) suffers from the same problems that the leader of the local church experiences. Organization development approaches to conflict management assume only three possibilities with regard to conflict: (1) no conflict, (2) win/lose conflict, and (3) win/win conflict. Win/Win is a so-called cooperative (or constructive) approach, and the win/lose (destructive) is competitive. Here is the way Johnson and Johnson differentiate between the two (this list is abridged from their work):¹

CONSTRUCTIVE

Defining the controversy as a mutual problem.

Participation by all group members.

Open and honest expression of ideas and feelings.

DESTRUCTIVE

Defining the controversy as a “win/lose” situation.

Participation by only a few group members; self-censorship and withdrawal.

Closed or deceitful expression of ideas and feelings.

¹David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975) 157.

Everyone’s contributions listened to, given attention, taken seriously, valued, and respected.

Quiet members encouraged to participate.

The contribution of many members ignored, devalued, not respected, and treated lightly.

Quiet members not encouraged to participate.

Everyone's contributions listened to, given attention, taken seriously, valued, and respected.

Effective sending and receiving communication skills used.

Differences in opinions and ideas sought out and clarified.

Underlying assumptions and frames of reference brought out into the open and discussed.

Disagreement not taken as personal rejection by some or all group members.

Adequate differentiation of positions; differences clearly understood.

Adequate integration of positions; similarities clearly understood and positions combined in creative syntheses.

Emotions responded to with involvement and other emotions.

Equal situational power among all members.

Moderate level of tensions.

The contribution of many members ignored, devalued, not respected, and treated lightly.

Effective sending and receiving communication skills not used.

Differences in opinions and ideas ignored or suppressed.

Underlying assumptions and frames the of reference not brought out into open and discussed.

Disagreement taken as personal rejection by some or all group members.

Inadequate differentiation of positions; differences not clearly understood.

Inadequate integration of positions; similarities not clearly understood and positions not combined in creative syntheses.

Emotions responded to by uninvolved understanding or ignored.

Unequal power among group members.

Tension level too low or too high for productive problem solving.

As can be seen from this list, one either has conflict or doesn't have it. Conflict is either "on" or "off"; there doesn't seem to be any "in-between." Further, much of the current literature on conflict management assumes that conflict, even when "on," is within manageable limits. Differentiating between those conflicts which are easy, those which are tough, and those which are impossible has rarely been addressed to my knowledge in the organization development literature. There are some conflicts in which the standard, organization development approach to conflict management proposed by such practitioners as William Dyer, Alan Filley, Joyce Hocker Frost and William Wilmot, Rensis and Jane Gibson Likert,² and others simply are not appropriate because they assume that the parties to the conflict are going to have the best interests of

²William G. Dyer, *Team Building: Issues and Alternatives* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1977). Alan Filley, *Inter-Personal Conflict Resolution* (Glenview: Scott-Foresman, 1975). Joyce Hocker Frost and William W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1978). Rensis Likert and Jane Gibson Likert, *New Ways of Managing Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

the organization at heart and will play according to the rules of the Marquis de Queensberry. For example, the methods proposed by Likert and Likert in their book, *New Rules of Managing Conflict*, assume that the game will be played fair: valuing differences between persons in the organization; using supportive listening skills; working for consensus; de-emphasizing status; and depersonalizing problem solving.

There is no question about the appropriateness of the methods suggested by the Likerts and other organization development scholars and practitioners for certain levels of organizational conflict, but serious questions need to be raised about their appropriateness when not all the parties have the best interests of the relationship or the organization at heart, or when they are unwilling or unable to keep their behavior within the bounds of reasonable and ethical behavior.

These same questions can be raised within the setting of the local church just as for business or government. Sometimes church fights are relatively low level affairs which can be worked out between the parties involved with little or no “outside” assistance; however, other difficulties in the local church, as each reader knows, can escalate into very difficult situations indeed: groups or individuals “take matters into their own hands,” taking the church’s financial records, changing the locks on the doors, barring entrance to meetings, starting competing congregations, disrupting meetings, suing the congregation in civil court, etc.

The question, then, for churches—as well as other systems—is, How bad is the conflict? Is it one we can handle ourselves with little loss to the congregation and the people who are leaders in it? Do we need outside help? Will collaborative, so-called win/win approaches be appropriate? Will active listening skills help? Or will more stringent measures be needed?

