Church Conflict: An Organizational Fact Of Life

“Customers complain. Co-workers bicker. Defendants dig in. Counsels advocate. Union officials demand. Organizations are rife with conflict that takes many forms and wears many faces. They can hide it, quash it, control it, fight it, deny it, or avoid it, but whatever they do, they cannot make it disappear: conflict is an organizational fact of life” (Costantino and Merchant 1996, 3). Church consultant and author Speed Leas defines organizational conflict as “the confrontation between differing expectations, purposes, goals, values, or desires; and / or the competition for limited resources” (Leas 1997, 33). Conflict is well understood as “a disagreement between interdependent people; it is the perception of incompatible or mutually exclusive needs or goals” (Schrock-Shenk and Ressler 1999, 23).

Take for example the conflict circumstance in the following modern parable:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude, little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who where saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club’s decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club’s initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded.
History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown. (Clinebell 1984, 1)

Signs And Symptoms Of Conflict in the Church

Conflict occurs because people interact and interact intimately on matters of importance. If you and I are working together on a church-related task, we may well disagree about how something should be done, or what each of us should be doing to get the task completed, or perhaps on some more dynamic issue like how we treat one another during the work of the task. This is an organizational fact of life, and in reality there is a positive aspect to this kind of conflict. When two people or groups of people disagree, it means that we care enough about the issue of importance to take a stand and advocate for what we believe is right or essential. There is an abundance of conflict in religious organizations because we work together intimately in teams, task forces and committees about things that are of highest value to us. We also have a mandate to relate to one another in ways that express God’s grace (Gal 5:22) and thus we have a heightened sensitivity to the process of relationships. We care about how we are treated and how we treat each other. It is not realistic to think that churches can or should eliminate conflict.

Costantino and Merchant define conflict in organizations as:

… the expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement with an interaction, process, product, or service. Someone or some group is unhappy with someone else or something else. This dissatisfaction can result from multiple factors: differing expectations, competing goals, conflicting interests, confusing communications, or unsatisfactory interpersonal relations. (Costantino and Merchant 1996, 4)

The authors observe that conflict is an indicator of organizational dissatisfaction or disagreement rather than the problem itself. It is more a symptom than a troublesome “thing” that can be solved, manipulated, tamed or controlled. Conflict is a phenomenological reality in relationships; it is a fact of life that cannot be eliminated. For those who are at the hub of conflict, it is experienced as a “grinding” process that erodes the good will between people and subsystems within a system.

A conflict may produce one of several symptoms, a dispute being the most frequent. A dispute is the product of the unresolved conflict. “Whereas conflict is often ongoing, amorphous, and intangible, a dispute is tangible and concrete—it has issues, positions, and expectations of relief” (Costantino and Merchant 1996, 5). Conflict in an organization like a church manifests in several ways (summarized from Costantino and Merchant 1996, 6):

1. Disputes, disagreements, arguments, unresolved tension, church discipline, lawsuits, and threats are all signs of dissatisfaction and unresolved conflict; they are the first and most obvious by-product of conflict. Note again: disputes are not the conflict itself; they are a symptomatic representation of conflict that exists within the system.

2. Unhealthy competition between leaders or leadership groups or subsystems is a frequent expression of conflict. Unhealthy competition is of the sort that sacrifices the goals of the organization to “win” against another who is experienced as an antagonist.

3. Sabotage is the expression of conflict that erupts to weaken or subvert another member of the organization, most frequently a superior or leader. In sabotage, the goal is to harm another at the expense of that other and the organizational system. In a kind of moral calculus, these sacrifices are seen as equal to the harm that the saboteur has experienced.

4. Inefficiency or lack of production, slow work, deliberate delay, “forgetfulness,” decreased output, and unclear goals can be manifestations of conflict. Some of these are common labor
entitlements when they are in organizational conflict with management. Again, the goals of the organization are harmed by such expressions of conflict. Many of these expressions are tolerated since they can appear to be so “human,” however, they are most likely an expression of conflict than not.

5. Low morale is often a result of attempting to avoid or deny conflict or of frustration with attempts to protest organizational action or inaction. Members of the system get weary of being retransferred, restructured or reinvented yet again.

6. Withholding knowledge: power is the dispersal of knowledge; when information is withheld it becomes a source of passive-aggressive control. It is most common in an organization that has an "informational caste system."

Three Approaches To Organizational Conflict

“When a conflict arises, most of us automatically focus on who is at fault or what the issues are” (Halverstadt 1991, 19) often ignoring the third element: the process of the resolution. There are three elements in any conflict: (1) the people involved; (2) the problems at issue; (3) and the process for resolving the conflict. These three elements have a determining influence on “the progression and resolution of the conflict” (Schrock-Shenk and Ressler 1999, 23). These three elements of conflict permit three organizational perspectives in understanding the conflict in the lifesaving station: “Some analysts pay close attention to what individual members do, some to the problems the organization needs to solve, others to how the system is functioning” (Parsons and Leas 1993, 4). The first is the “difficult people approach” as represented by Kenneth C. Haugk (1988) in Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict. Haugk and others (for example, Wayne E. Oates, The Care of Troublesome People, 1994) focus on problematic personalities in church members and leaders who precipitate conflict within the church. Seldom does good come from antagonistic conflict and much of the interventionist’s time is invested in putting out fires to save the good of the overall community. These antagonists may be simply unskilled and opinionated or they may be expressing more profound personality disorders. In the story of the lifesaving station, it would be interesting to understand the personality dynamics between the homeostatic group that wanted no change no matter how right and biblical, and the morphogenic group that insisted upon the creation of a new station. Inevitably a cutoff occurs as one or more members leave. This might be expressed in the terminology of “church planting” or “excommunication” but the reality is the same—the members could not come together to serve a joint mission.

