Bridge Builders

TRANSFORMING CHURCH CULTURE

Transforming Conflict:
Some Keys for Church Leaders

By Alastair McKay, Executive Director of Bridge Builders

Bridge Builders

TRANSFORMING CHURCH CULTURE

Transforming Conflict: Some Keys for Church Leaders[1]
by Alastair McKay, Executive Director of Bridge Builders

Many church leaders think of conflict as negative or destructive and therefore something to be avoided. This article offers some keys that can help unlock a different understanding of conflict and an approach which can enable leaders to engage conflict as a source of creativity and transformation in the life of the church.

Think differently about conflict

How we think about conflict is important. At the beginning of Bridge Builders' training events we often begin by eliciting leaders' associations with the words "church conflict," particularly the feelings and behaviours that come to mind. With almost every group of church leaders, whatever their denomination or role, the initial associations are overwhelmingly negative. We hear associations such as pain, a lack of understanding, hurt, anger, separation, power struggles and shame.

At the outset it is important to recognise the negative view that most of us have of conflict. If, as leaders, we are to engage creatively with conflict then we need to think differently about it. In trying to shift perceptions, it is worth reflecting on why conflict has such bad press. One teacher from whom I have learned, Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, suggests four common misperceptions.[2] First, we often restrict the use of the term conflict to tensions where there are negative elements, and fail to include situations where there is a positive outcome. Second, we tend to view pain and struggle as negative and to be avoided, rather than as inescapable and intrinsic elements in growth and creativity. Third, as Christians, we often hold a theology that conflict is wrong or sinful, instead of understanding that conflict is neutral and that it is our responses to conflict that may be sinful or godly. Finally, we'd like to think that it should be easy to get along together, but in reality, dealing with our differences in Christian community is often profoundly challenging and demanding:

> We have seldom been taught how to be proactive in conflict and to understand that conflict transformation is a deeply spiritual task that demands commitment, discipline, new skills, much practice, and constant vigilance from each of us.[3]

Further, the term "conflict" is generally used by the media to indicate violence. Therefore we need to clarify what we mean by the term. One useful academic definition from the field of conflict studies is:

> Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals[4].

However, this is less user-friendly than the simple definition: "Conflict equals differences plus tension."[5] Whenever we encounter tension over differences, we are facing conflict. This is broader use of the term helps open up the possibility of embracing and positively engaging with conflict.

---

[1] This is a revised version of a chapter that was published under the title "Resolving Conflict" in John Nelson (ed.) *How to Become a Creative Church Leader: A Modem Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008) pp. 194-210

[2] Carolyn Schrock-Shenk <u>Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation</u> (pp. 25-37) in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (eds.) *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999) pp.33-34. This book is the single best introduction to conflict that I know.

[3] Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, *op. cit.*, p.34.

[4] William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker *Interpersonal Conflict* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2001, sixth edition), p.41.

[5] Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, *op. cit.*, p.23.

Think theologically about conflict

As well as changing our thinking about conflict, we may need to change the way we read our Bibles. Many of the books in the Bible have grown out of situations of conflict, and most of the narratives are tales of conflict. The Bible can therefore be a wonderful resource as we seek to work creatively with conflict. One example from the early church can illustrate the point. Acts 6 records the first community-wide conflict within the newborn church at a time of growth and change. There are two distinct groups within the church, the Hebrew-speaking and the Greek-speaking believers. The Greek-speakers have a serious complaint: their poor widows are being left out of the community's relief work.[6] The leaders are under pressure, and now they're being accused of injustice and unfaithfulness.

How does the leadership respond? They *don't* get reactive and defensive. They *don't* just tell people what to do. They *don't* tell everyone to go away and just pray about it. What they do instead is recognise that the issues matter deeply to people, and so they call the community together to discern together how to proceed – to listen to one another and to work at problem solving. The temptation, when conflict comes, is to separate and avoid. The apostles resisted that temptation. They had the courage to face the issues and the feelings of hurt. They also provided clear self-definition, giving their perspective on where they thought their leadership priorities should lie: devotion to prayer and serving the word. They had a clear sense of their own call.

Having listened carefully to the community and taken their concerns seriously, the apostles made a proposal for the way forward: that the leadership team should be expanded. Both the community and the leaders recognised that the matter of justice for the poor was not the only issue. There was also a matter of justice in relation to the leadership. All the current leaders were Hebrew-speakers. Judging from their Greek names, it seems that all the newly selected leaders were Greek-speakers. Real justice was not just about attending to the needs of the poor but also about sharing power together.

