

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: 3

How to Prevent and Resolve Congregational Conflict

Why are we gifting you this volume? Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to www.TheParishPaper.com for subscription information.

Purpose of this Volume: Provides (1) in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures by which laypersons, clergy, and staff can minimize the damage that sharp differences of opinion and a few “bent” personalities inflict on congregational effectiveness; and (2) a study-discussion process that helps people shift from the purely reactionary role of putting out conflict fires to a more proactive role of fire prevention.

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How to Use This Resource

As in all types of human families, congregations experience occasional conflict. In this “normal conflict,” most of the parties involved quickly recover from their emotional stress, and the congregation as a whole begins to view the conflict as irrelevant, past history. This does *not* mean that conflict prevention and resolution skills of governing board members, committee members, clergy, and staff are unimportant. The greater those skills among key leaders, the fewer normal conflicts and the faster those conflicts evaporate into irrelevancy.

But what if the congregation experiences “abnormal, unresolved conflict” such as one of the following?

- Repetitive conflict over several years, due to warring factions that vie for control
- Heated community conflict that began in a local school board fight, bled into a small-town congregation, and estranged many of its most active members
- Clergy-versus-people conflict with the last pastor, which left unhealed the feelings and resentments among several members on both sides of the issue

If one of those three circumstances or something similar exists, the strengthening of conflict prevention and resolution skills becomes *acutely* important.

When congregations experience “abnormal, unresolved conflict,” the members no longer feel like family. Thus, they experience difficulty in making decisions, accomplishing ministries, and planning for the future. Moving beyond those non-family feelings typically requires new insights and new action-habits among the laypersons who serve in governing board and committee roles—*not just greater clergy and staff skill.*

In abnormal conflicts, the congregation’s hope that getting a new pastor will “fix the problem” is seldom realized. The underlying, and often unrecognized, cause of the congregation’s conflict pattern remains. Nine months into the new pastor’s tenure, the systemic conflict reappears in a new form.

In those situations, the study-discussion options outlined below offer a middle road between (a) doing nothing and continuing to experience conflict damage and (b) spending \$10,000 or more to secure the services of a professional conflict management specialist.

In congregations with “normal” conflict, the study-discussion options outlined below can reduce the frequency and duration of conflicts by (a) providing principles and procedures by which laypersons, clergy, and staff can minimize the damage that sharp differences of opinion and a few “bent” personalities inflict on congregational effectiveness and (b) providing a study-discussion process that helps church leaders shift from the purely reactionary role of putting out conflict fires to a more proactive role of fire prevention.

Biblical Basis for a Study-Discussion Process

“Where there is no vision, the people perish . . .” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). “Without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22). “The ear of the wise seeks knowledge” (Proverbs 18:15). “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

Five Study-Discussion Process Options

Members of congregations can use this volume in one or more of several ways. Ask five key leaders in your congregation to read the diagnostic list titled “Are We in One of the Five Classic Conflict Levels?” on pages 27-28. Ask those laypersons to decide whether any of those levels apply to your congregation. If not, or you may merely want to use this *Nuggets Volume* as an educational and training tool.

After your leaders complete the evaluation using the instructions in the previous paragraph, examine the following options and decide which one or more of them seem to fit your church's needs.

Option #1. Individual study by laypersons, clergy, and staff.

Option #2. A thirty-minute study-discussion session at the beginning of six to twelve weekly staff meetings, led by the senior pastor. Use the following plan:

During the week prior to the first study-discussion session, create three-hole notebooks that contain a copy of this *Nuggets Volume* and distribute them to each staff member. Due to time constraints and the value of "spaced learning," some staff groups use one-half of each of the six sessions and thereby spread the study-discussion process across twelve weeks.

This is *not* group therapy, but it is more than a mere academic experience:

- Ask each staff member to state what she or he hopes to gain from this study.
- Agree on some parameters for the discussion, such as "honest expression of feelings, but no personal attacks or criticisms of other staff members."

This study-discussion process assumes that (a) the senior pastor has some training and skill in the basics of group process, (b) staff members realize that at a few points the discussions may surface matters that could be painful or contentious, and (c) every staff member enters the group discussions with an honest desire for insight and the willingness to talk through such issues.

Staff Member Preparation. Prepare for each study-discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Senior Pastor Guidelines. Begin with a section of the material in Session #1. Give staff members the opportunity to respond to question #1 above in relation to that section.

Then, give staff members a chance to respond to question #2.

Then repeat the process with questions #3 and with question #4.

Study the Appendix material titled "Unusual Behaviors in Groups," which may in some instances prove helpful in guiding the discussions in positive ways.

Option #3. A thirty-minute study-discussion session at the beginning of six consecutive governing board meetings. Use the following plan:

Select a discussion leader, preferably someone other than the pastor or the governing board chairperson. Select someone who can effectively involve people in a discussion, not an overly dominant personality who tends to force-feed people his or her ideas.

During the week prior to the first study-discussion session, create three-hole notebooks that contain a copy of this *Nuggets Volume* and distribute them to each governing board member.

Governing Board Member Preparation. Read the designated study-discussion session and make notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. Begin with a section of the material in Session #1. Give people the opportunity to respond to question #1 above in relation to that section.

Then, give people a chance to respond to question #2.

Then repeat the process with questions #3 and with question #4.

Study the Appendix material titled “Unusual Behaviors in Groups,” which may in some instances prove helpful in guiding the discussions in positive ways.

Option #4. Three study-discussion sessions—two hours for each session—for all governing-board members, committee members, clergy, and staff. Use the instructions outlined above. Secure a discussion leader from outside the congregation.

Outside leader possibilities: a regional denominational staff member, a district superintendent, a professional with conflict-resolution skills, a private-practice counselor, a psychologist, or a professional hospital chaplain with an advanced degree in clinical pastoral care.

In each of these three sessions, cover two sections of the six sessions in the *Nuggets Volume*.

Option #5. Six study-discussion sessions for a governing-board-appointed special task force that acts on its behalf. Sometimes called the CPR Team (Conflict Prevention and Resolution Team), as with Option #4 above, someone from outside the congregation leads the CPR Team.

Outside leader possibilities: a regional denominational staff member, a district superintendent, a professional with conflict-resolution skills, a private-practice counselor, a psychologist, or a professional hospital chaplain with an advanced degree in clinical pastoral care.

In each of these six sessions, cover one section of this *Nuggets Volume*.

Meticulously implementing the steps outlined below are the primary determinants of the CPR Team’s effectiveness.

Step #1. The governing board appoints a special task force that acts on its behalf, comprised of six respected laypersons and the pastor. A good selection formula for this special task force, which some congregations call the CPR Team (Conflict Prevention and Resolution Team): two people above age forty, two people under age forty, two adults who became members within the last three years, and the senior pastor. If the congregation’s conflict involves two opposing factions, appoint one person who can effectively represent each of those two viewpoints to serve on the CPR Team. The other four CPR Team members should *not* be closely aligned with either faction.

Procedural Warnings:

- Avoid the temptation to allow one individual, such as the pastor or governing board chairperson, to appoint the members of the CPR Team. Rather, the governing board, at one of its meetings, must ratify the team-member names. This insures that the team’s “official” approval and status nullifies criticisms such as “who appointed them anyway!” or “I don’t think they have the authority to do that!”
- Avoid the temptation to make the CPR Team larger than six people plus the pastor. Research indicates that any kind of group, regardless of the excellence of its individuals, reduces the likelihood of thinking outside the box of recent history, reduces its insight-generating ability, reduces its creativity, and reduces its planning ability when it moves beyond five-to-seven members.
- Avoid the temptation to appoint a husband and wife to the CPR Team for reasons such as convenience in attending meetings. By reducing the number of viewpoints, you reduce the creativity.

Step #2. The governing board approves an outside leader to guide the CPR Team’s six sessions (including the fees and travel expenses for that individual).

Outside leader possibilities: a regional denominational staff member, a district superintendent, a professional with conflict-resolution skills, a private-practice counselor, a psychologist, or a professional hospital chaplain with an advanced degree in clinical pastoral care.

In each of these six sessions, cover one section of this *Nuggets Volume*.

Step #3. The Conflict Prevention and Resolution Team (CPR Team) begins its ministry with six, two-hour discussions of this *Nuggets Volume* during six consecutive weeks. Prior to the first session, create three-hole notebooks and distribute them to CPR Team members. Ask Team members to commit themselves to reading the material in preparation for the six discussions.

CPR Team Member Preparation. Read the designated section and make notes in the margins, especially with regard to questions such as the following:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. Begin with a section of the material in Session #1. Give people the opportunity to respond to question #1 above in relation to that section.

Then, give people a chance to respond to question #2.

Then repeat the process with questions #3 and with question #4.

Study the Appendix material titled “Unusual Behaviors in Groups,” which may in some instances prove helpful in guiding the discussions in positive ways.

Step #4. Make prayer a high-priority part of this process. At the close of each session, ask team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

At the beginning of the multiple study-discussion sessions, ask all CPR Team members to commit to daily use of the prayer card titled *The Secret to Abundant Living: Learning How to Ask*—downloaded free of charge from the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site.

During worship the week prior to the first CPR Team session, reproduce the downloaded card and use the instructions to ask all church members to commit to daily use of the prayer card.

Step #5. The governing board leads the congregation’s committees and ministries in implementing organizational or policy changes recommended by the CPR Team at the conclusion of its six weeks of study-discussion sessions.

Option #6: Congregations that either (a) used one or more of the five options above without achieving all that they had hoped for or (b) feel that none of those options is likely to address their need. Secure an outside leader in one of these ways:

1. Ask the appropriate denominational structure to recommend a conflict specialist.
2. Secure a conflict consultant through the Alban Institute, Inc. (www.alban.org).
3. Secure a professional conflict specialist from another reputable source.