A second avenue to approach conflict is the more matter-of-fact problem solving or negotiating approach where the consultant seeks to work towards pragmatic solutions within the faith community. Ron Susek in “Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts” (1999) presents a six-stage lifecycle of chronically conflicted churches. Typically problem solving, Susek’s interventions assume that there are clear and ready answers to recurring problems. At each of the six levels of conflict, practical advice is given to overcome the conflict. Fisher and Ury say, “Negotiation is a basic means of getting what you want from others. It is a back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interest that are shared and others that are opposed” (Fisher and Ury 1991, xvii). Problem solving is effective when opposing parties are motivated to conciliate. This usually means that there is some "payoff" for conversation and mutual understanding. Problem-solvers, however, run into the difficulty when there is a lack of will from the combatants to resolve the conflict. Chronic conflict has the uniqueness of some person, group or system that benefits by the maintenance of the conflict. At this non-conciliation point, the first task of negotiation is to separate the personalities of the opponents from the essential issues over which they are conflictng. “If negotiators view themselves as adversaries in a personal face-to-face confrontation, it is difficult to separate their relationship from the substantive problems” (Fisher and Ury 1991, 36).
The third approach is a systems approach to leadership and consulting. According to Parsons and Leas “a systems approach does not deny that difficulties can be caused by individuals and/or by problems the organization needs to address, but it also observes the reactive patterns or nonconscious agreements or understandings that people have about how they are supposed to act or how to get along” (Parsons and Leas 1993, 5). The question for the consultant in this conflict situation is “what is going on?” rather than “who is at fault?” or “what is the problem to be solved?”

A systems approach is the most recent development in understanding conflict as it pertains to organizational change. Charles Cosgrove and Dennis Hatfield in Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights write: “Conflict is normal in family life, but the repetition of the same conflict (or the same sorts of conflicts) over and over without resolution suggests a problem in the congregational family—a problem that can be treated only if the system is treated as a whole” (Cosgrove and Hatfield 1994, 20). That is to say, a systems approach means viewing so-called problem people as likely signs of wider unhealth in the church family. It asks what there is about the congregational family that encourages, sustains and refuses to resolve problems even when they are resolvable. The basic assumption is that “individuals don’t change unless change happens in the systems in which they live” (Cosgrove and Hatfield 1994, 20). Chronic conflict cannot be resolved unless there is systemic change; that is, change in how the system sustains and exacerbates conflict.

“Thinking systemically means that the parts of the whole take into consideration the needs of the other parts and the needs of the system as a whole … Systemic thinking assumes multiple causes—not a simple cause; it assumes that there are many contributing factors to any given set of circumstances” (Parsons and Leas 1993, 18). In the example of the lifesaving station there is disagreement over the purpose of the organization: traditional life saving activities versus the social life of a club that celebrates previous lifesaving missions. There is also disagreement over how the conflict between the parties should come to a mutual resolution. However, in a systemic view of the conflict, rarely is it the substance of the conflict that fuels the insolvability of it. There are more basic questions that the systemic consultant considers: (1) What is our mission? This is the issue of identity. (2) Who decides what our mission is? This is the issue of authority. (3) Do we really want more people in our organization? This is the issue of inclusion. (4) What is our future if we continue without change? This is the issue of growth and change (or homeostasis versus morphogenesis).

Chronic conflict, that is, conflict in an organization or between people that has existed for longer periods of time (2 years and sometimes very much longer) with various manifestations or expressions and without approaching a reasoned resolution, may be more amenable to a family systems approach. That is not to say that there are not difficult people involved and that removal of one or more of these people may result in a changed relationship between the conflicting parties. This may be a reasonable solution and it may be that ongoing problem solving produces beneficent outcomes in the organization. However, sequentially and developmentally, the third level (a systems view of conflict) will be required when the conflict is not, in fact, about people and not about presented issues. It is not so much that a systems view of conflict is preferable in all conflict circumstances; it may be that a systems understanding of conflict is the best approach when the other approaches have been exhausted.

However, having made this point, it is also true to say that a systems view of new and urgent conflict might be the best stance for a conflict-resolving leader to take. A systemic view of problem-resolving does not negate the other approaches to the conflicting circumstance but it does permit a particular definition of the coach or consultant. Self-differentiated leadership in conflict is the primary systemic approach to those in conflict. This involves the roles of being separate from the emotional processes while remaining “in touch” with the disputants. It does permit the coach to remain outside of trying to engineer an agreement while enabling those primarily invested to come to some mutually satisfying accord.
A Systems View of Conflict

When looking at the various causes for conflict, one must look beyond the personalities of the combatants and the presented or “content” issues of the conflict. Edwin Friedman, a family systems theorist, writes, “It is almost never the issue per se that is destructive but, rather, the overall homeostatic conditions that give to any issue its destructive potential” (Friedman 1985, 204). In other words, the organizing principles that produce stability and security (homeostasis) automatically restrict participating in growth and change (morphogenesis). Before any intervention, systemic consultants remind themselves of this axiom: “the issue is not the issue.” Chronic church conflicts continue after the protagonists have departed and after the problems have been “solved.” Rooted below the content issues are systemic causes that produce new antagonists and new conflicts with attending problems to be solved.

