Preparation for Church Conflict

Curtis Birky

Imagine a continuum illustrating church conflict, with “Healthy Conflict Resolution” written on one end and “Elimination of Conflict” on the other. Which end of the continuum would you like to place your congregation on? The possibility of a conflict-free congregation is alluring for good reasons. Church conflicts have produced a lot of damage—church splits, broken relationships, tainted witness, misunderstandings, consumption of energy and resources that might have been better used elsewhere. You could probably extend the list without too much effort.

Even though these negative outcomes are easily associated with church conflict, an interesting question can be raised. Do these results grow out of the conflict itself, or are they a result of the way that the conflict is handled? Furthermore, what does a congregation experience when a healthy resolution to conflict is achieved?

This article will propose that intentional preparation for church conflict is likely to reduce the number of times that damaging results occur. Because of this probable outcome, healthy resolution of church conflict is worth striving for. In addition, it will suggest that the elimination of all conflict is neither a reasonable nor desirable goal for a well-functioning congregation. To begin with, the concept of church conflict will be defined and briefly discussed. Then, common types of church conflicts and possible causative factors will be examined. Lastly, preparation for handling church conflict in a healthy way will be considered.

Conflict in Churches

Everyone knows what conflict is and why it’s so harmful. Some participants blame, argue, and act in a mean-spirited way. Others quietly push buttons, offer subtle digs, passively infuriate, or adopt a cool, collected demeanor. Whether the conflict is overt or covert, we all know when it’s happening and how it hurts.

Yet, what is described above is not actually conflict. These are simply methods of dealing with a conflict. You could probably identify other destructive ways of handling conflict that people use at work, at home, and also at churches. For the purposes of this discussion “church conflict” is defined very simply. It is those times when there are two or more perspectives about how to proceed. Are we going to do this or that? Is this or that the right way to think or believe or act? A church conflict presents us with a choice and requires a decision about how to move forward.
We are familiar with legal conflict. Two parties sit in front of the judge and argue about what is true or fair. The judge decides how things will move forward. Athletic conflict is commonly understood in our culture. Each team has its perspective about how the game should turn out and team members play toward that end. During this past year a good deal of time was spent working out a political conflict between two presidential candidates who had different perspectives about how to move the country forward. Resolving such political conflicts is generally done in an orderly and predictable manner. But what about resolving church conflict? Are there ways of doing it that can be as useful as a judgment, a scoreboard, or a voting tally?

Preparation depends, at least in part, on what kind of church conflict is encountered and on its root causes.

Preparing for Church Conflict

Identifying and understanding the root causes of common church conflicts is the first crucial step in the process of preparation. Church conflicts are often complex, and preparations need to be tailored to specific kinds of conflict. What is useful in handling one conflict situation may be less helpful in another. Once particular kinds of conflicts are identified and understood, several basic questions can be asked about preparation for handling those particular conflicts in the congregation’s future. Does this kind of conflict have the potential for good outcomes in the congregation? If yes, how can the congregation be prepared to handle it productively? If not, are there things that can be done to prevent it?

Engagement in the kind of preparation for church conflict suggested below needs to be an intentional choice of congregational leaders and requires adequate time and resources for education, training, and organization. It is a commitment to handling conflict directly and productively, and it requires the courage to be loving. This sort of effort is not a quick fix for conflict resolution, but it does take seriously the Matthew 18 message to try and work out conflicts among believers in church communities. This preparation could result in a congregation reducing the number of conflicts it experiences and having a better chance of resolving conflicts in a healthy way. Doing well at church conflict resolution all the time is not possible. However, whenever it is done well the participants will benefit from creating or maintaining loving relationships and from having acted with Christian integrity.

A long list of various church conflicts could likely be created by any group of experienced church leaders. Perhaps if these were analyzed some patterns would emerge. Some kinds of conflicts could be seen as more common and others as unusual. We now will examine several commonly experienced types of church
conflicts and consider how to prepare for handling them well in the congregational setting.

Conflicts Related to Different Spiritual Priorities

If one hundred Christians were chosen randomly from any large community and each described his or her faith experiences, one would expect a great deal of variation in the accounts. However, an ethnographic researcher who listened closely might begin to form categories of stories. A basis for dividing the stories into different groups would need to be established—some core element. Using a core element, i.e., age at conversion, the researcher might eventually place each story into a group. All of the stories in group “A” would be similar to each other in that they involved an early childhood conversion. Those in group “B” involved a conversion in the teenage years, and so on for the other groups.

This approach of categorizing based on a core element can be used to understand several kinds of church conflicts. The core element chosen for this purpose is identified as a person’s spiritual priority. For this discussion, a spiritual priority is defined as the most important element in organizing a person’s thinking about his spiritual life. The person may or may not be aware of the priority and its organizing role in his spiritual life.