Study-Discussion Session #1

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

I. Conflict Does Not Mean Church Leaders Failed

Most pastors, especially in early months of a pastorate, assume that their exceptional leadership skill will prevent conflict. This delusion leads to unnecessary emotional pain and guilt feelings. Any time two or more people work together on something of mutual interest, as in a marriage, conflict happens.

During its early years of rapid expansion across Asia Minor, the church experienced many conflicts. That history teaches at least four lessons:

First: conflict is normal. Most of the New Testament books were written to address conflicts in congregations. Paul and Peter, two of the church's most capable leaders, conflicted sharply at the Jerusalem Council: "There arose a sharp disagreement" (Acts 15). During this conflict, Paul and Barnabas stood together, but after settling it they disagreed so strongly that they parted company.

Second: conflict does not mean we are un-Christian. Did these first apostles and missionaries disagree because they were not spiritual enough? No. As committed Christians often do, they disagreed about goals and methods.

Third: conflict often produces positive results. Without the conflict at the Jerusalem Council, Christianity might have remained a tiny Jewish sect that never made it to Spain and America.

Fourth: conflict often builds stronger relationships. Some authorities believe that genuine harmony is rooted in conflict. Because people with positive relationships have successfully resolved previous conflicts, they can disagree and argue without rancor. With each "controlled conflict," their relationships "become stronger and stronger, much as steel becomes stronger in the refining fires of a furnace." (Kenneth H. Cooper, *Can Stress Heal?* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers], pp. 195-196) Years after their Jerusalem Council controversy, Paul urged his newly established churches to take up offerings to help the beleaguered Jerusalem Church, led by Peter (1 Corinthians 9:1-5).

II. Why is Handling Conflict Such a Leadership Challenge?

According to an old adage, a good leader knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. Why, then, do people who do that in other aspects of church life find it so difficult in this one?

First: we feel uncomfortable with conflict.

- Some of that discomfort comes from the fear that conflict is un-Christian.
- Some of that discomfort is rooted in painful childhood conflict with parents, causing us to feel great anxiety with adult conflict.
- Some of that discomfort is attitudinal: many people view every conflict as a disaster instead of an opportunity.
- Some of that discomfort is circumstantial.
 - In small churches where members are like family, people often avoid expressing their opinions during meetings.
 - They fear hurt feelings and relationship tiffs. In small towns and agriculture-based communities, people are especially fearful that conflict might make a forty-year enemy.

Second: we have low skill levels in conflict resolution. Most of us react to conflict in one of three ways.

1. We express anger.
2. We try to placate.
3. Or we withdraw.

None of these behaviors is an effective conflict-prevention or resolution procedure.

Third: we expect conflict resolution to be an event instead of a process. Most disagreements are resolved when we stay in relationship with people and learn a new set of skills in dealing with them. That seldom happens instantly.

III. Symptoms of Conflict that “Goes Ballistic”

How do we distinguish between normal conflict and conflict that requires unusual intervention?

A church that experiences one of the following symptoms is dealing with “ballistic missile” conflict that requires overt action by the pastor, governing board leaders, regional denominational staff, an outside conflict expert, or all of the above:

- ***Worship attendance drops 20 percent or more compared to the same months last year.*** Has a local company at which many members work relocated and taken the workers to a new community? Except for circumstances of that sort, a 20 percent attendance downtrend in the primary worship service(s) usually represents only the visible part of a much bigger iceberg.
- ***Financial contributions drop 20 percent or more compared to the same months last year.*** Contrary to the assumption of many members, this decrease *never* happens because 90 percent of the attendees have reduced their giving. Research by the financial secretary inevitably reveals that three-to-five substantial givers in a small church and six-to-ten givers in a large church are withholding their contributions or giving to the building fund rather than to the operating fund.

- **Membership transfers to other local churches exceed by 20 percent those in the same months last year.** A few such transfers happen in every church every year. No congregation can meet the spiritual needs of every person in the community. The bigger the church and the faster its membership grows, the more people jump ship each month. When transfer numbers become extraordinary compared to last year, something unusual is causing that exodus.

If none of the above is happening to your church, rejoice. Your conflict is a normal aspect of all organizational and interpersonal relationships.

To keep your congregation's conflict within those boundaries—or to return it to within those boundaries—study the following sections.

IV. Causes of Ballistic Conflict

Church leaders who attempt to identify the “why” behind a ballistic conflict should assume the presence of multiple causes. These are usually so intertwined with one another that they may not, at first, be seen as major contributors.

A. Facts. Is homosexuality a physiologically based trait or a learned behavior that people choose? Peace is shredded in many denominations because people disagree about which of those opinions is a fact.

B. Values. Harry thinks tolerance is more important than high standards for people who hold church offices. Joan values high standards for church leaders; she sees anything less as a compromise that destroys a congregation's witness-effectiveness.

C. Methods. Frank wants to spend \$100,000 of the principal in the church's unrestricted endowment for a new Christian Life Center. George wants to spend only the endowment's interest, keeping the principal for a rainy day. Frank says it is raining. George says it may rain much harder later. Both believe in being good stewards of the Lord's money. The issue becomes which method to use.

D. Goals. Susan wants her congregation to make evangelistic outreach its major goal. Other people are equally adamant about community service. From a biblical perspective, those two goals should coexist (see Jesus' Great Commandment and Great Commission). Yet people sometimes disagree so much about priorities that they would rather fight than compromise.

E. Beliefs. One denomination believes that miraculous healing and gifts of the Spirit such as speaking in tongues during a worship service are not limited to New Testament days; they also happen now. What if people from that denomination join a church whose leaders do not believe that? A “belief fight” sometimes ensues.

F. Members' psychological traits. The locus of the conflict is inside one or a few members' psyches.

- **Some people fight because they lack the emotional ability or the willingness to say two healing words:** “I'm sorry.”
- **Some people fight because of their immature personalities.** Arrested personality development causes them to act like children. They have not learned how to let go of personal grudges. That limitation prevents frank, open, honest discussions. Thus, they

are unwilling to work out their differences. One or two such individuals, especially if they are church officials, can keep a congregation in turmoil.

- ***Some people fight because they need a great deal of personal recognition.*** This often stems from low self-esteem or an overweight ego. The perpetrators of such fights usually claim that they are based on substantive religious convictions, but the real culprit is insufficient attention from the pastor or lay leaders.
- ***Some people fight because they want others to view them as the resident expert in some aspect of church life.*** When their views do not take the day, a fight ensues over failure to recognize them as outstanding authorities.
- ***Some people fight to attain or retain power and control.*** People with dominating personalities often vocalize their discontents over minor issues. When that happens repeatedly with the same person, the specific expressed issue is probably not the real issue; exerting power and control is the issue. When two lay leaders, or one lay leader and the pastor, have that personality bent, expect fights.
- ***Some people fight because they have innately angry personalities.*** Viewing their behavior as righteous indignation, most such people fail to recognize how negatively they impact the congregation's atmosphere. One such person, especially in a small congregation, can keep the fires of conflict burning bright with virtually no kindling except their own personality.
- ***Some people fight because they unconsciously practice "transference."*** Unknowingly, they transfer hostile emotions from significant relationships in their *past*—sometimes from childhood authority figures and sometimes from previous pastors—to the current pastor or to other laypersons in authority roles. In counseling situations, a therapist can point out transference behavior to the patient and use it in the healing process. However, such extremes of either hostility or affection, because its carrier is sure that his or her feelings are based on an accurate assessment of *current* reality, are difficult to deal with in church interactions.
- ***Some people fight because they unconsciously practice "projection."*** They attribute their own problems, behaviors, or feelings to another person in the church. This often leads to scapegoat selection, a psychological process by which the projecting individual escapes responsibility for his or her own feelings by blaming someone else.
- ***Some people fight because they do not accurately report reality when they describe what people around them say and do.*** They constantly convey misleading information regarding the actions or motives of other church members. The adversaries of such individuals (which such people tend to create large numbers of) usually call them liars. Sometimes that is true. Sometimes, however, they just have faulty reality-assessment ability and/or bad memories.
- ***Some people fight because they over-function.*** These individuals are often perfectionists who try to do everything "right," and they become uneasy when others do not follow their definition of "right." They often overestimate the seriousness of what, to other people, look like minor matters. Such people are easily hurt, quick to

complain about someone taking advantage of them, and are prone to act and feel like martyrs.

- ***Some people fight because they lack social competence.*** Dysfunctional social skills can seem harmless in rank-and-file members, but in key leaders often stack up into problems. Examples: constantly talking about ones self, expressing rude curiosity in conversations, jumping across others' personal boundaries with tone of voice or body movements, "keeping on keeping on" when everyone else wants to stop talking about this topic, or not seeing the turn signal when someone shifts a conversation's direction. Some psychologists believe social incompetence is an emotional learning disability, often visible early in childhood. (Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* [New York: Bantam], pp. 120ff, 251-255)

- ***Some people fight because they cannot resist "labeling" people pejoratively who disagree with their viewpoints.*** We/they language comes easily to such people. Their enemy list gets long quickly, and they feel quite justified in building it. The late Henri Nouwen advised in a conversation at a retreat, "Do not even in your heart figure out, 'He's just a jerk.' Try to avoid that. As soon as you start dividing your parishioners into jerks and non-jerks, you're lost, because community is primarily an interior thing." (Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks* [Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute], p. 14)

- ***Some people fight because they are overly critical of other people.*** When several such people get into leadership roles, a congregation can develop a "black and white syndrome" whose characteristics are as follows:
 - Conflict occurs repeatedly concerning tiny issues that seem silly to the uninvolved observer, such as where to store the cups in the church kitchen.
 - Creativity is punished.
 - Members withdraw from responsibilities, burned by petty criticism.
 - Many creative leader-types turn their attention to community organizations where they can gain a sense of accomplishment while working in a more positive climate.
 - New pastors and new members occasionally attempt to change this black and white pattern. Their efforts are thwarted by the conversational acid-rain that encourages them to seek a better climate elsewhere.
 - Short pastorates become the norm.
 - Rank-and-file members feel more and more bored with the spiritually stagnated environment.
 - Members who stick retain acceptance by working hard to meet the rigid standards of "black and white syndrome" leaders.
 - The church gradually (a) takes on more and more of a "good works" theological posture, (b) develops the emotional atmosphere of a military unit commanded by a rigid drill sergeant, and (c) loses the loving family orientation of healthy congregations.