When the pastor is the focus of the conflict in the church, the criticism might be directed to his increasingly seeker-sensitive preaching (“We never get a good repentance sermon since he went to that conference!”), her decision to retain the services of a psychologist to help with her marriage difficulties, or the problems that result when he or she gets overburdened or “burned out” by the demands of ministry. When this occurs, emotional triangles are created, typically represented by the ever-switching roles of “Victim,” “Persecutor,” and “Rescuer” (Karpman 1968, 39-43). The person associated with the role changes according to the content issue of the presenting problem. In the scenario of the burned out pastor, clearly the pastor is viewed as the Victim, often to the ever-increasing demands of the congregation (who become the unwitting “Persecutors”). The “Rescuer,” at least initially, will be the minister’s spouse, good friends of the clergy couple, the pastor’s therapist or various kind-hearted members of the congregation. Their ministrations might include prayer, acts of hospitality and kindness, quiet advice and practical helps. However, should the pastor exploit the advantage and attention as the burned out and sickly “Victim” and not return to the level of his or her previous well-being, those who were initially sympathetic might well switch to the more aggressive “problem solving” stance of “Persecutor.” Interestingly, the presenting issues remain the same (that is, the pastor’s experience of burnout) but the helpers and the congregation’s response to the issues change. In other words, the pastor who needs to strategize for a differentiated life remains stuck while the corresponding systems switch and, in effect, keep the entire church system from progressing.

Pastor-focused church conflict usually circles around content or behavioral issues. Friedman (Friedman 1985, 206) lists seven possible content issues in pastor-focused church conflict. (1) The first is the pastor’s preaching and this might relate to content or delivery. (2) The leader’s preferences have to do with his or her personal lifestyle, deportment, friendships and hobbies. (3) The minister’s personal or relational qualities has more to do with his personality makeup; whether he is quick to warm up to people, whether she relates to children as well as older people, whether he or she does the job with enthusiasm. (4) The fourth area has to do with the pastor’s family members and the “fishbowl” experience that clergy families often endure. (5) The way the pastor administrates the church, handles the budget and organizes his or her own time to balance the demands of the church and the broader community. (6) The pastor’s responsiveness to the church related to their ministry priorities: for example, home visitation, adult education, fund raising, recruiting new members, and the like. (7) The pastor’s theological attitudes toward prayer, the kingdom of God (broader church community and the activity of God).

Pastor-focused church conflict is not always about something as tangible as her preaching or his preferences about the type of worship. These “content issues” (Friedman 1985, 206) according to Friedman are quite often presenting problems that masquerade the underlying frustration and anger relating to something more basic to the church-based system: the disruption in the homeostatic condition of the church. As in the example of the burned out pastor, the triangulation around his exhaustion had everything to do with nourishing (the “Rescue” response) him to normalcy so as to return the system to the same place it was prior to his breakdown. Those who functioned as “Persecutors” had the same
intent: to tough-love the system back to normalcy or no-change. The burned out pastor was, in uncompassionate language, a “homeostatic disruption” to the everyday functioning of the family system called the church.

According to family systems theory, what really causes conflict to develop in the church is not the content concerns (though these may well be legitimate) but anxiety-inducing changes in the church system. These systemic adjustments provoke anxiety within members of the system and within the system itself, which then produces the conflict that becomes fixed around a content issue. Should the content issue be resolved (say the preacher changes her mind about the value of seeker-sensitive sermons) the anxiety will affix to another content issue (for example, a biblical view of women in church leadership, or the matter of equipping the saints for the work of ministry). In chronic conflict, the underlying systemic concerns are not addressed though the content issues change.

The most common systemic causes of conflict in the church relate to the disruption of homeostatic conditions within the church system. Friedman (1985, 202ff.) outlines five systemic disturbances.

1. Lay over-commitment. According to Friedman, “The intensity with which some lay people become invested in their religious institutions makes the church ... a prime arena for the displacement of important, unresolved family issues” (Friedman 1985, 198). Interlocking emotional triangles between personal family issues and congregational family issues are the predictable consequences of such displacement.

2. Change in homeostasis (i.e., the “status quo”) of the church. Examples might include changes in the pastor’s personal life (e.g., crisis in the pastor’s marriage or family life); the pastor’s professional life (e.g., professional advancement or decision to prolong his or her stay at the church); changes in the long term constituency of the congregation (e.g., introduction of racial diversity); changes in the extended family of the church hierarchy (e.g., retirement or hospitalization of a founding member).

3. Life cycle transitions within the congregation. As predictable and important as these passages are (marriages, deaths, births, and the like) there is great stress before, during, and after the various rites of passage. These can be crises for the congregation provoking examination and upset.

4. Pastoral overfunctioning. When pastors attempt to “do it all” and takeover when others fail, they are prone to burnout. The most dangerous thing about overfunctioning asserts Friedman, is that “if overfunctioning is a manifestation of anxiety, it will serve to promote it as well” (Friedman 1985, 211).

5. The formation of emotional triangles. The stress endured by the pastoral staff, parishioners, clergy family, and board officials is often handled by the formation of emotional triangles. This begins in its most basic form as the proliferation of indirect communication between two principle parties by adding an additional non-principle party.

Purposeful and Ruinous Conflicts in the Church

Conflict produces change and growth. And reciprocally, when growth occurs conflict is inevitable. As in the illustration of the lifesaving station, the growth of the station destabilized the organizational mission and conflict inevitably resulted. It is also true that the conflict produced the growth of more lifesaving stations and the saving of more people. Churches, families, denominations, in fact, all organizations and even individuals need conflict to provoke ongoing growth and maturity. Conflict moves a system from homeostasis (no change) to a state of morphogenesis (continuous change) (See Illustration #8). New
ideas can emerge from conflicts—new ways of thinking, relating and working effectively that can be useful to everyone. People who stimulate conflict are people who produce change; they may be leaders with the necessary visionary skills for the next stage of the development of the organization. When the system anxiously and automatically reacts to conflict by suppressing it, the possibilities for growth are also curbed.