What I have done in the last year—building on an idea published by Malcolm Leary in a publication of the Association of Teachers of Management, “Handling Conflict: Dealing with differences—creatively and constructively”—is to develop his idea that there are stages of conflict, that one can distinguish between them, and that different strategies should be used with each stage. (I am indebted to Mel Hensey for calling this article to my attention.) I have taken Leary’s idea and substantially changed it so that I doubt that he would recognize his original idea in this article. In the first place, I have avoided the use of the word “stages” to describe the various levels of conflict. Theories which describe any kind of human behavior or thought development in terms of stages are in for a good deal of criticism these days and might be particularly awkward in a theory of conflict. Stage theory assumes that there is an orderly progression of the emotions or behavior or thoughts from one predictable behavior to the next, as in Kubler-Ross’s progression from denial to anger, etc., in the grief process, or Fowler’s stages of faith development or Kohlberg’s stages of ethical development. In fact, I doubt that future researchers will be able to show that there is a predictable pattern of conflict development from easy to difficult through predictable levels. Depending on what is at stake, the level of fear in the system (or an individual), or the skill with which people can manage differences and many other factors, conflict may begin at high levels without going through the easier,

lower “stages.” Further, it is not unusual in my experience to see de-escalation from high levels to almost immediate low level conflict, again with an apparent discontinuity between what

started out very difficult and miraculously ended up almost sanguine.

Second, Leary's nine-stage theory is far too complex when one is actually dealing with conflict and, for that matter, differentiates between so many levels that their utility is lost on the practitioner. Finally, I have attempted to be rigorous in using behavioral categories for discriminating between what I will be calling levels of conflict (rather than more general categories such as personality traits or styles). These behavioral categories are my own and come from my experience in working with conflicted religious organizations.

In any organization whether it is religious or not, voluntary or not, small or large, it will ordinarily be the case that not all the people will be at the same place (level) with regard to any given conflict. In a local congregation some of the people may be severely exercised about a conflict, others mildly upset, and others (there are always some) who think the thing is a tempest in a teapot and are not concerned about it.

Of course it will be critical for the pastor, lay leader, consultant, or executive working with the congregation to know just how many people are at what level of conflict as the conflict is approached. If only one or two people are having difficulty, they will need to be dealt with individually, and the larger organization would not be brought into the activities directed at managing the conflict. If, on the other hand, a larger group is involved, then more comprehensive strategies should be used. The trick will be to respond to individuals and groups at the level from which they are coming, and not to assume that just because certain individuals are experiencing a high level of conflict the rest of the organization is also at that place and will need to be dealt with as if it were an organization-wide conflict.

IDENTIFYING LEVELS OF CONFLICT

I have identified five levels of conflict which I designate both with numbers and titles in order of ascending difficulty. They are: I. Problems to Solve; II. Disagreement; III. Contest; IV. Fight/Flight; and V. Intractable.

Level I, Problems to Solve

In the first level of conflict we are not talking about a "problem of communication" or misunderstanding where the parties, because they have interpreted something incorrectly, are feeling uncomfortable. In Level One, I am describing real conflict; that is, disagreement. Actual differences exist, people understand one another, and they have conflicting goals, values, needs, action plans, or information.

At this level the parties to the conflict are likely to feel uncomfortable in the presence of one another. There may be some short-lived anger or intentional or non-conscious denial of hostile feelings. The feelings of the participants, however, are not the key indication of the level of conflict. Anger may flare at any level. At Level One the anger will be short-lived and quickly controlled. Anger

which is sustained is an indicator of higher levels of conflict (especially III and IV).

The two key identifying characteristics of each level of conflict are the parties' objectives and their use of language. At Level One conflict the objective of the key actors is to fix the problem—to use rational methods to determine what is wrong. At Level One the parties will be

problem oriented and not person oriented. They will be quick to move to rational problem-solving techniques and will be optimistic about working through the difficulties if they just confront the difficulty (not the person) and work it through. Usually people at Level One believe that collaborative methods are available to them and will choose to engage the conflict in a way that is open with regard to full sharing of information and participation on the part of everyone involved (everyone, that is, who is at Level One).