- ***Some people fight because they habitually “triangle” with one or more people of perceived power to gain leverage of some sort.*** They substitute this habit for conversations with the person with whom they disagree. As a result, both begin to talk about each other instead of with each other. Instead of working things out, one or both parties begin to play “uproar.” Examples:
 - The thirty-year church secretary triangles with her father and son (who are on the governing board) against Karen, the new senior pastor.
 - In another church the choir director triangles with the adult choir to resist changes the new pastor requests.
 - Another pastor grasps for leverage as he triangles with the board chairperson. This pastor hopes that enlisting this ally will enable him to resist making the changes in his leadership style that the personnel committee strongly recommends.
 - An associate pastor tries to build an alliance with several influential board members to help handle anxieties that the senior pastor precipitates with his firm request for changes in the associate pastor’s behavior and ministry focus.
 - A church bully tries to triangle with other board members against every proposal from the pastor. Claiming to represent the thinking of many people in the congregation, the church bully is actually attempting to gain support from the other board members to block the pastor’s change efforts.

For more information about triangles and related organizational leadership issues, see Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press).

G. Pastors’ psychological traits. In an Alban Institute Study, only 6 percent to 13 percent of clergy were fired because of professional incompetence, with most of that small percentage centered on administrative issues. By contrast, almost one-half of the pastoral terminations fit the “interpersonal incompetence” category, which took two primary forms:

- Some churches wanted to get rid of a contentious, authoritarian, dictatorial pastor—the cause of 23 percent of “involuntary clergy relocations.”
- An equal number of churches (23 percent of clergy firings) wanted to get rid of a socially withdrawn, aloof, uncommunicative pastor.

Other defective psychological traits among clergy that cause church fights:

- Habitually placing blame on persons or groups
- Inability to properly delegate responsibilities and authority
- Not supporting others emotionally when disagreeing with them intellectually
- Needing emotional support and approval all the time from everybody
- Interpreting differences of opinion as a personal threat
- Denying responsibility for what he/she thinks or feels and attributing it to others
- Taking action on misinterpretations of reality
- Demonstrating inability to develop common commitments and loyalties
- Saying one thing while doing another

(Speed B. Leas, “*Should the pastor be fired?*” [Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute], p. 10-11)

H. Defective personal relationships. Sometimes the fight does not locus in the psyche of members or ministers but in fractured relationships.

- ***Some people fight because of an unresolved disagreement or misunderstanding.*** The relationship suddenly or gradually deteriorated between themselves and their pastor or another church leader. If the relationship heals, the fight stops. Often, however, the pastor tries to stop the fight by working on the subject matter. The fight goes on because the deteriorated relationship is the real issue.
- ***Some people fight because they want revenge.*** In a few instances, people become addicted to revenge. In one church, two families had periodic fights for thirty years. The subject matter was different every time, but each fight carried the same intensity. The hidden goal was not issue-resolution but revenge.
- ***Some people fight because they get advice and counsel from the former pastor.*** Thus, the *old* positive relationship blocks the formation of a *new* positive relationship. The former pastor who allows this “triangulation” to occur usually has unconscious power-and-control needs or an inordinate level of “the need to be needed.”
- ***Some staff members fight about their relationships with one another or the senior pastor.*** Retirement or relocation of the senior pastor requires adjustments that some staff members are unwilling to make. Since every staff member, regardless of how imperfect, has a few loyal supporters, such conflicts can quickly get large and blown out of proportion.

Study-Discussion Session #2

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

Continued from Session #1... IV. Causes of Ballistic Conflict

I. Organizational dysfunction. These kinds of fights do not stem from the abnormal psyche of members or pastors. Nor do they result from broken relationships. The organizational structure or the way it functions perpetuates fights. Because the problem is systemic rather than circumstantial, resolving a particular dispute is never enough. The dysfunctional system soon creates new disputes. Examples:

- ***Some churches fight because older members treat young-adult members as if they were in a parent-child relationship instead of a peer-relationship.*** When older leaders treat young-adult members like children, they often begin to behave like children. Young-adult members only become mature leaders when given the chance to assume leadership roles:
 - That inevitably involves some successes and a few mistakes from which those young leaders grow in their skills.
 - When are young-adult members' ideas more likely to be superior to that of older-adult leaders? In matters related to developing meaningful ministries with and for young adults.
 - Why do some older leaders persist in thinking they are smarter than the younger leaders? Because older leaders tend to assume that young adults either think or should think exactly like they did when they were that age. Such is rarely the case. This persistent delusion often leads to fights.
- ***Some churches fight because the organizational structure no longer fits the church's size.*** Examples: when a small church grows to midsize, or a midsize church grows to large size. When the size of any kind of group—business, social, or church—increases or decreases by 40 percent, failure to revise the governance procedures will cause many fights.

- ***Some churches fight because decision-making process and lines of authority are unclear.*** Approximately 61 percent of Americans attend a congregation of a denomination in which they did not grow up. Thus, clarity about “which leaders can decide what” is harder to maintain than in earlier decades when people seldom switched denominations.
- ***Some churches fight because printed and oral communications are foggy or insufficient.*** Infrequent newsletters, especially when small churches grow larger, can produce misunderstandings. Some people, when they lack information, invent and distribute their own facts. When other people, especially *paranoid* other people, hear that imaginary information, fights follow.
- ***Some churches fight because leaders rush into changes without processing their new ideas through normal channels and scheduling several discussions scattered over weeks or months.*** The majority of people in every kind of corporation, civic organization, or congregation resist change—any kind of change. But a majority of people can also change their resistance into acceptance. If given insufficient time to process the new idea, resistance often hardens into hostility and fights.
- ***Some churches fight because the key leaders are comfortable with fighting.*** Leaders in a few congregations feel normal during a fight and abnormal otherwise. Most such leaders fail to see that such behavior is a new-member repellent and a congregation killer.
- ***Some churches fight because the leaders are uncomfortable with openly expressed differences of opinion.*** In many small congregations, members resist expressing their opinions in committee and governing-board meetings because they fear damaging their relationships with other members. Yet after the meetings people often find their feelings coming out in strong ways as they talk with friends in the parking lot or on the telephone. They delude themselves with requests such as “Please don’t tell anyone I said that.” Such confidences are rarely kept.
- ***Some small-town churches fight because the majority of members are from two or three family trees.*** If some of the kinship relationships are negative, those feelings can spill over into and complicate church life. On the other hand, most of the kinship relationships are positive, blinding people to the limitations of their relatives’ behaviors in church leadership roles. Result:
 - People get elected to leadership roles even though they are unqualified for those positions, and they may “own” those positions for years because relatives are unwilling to hurt their feelings or risk a ruckus.
 - New community residents who join such churches are often puzzled by the way people in densely kinship-related congregations behave. Their interaction is like that of a quarrelling family which can fight bitterly, yet stay together.
- ***Some churches fight because the key leaders fail to discuss and establish priorities.*** When that pattern exists, different leadership individuals and groups ride off in different directions. Sometimes their enthusiasms move in mutually-exclusive directions. They find their priorities unable to co-exist in the same budget, the same building, or the same theological frame of reference.

J. Congregational transition adjustments. Everyone is familiar with personal transition-stress caused by death of a spouse, divorce, job loss, or other painful changes. Congregations experience similar stresses. Examples:

- ***Most pastors report approximately eighteen months of transition-stress each time the church size increases 25 percent or more.*** This stems from factors such as changes in procedures and ministry style, re-formation of and addition of new fellowship groups, and displacement of “old guard” leaders by new leaders. During this period the group adjusts to its new size and eventually arrives at a plateau of tranquility.
 - In a growing church, transition-stress follows each membership increase, but subsequent transitions are seldom as tough as the first one.
 - Transition-stress usually happens when churches jump 25 percent above the following average worship attendance levels: 40, 70, 115, 180, 290, 450, 700, 900, 1,800, 3,000, and 10,000.
- ***Conflict can also result from membership shrinkage of 25 percent or more.*** The disappearance of numerous church members through a factory closing can bring feelings of depression, fights about how to use a shrinking money supply, and conflict resulting from irrational insistence that we keep doing things the way we used to.
- ***In some churches, low self-esteem is the invisible cause of conflict.*** Examples:
 - When membership declines or a new congregation never achieves viable membership size, feelings of low self-worth can produce fights over issues that otherwise would have caused no ripples.
 - Other congregations fight because of low self-esteem that originated in one or more historic experiences. This kind of low self-esteem becomes systemic, diffuse in its symptoms, and invisible to the church’s members.
- ***Some conflicts stem from leaders attempting to change a congregation’s personality.*** Sociologists can classify congregations into several dozen personality types, each of which is defined by “who we are, what we do, and how we do things here.” Many conflicts erupt when (1) someone tries to change the church’s personality and/or (2) the congregation must change its personality in order to survive. While such church fights may manifest themselves in different ways, depending on what personality a church is moving away from and what personality it is transitioning into, the underlying cause is being “between frames.” (Penny Edgell Beck, *Congregations in Conflict* [Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press]).
 - In these scenarios, conflict results from a violation of shared expectations or a clash between two fundamentally different sets of behavior.
 - While these church fights look similar to a liberal-versus-conservative theology fight, the actual cause is the struggle to change and resist changing the church’s personality.

For a detailed analysis of the differences in several dozen congregational personalities, how they get that way, and how to change them without a fight, see Herb Miller, *Church Personality Matters!* (St. Louis: Chalice Press).