The new leaders were commissioned by prayer and the laying on of hands. They were clearly endowed with spiritual authority. The mark of this is seen in the succeeding chapters as Stephen and Philip proclaim the good news to Jews dispersed around the Roman Empire, along with demonstrations of power. Interestingly we hear nothing further of the seven's involvement in administering aid to the poor, but we do see them exercising the same authority as the apostles: they were not a second-tier, or second-class leaders. Rather they were empowered leaders who shared fully in the leadership responsibilities and authority.

This conflict in the early church contributes to God's purpose of drawing people into his kingdom. Verse 7 says, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."[7] This verse clearly seems to be linked to the story which comes immediately before it; there is church growth that results from the creative and constructive addressing of the conflict. And in many ways it is a preface to the bigger conflict which culminates in Acts 15 where the issues are not between Jews who speak different languages, but between Jew and Gentile. Again, as Luke tells the story, the successful addressing of conflict opens up the church's mission. So conflict can be the arena for discerning God's will for the church and the world.

---

[6] In the Old Testament prophets, doing justice for widows was shorthand for covenant loyalty; and in the Rabbinic tradition, doing justice was spelled out in terms of organised community giving to the poor, particularly widows. So the complaint relates to questions of justice and faithfulness to God's covenant, not simply feeding of widows.
[7] New Revised Standard Version.

A first step: be aware of your power

Jesus offers some teaching for the church in Matthew 18 which can provide a helpful starting point for the creative church leader addressing conflict. The start of the chapter, which alludes to the power struggles among Jesus' disciples, provides an important reminder that conflict is nearly always related to issues around power and influence. Within the church, factors of power are all too easily ignored, either from embarrassment or denial. Jesus begins (vs 1-5) by challenging the prevailing aspiration among us all to seek to rise or increase in power, and calls us to solidarity with the least powerful. For all leaders, this is a challenge. But the challenge doesn't stop there. Jesus continues (vs 6-11), with an exhortation to those with power not to take advantage of those without. According to Jesus the test of whether our use of power is redemptive or abusive is our treatment of the least powerful. We are called to constant vigilance about our potential for abuse of power. And we are called to look out for the weak who fall or are left behind (vs 12-14). As leaders, an awareness of our own power, and how we use that power, is an important first step.

Accept conflict as normal

In the middle of Matthew 18, Jesus sets out what is generally seen as a disciplinary process. We should note that this is not a legal process, however, but about relationships and about being included or excluded from the community. While the process is designed to address issues where a member of the community sins, my experience is that in most situations of conflict there is normally a perception (often on both sides) that someone has sinned or offended in some way. Therefore I think that we can legitimately draw out some principles for handling conflict from the disciplinary process set out in verses 15-22. Jesus' teaching here indicates that we need to expect to have to deal with sin in the Christian community. This points to the first principle, that conflict is normal, it is going to happen, and we need to expect it in the church. This is a message that leaders need to communicate to the church. By doing so, they help to reduce anxiety.

Learn to take the initiative

A second principle is the need to learn to take the initiative with someone who has hurt or offended us. Often our instinctive response is to distance ourselves but Jesus calls us to take the initiative, to go directly and address it with the other person. This is a challenging demand. It will take courage to face the one we may see as our "adversary" or "enemy." It will also require us to engage in self-reflection ("What is my part in what has gone wrong?"), to be vulnerable ("What do I feel, and how have I been affected?") and to engage the other person in dialogue ("How prepared am I to hear a different perspective from my own?"). If we are ever in doubt about taking the initiative, Matthew 5:21-24, reminds us that when we know someone else holds something us against us, Jesus also calls us to go directly to address it with them, a priority even higher than going to worship. Jesus catches us both ways. What he calls us to is counter-instinctive: moving towards the other with whom we have a difficulty.

Develop your communication skills and be ready to persist

A third principle from Matthew 18 is the need to develop our communication skills. As the repeated use of the word highlights, *listening* is at the centre of the process (vs15-17). This requires us as leaders to deepen our listening skills, to be able to demonstrate that we have heard the other, and not to brush people off with "I hear what you're saying." It also requires us to improve our ability to speak in ways which enable the other to listen – by avoiding blaming and attacking language, and instead speaking in a centred way, articulating our own feelings and concerns. All this

points to a fourth principle from the passage; that often reconciliation requires hard work, and perhaps several attempts at listening and trying to achieve understanding. We need persistence in trying to restore broken relationships, as indicated by the multiple steps of the process (vs 15-17).