Organizational conflict that allows the organization or people in it to grow, solve problems more effectively, and counter-balance the homeostasis or inertia that most organizations develop is considered to be “purposeful conflict.” Purposeful organizational conflict contributes to helping people examine that which they take for granted, old ways of doing things that may no longer be optimal, and stimulate creativity and problem solving. For organizations to benefit from conflict, two attitudes need to be embraced.

First, people in the organization need to be able to separate the personal and emotional aspects of conflict from the problem-solving parts. When people become overly invested in their positions, they tend to make organizational enemies as conflicts become more and more personalized. Personalization means that people forget they are on the same side and see each other as very personal enemies. A helpful distinction for church leaders is to maintain a self-differentiating objectivity when conflicting with other leaders or systems in the church. To maintain objectivity requires the leader to stay in touch with the church and its leadership while defining his or her point of view.

People in the organization need the skills and understanding required to interact in conflict situations so they avoid escalating rather than working to solve the manifestations of conflict. Family-based organizations need to learn the skills in how to “fight fair,” and stay focused on problem solving, while observing systemic roots. Leaders have the responsibility to potentiate the “good conflict” while depotentiating the destructive conflict. If one imagines a rheostat or light dimmer, the leader turns up the light on purposeful conflict and turns down the power on destructive conflict.

Conflicts move from “purposeful” to “ruinous” in a number of ways. In addition to the ways people interact, organizations can, at times, “conspire” to create prejudicial conflict. If we look at organizations that tend to foster ruinous conflict, we find that they share some or all of the following emotional processes. In churches, pastors and stakeholders are almost always an integral participant in of the escalation of the problem.

1. The first ruinous attribute of systemic conflict is non-action. The most common ruinous strategy is doing nothing. Sometimes, doing nothing has wisdom, provided the decided inaction is thoughtfully considered and based on an analysis of the situation. However, leaders who “do nothing” are usually
avoiding conflict situations for personal and often unspoken reasons. Doing nothing generally results in the conflict escalating, and sets a tone of inaction and no-change for the organization.

2. Another strategy that leads to increased systemic conflict is “shuffling” or “orbiting.” Administrative orbiting is a strategy of keeping appeals for change or redress always “under consideration.” While non-action suggests obliviousness since it doesn’t even acknowledge the problem, orbiting acknowledges the problem, but avoids dealing with it. Common shuffling stalls include: collecting more data, documenting performance, canceling meetings and the like.

3. A third common means of avoiding conflict (or repressing it) is to hide it. The notion is that if nobody knows the problem, then the conflict is minimized. In Christian circles this may be defined as “love covering sins” (“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins,” 1 Pet 4:8 NIV). However, by being secretive conflict and confrontation is only delayed and when it does surface it will have far more negative emotions attached to it than would have been the case if things were more open.

4. Rule-mindedness is the fourth common and tragic leadership strategy that results in dysfunctional systems. Leaders who mistakenly think that they can order people to “be nice” use this strategy. Using regulations, persuasive sermons, and power collusions in leadership meetings, the person using the approach “leans on” people to repress the outward manifestations of conflict. Of course, this doesn’t make conflict go away, it just sends it scuttling to the underground, where it may well grow and increase its destructive power.

These are organizational emotional processes that produce unhelpful conflict. The origin of this behaviour, according to Edwin Friedman in his study of organizational leadership (A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix), is what he calls “peace-mongering.” In any type of institution when a self-directed, imaginative, creative member is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, Friedman believes that “the person at the very top of that institution is a peace-monger” (Friedman 1999, 254). Friedman defines the peace-monger as

… a highly anxious risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolved around the axis of consensus, a “middler,” someone who is incapable of taking well-defined stands … such leaders are often “nice” if not charming. (Friedman 1999, 254)

Family systems theory advocates for a well-differentiated leader (or, possibly but less likely, a well-differentiated leadership group) as the single variable that most significantly distinguished those organizations that survived and flourished from those that disintegrated. Such a leadership would have clarity about the organizational goals and thus would be less likely to be lost in the anxious emotional processes stirred up by conflict. The leader would be able to remain separate from the anxious bedlam while still remaining connected to the people in the system. Because of this attribute the leader would be someone who could maintain a modifying, non-anxious and sometime challenging presence. A well-differentiated leader is someone who can manage her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.

Five Levels of Church Conflict

As in marriages, organizations and governments, not all problems are chronic. Some conflicts are so well resolved within the automatic defaults of the system that most system participants do not know that the conflicts even existed. A church that is led by elders that are open to new information and new ways of leading, that assume conflict as not out of the ordinary, and that people do not have to be perfect to be leaders, will approach upsets with toleration and grace. This is quite different than the “gotcha” approach of many leadership teams, families and eldership boards. Speed Leas in Moving Your
Congregation Through Conflict (1984) identifies five levels of conflict in order of ascending complexity, difficulty, and intensity (see Illustration #9). These are common to any organization.

Illustration #9: Levels of Conflict in a Church System

| Level 1: Problems to be solved | Healthy Conflict |
| Level 2: Disagreements | |
| Level 3: Contests | |
| Level 4: Fight / Flight | Antagonism: Unhealthy Conflict |
| Level 5: Intractable situations | |

including the church, that has a family focus and understanding.