- ***Some fights stem from the pastor’s transition adjustments related to tenure in that congregation.*** The well-known “honeymoon stage,” which lasts nine months in small churches and as much as four years in large churches, is inevitably followed by a less happy stage:
 - During this period, the pastor and congregation learn much more about each other.
 - Similar to the same stage in a marriage (two-to-three years beyond the altar), this turbulent time is followed by either “liking you anyway” or a divorce court.

- ***Conflict can result from rapid changes in the congregation or the community.*** For some people, even *positive change* produces grief, and they react with irritation as they begin to accept that loss. As well-meaning leaders try to exert change, well-meaning members resist the changes:
 - After Moses rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, they experienced “transition-stress” on their way to the Promised Land. Shortly after Moses got the slaves across the Red Sea, they formed a “Back to Egypt Committee.”
 - As they wondered through the wilderness, cared for by God’s providence in amazing ways, repeatedly, “the people murmured against Moses” (Exodus 17:3, KJV).

How can you find out which of these causes contributes to conflict in your congregation? Hand copies of the above list to your governing board members at a regular meeting:

- Ask them, without discussing the list or signing their names, to check the items they think are true of our congregation right now.
- After collecting the sheets and collating the totals for each number, your governing board can appoint a task force to discuss how to strengthen your church’s mission-and-ministry effectiveness “by moving beyond our conflict.”

Study-Discussion Session #3

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

V. Twenty-six Ways to Prevent Ballistic Conflict

The following suggestions are designed to prevent normal conflict from escalating to ballistic levels.

A. Recognize that big changes often scare people. Avoid changing several things at the same time. During change, preserve as many organizational routines as possible. Consider how the change looks from the staff or lay leadership point of view. Is the change easily mistaken as a “mandate from above,” or do you give people opportunities for input before the change happens?

- As often as possible, practice collaboration in making a decision.
- The bigger the decision, the more people and groups should have the opportunity to comment on it before it is executed. Otherwise, the decision may be *executed* after it is executed—by the people it impacts who did not have a chance to give their opinions.
- Avoid overreacting to initial change-resistance. When they hear a new idea, people often make statements such as the following:
 - We tried it before.
 - It costs too much.
 - We’re too busy for that.
 - It’s too radical a change.
 - Not enough help.
 - We’ve never done it before.
 - Let’s get back to reality.
 - Why change it; it’s still working OK.
 - I don’t like the idea.
 - You’re right, but . . .
 - We’re not ready for that.
 - It isn’t in the budget.
 - Good thought, but impractical.
 - Not that again.
 - It’s impossible.
 - We’ve always done it this way.

Use the following principles to address the change-resisting protests listed above:

1. *Try not to take them personally.* Regardless of how skillfully you introduce a change, you will hear one or more of those statements.
2. *Avoid blaming the people who make those statements.* Reacting that way to a change-resistance reaction is equivalent to blaming people for being human.
3. *Expect most of the change resistance to disappear with discussion and the passage of time.* People's initial reaction to a new idea often bears little similarity to their final opinion at a later date.
4. *Ask questions to draw out feelings and opinions.* Questions and listening often allow people to argue themselves out of their original position.
5. *Ask people to identify the major differences between a proposed change and similar ideas that did not work.* At first hearing of a new idea, people tend to mentally classify it as similar to something else. That initial thought-leap often blocks them from understanding the new idea's true nature.
6. *Put influential individuals who are likely to resist a change on a task force to study its feasibility.* Do not, however, appoint that person chair of the committee.
7. *Pay more personal attention to people who put up oral barriers to change.* Often, resisting change is a way of getting noticed.
8. *Let other people in the governing board, committee, or group provide answers to change-resisting objections.* Internal psychological reasons cause some people to resist changes that authority figures suggest. These individuals may not resist changes that peers support.
9. *Give the idea time to marinate.* Avoid rushing something to a vote the first time you bring it up. Say, "Let's think about it and discuss it some more at the next meeting."
10. *Avoid underestimating the resistance to change.* The fact that the new idea personally benefits members of the group will not protect it from irrational responses. Expect "zoo behavior" from several people initially, and from a few people permanently.

B. Reject malignant resolution procedures. Examples:

- *Avoidance:* The leader ignores or runs away from the conflict to avoid elevated anxiety levels. Avoidance does not resolve conflict; it perpetuates conflict.
- *Ultimatums:* Although designed to control conflict through intimidation, ultimatums more often drive it underground.
- *Labeling conflict as sinful:* This habit often leads to branding an opposing opinion as "a spiritual problem." Such labeling makes people feel rejected and/or angry.

- *Political maneuvers*: These ploys take many forms, such as premature votes at special called business meetings, parliamentary tactics, and recruiting inactive members to attend and vote at congregational meetings.
- *Socially isolating the opposition*: Why do some pastors make condescending, cutting remarks in casual conversation or deliver pulpit put-downs of people with different opinions? Both behaviors are clandestine confrontation methods designed to isolate the opposition. The pastor who forms an exclusive social group to provide emotional support gets the same result. People feel excluded and hurt. Objectivity dims. The walls between “we” and “they” factions get higher.
- *Acquiescing to broken behavior*: A pastoral psychologist warns: “Religious systems attract dysfunctional persons.” (Conrad W. Weiser, *Healers—Harmed and Harmful* [Minneapolis: Fortress], pp. 2, 10) Caring for sick souls is the church’s business. However, welcoming and including difficult people does not mean that we should allow their agenda to direct the congregation’s mission and ministry:
 - Most churches, like families, contain some odd types whose behavior appears nonsensical to outsiders.
 - The new pastor should avoid overreacting to a situation, and/or misreading it as more serious than the congregation sees it.
 - Yet the congregation’s lay and staff leaders must also avoid letting broken people control its agenda.

C. Improve your ability to listen to angry people. Pressure cookers and hot issues cool when steam has an opportunity to vent. A psychologist gives this list of suggestions:

1. Actively listen by using responsive listening techniques.
2. Give a statement of regret.
3. Give an empathy statement (I can understand why ...).
4. Look for areas of agreement.
5. Ask open-ended questions (Tell me more about ...).
6. Offer suggestions (and see how they respond).
7. Thank them.
8. Follow up.

Every angry situation contains two ingredients: content and feeling. You must deal with both. Try to sort out how much of which is affecting the person and his or her story. (Walt Lacy, “Dealing with Angry & Aggressive People,” *How to Handle Conflict, Criticism, and Difficult People in the Church* [Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute], audio tape #6)

D. Increase your triangle management skill. Triangles are normal. People use them to help handle their anxiety. Try to reduce your own tendencies to triangle:

- Avoid the habit of talking about people instead of talking with them to resolve disagreements.
- Avoid the temptation to get a short-term emotional charge by sympathetically listening to triangle conversations but failing to say something that encourages people to work out their relationship problems with the other person. Ask, “What keeps you from talking to John about this problem?” or say, “Let’s put this on the agenda for the next meeting and let the committee work it out.”
- When you discover that you are in an ongoing triangle, exit. Maintain friendly contact with both parties, but stop participating in the drama.

E. Practice the power of prayer. Begin or end all meetings, even office meetings between two staff members, with prayer.

- Begin every board and committee meeting with a five-minute exercise in which people cluster into groups of three or four and share something of what is happening in their lives.
- Ask people in these clusters to pray for one another, each day, by name, and to pray for their pastor, the church's ministries, and for specific insights on key issues.
- At the beginning of the next committee or board meeting, reshuffle people so that no one is in a cluster with someone from the previous month's group. Repeat this process forever.

F. Celebrate differences of opinion as opportunities to “know the mind of Christ.” Repeatedly stress the idea that people in healthy congregations openly pool all of their opinions *during the meetings*. Stress that a majority opinion is more likely to be the “mind of Christ” than any one individual opinion by itself.

G. Encourage chairpersons to keep disagreements on the table. Some church leaders fear discussing something in a meeting. They think it might evidence disunity or damage feelings. However, few burning issues are extinguished by refusing to discuss them openly.

A better approach:

- “Let’s get all of the opinions on the table so we can think about this issue as intelligently as possible,” a board chairperson said. “We can’t resolve something we don’t have enough information about.”
- Then she waited, listened responsively, and kept repeating her plea for all opinions to be heard.
- Her sensitivity allowed resolution of an issue that in another congregation became a ten-year fight.

H. Publish a chart of the church’s decision-making structure each year. One-third to two-thirds of your church’s members did not grow up in your denomination. More faith-family immigrants arrive every year. Do perpetual education about your organizational structure.

I. Quickly and openly report governing-board and committee decisions. Stack in the foyer the following Sunday morning copies of the governing-board minutes:

- Note in the worship bulletin that these are available to anyone who wishes to pick up a copy.
- Few people, after they read one or two months of minutes, retain a keen interest in this information.
- However, this “open posture” toward communicating decisions reduces the grapevine’s tendency to manufacture erroneous information that generates conflict.

J. Fully disclose church finances. One congregation’s treasurer was afraid that pastors would overspend. She hid 10 percent of each month’s offerings in a secret bank account.

- Over time, other officers learned of the “rainy day account.”
- Eventually, the church grapevine said, “the church board cannot be trusted to tell the truth.”
- As well as being illegal—due to IRS nonprofit tax laws—such “creative accounting” generates mistrust and fights.

K. Make sure your church’s organizational structure fits its membership size and this decade in history. Appropriate organizational structures enlarge the number of people involved in a church’s ministries, reduce conflict, and increase democratic decision-making. Observations:

- Dysfunctional structures often go unrecognized by church leaders because their defects have become invisible due to years of “we have always done it this way.”
- Regional denominational leaders can often give helpful guidance in such matters.

L. Ask nominating committees to strive for “balance.” Suggest the following:

- Make sure that one-third of each church committee consists of people who have joined your congregation during the past five years. This ensures a continuous flow of new ideas.
- Scrupulously apply three-year term limits to protect people from burnout and to avoid the appearance that “a few people make all the decisions around here.”
- Appoint as many people as possible from the twenty-five-to-forty age group.