Expect to encounter God

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This is one of the best known verses of Matthew's gospel, often quoted in relation to the Christian community (and at poorly attended prayer meetings!). However, the context of this verse has been long ignored. Jesus is promising his presence when his followers gather together to engage in loving confrontation, good listening, and seeking agreement in the midst of their tensions and differences.[8] When we face conflict we can expect to learn new things about ourselves, and new things about the other with whom we are in conflict. Jesus points here to the principle that we can also expect to encounter God's presence in a new way when we have the courage to come together to face conflict. We certainly need God's presence in such situations.

Know that you are forgiven

There is one last principle to draw out from Matthew 18, which relates to forgiveness.[9] It is important to note that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness follows the teaching on confrontation. Forgiveness is not a substitute for confrontation. However, in calling us to be ready to forgive seventy-seven times, Jesus challenges us to develop a reflex of forgiveness. Martin Luther King put it this way: "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude."[10] How can we develop such an attitude? Jesus addresses this (vs 23-35) in the parable of the forgiving king and the unforgiving slave. It is only as we grasp the depth of how much we have been forgiven, that we will be motivated to keep forgiving others. So another principle for us as leaders is that our capacity to forgive and be agents for reconciliation is rooted in the acknowledgment of our own sinfulness and our experience of God's overwhelming forgiveness.

Learn from contemporary insights

In addition to biblical teaching, the creative church leader can learn from practitioners in the field of conflict transformation and psychology. The remaining principles emerge from these two fields.

Dig deeper

A basic idea for resolving conflict is the need to distinguish between the positions that people take and their underlying concerns. The challenge is to dig deeper, not to get stuck on the position (a person's solution to an issue, or what they want to happen), but instead to explore underlying interests (a person's concern about an issue, or why they want something to happen) and needs (what motivates a person's interests). This has been popularised as the approach of "principled

---

[8] Interestingly there are three such promises in Matthew's gospel, as theologian Jeremy Thomson has pointed out to me. The first, near the beginning, is in the context of God's redemption of the world, where we are promised Emmanuel, God with us. The last is at the close of the gospel in the context of mission and being sent out as God's agents into the world. The second is here, at the centre of the gospel in the context of dealing with the tough issues within the Christian community.

[9] I have certainly not exhausted the principles that could be highlighted from this chapter, but these few will suffice for this short article.

[10] Martin L. King *Strength to Love* (Glasgow: William Collins/Fount, 1977) p.38.

negotiation".[11] The approach is often helpful because it means taking time to find out what really matters to people, and being creative in finding ways to address both their and our concerns.

Understand and explore style differences

No matter how obvious it may be, we all struggle to really grasp that people are different from one another: typically we expect others to be like us. Differences in personalities and styles of handling conflict can become tense issues of their own and leaders can provide tools to help understand these differences. Fortunately there are tools available. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Enneagram are two widely used instruments in the UK, and are both useful. I have found the *Friendly Style Profile for People at Work* produced by Susan Gilmore and Patrick Fraleigh to be particularly helpful.[12]   Simpler than both MBTI and the Enneagram, its four styles are easy to grasp.[13] One of its greatest strengths is that it distinguishes between our functioning under normal circumstances ("calm") and our functioning under stress ("storm"), which either not picked up by, or less central to other instruments.

Such personality style tools help our self-understanding as well as improving our understanding of others who are different from us. Whichever tool we use, it is important to know the tool well and use it regularly, and to work with it together as a leadership group. This gives a common language to explore style differences, which helps to reduce tension and enable constructive engagement around our style differences.

Understand emotional dynamics in the congregation

Have you ever been caught off guard by interactions between people in your church, and been left thinking, "Where did that come from?" Typically it may be behaviours that do not seem to make sense rationally. A key here is to appreciate that church congregations function as emotional systems.[14] They have much in common with the dynamics of a human family, therefore family systems theory can help shed light on what happens in church groups.[15] Some features of an emotional system include:

- The functioning of members of the system (such as the congregation) is profoundly interdependent, with changes in one part of the system reverberating in other parts. Therefore one cannot change one piece of the system without impacting others.
- Interactions and relationships within the system tend to be highly reciprocal, and patterned. So people will respond to the behaviour of others out of a range of typical responses.[16]
- Emotional systems are constantly seeking balance (or homeostasis) and will react to any threat to that balance. Thus, there is always some level of resistance to change.