The first level of conflict Leas calls a “problems to solve” (fix the problem) where the goal is to collaborate for a mutually beneficial solution. People may disagree how to solve the presenting problem but they are committed to working at its resolution. They are talking directly to each other and not withholding information. An example of level 1 conflict is disagreement over the curriculum for the Sunday school. Not a significant amount of the church’s energy and anxiety is involved. What is needed is clarification and a nondefensive attitude by the leadership.

The second level of conflicts is “disagreements” (conflict over issues with personalities involved) where the goal is problem solving but where there is more self-protection and defensiveness and where third parties are often triangled in. The conflicts are often not spoken of directly and specifically but in a more generalized way as in “we are not communicating,” or “there seems to be low trust in this church.” At level 2, conflict is a recurring issue over which strong feelings have been expressed and arguments about Scripture are advanced. An example of this would be a debate over the role of women in the leadership of the church. The role of the coach is to get the people talking, praying and being with each other, and thus the conflict becomes more open and conscious. Hiding a problem exacerbates most conflicts and propels it to increasing levels of dysfunctional conflict.

“Contests” (win / lose) is the third level of conflict where the goal is to win which necessitates the bettering of an opposing force. Here the conflict is no longer about solving a problem—it is now about defeating an enemy and proving your own virtue. It is about forging a highly prized personal solution to an often-complex difficulty. The language is usually vague, overstated, distorted and dichotomized—the weapons of verbal warfare. “People are not in factions, but they clump together, and we give them labels: ‘the pastor’s buddies,’ ‘the old pillars of the church’” (Leas 1984, 16). A level 3 conflict has persisted with constant escalation for a period of time without resolution. An example is an ongoing debate about a charismatic style of worship in an otherwise emotionally placid congregation.

In the fourth level of conflict called “fight / flight,” the goal is to hurt the opposition irrespective of the mission of the organization. Disputants are no longer satisfied with getting their own way; now they have to get rid of the opposition. The goal is an emotional divorce or “cutoff” and may include firing a pastor, stopping people from coming to church or disbanding a committee or ministry. People are now in factions, usually meeting in secret. There is a clear leader or “chief disputant” and, sometimes, two or more fighters or flyers. Fighters want others to leave; flyers want to leave. Outside help is needed to deal with level 4 conflict. Objectivity is lost and the opposing systems are not able to self-differentiate. Anxiety is rampant and decisions are mostly reactive.
The fifth and most destructive level of conflict Leas called “intractable situations.” Here the goal is the destruction of the opposition; there is no expression of solving a problem or resolving a dispute. “People won’t settle for getting people to leave; now they want to remove them from the face of the earth … In a church, the people are not satisfied with a resignation; they want to have the pastor defrocked … Disputants at this level become fanatics; they won’t stop fighting because they feel it’s immoral to stop” (Leas 1984, 16).

Leas indicates that though the difference between level 1 and level 3 conflict is one of degree whereas level 4 and 5 conflicts differ in essential ways. Level 4 is not just more of level 3; it is a totally different type of conflict. Whereas reconciliation is the implied goal of levels 1-3, at level 4-5 the transformation of conflict is such that it seeks to damage and destroy the opposition. At the chronic conflict level of 4 and 5, the disputant’s goal is to ensure survival, sameness and sureness at the expense of the relationship with the other.

Roy Bell in his article on “Church Conflict” comments that “all of these levels of conflict find their expression in 1 Corinthians” (Bell 1997, 120-23) and the exigencies of the Corinthian church. A level 1 conflict (problem to be solved) is manifest with how the church compassion offerings were to be taken and distributed to the other needy churches: “the collection for God’s people” (1 Cor 16:1 NIV). At this level of conflict, teaching and clarification were sufficient interventions to move the church to well-functioning harmony. A level 2 conflict is illustrated by the debate over whether the Christian should consume the sacrificed meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1. Here the debate has become more serious and a more serious response was required. A level 3 conflict (contest) occurred over the issue with the system of churchly worship in 1 Corinthians 11-14 that was threatening the very existence and unity of the church and had the potential to escalate without hope of being resolved. An example of level 4 conflict forms the lead issue in 1 Corinthians: “I follow Paul”; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ’ (1 Cor 1:12 NIV). A level 5 of conflict is found in the debate about expelling from the fellowship the immoral Christian (1 Cor 5). It was thought that having no contact with the offending brother would protect the whole.

Chronic Conflict in the Church—Levels 4 and 5

Leas initially had difficulty finding materials describing level 4 and 5 conflict. After looking everywhere in church, business and mediation materials, Leas noted that the only manuals which accurately described levels 4 and 5 conflict were military manuals. Leas observes ten conditions within churches experiencing “chronic conflict” in the church (Leas 1989, 45-57). I have itemized and will make comment on the first five:

1. Christian values and biblical graces are minimized or even eliminated. The higher the conflict (levels 4 and 5), the lower the value level people are operating on. Combatants fight primitively as if their lives depended on it. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22 NIV—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”) though notionally agreed to are substantially absent.

2. Severe character and identity testing. The testing especially to the leadership and key holders corresponds to the intensity of the level of conflict. It is, perhaps, akin to Peter’s experience of satanic “sifting” when he denied Jesus (Luke 22:31-32).