M. During periods of significant membership growth, avoid talking a great deal about that growth. This tends to increase anxiety-levels among long-term members, some of whom may feel that “the pastor doesn’t care about the older members anymore, just the new ones.” To some of those older members, this feels like rejection rather than a cause for celebrating.

N. Use permission-giving bylaws. One church’s bylaws are forty-four pages long. Written on a military-manual, government-rules model following World War II, these bylaws attempt to list every potential danger and prevent church leaders from making mistakes:

- That kind of document encourages power-needy, veto-hungry board members to become expert change-blockers.
- The result: numerous fights between legalists trying to preserve the past and change agents trying to invent the future.
- Newer model bylaws are “permission-giving” rather than “permission-withholding” documents, built on the assumption that board members are trustworthy rather than stupid.
- Many such bylaws run fewer than five pages—covering the basics of purpose, board size and election methods, quorum, and personnel hiring and termination procedures.
- Brief bylaws usually mean fewer fights.

Study-Discussion Session #4

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

Continued from Session #3...

V. Twenty-Six Ways to Prevent Ballistic Conflict

O. Encourage critics to speak for themselves. How should a board member respond when someone complains about the pastor, a staff member, or a church leader but says, “Please don’t use my name?”

Tactfully say that it is best for him or her to communicate directly with that individual, because the problem will more likely get resolved that way. This avoids triangles and thereby shortens the disagreement. When one person in a fight remains anonymous, the fight tends to continue.

P. Ignore anonymous letters. Encourage officers and staff to disregard unsigned complaint letters. Most anonymous letters are a covert way of expressing anger, “concern,” or power-needs. Do not allow one individual the influence of an army via his/her anonymous letter. Make it known that “our church and governing-board policy is to ignore anonymous letters, as they are inappropriate ways to address important issues.”

Q. Let people who threaten to leave the church do so. Do not attempt to rescue individuals who try to exert control by such a threat, especially if they play this game repeatedly. Let them find another church home. With some people, the greatest danger is *not* that they will leave but that they will stay and continue their behavior pattern.

R. Three-to-six determined governing-board members practice positive modeling. In some churches, one or two hypercritical personalities poison the spirit of every public meeting. Altering this pattern only happens when a group of laypersons form a secret conspiracy. Each of them promises to say something positive about the person or situation under discussion *every time* a chronic critic throws an emotional hand-grenade into a conversation or a meeting. After three or four such experiences, the grenade thrower’s behavior stops. Negative people get no fun from practicing their black art when several people immediately extinguish it with positive statements.

S. Recognize that churches with two or three major conflicts during the last decade seldom change that pattern without unusual intervention. Pastors usually learn about this repetitive quarreling pattern after their arrival in a new parish. Self-care is crucial, since the congregational fight-film is likely to rerun:

- Use resources available through your denomination.
- Find an outside confidant with whom you can safely express your feelings on a regular basis.
- Pastors who depend on their spouse as sole confidant can drag both mates into depression.

Effective pastors do not cut themselves off from people on either side of the conflict. When they withdraw from contact, their behavior backfires. The person withdrawn from accuses the pastor of coldness and lack of caring. “Differentiation” means that the leader retains his or her own view and perspective while staying in touch with all conflicting parties in a caring way.

If possible, during an interim ministry or the early months of a new pastor’s tenure, ask the governing board to appoint a task force to engage in a several-month study-discussion process. The objectives:

1. To raise consciousness regarding how and why conflict patterns keep recurring.
2. To recommend several antidotes (using ideas from this material).

T. Insist that the senior pastor function as “chief of staff.” The church governing board, through the Personnel Committee (called the Staff-Parish Relations Committee in some congregations), should hold the senior pastor accountable for the results of each staff member’s ministry. If the senior minister is unwilling or incapable of assuming that role, chaos results throughout the system. The Personnel Committee’s role is to advise, encourage, and counsel with the senior pastor as he or she coordinates and coaches staff members.

Do not assign specific Staff-Parish Relations Committee members to specific staff persons for communication and relationships. This inevitably creates triangulation that leads to conflict among staff members and conflict between staff members and the senior minister.

To deliver on his or her supervisor role, the senior pastor should study these resources: (1) Reprint R00204, “Leadership that Gets Results” by Daniel Goleman, *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000, pp. 78-90; (<http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org/archive>) and (2) *The Five Temptations of a CEO* by Patrick Lencioni (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

Senior pastors must learn the art of criticizing a staff member’s behavior while affirming him or her. Some clues:

- Do it in person, never by E-mail, letter, memo, or telephone.
- Bring a non-anxious presence to the conversation.
- Begin with prayer.
- Focus on actions and their outcomes.
- Say it in specifics, not generalities.
- Be respectful and sensitive to how the staff person is receiving the criticism.
- Ask what we can do to change things.
- Offer solutions after listening to and agreeing with some aspect of, or the motives behind, what the staff member suggests.
- Listen for feedback and new information that can lead to agreement on a variation of what you had planned to suggest.
- Close with affirmation and a plan.
- Express appreciation for the willingness to discuss these issues with you.
- Make clear any expected follow-up procedures.
- End by praying together.

Pastors of large churches find especially beneficial training in how to hold staff accountable for concrete results without micromanaging their ministries. While incredibly expensive, one of the best continuing education events for pastors of large churches is a one-week course titled “Management of Managers,” sponsored by the University of Michigan Business School, Executive Education Center, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234 (www.bus.umich.edu).

U. Schedule staff meetings weekly, of at least one hour in length. Purpose:

- Review what is happening.
- Review what is coming up during the next couple of weeks and months.
- Consider what types of communication can help to facilitate the ministries of the various committees, ministry teams, and fellowship groups.
- Maintain open communication lines among staff members.

Pastors who says, “We don’t have time to meet!” will expend two-to-four times that many hours each week resolving conflicts that result from lack of communication among staff members.

V. In congregations smaller than 300 in average worship attendance, employ the church secretary and all staff members from outside the membership. In midsize and small churches, hiring a church member as the church secretary is similar to employing relatives in a secular business:

- They are easy to hire, and their family ties give them high emotional commitment to the job. However, if they experience unhappiness or job-performance deficiencies, the emotional damage of discharging them is far greater than when they are not family members.
- If you cannot fire a staff member without creating uproar in the church, you cannot effectively supervise that staff member.

This hiring rule also protects the church secretary by reducing members’ natural inclination to feel that secretaries who are church members exercise too much power and control.

W. All clergy and paid staff must come across to members as caring persons.

Administrative leadership is rooted in positive relationships, not merely in hierarchical authority positions or “expert” technical roles. The senior pastor may wish to provide all staff (clerical, program, and clergy) some listening-skill training. One option is the listening skills section from *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 9, How to Develop a Congregational “Care Team.”* (download free at www.TheParishPaper.com).

X. Maintain a systematic feedback loop between pastor and people. Each year, ask the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (in some congregations called the Personnel Committee), to use one of the relational feedback procedures listed below. “The lone-warrior model of leadership is heroic suicide. Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others. Each of us has passions that need to be contained by the other.” (Ronald A Heifetz *Leadership Without Easy Answers* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press], p. 68)

- A feedback procedure for senior pastors is Appendix B of *Leadership Is the Key* by Herb Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press).
- Another feedback procedure is *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 15, Ministry Role Feedback Process*. Written more recently than the book, *Nuggets Volume 15* (1) contains a more comprehensive instrument for the senior pastor, (2) has undergone more field-testing, and (3) also contains instruments specifically designed for associate pastors, program staff members, youth directors, choir directors, and church secretaries (download free at www.TheParishPaper.com).

Y. Shift the Staff-Parish Relations Committee behavior from reactive to proactive. The committee should meet at least four times each year (six times is better). Members of Staff-Parish Relations Committees (or Personnel Committees) that meet less than quarterly or “*only when we have to*” experience the following handicaps:

- They have not become comfortable talking with one another about small matters, so they lack the skill to deal with major crisis issues that appear unexpectedly.
- Meeting too infrequently automatically destines the committee to wait until small issues become so large that they are difficult or impossible to resolve.

The committee’s goal is keeping communication high and the sense of team spirit strong as laity and clergy work together to respond to the congregation’s needs and God’s call to ministry. Use the following procedure at each meeting:

1. Insist that *every* committee member participate. (People who refuse to speak when the pastor is present usually have a personal power agenda that keeps them from being an effective member of this committee.)
2. After an opening prayer, begin the meeting by asking each individual (including the pastor) to take turns sharing orally with the group the answer to this question: “What one or two ‘good things’ do you see happening in our church?”
3. Then, go around the circle again, asking each individual (including the pastor) to share his or her answer to a second question: “What one or two issues do you feel we should be concerned about as part of our effort to maintain congregational health and effectiveness?”
4. While people share their answers to the second question, the chairperson notes any issues he or she thinks the group should discuss in the next phase of the meeting.
5. After everyone has answered the second question, the chairperson says, “Let’s talk some more about Does anyone else have something to add to that subject?”
6. Following that discussion, the chairperson uses a similar approach to bring up any other issues that she or he feels merit discussion at this meeting.
7. Prior to each meeting, the chairperson reviews the minutes of the last meeting and decides whether any of those issues need discussing. If so, the chairperson raises a question such as “How do you think things are going with ...? We talked about that at the last meeting.”
8. Close the meeting by forming a circle, asking people to join hands, and asking each person to give a one-sentence prayer.

As each year begins, use the following procedure to set clergy time-use priorities consistent with what the committee feels God is calling your church to accomplish during the coming year. This process allows the committee members to accomplish three things:

- Hold clergy accountable for focusing energies in ways that are the most productive.
- Help interpret to other church members the focus of our clergyperson’s ministries at the present time.
- Protect clergy from unreasonable expectations that can occur when every member of the congregation places a different set of demands on clergy time.

