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WHY YOUR CHURCH NEEDS CONFLICT

by Eddy Hall

Do you enjoy conflict? I can't say that I do. When disagreement surfaces, especially in the church, my instinctive response is usually "uh-oh."

"Relational conflict is what the Bible calls sin," reads a discipling manual I came across recently. That says it pretty straight, doesn't it? But there's a basic problem with this take on things: It's not true. While, of course, sin does breed some conflicts, others grow out of nothing more sinister than differences in experience or personality or even spiritual gifts.

Not all conflict is bad. Much tension is life-giving--inviting us to grow, learn, or develop intimacy. Churches that habitually run from conflict (and there are lots of them) don't just miss out on these growth opportunities; they end up sick.

Chances are, in your church you've witnessed some of the crippling consequences of conflict avoidance firsthand.

Making lowest-common-denominator decisions

As one church launched a comprehensive planning process, a member rose and addressed the planning consultant: "One thing you need to know about this church is that we are very careful to not offend anyone." Translation: "Don't you dare rock the boat! We don't want to make any decision that anyone doesn't like."

Down this path lies paralysis. Doing nothing until everyone likes it

gives the most negative members of the congregation veto power. It insures that new and exciting changes will be rare, and it practically guarantees that many of the most passionate, outreach-oriented members of your congregation will leave. Why? Because by empowering those slowest to embrace change, you are disempowering your most creative leaders. Many of them will find another church that supports them in pursuing the vision for ministry God has given them.

No church can keep everybody happy. Some people are going to leave. But you can choose which group you will lose--your most entrepreneurial, visionary leaders, or those most fearful of change.

One Detroit pastor got this right. During a time of vision work that released great energy in the congregation, one member--a major giver--announced that if the church installed theater lighting in the sanctuary for a proposed ministry, he would leave. The pastor's answer: "We'll hate to see you go, but we can't hold up the rest of the congregation for one person." That church is well on its way to getting unstuck.

Settling for shallow relationships

Conflict is essential to developing intimacy. Until people have gone through conflict together and come out on the other side, the relationship is untested. Working through differences constructively forges deep bonds of trust.

In the life cycle of a small group, for example, the first stage of group life is the honeymoon. This is followed by a conflict stage through which the group must pass to reach the third stage--community. If a group spends too long at the honeymoon stage--staying at the level of pleasant, superficial acquaintance--a wise

group leader will intentionally surface conflict so the group can move ahead on the path toward mature community.

In the same way, the strongest marriages are those where the partners have fought their way through many tough issues to achieve a hard-won mutual trust. These husbands and wives know that more challenges will come, but that doesn't scare them. They know they can work through them together and be the stronger for it because they've done it before.

Sinking into irrelevance

The pace of change in our culture is faster than ever and getting faster. This means that although the gospel never changes, our ministry forms must constantly change to connect with a rapidly changing society. The only alternative is cultural irrelevance.

When a congregation's leaders commit to cultural relevance, this pushes many of us beyond our comfort zones. Christians passionate about reaching the unchurched will often clash with those more concerned with their own comfort. Between "what I feel most comfortable with" and "the most effective way to fulfill our mission" often stretches a wide chasm.

Pat Kiefert, president of Church Innovations Institute, describes a congregational study done at Emory University by Nancy Ammerman:

It concluded that every congregation that successfully adapted and flourished in a changing community had a substantial church fight. Those that chose to avoid conflict at all costs failed to flourish. *No exceptions.* (*Net Results*, January 1996).

Pretending differences don't exist

A committee member complained to her pastor about a long-standing committee policy that was causing problems. But when the committee discussed the policy at its next meeting, she kept quiet, insecure about expressing disagreement. So, the other committee members still don't know about the problem and ministry suffers.

Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, as one person sharpens the wits of another" (NRSV). When people sidestep working through differences, the iron never gets very sharp, working relationships remain strained, and the group tends to make poor decisions. In a healthy church, people know how to disagree without being disagreeable.

Being complacent about complacency

I was having breakfast with several members of a church council who were considering launching a strategic planning initiative in their church. At the end of the meal, one man asked, "How can we convince our people we need this when they are so content with the way things are?" I knew this was a church that prized keeping the peace above almost everything else, so I suspect my answer shocked them. "One of the most important responsibilities of church leadership," I said, "is to create tension. And you do that by making your people highly conscious of the gap between the way the church is and how God wants it to be. Make your people so aware of the something more that God is calling them to be that they can no longer be content with the way things are."

In a complacent church, it is the job of the leaders to *increase frustration*, to *introduce conflict*.

Avoiding the hard work of correcting sin

Conflict-avoiding churches often empower the most divisive members to wreak havoc. Other members may quietly complain about the bullies, but rarely do they acknowledge that such people are committing a grievous sin and that the church is morally responsible to discipline them.

Why are we so slow to confront people who are damaging the church? Well, we know it's going to hurt, and most of us don't enjoy inflicting pain. And we may not relish the prospect of arousing the offender's anger. But perhaps a deeper reason is that the New Testament instructions for correcting one another are designed to be lived out in the context of intimate community, and most of our churches today have much more the flavor of institution than of community. Spiritual correction doesn't work all that well outside of intimate relationship, no matter how well-intended.

But, in spite of the challenges, for the church to be healthy, we must find ways to give and receive accountability.

Life-giving conflict

To be healthy, your church needs conflict.

* Every church has defining moments when it must choose between being true to its mission and pleasing people. Obeying God must always trump trying to keep everybody happy.

* The church cannot fulfill its destiny apart from becoming an intimate community, and successfully working through conflict,

again and again, is essential to community-building.

* All progress requires change, and all change brings some level of conflict. Working through the conflicts that come with constantly updating ministry will always be part of the ongoing cost of making your church's ministries culturally relevant.

* No ministry team can thrive while sweeping important differences under the rug. To draw out the best in people, the church must offer safe places where all know that differing perspectives are not only tolerated, but truly valued.

* When a church is complacent, the leaders are responsible to "disturb the peace" by spotlighting the gap between what is and what needs to be until the members become so uncomfortable that they feel compelled to change.

* Finally, when conflict is fueled by sin, the church must respond graciously and firmly, speaking the truth in love, to restore the one who is sinning and to protect and heal the church from the sin's destructive impact.

One translation of Acts 4:32 says that all the believers in the Jerusalem church "all felt the same way about everything" (CEV). Really? I wonder if that translation team bothered to read the next chapter of Acts, or the one after that. The New Testament church consisted not of a bunch of ditto-heads, but of diverse people who cared--and disagreed--passionately. No, what Acts 4:32 really says is that the believers were "of one heart and soul" (NRSV). Their love for each other and their shared purpose inspired them to work through potentially explosive disagreements while respecting each others' differences, coming up with creative win-win solutions that embodied kingdom values. (See, for example, Acts 6 and 15.)

Such conflict is not the enemy. In fact, it is an absolutely essential element in the day-to-day rhythm of life in every healthy church.

May your church be blessed with many life-giving conflicts--and the grace to grow through every one of them.

Eddy Hall of Goessel, Kansas, is a senior consultant with Living Stones Associates (www.living-stones.com), a consulting team that helps churches identify and remove barriers to healthy growth through integrated planning of ministries, staffing, facilities, and finances.