3. Traumatization. Level 4 and 5 battling is one of the most challenging spiritual, emotional and physical experiences a church or its leadership can endure. Emotions escalate over thoughtfulness. Most leaders and responsible churchmen and women look for ways out rather than contributing to the trauma. Families within the church, as well as the church family itself, are traumatized.
4. Dismantling of leadership. When the ship appears to be sinking, it is the captain who is to go down with the ship. Aside from a few of the most faithful, most of the crew will grab a lifejacket and jump. Instant “promotions” may be the rule of the day. A passive church member may instantly become the congregational chairman. Trusted and qualified leaders, always difficult to find in any situation, are even less likely to come forth under the highly charged level 4 or 5 environment.

5. Precipitous membership decline. When a congregation experiences level 4 or 5 conflict, perhaps one-third of the membership will leave. Included in this group are key leaders, those who have rebelled and no longer wish to fight, and those who simply don’t want to be involved in any conflict at all. They will not readily come back.

There is a particular kind of unresolved conflict that is “chronic” in nature. In the Leas format, chronic conflict includes levels 4 and 5. It is at these levels that the conflict issues are not addressed and antagonism between the disputants becomes the dominant theme. When the conflict issues are not addressed, the organization experiences many of the following symptoms:

1. Conflict between the participants or subsystems in the organization runs for a long time and across many issues. It is not uncommon to see church conflict lasting generations. While the conflict issues may vary, the conflict expressions remain. These expressions include: disputes, competition, sabotage, inefficiency, low morale and withholding knowledge.

2. People have given up resolving the conflict and have moved to trying to score points and defeating others rather than resolving interpersonal difficulties. In chronic conflict, the issue is about who wins and not about the virtue or outcome.

3. People in the conflict focus on personal issues, such as styles, ways of talking, and personal qualities such as loyalty, rudeness, the pastor’s lifestyle, and the church’s changing liturgy.

4. People are often labeled pejoratively.

5. Participants triangle in a third party who is considered to be a higher authority to “fix” the problem using “expert” power (e.g., going to the senior pastor to have someone disciplined or to use his veto rights). The person triangled in is not normally neutral; rather, she is triangled with the requesting disputant.

Friedman itemizes five characteristics of chronic anxiety that can lead to chronic conflict (Friedman 1999, 75): (1) Reactivity or the automated responses that bypass concrete thinking and exacerbate the anxious atmosphere. (2) Herding, as in the process through which the forces of togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and moves everyone to adapt to the least mature members. (3) Blame displacement: an emotional state in which members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking personal responsibility for their own being and destiny. (4) A quick fix mentality that focuses on symptom relief rather than systemic change. (5) Lack of well-differentiated leadership which he defines as “a failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first four” (Friedman 1999, 75).

Chronic anxiety that leads to chronic conflict “can be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a gas-fume-filled room where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than having tried to disperse the fumes” (Friedman 1999, 79). Of course, every crisis has a context but what can be said of all organization and families irrespective of context and culture, is that to the extent that the organization deals with the crisis by focusing on the impacting agent or condition, they usually remain stuck as a result. More mature families that focus on their own response to a trauma generally heal faster. This is true not only in psychology; the New Testament book of James teaches us:
Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (Jas 1:2-4, NIV)

Can Conflict be “Christian”?  

The Bible is replete with wisdom, vivid example and vital stories of God’s direct intervention for the reconciliation of persons to Himself. The New Testament shows us the ultimate exemplar of reconciliation between God and His creation—Jesus Christ (Heb 10:10, Phil 2:5-11). The Scripture offers many pictures of unilateral forgiveness and provision for sacrifice as a substitute for judgment. Reading the Bible text, it becomes clear to see that thoroughgoing, direct and personal reconciliation is a major passion for God (Heb 2:1-4). God’s method of resolving conflict serves both as a model for a Christian’s own behavior and as a reminder of our own utter dependence on God as the source of all good we hope to achieve.

The earliest known conflict in a Christian congregation is recorded in Acts 6:1-7. The early Jerusalem church was multicultural and interracial with both Greek and Aramaic members. The leaders, and these included Jesus’ disciples, were primarily from the majority Aramaic speaking group while the complainants were from the Greek-speaking contingent. “The problem had to do with discrimination: widows of the Greek-speaking group were being neglected in the church’s daily distribution of charitable relief” (Schrock-Shenk and Ressler 1999, 168). The leadership of the church determined to bring all those involved together to facilitate a solution satisfactory to all. “Interestingly, the roll of table-server developed to solve the problem, has evolved into the contemporary church office of deacon” (Schrock-Shenk and Ressler 1999, 168).

The churches in the New Testament were familiar with conflict and its many expressions. In Acts 15 we discover two primary church leaders who were drawn into serious debate over the recently converted Gentiles into an almost universally Jewish Christianity. These new believers had been converted to Christ during Paul and Barnabas’ missionary journeys. The root of the conflict focused on the matter of inclusion or “boundaries” of the newly forming church of Christ: who gets in, who stays out and the requirements of admission. Some of the believers “who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5 NIV). Circumcision was at the heart of Judaism; it defined them as God’s covenant people. The passage speaks of “sharp dispute and debate” (Acts 15:2 NIV) and “much discussion” (Acts 15:7 NIV) but it does not speak of the kind of upset where the newborn church of Christ is jeopardized. While the conflict was emotional, direct and potentially explosive, it does not appear to be attacking and personalized.

“There was clearly lots of mud that could have been thrown. The issues were very important to the individuals debating them, to the community and to the future of Christianity. Nevertheless, there was an underlying goodwill, and they did not debate personalities. Without this and a significant willingness to hear what the Spirit had to say (Acts 15:8), no agreement could have been made” (Bell 1997, 121).