Each Staff-Parish Relations Committee should develop its own one-page list, since circumstances differ widely in various denominations. Here is one way to do that:

- Create a list of possible time-use tasks in your church, using items such as preaching, worship, teaching adults, teaching children, teaching confirmation class, funerals, weddings, children's sermons, counseling, visiting shut-ins, visiting members' homes, hospital visiting, training people in evangelism skills, making evangelism visits, organizational leadership, staff supervision, training leaders in financial stewardship methods, overseeing financial matters, working with civic organizations, working with other churches in the community, working with community service endeavors, regional denominational service, personal devotional life, returning telephone calls, summer camping ministries, visits to inactive members, visits to the elderly, long range planning, prison ministry, prayer groups, supervising the care of church property, public relations/press releases, youth ministry, Vacation Bible School.
- After creating a list that includes all possible clergy time-expenditure items in your congregation, ask each Staff-Parish Relations Committee member, without discussing the items with anyone, to rank the importance of these time-use tasks according to his or her personal viewpoint.
- Mark the most important task with #1 and the least important #3, with #2 on the continuum between them.
- Ask people to mark *an equal number* of the items with each of those three numbers.

This annual exercise allows pastors to say to complainers, "Every ministry is important. However, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee instructed me to give this a low priority this year, in favor of several other ministries [or specifically state X, Y, and Z ministries] that they feel require more of my attention this year."

Z. Accept the fact that you cannot make everyone in the congregation happy 100 percent of the time. Five percent of church folks are chronically dissatisfied:

- Many of them grew up in church traditions or in family structures whose atmosphere taught them continuous complaining.
- Addicted to unhappiness, they are not happy unless they are unhappy.

In addition to that 5 percent chronic-complainer bunch, some of the 95 percent of people who are normal occasionally get bent out of shape for rational or irrational reasons.

Respect yourself enough to recognize that you may not always receive everyone's approval. Smile, nod, and keep on keeping on.

Study-Discussion Session #5

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

VI. Mediating, Managing, and Resolving Ballistic Conflict

What if the conflict is no longer normal? It is ballistic, on the way to crippling the church's mission and ministry effectiveness. Now what?

A. Are We in One of the Five Classic Conflict Levels? Many people use the five levels of conflict originated by Speed Leas as a diagnostic tool. (Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church through Conflict* [Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1984])

Level One: People are *talking directly to one another about a problem* that needs solving. They are not withholding information or cutting off communication. They say, "We've got problems to solve, but we can do it."

The role of a conflict referee is to keep people talking, avoid the temptation to stop talking, due to weariness, until the problem is resolved.

Level Two: The focus has shifted from solving the problem to *taking care of ones self*. Anxiety is up. People fear personal injury and many withdraw. They have stopped talking directly to the people with whom they must solve the problem, or when they talk they withhold many of their feelings and opinions. Key players talk in generalities about "communication problems" or "there is a problem in the choir," while simultaneously refusing to communicate in specifics.

The conflict referee's role is to get the key players talking with one another about the problem.

Level Three: The focus has shifted from fixing the problem and taking care of ones self to *winning*. People have abandoned the idea that they could be part of the problem and have replaced it with the attitude that *I have the solution and it is the only possible answer*. When complaining about the problem, their language overstates, distorts, and polarizes the options. People are not yet in factions, but they clump together and label people with differing opinions as "the pastor's buddies," "the obsessive traditionalists," and "that Emmaus bunch."

The conflict referee's role is to create a safe environment in which people can air concerns. This requires either an intentionally structured special meeting or putting the matter on the agenda of a regular board meeting for protracted discussion. Specifically state, "We will not vote on this tonight; we just want to get all the issues on the table so we can understand the problem as fully as possible."

Level Four: People are no longer willing to settle for getting their way. They now insist on *getting rid of the opposition*. They want to fire the pastor, tell people to find another church, or dismantle a committee or a ministry altogether. People are now in factions and may be conducting secret meetings in homes. One or two informal leaders give marching orders to each faction.

At this level, a congregation's in-house referees know they must have outside help. Because no faction views them as neutral, they usually decide to call in outside help: a denominational official, a conflict specialist, or a respected pastor from another congregation.

Level Five: People will no longer settle for getting the opposition to leave. *They have become fanatics*. They want to destroy the opposition. Obsessed with continuing the fight, they feel it is immoral for them to stop. A resignation is not enough; they want to defrock the pastor. If they cannot get that, they may telephone congregations where the pastor is a candidate and warn them. "This pastor is totally evil," said one such antagonist.

At this stage, nothing but outside help works. The pastor will need advice from and sometimes protection by appropriate denominational officials.

The conflict referee must do the following:

- He or she begins by talking with representatives of each faction separately to gain an understanding of the factors in the conflict and build trust.
- Later, the referee can bring the groups together for group interaction.
- The goal is to get influential leaders of the factions to stop their obsession with hating one another and move the focus back to a *Level One* status, in which they work together to solve problems that everyone has agreed are the primary issues.
- In virtually all *Level Five* conflicts, the governing board must appoint a Conflict Resolution Team consisting of seven people plus the senior pastor who work together in a systematic way, over a period of several months, under the leadership of an outside conflict specialist.

After identifying your congregation's "level of conflict" from the list above, select and use appropriate methods from the following list.

B. Sexual indiscretions, abuse, and immoral or illegal behavior: Contact the appropriate denominational leaders immediately. Churches lose lawsuits (1) when the leaders do not have written policies in place to prevent abusive behaviors by paid staff and/or (2) when the Personnel Committee and/or the governing board does not deal with infractions immediately.

C. Multiple-Staff Conflict: When the entire staff in a large church is in conflict, ask the group to work together to perfect a "covenant of mutual support." The covenant should contain the following:

- A list of positive behaviors and conversational statements that we expect of one another
- A list of negative behaviors and conversational statements that we do not expect from one another

For an example of a "Staff Team Covenant," see George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. This is also a good study-discussion book for staff meetings (one chapter per week).

Perfecting this covenant may require two or three weeks of staff-meeting discussion, with the various sections agreed on by consensus, not by the dictatorial fiat of the senior pastor:

- After the covenant is forged, each staff member signs it.

- “How are we doing with our covenant?” then becomes an agenda item at each weekly staff meeting for the next six months.

Through these continued frank discussions, staff members grow into a strong, cohesive staff team by “holding each other accountable” for living up to the staff covenant.

Discussing the following book, one chapter each week at staff meetings, increases the likelihood that staff will stay in touch with one another and work together in beneficial ways. *Church Staff Handbook* by Harold J. Westing (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications).

When the conflict is between two staff members only, deal with it directly, using the following procedure:

1. Meet separately with the warring parties, and ask each one the same questions, such as, “Why do you think the other person is so upset?” “What’s the best way to resolve this, in your opinion?”
2. Tell both staff members that you’re going to call a meeting in your office to discuss the conflict.
3. Open the meeting with these rules: “You’re on safe ground, so we need to hear everything you are feeling. But everything you say must be in the best interests of the other person.
4. Define your role as mediator. Remind them to direct their conversation to each other, not you. Stop the discussion any time they refer to each other as “he” or “she” instead of “you.”
5. Help them see each other’s views by encouraging them to use phrases such as “This is how I feel when” “Can you understand why I would feel that way?”
6. Close the meeting by spelling out exactly what happens next. Example:
 - “I expect you both to keep these open communications going so that this problem doesn’t build up again.”
 - Ask both staff members to specify what they are going to change about how they interact with the other person.
 - Ask them what they expect you to do if the problem recurs.

(Adapted from ideas by Paul Falcone, *HR Magazine*, in *Managers Edge*, March 2000, p. 9)

D. How to Shorten Fights. Leaders take the first step in reducing conflict duration by resisting the urge to push it under the rug or to pretend that, like a hurricane, it will eventually run its course.

Express the expectation that—though the differences of opinion are real—a solution remains possible. Without a sense of hopefulness, people begin moving away from one another in one of these destructive ways:

1. Feeling resigned to their role as “doormats to the aggressor”
2. Attempting to squelch the complaint by hostile rejection
3. Trying to remove people from the organization
4. Resigning and leaving the church

Express the feeling that differences of opinion are acceptable in our organization. The only unacceptable behavior is unwillingness to discuss the underlying issues.

Express appreciation for “loyal opposition” in the parish. Thank people for caring enough about their church to want the best for its life and ministries.

Express the desire that we do everything possible to move away from a competitive atmosphere. The goal is a cooperative, collaborative atmosphere.

Try to get people to say directly to one another what they mean. This reduces the incidence of destructive substitute behaviors such as character assassination and generalizations.

Figure out which of the congregation’s formal channels is the most appropriate place to discuss the opinion differences. Is it the governing board, a committee, a subcommittee, a special task force, a ministry team, or a related organization? Generally speaking, the lower on the organizational wall chart these discussions occur, the better.

- If, however, fight talk already flows in torrents over the congregational grapevine, airing the different opinions at a governing-board meeting may be the place to start.
- Then, appoint a task force to study it and report recommendations back to the board.

Deal with the matter at either a scheduled or a called meeting of the appropriate decision-making group. Make space on the agenda that allows people to express their different viewpoints.

- Remind people that opinions not openly expressed tend to get stronger and go underground where they become impossible to deal with.
- Tell people, “We will not vote on it tonight. We just want to be sure we understand all the factors.”

Address the fear that discussing conflict issues with another key player or at a meeting is dangerous and will do damage. When people say, “That will make matters worse,” tell them you feel strongly that the opposite is usually true—not discussing the issue will make things worse.

Ask them, “Do we want to look back on this later and feel that we didn’t try to do everything we could?”

Study-Discussion Session #6

Participants. Prepare for this discussion session by making notes in the margins, especially with regard to the following questions:

1. Do you recall instances where this paragraph or section was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
2. What would you like to add or subtract from this paragraph or section?
3. In what ways does the idea in this section or paragraph seem true of our congregation?
4. What suggested methods from this section or paragraph should we consider using in our congregation?

Discussion Leader. As you move through this discussion session, ask participants to take turns sharing their answers to the above questions.

Continued from Session #5...