Scott Peck, a psychiatrist who integrates Christian faith into his writings, provides a useful model of spiritual development in his book, *The Different Drum*. His theories are similar to those of James Fowler, who also writes about spiritual development and whose work is perhaps more familiar than Peck’s among church leaders. Both of these writers owe much to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, which is based on the developmental psychology of Erickson, Piaget, and others. Peck’s model is noted because of its simplicity and ability to illustrate a particular kind of church conflict. The comments below use his model, but they rely less on a developmental stage approach. A stage concept can imply that progression through all of the stages is valued highly and that such progression is possible. The attempt here is to avoid the appearance of attaching greater worth to later stages, or to the people in those stages. Peck presents four stages of spiritual growth. The concept of categories is used here to suggest that they may or may not be connected progressively.

The initial category is a group organized around the spiritual priority of survival. People in this group face many dilemmas that grow out of their impulsive actions or words. Their misbehavior and generally unprincipled choices cause a good deal of trouble for them and make their lives chaotic. Spiritual action is frequently motivated by fear—usually of punishment from God, going to hell at death, being struck by lightning, etc.—when individual survival is in question. The old “hell fire and brimstone” and “scare them into heaven” sermons may
have grown out of trying to help people in this category. Societal examples parallel to this developmental process might be the belief that the death penalty will scare people into not killing someone, or reliance on military deterrence for national safety. Thinking in this stage is generally clear-cut, black and white, or concrete. Since survival is about the individual, not much regard for other people exists. The idea is to do the right thing so that God doesn’t punish you. Church members in this category might choose to attend church so that they will be assured of going to heaven when they die.

The next category of people is organized around the spiritual priority of orderliness. This category is largest of the four that are being discussed, and its people likely make up a high percentage of church parishioners. These faithful people have a strong trust in the institutional church and its formalities. Their choices and actions might be thought of as rule oriented or law based. Here people experience spiritual life as going well when they are following the perceived expectations of the church. These expectations may be stated by pastors in public worship or articulated during other less formal church activities. Persons in this category may glean useful guides for right behavior and correct thinking from sermons, study classes, denominational readings, Bible study, and so forth. At other times, church participants may transfer rules into their spiritual belief system from Christian sources outside of their immediate congregations or denominations. Societal examples parallel to the spiritual orderliness category could include the placement of high value on national institutions, political offices, national policies, etc; or even strict adherence to the “letter of the law,” while the “spirit of the law” may be disregarded or not understood at all.

In this orderliness group, the church’s perceived laws and rules are held in high regard and obedience is the desired and fulfilling response. Thinking continues to be concrete and choices are seen as quite clear-cut, black and white with very little gray in between. A great deal of discomfort and concern may be aroused when the parishioner observes other church members paying less attention to the rules, or questioning their importance.

People with the spiritual priority of inquiry explore spirituality through questioning and skepticism. They investigate the rules and belief systems of the church and seek evidence of their validity. Some rules for right Christian living may be tossed out the door, so to speak. Someone may enter this group in the face of new life experiences such as higher education, tragedy, the encountering of a very different cultural environment, or getting to know someone from a different religious tradition. More often than not, these church members discontinue regular attendance or disassociate with their home churches or denominations. Many people in this category abandon Christianity, explore
other forms of spirituality, or drop the spiritual quest altogether. They view their previous explanations of Christian spiritual life as inadequate, incomplete, or lacking in integrity.

The fourth category of this model is organized around the spiritual priority of integration. Church members in this group value complex answers to questions of faith and life. Church laws and traditions are understood in terms of the “spirit of the law” rather than the “letter of the law.” The individual makes sense out of Christian faith, pulling together understandings of God, the life and message of Jesus, biblical interpretation, prayer, humanness, Christian tradition, etc. Persons in this category may have a mystical sense of spirituality and talk of the connectedness of all people and all aspects of God’s creation. Their thinking is often symbolic and abstract. Authority and guidelines for Christian living are highly internalized.

A significant number of church conflicts are understood more accurately when using explanations based on these categories of spiritual priorities. The primary conflict dynamic is a clash of perspectives between the orderliness and integration groups of parishioners. For example, orderliness people feel secure in strict adherence to the rules—generally trusting those who have set the rules and the integrity of the rules themselves. This creates a steady and clearly understood platform or set of directives for living out the Christian faith. Integrative church members are more secure when basing their choices about Christian living on the theological and biblical underpinnings out of which the rules grow.

