

## **When Conflict Comes To Your Church\***

*And It Will!*

By Don Kimbro

I was excited when my wife and I returned from a week-long vacation at a beautiful retreat center in the Colorado mountains. So I called my friend Harmon, who was also an elder in the church that I pastored, to let him know that I was back and what a wonderful time we had. The weather had been perfect, the food outstanding and the accommodations were wonderful. The grounds were so beautiful and well-cared for that we felt like we were in the garden of Eden. It was an idyllic physical and spiritual setting and I knew that I had really gotten in touch with God that week. I was feeling relaxed, secure, and confident about the future. I was stress-free for the first time in months and my zeal for ministry had returned after a long dry spell.

As I was talking with Harmon, I could tell that he wasn't responding to my enthusiasm, which was unusual for him. Our relationship went back several years and he and his wife had always been some of our greatest supporters. I had often shared intimate concerns of my life and ministry with him — and he with me. As I hung up the phone, his parting comment troubled me. "Well, I guess only ministers can afford something like that!" I had a strong feeling that it was not said in jest. Did I detect some jealousy or was there something else going on? My new found peace was already being challenged.

The next day, as I was pulling together my sermon for Sunday, Harmon called. Officially I was still on vacation but he said he needed to see me right away and it was "very important." My mind was still halfway on vacation and halfway on my message preparation. I really wasn't in the mood for church business yet — but he insisted. It was not to be a social visit.

Harmon was at my house in fifteen minutes. He sat down at my kitchen table, spurned my offer for some ice tea and promptly announced that he was going to resign as an elder. Shocked, I asked him why. "Last Sunday, while you were gone," he said, "I had several people ask me where you were. They think you haven't been preaching enough lately and I don't either." For two Sundays in a row, including the one I was on vacation, I had let two men I had been mentoring do the preaching, in order to gain some valuable experience. They both did a fine job.

"We're paying you to preach" he continued, "and paying you very well I might add. You really get paid well for what you do — you really do," he repeated. Harmon continued, "Do those other men get paid when they preach for you?" "No, they don't," I replied. "It's part of their training and learning experience and — no they don't get paid." "But you do," Harmon retorted. "Yes, yes I do." I said.

There was an awkward silence. I could feel the tension mounting. I was under attack. The heat on the back of my neck was suddenly evident and I knew my face was becoming flushed. I felt that my integrity and my role at the church was being questioned. Do I begin to justify myself and strike back or is there a better way? I suggested that we should talk about this at a later time. I didn't want to get into a shouting match with my friend

or implicate others who may be feeling the same way. So Harmon abruptly left. I was glad but deeply disturbed — a major conflict may be just around the corner.

## **When Conflict Comes**

Conflict comes at the most unexpected moments and most of us are not adequately prepared to handle it. Yet unless you deal with it quickly, openly and honestly, your church may be in for a long, hot summer or a cold bleak winter!

## **What Do People Fight About In The Church?**

What do people in the church fight over the most? Everything! It can be over worship style, sermon content, doctrinal positions, Scripture interpretation, children, evangelism, a building program, the youth ministry, the color of the carpet, the pastor's pay, the pastor's vacation, the pastor's kids, the deacon board, the elders, women's role in the church, etc. In most churches, hostility is not limited to just members and leadership — it also involves members and members. People who have been friends for years, suddenly become enemies — often over the most trivial issues. Most conflicts don't end when there is a change in leadership — they're just put on hold!

In my case with Harmon, he and some others perceived that I was not doing my job if I didn't preach on Sundays. In my mind, preaching was an important part of my job — but training, discipling and raising up others to preach and teach were equally as important.

## **MANAGING CONFLICT**

Conflict is a fact of life. The challenge is not how to avoid conflict but to determine the best way to manage conflict and make it a positive experience for everyone involved. Douglas Lewis, in his book *Resolving Church Conflict*, puts it this way, "The choice is not whether we will experience conflict or not, but whether when it comes, will it be managed constructively or destructively? The most effective organizations are the ones that develop processes for managing conflict."<sup>1</sup> Churches are made up of individuals, and when we find that our goals, dreams and future are being threatened by an action that we don't agree with, we are likely to respond. Conflict can be a negative, nasty and painful experience when it comes, especially in the church — because we're supposed to know better. Managed well, however, it can be a decisive, relationship-building and creative experience that can move a church in a new direction that will set a positive example and produce even stronger commitments in the body of Christ. The challenge we face in every church conflict is how will we respond, handle and manage a problem area in such a way that will produce positive results and glorify God. It can be done.

Terry Wise, in his manual *Conflict In The Church — Practical Help For Understanding And Dealing With Conflict*, suggests these positive steps to conflict resolution in your church.<sup>2</sup> Here's how they helped me manage the conflict with Harmon in our church.

### **Admit That You Have A Problem**

Often churches will deny that a problem exists, hoping that the symptoms will go away. They seldom do. Sometimes churches will attempt to spiritualize and minimize the problem — by insisting that there are greater areas of concern in the church, like winning souls. However, Jesus made loving one another a high priority in the church (Jn. 13:34-35). Trying to fix individual blame is another way of avoiding the depth of the struggle but the problem usually is much more serious than the actions of one individual. None of these approaches will resolve the conflict — they will just make it worse. The first step is to recognize that a conflict exists and that it won't get any better unless you deal with it scripturally, constructively, decisively — and quickly. In our case, I

couldn't pretend the problem didn't exist. When I saw Harmon at our next Sunday's service, I told him that I realized this conflict was significant between us and I wanted to somehow work through it with him to resolve it.