VI. Mediating, Managing, and Resolving Ballistic Conflict

E. How to Limit Fight Damage. Some individual must take responsibility for this:

- In some cases, that person is the pastor (usually in instances where she or he is *not* the focal point of the fight).
- In other cases, that person is the governing-board chairperson (in instances where the pastor has become the center of the storm).
- In still other cases, that person is the appropriate denominational official or an outside resource person.

Whoever the referee is, his or her goal will include the following:

1. Ask people to stop their fight-and-flight behaviors. Tell them that we can't resolve the problem that is damaging our church's fellowship and ministries by either skunk behavior or rabbit behavior. Skunks stand and fight in odorous ways that cause rabbit people to run away.

- Publicly urge skunk-behavior people to stop their flow of negative comments about their adversaries.
- Publicly urge rabbit-behavior people to stay on the scene instead of getting so far away that no one can hear their concerns.

2. If possible, establish a four-week "cooling off period." Say, "This will prepare us for addressing the basic conflict issues in the most rational manner possible."

3. Suggest that all of us work toward increasing our tolerance of different opinions. Say, "Loving neighbors includes forgiving neighbors for being different. Otherwise, neighbors cannot effectively listen to one another."

4. With the exception of illegal or immoral issues that fall under “Section A” in Session #5 above, avoid voting on and/or calling in higher ecclesiastical authorities too soon. Wait until “we have time to properly surface and discuss all the issues.”

- If cooperation and collaboration procedures fail, the church must eventually use voting and/or denominational hierarchical authority.
- In most denominations, however, that should happen only as the last resort, because it often increases rather than decreases the fight damage.

5. Suggest that “we engage in a systematic process to make the best possible decisions.” We want to replace *homicide* (hurting others and our church) and *suicide* (hurting ourselves plus our church) with *decide*. All three actions stem from the same Latin root word, “to cut off.”

6. Ask people to state exactly what they want. Writing their desires on paper increases the clarity of thinking.

- In cases where people are so hostile that they refuse to speak with one another, this step involves asking the two factions to work separately from each other.
- In cases where hostility is not as high, ask each faction to state its desires at a meeting while someone writes them down.
 - The next step is a meeting of the two groups at which they select the one or two priority issues that they want to address first.
 - This process of “deciding what to decide” helps the two factions take the first step on the road to cooperation and collaboration—away from competition and conflict.

7. Encourage all participants to use “I” pronouns: Examples: “I feel like” or “It hurts me when” Urge people to avoid using *you* pronouns such as in “You always do ... [thus and such].”

- *You* pronouns create conflict.
- *I* pronouns create communication.

8. Encourage all participants to avoid generalizing: Statements such as “you always” or “you never” are off limits. The conflict referee instantly “calls” people on these infractions, so as to extinguish them from the conversation and keep participants sharply focused on the issue under discussion.

9. Encourage all participants to avoid “blaming.” Say, “Let’s learn to share our feelings without blaming other people for their feelings.” The habit of blaming builds communication barriers that make escalation of conflict more likely than resolution of differences.

10. Remind people that several types of conversation are OKAY. Examples:

- It is okay to *contend*, to set forth one’s opinion clearly.
- It is okay to *express concern*, to state facts that document the existence of a problem.
- It is okay to *disagree*—“I see it rather differently from that.”
- It is okay to *accentuate*—“This is a major concern to me.”
- It is okay to *indicate*—“I can live with (this), but not with (that).”
- It is okay to *confess injury*, to relate an event or remark that caused pain—“I feel hurt when you”
- It is okay to *request*—“May I ask that in the future you”

(Adapted from Keith Huttenlocker, *Conflict and Caring* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing], p. 73)

11. Remind people that several types of conversation are NOT okay. Examples:

- It is not okay to *contrive*, to line up political support for one's position in an effort to control a decision.
- It is not okay to *condemn*—"You have absolutely no business ...!"
- It is not okay to *discredit*—"That was a stupid idea that will never work!"
- It is not okay to *dictate*—"You either (this) or I will (that)."
- It is not okay to *place blame* and make generalizations that indict another person. Sometimes you have the right to be angry, but that does not give you the right to be cruel.
- It is not okay to *demand*—"I'm telling you that from now on you had better ...!"
- It is not okay to *inflict guilt*, induce shame on another person for his or her conduct or words.

(Adapted from Keith Huttenlocker, *Conflict and Caring* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing], p. 73)

12. Ask representatives from each warring faction to take turns speaking. Insist that they express their *desires* on only one issue at a time, not two or more.

- The goal is getting warring factions to state and clarify exactly what they personally feel and want on each specific topic and *avoid saying* what they think *someone else wants*.
- Holding warring factions in this framework of personal expression reduces the natural tendency to accuse "the other side" of having bad motives.

13. Ask members of the other warring faction to listen respectfully and responsively, then restate in their own words the desires they hear the other group expressing. "You are saying that you feel" is a good formula for someone on one side of an issue to use as the beginning of responsive-listening sentences in which he or she attempts to mirror what someone on the other side of the issue just said.

14. Appoint a drafting committee. Comprised of an equal number of representatives from both factions, ask this group to write an agreement that lists what both sides feel are essential *behaviors* necessary to moving beyond the conflict.

15. Watch for and expect this surprise: during the weeks when the conflict situation begins to improve, expect one or more key players to accelerate their conflict-producing behaviors. This is logical, since conflict-reduction means change is happening.

Change always means that a few people who have wielded power or want more power fear that they may get less of what they want:

- Meet with these individuals and tell them that you are aware of their recent conflict-producing behavior.
- Remind them of the agreement between the two factions.
- Ask them, "Wouldn't it be better if you upheld the agreement? Or would you prefer that I call a meeting of the two groups and try to rewrite the agreement?"

F. How to Handle Repetitive Grenade Throwers. This is among the most challenging of church leadership tasks. Laypersons in positions of authority on governing boards and committees have trouble figuring out how to hold a hard-working volunteer accountable for his or her words and actions.

1. Why do lay leaders fail to treat the grenade-thrower syndrome? Several reasons:

- They keep hoping some new pastor can alter the grenade thrower's behavior.
- They want to avoid hurting the grenade thrower's feelings.
- They say, "We should treat the grenade thrower in a Christian manner."
- They want to protect themselves from personal attack by the grenade thrower.

Often, lay leaders try to prevent grenade-thrower damage by saying to new people, "He's just like that. Don't pay any attention to him. Don't take it personally."

However, newcomers are even less inclined to tolerate a grenade thrower's tongue than are long-term members. Newcomers often respond with "Life is too short. We'll go to church elsewhere."

Sometimes a well-meaning, concerned lay leader says, "I know him pretty well. Perhaps he'll listen to me. I'll tell him we need to be careful not to hurt new people's feelings because they don't know how we do things around here."

Result: That approach never works with grenade throwers. Their hearing is insight-impaired.

2. Prescriptions for the grenade-thrower syndrome. "We are all made of clay and stardust," someone said. Grenade throwers have many good qualities but are color blind to the clay mixed in with their high motives. Thus, the following facts:

- Grenade throwers only change their behaviors when not doing so feels too risky.
- In small and midsize congregations with one ruling grenade-thrower, nothing but direct confrontation by a group of other layperson-peers works.
- Until a group of lay leaders band together in a united front and tell the grenade-thrower that his or her behavior is not acceptable, it continues.
- Leaders who wait for something better to happen with a grenade thrower learn that what happens is not positive.

But lay leaders tend to indefinitely postpone treating this destructive problem. They do not want to risk becoming victims. They know that he or she is willing to say things in public meetings and on the church grapevine that normal people do not say.

A dominating matriarch controlled one midsize congregation for fifty years:

- Her mother before her had done the same.
- The average tenure of the last four pastors had been twenty-one months.
- Two of those pastors committed suicide and the other two left the ministry.

In this midsize church in a small town, the leaders felt helpless to change things. Finally they realized that "softball" behavior—such as indirect, placating, non-confrontational, and appeasing efforts—did not work. They had humored the matriarch to prevent conflict in the church, but it happened anyway.

The lay leaders decided that they had felt so uncomfortable with the possibility of raising their personal anxiety level that they had allowed her to damage the church for far too long. They decided to take seriously the scriptural prescription in Matthew 18:15-20, and then went slightly beyond it because they felt that nothing else would work.

- Three representatives of the congregation's personnel committee asked to meet with her in her home.
- They listed some of her unacceptable behaviors.
- When she tried to justify those behaviors, they refused to play that game; they did not listen to or discuss her rationalizations.
- They said that they were not here to debate with her but to tell her that they would no longer tolerate her destructive behaviors.
- They put her on probation for one year.
- It worked. Her destructive behavior stopped.
- For about a year, she also stopped attending worship.
- When she eventually resumed worship attendance, her old habits did not reappear.
- The congregation's atmosphere improved dramatically!

Warning: Three or more leaders must talk with such people as a group. *Never* send one person alone. The pastor must *not* be a member of the group.

- If the group makes one of those two mistakes—sending only one person or sending the pastor—a grenade thrower blows off the message by thinking, “Joe is just that way; nobody else believes what Joe thinks about me.”
- Two results:
 - Zero change.
 - The grenade thrower gets on the church grapevine, distorts what Joe said into an unrecognizable form, and does the congregation even more damage than before.

In large congregations, two or three grenade throwers sometimes rule various fiefdoms (committees). Virtually always, their attitude, personality, and iron rule causes numerous church members to withdraw from committee participation and/or refuse to use their gifts and skills in accomplishing the ministries of that committee.

Ask the nominating committee to gradually replace those individuals.

- Typically, grenade throwers do not go willingly.
- Expect them to resist giving up their authority.
- Expect them and a few of their friends to provide several rational reasons for why they should remain in this chairperson role at this time.

A constitution with rules that permit committee chairpersons to serve only three consecutive years can ease this transition. But many churches that have such a rule in their constitution do not have the courage to enforce it.