Some explanation is useful here. Church rules are usually formulated to address an important situation or question that Christians face in their day-to-day experience. Stated more broadly, rules are intended to provide a Christian response to a particular cultural situation, usually a new one. A temporal element may also be present—a particular period in history. For example, some years ago pool halls emerged in the cultural scene. Along with the pool table came drinking, betting, harsh language, etc. Some churches developed a rule to help protect their young people from this kind of environment. The rule was, “You may not go to the pool hall and play pool.”

Probably everyone in the local church would have supported the rule. A survival group member response would have been that the pastor says it is wrong to go to the pool hall and even though I’d really like to go and play I won’t, because I don’t want to go to hell when I die. An orderliness perspective would have been that there is something inherently wrong with the pool hall and the game of pool itself. We can note that nearly all the pool tables—at that time—were in pool halls. An inquirer take on the situation might not have existed, because inquirers would not likely have been in church or concerned with the new rule. (If they
had been in church, they might have questioned the validity of the rule.) The integration response would have been to support the rule because there is nothing good about the pool hall environment and they didn’t want kids exposed to it. When the rule was made there was no conflict between orderliness and integration perspectives about the rule. Both supported it.

Now let us fast-forward the cultural scene by twenty years. Companies have discovered that a lot of people like to play pool. Homes are being built with recreation rooms. Soon, pool tables are manufactured and sold for in-home use. Young people can, potentially, play pool at home instead of in the pool hall.

What does the church’s rule look like in this circumstance? The survivor church member is not likely to take any chances with the heaven or hell risks related to the pool table. An individual with an orderliness response will be quite sure that someone who purchases a new pool table has done something sinful, because she believes the pastor has already made it clear that the game of pool is to be avoided. A person with the inquiry view is still very likely unconcerned with the validity of the church’s rules. An integration parishioner buys a pool table and the teenagers in the home enjoy it greatly. It was always understood that the church’s rule was about avoiding crass language, drunkenness, betting, etc., at the pool hall—and never about whether or not a set of marble balls rolled around on a smooth table with holes along the edges.

The church conflict can now form between the more concrete orderliness thinking and the more abstract or symbolic integration thinking. The original problem of pool halls appearing on the cultural scene had been addressed with a good and appropriate rule: “You may not go to the pool hall and play pool.” Everyone in the church supported the rule, and it was helpful in protecting the young people from the less than wholesome pool hall environment. As time went by, cultural circumstances changed. While pool halls remained much the same, the possibility of playing the game of pool in the safe and supportive home atmosphere emerged.

What about the two different interpretations of the rule? For the orderliness parishioner, the rule has become a valued guideline in decision-making about Christian living. Following the rule means that the right thing is done; and doing the right thing is important and necessary in order to have good standing as a church member, a child of God, a witness to the broader community, and so forth. From this perspective, a number of things follow. The rule’s interpretation has become a part of the Christian tradition. The well being of the church itself—its standing before God—is at stake if the rule is not followed by those in the church. The wrongful act of the integration church member who bought a pool table reflects not only on that poor soul, but also on the entire congregation. Such
choices must be addressed and brought in line with proper following of the rule. In addition, the well-intentioned orderliness person may be confused about how the new pool table owner could have made such an obvious error in Christian judgment.

For the integration parishioner, the rule was seen as a useful guide in responding to a specific problematic situation. When the situation changed—i.e., teenagers could play pool without being exposed to the crude environmental factors of the pool hall—part of the rule became irrelevant. The rule was thus revised from “You may not go to the pool hall and play pool,” to, “You may not go to the pool hall, however, you are welcome to play pool in our recreation room.” When confronted by the fellow church member with the orderliness perspective, this parishioner is initially perplexed or surprised and then graciously explains why there is no Christian ethic violated in owning and enjoying a pool table. When this has no validity for the orderliness believer, each is likely disappointed in the other.

At this point the conflict has been established. Two different perspectives about how to proceed are clear to both parties and to those in the church who think like them. While this conflict illustration is dated, it does serve as an example of a very common, and often painful, type of conflict encountered in church life. This kind of church conflict happens over and over again because the broader culture in which the church lives and operates changes continually.

Understanding what is at stake for parishioners is a crucial first step in considering what steps a congregation can take in order to benefit from an orderliness versus integration conflict. The faithful believer whose spiritual priority is orderliness experiences the external guide—the perceived church rule—as a greatly valued and fully trustworthy basis for correct choices about Christian living. From this perspective, spiritual security, faithful living, and right standing before God are connected to respecting and obeying the highly honored rules. This kind of steady operationalization of the institutional church’s traditions and teachings provides answers to many of life's questions and complexities in a comforting and useful way. On the other hand, the faithful believer whose spiritual priority is integration experiences the internal guide—the perceived essence of the rule, the foundation of the law—as a basis for correct choices about Christian living. From this perspective, spiritual security, faithful living, and right standing before God are connected to the ongoing creation of new responses or rule revisions which translate and demonstrate these values in an ever-changing culture. This kind of fluid operationalization of the institutional church’s traditions and teachings provides answers to many of life’s questions and complexities in a comforting and useful way.
Put simply, we could say that faithful action, from the orderliness perspective, is to respond to new cultural problems by applying trusted and familiar existing church rules. And, that faithful action, from the integration perspective, is to respond to new cultural problems with tailor-made reinterpretations of Christian core values. Put more simply and exaggerated, the two responses are to conform faithfully or adapt faithfully. These contradictory priorities lead, many times, to different ways of living out the Christian life, and the related dynamics are at the heart of a high percentage of church conflicts. Two different ways of moving forward are identified.