---

[11] See Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton *Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement without Giving In* (London: Random House, 1999, 2nd edition).

[12] Published by the Friendly Press, Eugene, Oregon, 2004 (2nd edition).

[13] For a basic introduction to the four styles, see Colin Patterson *How to Learn Through Conflict: A Handbook for Leaders in Local Churches* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003) pp.10-11. This booklet provides a well-written and accessible introduction to conflict in the church, especially suitable for small group study.

[14] The seminal book offering this view was Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York, NY: Guildford Press, 1985). For a shorter introduction see Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993).

[15] Family systems theory is also known as Bowen theory: it was originally developed by the American psychiatrist Dr Murray Bowen.

[16] See Roberta Gilbert, *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking about Human Interactions* (New York, NY: John Wiley, 1992) for a clear and readable introduction to family systems theory and the typical response patterns used to manage anxiety.

- Signs of distress or conflict may be indicators of the system's difficulties in adapting to change or loss.
- Systems are complex and organic, so problems or crises generally have more than one cause. Thinking systemically thus requires one to redistribute blame by seeking to address the multiple causes of a problem rather than "fixing" or removing an individual or group seen as the problem. It is necessary to complexify one's understanding of the situation, rather than simplify.
- The health of any system is more dependent upon the functioning of the leaders, those at the head of the system, than on any other single factor. So we as leaders have a key role, through our responses and self-management, in regulating the distress and anxiety within the system.

Family systems theory suggests four strands that are central for leaders to hold together if we are to help promote healthy group functioning, especially when emotions and anxiety are high.

(1) <u>Offer and Invite Self-Definition</u>: Healthy self-definition occurs when you openly express what you feel and believe, what you need and can give, what you hope for and where you feel disillusioned or hopeful. Often people wait for others to define first, and then define ourselves in reaction to them. When we, as leaders, clearly self-define it is much more likely that others will respond by defining themselves in a clear and positive way rather than in reaction to others.

(2) <u>Foster a Non-Anxious Presence</u> (or at least a less anxious one!): This is the opposite of being uptight and tense. It is about managing one's own anxiety and being fully present to other people. The goal is to create an environment where differences, hurts, feelings, and issues can be expressed and explored in a safe space. We offer a non-anxious presence, not by detaching from emotions or issues, but by engaging with them without retreating or attacking. Engaging fully with one perspective and then another while managing our own anxiety reduces the anxiety level within the group.

(3) <u>Maintain Emotional Contact</u>: When anxious, angry or hurt, people generally move away from the source of their anxiety by moving away from each other. Distance can take both physical and emotional forms. As a general rule, leaders should note anxiety and move toward it, maintaining emotional contact with the participants and helping them to maintain contact with each other and with us as leaders.

(4) <u>Stand Firm in Yourself When the Going Gets Tough</u>: When a leader provides self-differentiation, it is common to experience resistance and pressure to move back to the way things were. The challenge for the leader is to stand firm in oneself, holding to your convictions and sense of direction, while being flexible and willing to adapt what shape your proposed changes might take in the light of others' genuine concerns.

Take a second look at difficult or extreme behaviour

Leaders sometimes ask in despair what they can do about "totally unreasonable" people, who wear them down with persistent negative behaviour, and leave them feeling blocked at every turn, or even under siege. In such circumstances, it is easy to get sucked into a spiral of blame and

recrimination. The most important contribution you can make as a leader is to model a response that is both firm and compassionate. Here are some suggested steps, based on the work of Arthur Boers.[17]

First, separate the person from the problem. As soon as you label someone as a troublemaker, you tie together the problem and the person. It is then hard to solve the problem without rejecting the person. So, as a general approach, try to avoid that knot. Focus on how to respond to the difficult behaviour not on how to get around "difficult people".

Second, look below the surface. Try adopting a "research stance." This involves asking yourself what might be motivating the difficult behaviour, and why you are finding it so difficult. Recognise that it may be easier to act with grace towards another person when you are open to understanding things from his or her point of view.

Third, try testing your assumptions. Be slow to decide that this person has wrong intentions or is impossible to deal with. Rather than guessing at the person's motives, state your puzzlement and invite them to tell you *why* they are behaving in a certain way.