Recommendation:

- Pay whatever emotional price is necessary to eliminate fiefdoms ruled by grenade throwers who wear a benevolent-dictator mask.
- Gritting your teeth and making the change is cheaper than the long-term damage from an entrenched grenade-thrower committee chairperson.

G. Improving Skill in Handling Triangulation Attempts. Everyone who participates in congregations sees examples of triangulation. Triangles happen if the relationship between two people becomes painful and /or anxiety filled. The increased discomfort causes one of the two people to talk with a third person, seeking the power to (1) fix the relationship and/or (2) gain the emotional strength to endure the relationship.

1. Spotting the Pattern. Triangles and their potential results are hard to see in their early stages—both by the “triangler” and the “third-party trianglee.”

- The triangler commonly seeks emotional support to (a) help hold the anxiety in check and (b) feel better after talking about the problem.
- The third-party trianglee feels that he or she, by listening sympathetically, can play an important friendship role.

Usually, however, negative stories about the third person leave out or minimize the negative role the triangler plays in creating or sustaining the uncomfortable relationship.

Thus the third-party trianglee lacks full knowledge of everything behind the “look at what he did to me” game that the triangler unconsciously plays.

Result: the third-party trianglee gives the triangler emotional support, reducing the likelihood that the relationship gets worked out between the two primary players.

2. Triangle Causes and Results. In healthy congregations, people do not spend conversational time focusing negatively on an absent third person. Rather, they concentrate most of their energies on issues that maintain positive relationships with one another.

Generally speaking, the more immature people are in their emotional development, the more inclined they are to substitute triangulation for working out their relationship problems.

Corollaries:

- The more emotionally immature people any social system contains, the more triangulations appear.
- Some congregational and corporate systems have high conflict levels over many years because they contain more emotionally immature people than other systems.

When two members of a congregation cannot maintain their normal one-to-one closeness, anxiety increases. The person who becomes most uncomfortable *first*, talks to a third person:

- Reaching out to the third-person trianglee helps reduce anxiety in the person who reaches out because (a) it provides emotional support, or (b) it seems to offer the power to modify the other person’s behavior, or (c) both.
- However, the relationship that develops with the third-person trianglee usually creates a less-than-beneficial result for all concerned.
 - Yes, the third-party trianglee absorbs part of the trianglee’s conflict anxiety.
 - However, this prevents the triangler from talking out the conflicted relationship with the other person and working it back to normal.

3. Identifying Conflict Triangles. In most cases, conflict and hostility are easy to spot. In some instances, however, the true goal of a triangler’s initial third-party conversation is less than obvious.

One warning sign: when someone in your church talks to you in a negative way about a third person and you do not need to know this information, suspect a triangle.

Another warning sign: confusion. When something seems missing from the information you are getting, or the situation does not make sense, think about triangles. Wonder what else could be improved.

Still another clue: In any congregation passing through a period of significant change or conflict, expect several people to experience high levels of anxiety. One or several triangles, some of which interconnect with one another, will appear.

Individuals who occupy highly visible leadership roles are especially likely to attract triangles:

- Church secretary is such a role.
- Governing board chairperson and personnel committee chairpersons are such roles.
- In small and midsize churches, the role of clergy spouse attracts triangers.

Each of these individuals is approached, at times, by people who come across as “trying to help” from purely altruistic motives.

Close scrutiny of the situation, however, often reveals that the “concerned” individual is attempting to assuage anxiety and/or assert control by speaking negatively about the absent individual.

The staff or lay leader’s personality plays a role in increasing or decreasing triangulation behavior. Some people who occupy elected offices or paid leadership roles are prone to “savior mentality behavior”:

- That kind of temperament attracts triangers the way a refrigerator attracts magnets.
- Leaders who develop a reputation for making sacrifices to help people will have many valid opportunities to do so.
- However, such leaders also get a chance to play many invalid roles.

Triangers quickly learn that these self-appointed savior figures are willing to listen sympathetically to their plights and will often take arbitrary or unilateral action to right wrongs.

4. Handling Triangles. Effective triangle management begins with the recognition that triangles retard rather than improve the chances of resolving conflict:

- On the short term, triangles appear to work. The triangler feels better and often praises the third-party trianglee, making him or her feel compassionate, understanding, and useful.
- On the long term, triangles and the involvement of bystander third parties who are drawn into them prevent the anxiety and conflict from ending.

Basic principle: One person cannot fix the negative relationship between two other people by sympathetic listening alone. Efforts to do so usually prolong and/or worsen the situation.

What can a third party do to avoid involvement in or handle a triangle that is beginning or already exists? Familiarity with the principles listed below can increase triangle prevention and curing skills:

- Recognize that triangulation attempts are normal, reflexive means by which people attempt to reduce their anxiety.
- Recognize and diminish your own triangle-creating tendencies.
 - Can people speak to you directly without fearing that you will become defensive, explosive, or behave like an attack dog?
 - In other words, do you put up a wall that encourages them to talk about you with third parties?
- Identify and modify your tendency to derive satisfaction from acting like a savior for people and situations.
- Resist the temptation to get emotional satisfaction from sympathetically listening to someone who has triangulation needs. Encourage him or her to talk directly with the person with whom the relationship problem has developed.

- As you express sympathetic concern, learn to use constructive questions. Examples:
 - Can we put that on the agenda for the next meeting and let the committee work it out?
 - What keeps you from talking to John about this problem?
 - Do you have any guesses as to what behaviors of yours may contribute to the relationship problem?
 - May I refer you to a marriage counselor who is far more skilled in these matters?
- Encourage critics to speak directly to their targets, and resist letting them complain to you. When someone complains about another staff member and says, “Please don’t use my name,” tactfully but firmly suggest that he or she communicate directly with that person:
 - The problem is more likely to get resolved that way.
 - When one person in a conflict tries to remain anonymous, the conflict tends to continue.
 - When sympathetic listeners do *only* that, they lengthen the conflict.
- “Reposition yourself” when you awaken to the role you are playing in an ongoing triangle. Exit the triangle by stopping your participation in the drama, while at the same time maintaining friendly contact with both parties.

(For more detailed information about triangles and related organizational-leadership issues, see *Creating a Healthier Church* by Ronald W. Richardson [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press])

Triangulation takes three people. If the third person is willing to continue this emotional game, the triangle and the conflict continue.

If the third person decides not to play the game in the way the triangler expects and wants, the game stops.

VII. The Bottom Line

As much as possible, “just say no” to congregational conflict by using preventative measures. In case someone pulls you into a white-water rafting trip, use the safety measures prescribed in this *Nuggets Volume* to minimize the danger.

If your raft gets dashed against a rock, call the professional search-and-rescue people.

Appendix

Unusual Behaviors in Groups

Individuals often behave one way in private conversations but in quite another way during group discussions. Discussion leaders may find helpful the following tips for managing some of the most common group behavior traits.

The Over-talker. This person is seldom shy and usually tends to feel uncomfortable with long periods of silence. Therefore, he or she is likely to fill in the spaces with words, often taking over the conversation from other persons who have more difficulty putting their thoughts and feelings into words. The following rules can sometimes help to circumvent that trait:

1. No one can speak a second time unless everyone who wants to share has had a chance.
2. No one can interrupt someone who is expressing a thought or feeling.
3. Systematically go around the group and ask each person to share a response, rather than allowing a popcorn pattern of response, which is often dominated by the over-talkative person.
4. Ask for the talkative person's help by following his or her comments with a question such as, "What do the rest of you think?"

Mr. or Ms. Professor. This individual often has a significant amount of biblical, theological, or factual knowledge and the willingness (sometimes the compulsion) to convey information to groups and individuals. The following ideas can help to handle that pattern:

1. Go back to the original idea or issue under discussion, which is often a different subject from the one at which the "professor" has now arrived. Say, "That is an interesting viewpoint, but perhaps we should get back to the way it applies to us and our congregation."
2. Ask the other group members, "How do the rest of you feel about that paragraph?"
3. Say something like, "I feel that part of what you are saying seems right on target. Now, let's hear some other points of view."
4. In some instances, it will be necessary to talk to such individuals outside the group and let them know that their superior knowledge is causing many shy people who are less well-informed to withdraw from expressing their opinion. In this approach, ask them to avoid sharing so much of their knowledge so that others will feel less intimidated.
5. Sometimes it is necessary to talk to such people outside the group and let them know that their insights are valuable, but this group is different from the typical adult Sunday school class. Here, people need to express their feelings on certain issues, even when they may have less knowledge about those issues than others in the group would wish.
6. Sometimes it is necessary to tell such an individual that he or she is hurting other people's feelings by giving them the impression that they are inferior because they have less knowledge on a particular topic.

The Monomaniac with a Mission. This person often shows obsessive-compulsive traits by insisting on redirecting every subject into a particular channel. The following possibilities can help deal with this tendency:

1. Say something like, “That is interesting, but we need to stay within the guideline questions of this study.”
2. Sometimes it is necessary to talk with this individual outside of the group and say something like, “Joe, I am concerned about you. I see that you really have a high interest in the subject of _____. Could you tell me a bit more about why that is so important to you?” Sometimes this provides the kind of verbal outlet and sounding-board that the individual needs, in such a way that he or she finds a reduced need to focus on that topic during every discussion session.
3. Sometimes it is helpful to suggest that this individual may want to get involved in helping a particular ministry in the congregation, so that his or her zeal on this subject can be focused in a way that is both satisfying and productive, since these discussion sessions are not, according to the guidelines, organized for this purpose.

Fear of Sharing Feelings. This kind of person may focus on what other people ought to do in order to not express his or her feelings. Sometimes the following ideas are helpful with such individuals:

1. Ask more questions that focus on how a person feels rather than questions that seem to solicit opinions or facts.
2. Rephrase the study-discussion question in another way so as to probe for feelings and get past the superficiality of discussion that takes the group away from personal feelings.

If discussion leaders wish to strengthen their knowledge and skill in guiding group process, one helpful resource is *How to Lead Small Groups* by Neal F. McBride (Colorado Springs: NavPress).