### **Identify and Clarify the Issues**

Communication is essential for problem solving. Help the parties understand and see each other's viewpoint. Encourage dialogue on whatever basis the emotional level can support. Immediately after a heated board meeting is probably not the time for further remarks — but over coffee the next morning or in a few days may be. After the initial encounter with Harmon, I waited through the weekend, then called him to set up a lunch meeting. He appeared cordial and I was relieved. We agreed to meet the next day.

It's good to put together as much useful and accurate information as possible so that the facts (not the feelings) can be well presented on both sides. Use God's Word and prayer as a resource to bring people together and not as a tool or weapon to divide. Attack the problem and not the people involved. After our initial lunch, Harmon and I agreed to meet with others who shared his concerns, at a purposely neutral site — the private dining room of one of our favorite restaurants. We gave everyone an opportunity to give input and explain their perspective. There's something about the "breaking of bread" together, that soothes the human soul. It was an encouraging evening and most of us went away with a new resolve to be patient with one another, forgive and break new ground toward reconciliation and understanding. Harmon and I, however, realized that there was still some work to be done in our and relationship and understanding.

### **Seek Help From A Third Party If The Two Sides Won't Come Together**

Business firms hire outside consultants all the time. No one is so qualified or so gifted as to know how to handle every situation that may develop, especially one as emotional as a church conflict. Sometimes a pastor from another church in the area or denominational board can be a big help. Christian organizations that specialize in conflict are now available to the church in increasing numbers because it has become a major issue. A small investment could reap huge dividends if it means holding your church together. Just as churches would be unwise to begin a building program without consulting people who are in the business of building churches, seeking specialized help in restoring relationships within the body of Christ can also be appropriate and profitable. God's word encourages us to seek advice and counsel (Prov. 11:14; 15:22).

When is an outside call for help in order? When the conflict is drawn out and complex or time is short and the conflict is urgent. Sometimes the major parties in the conflict may be deadlocked in their differences. There is a need for someone to help them move off center. A neutral, qualified person can help both sides work through the issues and help them come to a solution before serious and lasting damage is done to the church community. A church may have to swallow its pride and invest a few dollars but the benefits can be long lasting if a church split is averted and peace is restored. Consider the alternative.

In our case, Harmon and I agreed to call on a mutual pastor friend of ours who had been instrumental in both of our lives. He had been my mentor in the early years of my ministry and Harmon's pastor for several years, as well. He was deeply respected by both of us. It took only two conference calls to get us back on track and we both learned a few things that we needed to change — mostly about ourselves. I realized that I had become so task oriented in my job that individual relationships with people were suffering. Harmon was one of those. I was sacrificing time with those who loved, supported and encouraged me for my desire to "do a good job." Harmon, on the other hand, was reminded that as a friend of mine and a church leader, it was O.K. to be "my brother's keeper," in my behalf. I needed him to watch for signs in my ministry when I could use a break, a pat on the back or a word of encouragement and support.

### **Empowerment**

People are almost always the cause of conflict in the church. They are also the solution. Extensive effort should be made to work with the key players on an individual basis with the goal of reducing tension and building trust. Encourage participation at all levels and on all sides of an issue. Conflict is painful. Be sensitive to the feelings and emotions of an issue but don't let them guide the course of resolution. The goal is to restore, establish and strengthen each other so that the suffering will end and healing can begin (1 Ptr. 5:10).

I realized that I had taken on too much responsibility and decision making for the success of our church and in the process I was leaving others out who had an equal interest. I resolved to seek out Harmon and others at every opportunity for advice and counsel in critical issues.

### **Resolve To Work Together Toward A Solution**

Two men were overheard arguing about Scripture. One said to the other, "Well, either I'm right and you're wrong, or you're right and I'm wrong." They didn't realize that they both could be wrong! That's the way it is in conflict. Both parties are never totally right — or totally wrong. They're both at fault but reconciliation is more important than being right or wrong. Help them seek other alternatives and options. There is more than one way to do things. Help each party focus on the positive interests they have enjoyed together in the church.

Above all else, seek the Lord together. It's not easy to do that, especially when both sides feel like God is on their side. But God is on both sides and wants His children to live in the peace "which transcends all understanding" (Phil. 4:7).

Harmon and I, along with the other men who had shared his concerns, agreed to pray together on a weekly basis for a season. We had prayed together before, but it was usually about third party issues, people in the church, finances, ministries, etc. Now we began to pray specifically about any differences we had, avoiding preaching while we prayed. It deeply softened our hearts toward one another. In a few months we all felt strengthened and were ready to move on. There was a "clearing of the air" and God's peace was obvious once again.

### **The End Of The Matter**

As Harmon and I, and others who were involved, worked through that conflict, the church became stronger — so did our friendships. Today, Harmon in particular is one of my very best encouragers and supporters. We often laugh when we think of that encounter together. We also cry a little bit, too, when we think of what could have happened to a friendship and a church had we not followed some sound principles, while making a genuine effort to resolve a difficult situation. Perhaps author Dorothy Sayers said it best, "Trouble shared is trouble halved." I think Harmon and I as well as our church, learned that well through conflict that produced positive results and brought glory to God.

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Lewis. *Resolving Church Conflict*. Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1981. pg.11.

<sup>2</sup> Terry S. Wise. *Conflict In The Church*. Avalon Press, Newburgh, IN. pg. 24.

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