Fourth, examine the bigger picture. Assess the church's health and the functioning of the entire body. Where there are structural problems or skewed relationships in the congregation as a whole, the behaviour of difficult individuals may be a *symptom* rather than the *cause*. Why are other people not taking a stand against the difficult behaviour?   The person perceived as difficult may be expressing concerns that others are avoiding articulating. Beware of allowing this person to function as a scapegoat, thinking that if the "troublemaker" is removed, everything will be all right. Instead, work at strengthening relationships in the whole and establish a common corporate response to the difficult behaviour, especially within your leadership group.

Fifth, take a stand against harmful behaviour. In the face of difficult behaviour, an aggressive response – being equally difficult in return – simply multiplies anger. But the opposite approach is also dangerous.   Being passive, or just "reasonable," will simply ensure that people get hurt, and then may leave. Instead, choose to be assertive, willing to confront and speaking the truth in a loving way. Unlike the other two stances, assertiveness requires careful thought and practice. It is likely to involve naming the problem behaviour, explaining why you consider it inappropriate in the context, and exploring alternatives which will build up rather than undermine. There may also be a need to establish clear boundaries, appropriate to the context.

Finally, it is worth recognising that, in exceptional circumstances, extreme behaviour may be an indication of serious mental illness. Do not be quick to jump to this conclusion; and seek professional counsel from a trained psychologist or therapist before reaching such an assessment. However, if this is what you are facing, you may need to establish some firm corporate boundaries and take protective measures for the sake of the group. If you are facing genuinely serious harassment, this may include securing legal protection.

Develop a facilitative leadership style

How would you describe your leadership style? Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie offer this proposal: "Rather than fulfilling the expectation that they will provide answers, leaders have to ask tough questions. … Instead of quelling conflict, leaders have to draw the issues out."[18] This suggests the need for us as leaders to avoid being the answer-givers and instead, to develop a more facilitative leadership style, welcoming conflict, inviting expression of differences, and helping the group to wrestle with the challenges that it faces. This does not mean that you will avoid providing clear self-definition: as we have seen, you need to articulate your values and convictions. But it does mean

---

[17] See Arthur P. Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behaviour* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999)

[18] Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie <u>The Work of Leadership</u> in *Harvard Business Review on Leadership* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1990-1998) pp.173-174. See also Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994).

that you will hold back from offering "the answer" or the way forward, and it will facilitate the engagement of everyone in the group, plumbing the depths of the different concerns that they bring. Developing your skills for facilitating groups and meetings is enormously helpful.[19]

Work at building consensus

Part of an effective facilitative leadership style is seeking to build consensus in reaching decisions, especially within the leadership group, but also within the wider body. Simply securing a majority vote is not good enough. Effective leadership will enable the group to move forward together, helping to ensure that people will not undermine decisions that are reached. It is important to be clear that consensus is not unanimity, which is an unrealistic goal in most situations. Rather consensus is the readiness to live with a proposed decision, to give one's consent to moving forward.[20] Such agreement to co-operate is normally evidence of the Holy Spirit at work (see Acts 15:28). Different levels of consent can range from enthusiastic support to having significant concerns but without standing in the way of the group making a decision. Those with very serious concerns can still give their consent if they are willing to do so for the sake of the group. However, they are much more likely to do so if their concerns have been adequately heard and noted and if the proposal can reflect their concerns in some way.

One method to test consensus before making a decision, that Bridge Builders has found particularly helpful, is a graduated straw poll. Sometimes called the "High Five" approach, this method helps avoid the trap of false consensus which assumes that silence indicates support. Once the chair or facilitator has restated the tentative proposal, each person in the group responds to the proposal indicating his or her level of support with a show of fingers on one hand, corresponding to the following scale:

5. I fully support the proposal. I can give an unqualified "yes".
4. I can support the proposal. It's OK with me.
3. I can live with the proposal, although I do have some concerns about it.
2. I have significant concerns about the proposal, but I will not block the group from making a decision (maybe because this seems the best decision that can be reached right now). And I will not undermine the decision once taken.
1. I cannot live with this proposal, and I need to block it.

When the group largely responds with fives, fours and some threes, they are probably ready to move to a decision. If there is a significant proportion of twos and threes, this suggests a need for more discussion, as, obviously, does the presence of any ones.