The language of the people at this level of conflict is clear, specific, oriented to the here and now, not loaded with innuendo, clear of blame, and, to use a Berne category, in the “adult.” Persons at Level One are likely to invite others to describe what it is they want, or what the difficulty is, and are likely to contribute, as fully as necessary, descriptive and specific information about what is happening or not happening that is creating the problem.

Level II, Disagreement

The second level of conflict which I call disagreement is more difficult than Level One, but we still have not yet reached the stage of win/lose conflict. In Level One the parties were concerned about solving problems. In Level Two their objectives changed to being less concerned with the problem to solve than they are with protecting themselves. At Level Two a new item of concern has entered the picture: myself. While I certainly would like to solve the problem, I don't want to get hurt in the process nor do I want to be besmirched in any way. In short: I want to come out looking good. At Level Two a new element of shrewdness and calculation enters into the conflict arena. The various parties will probably find themselves calling on friends to discuss the problem and ask for advice; perhaps one will begin to plan strategies for how to deal with the conflict when it is next expressed in a meeting or relationship.

What happens in terms of language at Level Two is that there is a shift from being specific to being general in one's descriptions of the problem. The parties to the conflict will stop naming the individuals with whom they are having difficulty and will begin to allude to “some people”; each will be more protective of the self and of others. Instead of describing who is doing or not doing what, the participants will report that there is no trust, or “we have a communication problem,” or “we need more openness,” or “people should act more like Christians around here.” Behind each of these generalizations is likely to be found a specific, factual happening, but those involved in the conflict are distancing themselves from their reality and each other by generalizing about it. At Level Two they have not become hostile, just cautious, and this caution could well keep people from getting close enough to each other to work through their differences.

There are other behaviors which also seem to be characteristic of the Level

Two conflict. For example, the parties will be cautious about sharing all that they know about the difficulties they are experiencing; they especially will tend to withhold data that might enhance the other (especially at the expense of the one sharing the data).

At Level Two compromise is a common strategy talked about for dealing with the differences. This may not be an appropriate or possible strategy, but nevertheless, compromise ideas begin to emerge at this level and are difficult to revive at Levels Three and Four.

Hostile humor also is apart of Level Two conflict. Perhaps “hostile” is too strong a word to describe what I am getting at here; what I mean to describe is the barbed, distancing gibe that

does nothing to relieve tension, but puts down or derides the other and what she or he believes to be important.

Level III, Contest

Note that it is not until one is through two levels of conflict before win/lose dynamics are encountered. In other words, win/lose is a fairly high level of conflict, but short of the hostilities and agonies of fight/flight dynamics. It is a pity that much of the literature on conflict (some of which I have written myself) is unable to help the person in conflict recognize that win/lose is tough, but still short of fight/flight dynamics which are destructive of organizational tissue and individual integrity.

As the name suggests, the objectives of the parties in Level Three have shifted from self-protection to winning. At this point, what is important is not hurting or getting rid of one's opponent (in fact, many at Level Three are stimulated and exhilarated by a worthy opponent and are disappointed when the opposition folds quickly or does not put up an interesting challenge). The objectives of the Level Three protagonist are usually more complex than those of Levels One and Two. Usually there is more than one problem to "fix." Often parties are beginning to emerge where problems begin to cluster in issues. For example, one may be concerned about the problem of male-oriented language in worship, but also there is the problem of whether to hire a male or female assistant pastor, and there is the problem of a disproportionate number of women on the church board. As these problems begin to cluster we now begin to talk of women's issues, and groups begin to *take sides*, forming factions which take positions they believe are consistent with the interests of those in their constituency. These emerging factions are looking for victories, for evidences that their group is in the ascendancy, that they have more power or control than the other or others. In other words, the win/lose dynamic is in effect.

With regard to the language used by the parties at Level Three, we see a dramatic difference from that used at Level One and Two. At Level Three distortion becomes a serious problem. Whether the person actually perceives the world in a distorted way, or only describes it in a distorted way, is a chicken and egg problem beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is clear from a great deal of research on conflict and perceptions³ and from a number of theories of

³Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); Harvey Horstein, *Cruelty and Kindness* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

psychological intervention (especially Transactional Analysis, Rational Emotive Therapy, and Neuro-Linguistic Programming) that perceptual distortions are a serious problem, especially in individuals and groups in moderate or high conflict with themselves, others, or the world about them. I have chosen several key distortions which occur at Level Three as well as Four and Five: magnification, dichotomization, over-generalization, and assumption or arbitrary inference.