The debate could have been polarized ethnically and the conflict could have resulted in the destruction of the church’s efforts in evangelism and growth. But the church and its leaders reached a unanimous conviction that transcended personality, persuasion and culture. In so doing it is possible to understand several factors in the resolving of disputes within the local church (see Bell 1987, 77-79 and Schrock-Shenk and Ressler 1999, 179). (1) There was plainspoken discussion as Peter, James and the other leaders frankly addressed the issues. (2) The leaders as well as all those assembled participated in prayer. (3)There was willingness among the whole group to identify the issue and to focus on the crux of the dispute. (4) They placed a high value on narrative experience, that is, telling stories of how God has worked in believers’ lives. (5) There was a concern to understand not only what God has said in the past
(James quotes at length from the Old Testament prophet Amos, chapter nine) but any fresh truth found in Scripture that applies to the situation. (6) They interpreted the scriptures in light of the narrative experience. (7) They permitted opposition and debate in the open assembly. (8) There was a willingness to renegotiate the social contract that existed at the time, recognizing that the compromise process does not necessarily produce an inferior Christianity. (9) They communicated their decision, once reached, in a personal and pastoral manner to all affected.

The conflict provoked the kind of change in thinking and behavior that was required for the church to prosper through and beyond the presenting circumstance. The whole Christian cause was now focused on the entire world and not only Palestinian Jews of the synagogue. The mission expanded, new believers were welcomed, and Christ’s mandate to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19 NIV) was initiated.

However, not all conflicts are as clearly resolved and as beneficent. Paul and Barnabas clashed over their protégé and Barnabas’ nephew, John Mark (Acts 15:36-41). Their disagreement was sharp and they parted company. Though they disagreed, they continued in the gospel work: “Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord” (Acts 15:39-40 NIV). When the conflict came to the church leadership, their work of “strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41 NIV) was commended. This is telling. Some conflicts are well resolved by respectful withdrawal. It seemed that the leadership treated the difficulty as a problem to solve and not a reason to disqualify either for their ministry task. They advised them to partner with others and to continue their mission activity. “There appears to be a distinction here: personality conflict has a much lower priority, especially as this was a mission team rather than a local church … Barnabas and Mark went off to Cyprus; Paul and Silas to Syria. As far as we know, both sets of people had productive lives and ministries” (Bell 1987, 89, 91).

God’s Commitment to the Reconciliation of Persons

By studying the Scriptures with a hope for usefulness in the Kingdom of God and with an experience of the ultimate conflict conciliator at work within one’s life, clear direction emerges for being reconciled and restored when inevitable conflict occurs in our churches and in our everyday lives (adapted from Augsburger 1997, 210-11).

1. Conflict is the mechanism that allows us to mature and to become more like Christ in character and spirit (2 Cor 12:7-10). We have the opportunity to mature through facing and resolving conflict, though perhaps many of us would choose to ignore or flee from it. Maturity has its desired goal of character formation, forming us into the image of Christ. Avoiding conflict will often exacerbate the presenting conflict problem, producing avoidant people, as well as stunting personal maturity and organizational change.

2. Peacemaking starts with our own prior commitment to becoming a peacemaker, which in turn comes from a focus not primarily on the conflict issues but on the character and person of God (1 Pet 3:13-15, Phil 2:5-11). Note that peacemaking is active, responsible and participative process that assumes conflict and change, whereas peacekeeping works towards no-change and the maintenance of the status quo.

3. Justice and fairness, righting wrongs—these qualities originate in God’s character and are revealed through the Scripture. These qualities are often contrary to our self-interest (Luke 6:27-39). In approaching a conflicted system, the coach envisions a preferred future where justice and fairness are possible. To achieve the goal, it requires a commitment to have God’s agenda for the church rather than one’s own. The coach allies with the preferred future rather than colludes with one or more subsystems in the conflict. The coach directs the combatants towards a reconciled relationship with a preferred future where the reconciliation represents the character of God.
4. Resolving conflict may require different methods at different times, contexts and places (1 Sam 25:26-35; Esth 7:1-6; Prov 6:1-5; Acts 16:22-24; Acts 22:22-23, 29). There is no one “right” method for conflict resolution. This is important as we often conflict over the process of resolving the conflict. It is often true that when combatants contest over the process of creating a just resolution (as in the Arab-Israeli resolution process that has been on and off for three decades) that they are exploiting the resolution process to sustain their gains in the presenting conflict. The consultant or church leader brings several conflict resolution skills and interventions to the table and these may include: empathic reflection; reframing language; conflict mapping and listing; interviewing subsystems for solutions for the larger system. No one intervention is necessarily the right intervention.

5. Differences of opinion are inevitable and usually are understandable and tolerable (1 Cor 12). Differences of opinion do not require forgiveness or reconciliation but greater toleration that will, in turn, produce greater understanding. In conflict management, differences are to be understood and, eventually, celebrated as each contributing part forms the entire system of the church.

6. Reconciliation does not necessarily require giving up or giving in, especially when values are being challenged or when someone is being wounded. Loving confrontation as opposed to passivity is preferable (Gal 6:1-5) when its goal is restoration.

7. God reconciled all to himself through sacrifice and forgiveness and we are invited to participate with God. This is done by focusing on those to whom we conflict by “building others up according to their needs” (Eph 4:29-32 NIV).

8. Resolving conflict God’s way will require us to alter our behavior (Eph 4:22-32). While resolving conflict is a change process that begins in right thinking, it concludes in right behavior. There is no conflict resolution without changed lives.