Working to build consensus will take time, as the above suggests. But it is invariably time well spent, especially with major decisions. For example, the Mennonite congregation I was part of in the 1990s took over a year to consider the possibility of calling its first paid (part-time) ministerial leader. It was a real struggle for some, with plenty of agonising, but the leadership stayed committed to finding a consensus, and this was eventually achieved. When the leader who was called left a few years later, there were no murmurs in the church about calling another paid leader, and during his whole time there were no concerns expressed about the decision that had been taken – both dividends

---

[19] Bridge Builders regularly offers a five-day course, Transforming Church Conflict, to equip church leaders with some of the awareness and skills set out in this chapter. See www.bbministries.org.uk/training/training .

[20] In a pure consensus model, an individual who is unhappy, for example because of questions of principle, can block a decision if they are unwilling to stand aside. Pure consensus can be an impractical ideal at times. Sometimes individuals abuse the power that consensus gives them, or their own inner struggles stop them from respecting the group as a whole. For this reason, I recommend a modified consensus model, where every effort is made to come to a consensus decision, but if the group gets stuck then ultimately it can proceed with a decision on the basis of a substantial majority vote, say 80%. This allows a church to proceed when there is a large majority which has worked hard to address the concerns of the minority, without having to be paralysed by those concerns. It also allows conscientious individuals to preserve their deep convictions without feeling responsible for the outcome.

of the hard work several years before. It is important to recognise that for most churches working at consensus-building constitutes a significant change to the way they have operated in the past and thus will take sustained and skilful leadership to effect a change. It needs to become part of the culture of your church's decision-making to be most effective.

Plan and agree decision-making processes

Decision-making can be a difficult time for churches for at least two reasons: first, because it often brings underlying disagreements (perhaps unrelated to the focus issue) to the surface; and second, because it means that the church is facing a time of change which can act as a focus for people's anxieties about changes elsewhere in their lives and in the wider world. Therefore, decision-making is likely to involve some conflict.

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to be happy with the changes and decisions that are made. However, if people are not involved in the decision-making process they can feel ignored, and marginalised. This can lead to bitterness and divisions that may not surface immediately but may sow the seeds of destructiveness later on. So it is important to obtain support for important decisions, including from those who may not agree with the final decision. An important principle of good decision-making, therefore, is that it requires the participation of all those who will be significantly affected by the outcome. One first step that can make a big difference is to carefully plan the process for a major decision, and get ownership of the process from the group at the outset. If people own the process, they will be much more likely to live with the outcome, even if it is not an outcome they are particularly happy with.

Likewise it is important to build in methods for people to respond in open and creative ways through the course of a decision-making process, promoting listening, reflection and problem-solving. Most people are familiar with surveys, small group discussions, and panel discussions. Other, less familiar methods for eliciting responses, which Bridge Builders has found particularly helpful, include the Human Rainbow (which involves people standing along a physical spectrum between two extreme points); the Samoan Circle (a type of "fish bowl" process with discussion only happening in an inner circle and which people can leave and join); and mapping needs and fears (of the different subgroups, done on a large flip chart).

I have written at some length on decision-making elsewhere, but the above hopefully provides a few important pointers to help reduce destructive conflict from decision-making within the church.[21]

Understand conflict levels and intervention options

Conflict within groups ebbs and flows. It is helpful to be able to assess the level of intensity of conflict in the group. In my work with Bridge Builders, one model that I have found helpful is that developed by Speed Leas.[22] Leas proposes five broad levels of conflict intensity, and strategies for working with each level. Here is a brief summary:

Level 1: Problems to Solve. At this level there are real differences between people, but the people are problem-focused not person-focused. Communication is clear and specific and the people involved want to sort out the problem. Dialogue and discussion will enable the parties to do so. This is healthy conflict.

Level 2: Disagreement. At this level people are more concerned with self-protection than problem-solving and may talk with friends about how to deal with an issue. Communication is more generalised and people withhold information they think may be used by those with whom they

---

[21] Alastair McKay, <u>Congregational Decision Making</u>, in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, *op. cit.*, pp.177-187.
[22] Leas, S. *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1985), esp. pp. 17-22.

disagree. This level will need the leaders to facilitate more structured negotiation with active encouragement of participation.

Level 3: Contest. At this level people's objectives shift to winning the argument and coming out on top. There is a win-lose dynamic and communication becomes more distorted with personal attacks and emotional arguments overshadowing rational argument. While this level falls short of active hostility, it will require skilful leadership to find a way forward. Clear ground rules and a clear, agreed-upon process for problem-solving need to be established. Certain situations at this level may require an outside facilitator.