Magnification is the tendency to see oneself as more benevolent than one actually is, and the other as more evil than he or she actually is.

Dichotomization is the tendency to divide everything and everybody into neat dual, but separate, packages: us versus them, right and wrong, stay or leave, fight or flee, etc. When one is dichotomizing, it is almost impossible to see shades between extremes or to find more than two alternatives when making choices.

Over-generalization. In Level Two there is a tendency to see specific behavior as an example of a category of events or attitudes (trust, friendly, communication, etc.); in Level Three generalization takes on an out-of-control and/or pernicious quality: “You always,” “He never,” “Everybody.”

Assumption. At Level Three the contestants delude themselves to believe that they are excellent mind readers, students of their oppositions’ subtlest motives. In fact, they often believe they know the other’s mind better than he or she does: “You’re just trying to wreck the church.” Note that this statement not only describes (perhaps wrongly) the consequences of the other’s behavior, but purports to be keen-sighted insight into the reasons for the behavior.

In addition to the language and objectives criteria for identifying Level Three behavior, other behaviors are common at this level. For example, it is likely that there will be resistance to making peace overtures on the part of individuals at Level Three. Somehow the idea of “winning” seems contradictory to inviting the other to try to work out a solution or resolution to the problem or issues, and the parties therefore each hang back waiting for the other to show “weakness” by admitting there is a problem and asking for steps toward ending the tension.

Personal attacks are endemic at this level and are often mixed up with problem identification. In informal settings the parties are uncomfortable with each other and not likely to continue conversations beyond what is required by social probity. Further, at Level Three, the parties find themselves being torn between attempting to use rational argument and appealing to emotions. Emotional appeals (e.g., “How could you go against us when we are so much for you”) usually have little or no impact on either neutral audiences or partial contestants, but they seem to increase as a part of this level of conflict.

Level IV, Fight, Flight

At Level Four the objectives of the parties to a conflict change from winning to hurting and/or getting rid of the other. In a local church this behavior is differentiated from Level Three behavior in that changing the other or the situation is no longer enough. In fact, the parties do not believe that the other can or will change. Therefore, they believe that the only option open to them is the elimination of the other from their environment. Examples of Level Four conflict

include attempts to get the pastor fired, trying to get those with whom one doesn’t agree to leave the church, and attempting to get people to join oneself in leaving. Here the objectives have shifted significantly. No longer is the good of the organization a central concern of the parties, but the good of a sub-group within it (which can either be a minority or a majority group). Being right and punishment become the predominant themes of the conflict.

It is at this level that factions become solidified, and there are clear lines demarking who is in and who is not in each of the camps. Strong leaders emerge, and the members of the factions are willing to conform to the wishes of the leaders and the will of the group. Sub-group cohesiveness becomes more important than the health of the total organization.

Not only do the membership lines of factions solidify, but also the language around the issues begins to solidify into an ideology. Members of the factions begin to talk about principles more than the issues; they refer to eternal verities such as truth, freedom, and justice; and they speak of rights that seem to stand alone and cannot be contradicted in conflict with anything else:

property rights, right to life, right to bear arms, etc. These principles are used to sanctify the Level four combatant and make it possible for her or him to be less concerned with the ethics of means and to believe with Saul Alinsky, “If the ends don’t justify the means, what does?”

The reason that I have designated Level four conflict as fight/flight is that it brings out the most primitive survival responses in both defendants and proponents. There seems to be no middle ground between running or attacking—and the attacks are on persons which the attacker cannot differentiate from the ideas proposed or defended.

Other behaviors that are common to this level of conflict include: a detachment of the parties from one another so that they are not aware of the pain they are causing the other, and a kind of unforgiving, cold, self-righteousness. The parties at this level will attempt to enlist outsiders in their cause—outsiders who will join with them (not outsiders who are neutral and will help manage the conflict); outsiders who will help them punish or get rid of the “bad people.” Further, when the parties are in the same room, they will not speak to one another, nor will they be seen together (except on unfriendly and hostile terms).

Level V, Intractable

I have chosen to title this level of conflict with a word which means unmanageable. Level five conflicts are not within the control of the participants to manage; they are conflict run amok.