According to Augsburger, “Biblical peacemaking involves an active commitment to restoring damaged relationships and to develop agreements that are just and satisfactory to everyone involved (1 John 3:18). A spirit of forgiveness, open communication and cooperative negotiation clear away the hardness of hearts left by conflict and make possible reconciliation and genuine personal peace” (Augsburger 1997, 211).

Concluding Considerations

Conflict is an organizational fact of life. Leaders cannot wish it away or pray it into a spiritual nether world. Leaders who learn to face conflict utilize its strength and embrace it as a leadership way of life will participate with God in creating a preferred future for the church. Leaders that hide in undifferentiated anxiety from the real world reality of everyday conflict will destine their churches to chronic anxiety, conflict and defeat.

“Conflict in the church that goes on and on toward no beneficial end is like pouring sand into the bearings of a machine. Unmanaged conflict frays nerves and wears down persons’ patience until finally, all the ministries of the church grind to a halt. Some persons fight to the finish, others break their ties with the congregation and go elsewhere.” (Shawchuck and Heuser 1996, 246)

Christians fight and sometimes Christians fight unfairly. Christians have differences regarding ways, means, ends, and values in the church. Differences occur that cause distance, rejection, compliance and other inappropriate expressions over methods, resources, goals, and what is most important in a local church.

Conflict with God’s people is not new. Conflict has been with us since the creation of man (“… they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” [Gen 3:8 NIV]); since the coming together in
intimate relationships (“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” [Gen 3:12 NIV]); and since the inevitable failure of mankind to live up to God’s commands (“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” [Gen 3:16 NIV]). Conflict is manifest in myriad of ways but none so dramatic as the fratricide in Genesis 4 punctuated by God’s systemic question: “Where is your brother…?” (Gen 4:9 NIV). The Old Testament is replete with murders, rapes, suicides and wars; all that originate in conflicts unresolved and murderously nurtured.

Although people may think conflict means open controversy, a truer definition might be the absence of peace. God’s people murmur. Systems get stuck. Relationships are frozen. It is true that “healthy resolution of church conflict requires that those involved value one another as human beings, put forth the effort required to understand opposing points of view, and mutually agree that the good of the congregation is paramount” (Haugk 1988, 36). But getting there is often the trouble. Many leaders fall into inevitable frustration because of the myriad of tensions in leading the church—“shepherding cats” as someone has said.

According to Shawchuck and Heuser “ninety percent of church conflicts are initiated or maintained by the pastor or key leader” (Shawchuck and Heuser 1996, 249). They also argue that when judicatory officials are involved that they exacerbate the problem because they do not understand either conflict management or systems theory. It is their position that “church conflicts often become habitual and escalate in ever tightening circles of destructive behavior” (Shawchuck and Heuser 1996, 249).

At the outset of this chapter I quoted the modern day analogy of the lifesaving station. Typical of many churches and ministry organizations that lose their mission, it replicated its faults and multiplied its sins. How would a family systems church consultant strategically participate with these good people who had become anxiously confused and attacking? I offer the following ideas as foundational principles of family systems theory coaching.

First, the systems coach would join with the system while remaining separate from the emotional processes of it. Such self-differentiation is important throughout the process but is essential at its inception. Such a posture would be experienced by the people directly involved as “maintained neutrality.” Neutrality has to do with siding with the best outcome rather than one or more of those in conflict. The best outcome is an outcome in which God is honored and in which the disputants can agree. The only benefit to the coach is that approximate righteousness it done.

Second, the coach would vector his energy in focused listening while asking “uncovering” questions to the various participators in the system. The focus would be on the emotional processes of the system rather than the symptomatic content. The questions themselves are less fault-finding than soliciting evidences for the resources that exist within the system. Systems theorists presume that “the human powers for preservation, healing and change are already resident in the congregation” (Cosgrove and Hatfield 1994, 124). We understand these human powers as God-given and we assume that God’s Spirit is already working to guide and strengthen whatever natural strength the family systems may already possess. The task of the congregational coach is to participate in what God is already doing. Thus listening is a primary strategy for the systems coach.

Third, the strategic focus would be inclusive rather than restrictive. This reduces the possibility of participating in covert triangles and excluding one or more parts. The coach approaches all the primary subsystems within the congregational system, including the official leadership (as in the elders, pastors, deacons and the like), founders and key holders, newcomers and old-timers, mostly in groups and without specific exclusion. This has the effect of democratizing the organizational structure of the system. This, in turn, often leads to reducing the presenting symptoms. When the subsystems of the congregation receive strategic focus within their natural relationship system, the system that produced the dysfunction is substantially modified. Anxiety is reduced and conciliation efforts are increased. Note that the dysfunctional component or person in the system is not directly challenged and there is no effort
made to do discipline. Often the “troublesome” (Oates 1994, cover) person changes or moves away as a result of an inclusive strategic focus.

Fourth, the systems coach would resist the family projection process of the upset system to scapegoat the dysfunctional member or members as problematic. The coach locates the problem in the structure of the system rather than in the nature of the symptomatic member or “identified problem.”

Fifth, the benefits of change for the congregation would be appreciated and the opportunity for celebration would be created. Inevitably, people would have deserted the church or mission. Goodbyes would need to be said and opportunities to reconnect would be provided. The last part of the coaching would be creating a preferred future on the basis of their renewed congregational system. The renewed system would involve discovering their mission and selecting leadership on the basis of this new vision. New covenants would be entered into and forgiveness would follow.

The lifesaving station remained mired in automatic and undifferentiated behaviour; thus purposeless conflict ensued. The leadership could not see that they had come together for something more than self-preservation. They forgot that they form a whole to respond to something larger than themselves and their own interests.