Level 4: Fight or Flight. At this level the parties' goal is to hurt or get rid of others, or to leave if they cannot achieve this. Factions have solidified, with identified leaders, and the good of the subgroup – rather than the whole congregation – becomes their focus. Communication is characterised by blaming, negative stereotyping, self-righteousness and a refusal to take responsibility ("It's all their fault; they're the ones who need to change."). At this level, no leader within the congregation will be perceived as impartial, no matter how hard they've worked at remaining so. Therefore a specialist outsider mediator or consultant is required to lead an extended reconciliation process for the group. (This is the level at which Bridge Builders is most commonly called in.)

Level 5: Intractable. In a church context, this level is perhaps better referred to as "Holy War" since conflict is out of the participants' control, and the goal of opposing parties is to destroy one another. In such situations people see themselves as part of an eternal cause, fighting for universal principles with any means justifying the all-important ends. Communication is characterised by outright condemnation of others, extreme emotional volatility, compulsiveness, an inability to disengage, and with the issues lost from sight. At this level mediation and consultancy will be ineffective and short-term reconciliation is unrealistic. Authority needs to be exercised by those outside the congregation to determine clear boundaries and to secure an end to hostilities.

The key is making an accurate assessment of which level the critical mass of the group is at, as well as the key participants, as this will determine what type of intervention is appropriate. The appropriate approach at one level can be ineffective or counter-productive when used at another level.

Know when to seek help

As leaders in the church it is important that we understand our own limitations, and recognise when we need outside help. The central need is to build-in regular mechanisms for support and review for oneself as a leader, well before a time of crisis is reached. This might include regular meetings with a spiritual director, an external supervisor (perhaps a trained counsellor) or work consultant, and/or a small group of trusted peers who are not afraid to give honest feedback. People such as these can help us become more aware of when we are getting over-stretched and when we need further help. Another key is developing a good relationship with a denominational senior leader to whom you can turn when needed. When the time of crisis comes, know who you can turn to, and do not be too proud to seek help: the capacity to do so is a sign of maturity, not of weakness.

A while back, after more than two years working together, one of my colleagues and I experienced some significant conflict between us. We both recognised that we had moved beyond our capacity to handle the situation ourselves without third party help. Fortunately, we wanted to sort things out between us. We both trusted the director of our centre, so we approached him and he was able to mediate successfully between us. We were able to continue working productively together until the end of my colleague's term later in the year, and to maintain a positive relationship following her departure. This would not have been possible if we had not sought help.

Work at creating a culture of peace

I believe that everything I have set out in this chapter is part of what Alan Kreider calls building a culture of peace. It is important to acknowledge, as he does that:

> It will not be easy, and the changes required will be numerous. They will take time – because essentially we are looking at a process of cultural change within the church. And such a change of culture can only take place over the medium- to long-term, through a range of strategies sustained over time.[23]

This chapter seeks to set out some of what is needed to develop such a culture of peace and peacemaking within the church. Leaders have a central role to play, especially when it comes to transforming the church's experience of conflict. As one executive has put it: "The work of the leader is to get conflict out into the open and to use it as a source of creativity."[24] But this is more than just about harnessing the creative energy in conflict. It is about our vision of the church. Let me draw to close with a vision of the church that I share, set out by Robert Warren:

> Despite the forces at work which seem to have marginalised the church, we stand today faced with a great new opportunity to speak the good news of Christ into our culture by the way we live that truth in the life of the local church. …The church is called to be the pilot project of the new humanity established by Christ, an outpost of the kingdom of God and the 'community of the Age to Come'. Not least is the world looking for models of handling conflict. … A church where there is no conflict has little relevance to our society. A church that has found a way to handle conflict creatively will be good news to all around it and in it. … the truth remains, that there is a longing to see relationships work, to see the truth of God's call to love being practised. Conflicts in the church can seem such a distraction from getting on with the real work; *but this is the real work*. When people come near such a community they will instinctively know how real the relationships are."[25]

If you share a similar vision for the church, then join me in seeking to transform the way the church engages with conflict and in the model that we provide as leaders, developing a new culture of peace.

---

[23] Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), pp. 91-92.
[24] Jan Carlzon quoted by Ronald A. Heifetz and Laurie D. L. The Work of Leadership in Harvard Business Review on Leadership (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1990-1998) p.182.
[25] Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), pp. 15-17