Where the objective of the participants in Level four conflict was to punish or get the other out of the organization of which the participant is a member, in Level five the objective of each of the parties is to destroy the other. The opposition is seen not only as dysfunctional in the organization of which he or she is now a member, but to be harmful to society at large, and he or she must therefore be removed. An example of this kind of behavior in churches is the situation where once a pastor has been dismissed from a congregation, the members who remain feel constrained to see that the pastor does not get another position in a church, and they appoint themselves to hinder the job search of the pastor.

At Level Five the parties usually perceive themselves to be a part of an eternal cause, fighting for universal principles. Since the ends are all-important, they believe they are compelled to continue to fight. They cannot stop. Indeed, the costs of withdrawal (to society, to truth, to God) are seen to be greater than the costs of defeating the others; therefore, continuing the fight is the only choice; one cannot choose to stop fighting.

USING LEVELS OF CONFLICT ANALYSIS

It is not possible within the scope of this short essay to delve in detail into what is appropriate to do at each level of conflict within a local church; that task will have to be done in another context. However, there are several practical applications that can be briefly mentioned here.

Conflict cannot simply be dichotomized between win/win and win/lose. Some conflicts are worse than win/lose and some which are not quite win/lose are more complex than those for which a simple sharing of information and working collaboratively would be useful.

Therefore, at Level Two much will need to be done to help the participants feel safe and allow themselves to be vulnerable to working with (rather than against) others.

The language of the parties is a significant determinant of where people are in the conflict and can be used as a point of intervention. Distorted language is a symptom and a cause of conflict. In order to help the parties to a conflict deal constructively with their situation, it is appropriate to help them describe more accurately what is going on. This can be done both by helping them understand how thought and language become twisted in conflict and by encouraging them to attempt to find more accurate means of expressing themselves (though not at the expense of honesty and completeness).

While problem-solving methodologies may be useful for Levels One through Three, it is unlikely that these methods will be helpful at Levels Four and Five. At Levels One and Two there should not be significant difficulty in helping the parties of a conflict (as an advocate or third party) find ways to accurately identify workable problems, search for alternative solutions to the problems, and choose one among the alternatives. Of course the biggest issue at Level Two is to keep the parties working and sharing all of their information—not withholding data or getting scared and leaving the problem-solving scene.

At Level Three things become more difficult and it will be a judgement call whether the parties believe they can work out the conflict without the help of an outside consultant. Level Three and early Level Four conflicts have the greatest potential for maximizing third party consulting resources. The consultant (if perceived to be neutral by all sides) can help keep the conflict within bounds, direct problem-solving activities, and assist the parties on communicating with one another in clear, specific, non-distorted (or less-distorted) ways. If the conflict is genuinely a Level Four problem, it is not likely that the consultant will be of much more help than to assist the parties to use whatever formal, legal, authorized system they have for coming to a decision as to who leaves. Usually the denomination has as good a set of resources for dealing with Level Four con-

flict as any which a consultant can bring. Moreover, at Level Four the denominational executive can function within his or her role as denominational authority to help maintain order, keep the decision making legal and fair, and to get the decision made as quickly as justice (fairness) allows. At Level Four there is usually no choice but to move toward the hierarchically determined processes for making decisions; thus the role of the executive (rather than consultant) is here appropriate and, indeed, called for. At Level Three, however, there is still hope that the congregation can make decisions for itself; that it need not be dependent on denominational authority to make decisions; and that the role of facilitator or enabler is especially propitious.

At Level Five the parties will not be willing to abide by the decisions that are made within the congregation or within the hierarchy; therefore, some kind of policing action such as sending in a committee to govern the congregation or at least to monitor its meetings would most likely be appropriate. The best that can be hoped for at this level would be to separate the parties and keep the partition between them strong. I don't know of anyone who would recommend that continued working on the problems would be appropriate. It is better to attempt to get agreements of non-aggression and to keep the parties from encountering one another as much as possible.

CONCLUSION

This article is really just a beginning—the beginning of a conversation which will invite consultants, pastors, and executives to be more sophisticated in their analyses of conflicted churches. We have been naive to this point in looking seriously (in our theory, not our practice) at only two alternatives for conflict management: win/win and win/lose. Perhaps as our conversation and research continues we can move into a richer and more complete understanding of what happens to churches in conflict and what is appropriate to do with them at different levels of difficulty.