



When a Problem becomes a “Problem”

Every congregation faces challenges. Unexpected building repairs, the loss of a key lay leader, consideration of a controversial issue and declining church attendance or income commonly become major Session agenda items. At least one Session member will give voice to the feelings of most elders, “Clearly, we have a problem.” Too often, how the Session deals with a problem becomes a problem. That is, it becomes a conflict.

Speed Lees, a senior consultant for the Alban Institute has identified five levels of conflict:

- 1) A Problem to Solve
- 2) Disagreement
- 3) Contest
- 4) Fight/Flight
- 5) Intractable

(Moving Your Church Through Conflict, The Alban Institute ISBN 1-56699-012-2)

In most cases, Contest conflict requires intervention from outside the congregation. Fight/Flight and Intractable conflicts inevitably leave scars affecting a congregation’s life for many years. Therefore, wise church leaders seek to confine conflict to the first level and recognize second level conflict dynamics as a warning.

1) A Problem to Solve

Problem oriented rather than person-oriented

Short-lived anger

Open sharing of information

Resolution involves moving towards unanimous agreement

2) Disagreement

Issues and personalities mixed

Signs of distrust evident – sides defined

Sides selectively hold back information

Resolution involves moving towards consensus while saving face

Strategies for Managing Conflict

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Elders' Toolbox

- The single most important strategy for managing conflict is to define and describe the issue. The moderator has a key role in clarifying the issue and encouraging session members to focus on solving the problem.
- It is helpful for the moderator to facilitate the identification of the core values that are in play when the Session is seeking to resolve a problem. Often, unidentified values move a difference of opinion to a higher level of conflict. The “need to win” or “save face” should be included as values that are often unnamed when the Session faces a difficult decision.
- At the first signs that the consideration of a problem may itself become a problem, the moderator can ask each Session member to rank on a scale of 1-10 his/her intensity of feeling regarding the issue.
(1 = “I could care less” and 10 = “Over my dead body.”)
- Establish a common understanding that the members of Session will avoid such destructive conflict tactics as belittling, accusing, dredging up old or extraneous issues, walking out (resigning), etc.
- Encourage the practice of “active listening” and the asking of questions for clarification prior to forming a response.
- Take “time out” for personal prayer while conscientiously avoiding manipulative prayer which includes a description of the solution that everyone “just needs to see.”

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