**Preparation Strategies**

Church conflicts related to different spiritual priorities have potential for good outcomes in the congregation. The following are examples of the kinds of preparation strategies to consider.

(1) Initial preparation includes pastors educating themselves about the basic ideas of Kohlberg, Fowler, or Peck in order to have a better grasp of the spiritual priority categories.

(2) Sermons about controversial issues can be presented in a way that is meaningful to parishioners in each of the groups, and the issue can be stated in a way that models respect. Specifically addressing both the “letter of the law” and the “spirit of the law” could be helpful.

(3) Creating a work group that could suggest usable rules appreciated by orderliness church members could be helpful. Including an emphasis on when the rule should be reviewed might be helpful to those from the integration group. Openly identifying the spoken and unspoken rules of the church could help raise awareness about the influence of rules, especially if rules from the past that are no longer used could be named. Identifying which issues the rules address, which rules are long term, and which rules are shorter term might help people from the two groups find some common ground.

(4) Classes could be offered to teach church members about the spiritual priorities and model acceptance of the different experiences.

(5) Small groups could be structured to deal with an issue from each of the four different spiritual priorities perspectives. Ground rules for interaction could include an emphasis on accepting each group member and not trying to change anyone else’s views. Participants could be encouraged to indicate which of the spiritual priority perspectives helps them deal with the issue being examined. It could be thought of as practicing what each of us experiences from God—acceptance of us where we are, or starting with us where we are.

(6) Educating each new church member about the reality of peoples’ differing spiritual priorities, or about a model of spiritual development, and
emphasizing how to handle differences respectfully could slowly build an expectation that differences in a congregation are normal, and that people are tolerated despite their sincere differences.

(7) A group of interested parishioners could be trained to teach church members in different spiritual priority categories to talk respectfully to each other about controversial issues without severing their relationships. The training would need to include how to teach or model specific skills in listening and assertiveness—skills intended to operationalize love in conversation—along with recognition of spiritual categories. When the trainees eventually led groups, a strong emphasis on skillful interaction could help maintain a good group process.

Such preparation assumes an active engagement of the conflicts that are inherent between those from the orderliness group and those from the integration group. A concerted effort over the course of a year could go a long ways toward reducing tension between the groups. They might be more respectful of each other, less often question the validity of each other’s faith, and be more able to engage cooperatively when decisions about how to move forward are needed. It is more likely that, in such a congregational climate, those in the inquiry category could stay within the church as they ask difficult questions and experience support in their necessary spiritual work.

**Conflicts Related to Personality**

*Personality conflicts* are commonly experienced in day-to-day church life. Most of them are described as people not able to get along due to power struggles or differences of opinion. Generally speaking, these differences of perspective about how to proceed are contained to a small number of parishioners, time limited, and restricted in scope. The whole congregation is not involved or polarized. When it is resolved, there are few lingering effects.

There is a kind of personality conflict, however, that is much more severe and can have long-lasting effects on the life of the local church. These conflicts involve parishioners who can be described clinically as having a *personality disorder* of some type. Nearly all congregations have one or more people that fit this sort of descriptive category. Basic knowledge about two types of personality disorders is necessary before considering how to prevent damage from the sorts of conflicts they create in congregations.

For the vast majority of church folks, bad days and regrettable behavior happen occasionally. The difficulties these cause can generally be overcome. But for the adults with a serious personality disorder, the severely defensive response pattern anyone might display on a rare bad day is prevalent in many situations with many different people. It is a way of life. Psychologist Gregory W. Lester
says, “They wreak havoc in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. And they don’t see anything wrong with what they are doing.” In reality, all of us display personality disorder traits—some days more, some days less. The difference is that individuals with personality disorders are on the severe end of the continuum a good deal of the time. It is a matter of degree.

Two types of personality disorders can be particularly difficult for a congregation to live with and can cause damaging conflicts in congregational life. The first, *borderline personality disorder*, has traits that are some of the most difficult to deal with. It might be described as a disorder of instability—both internally and behaviorally. These people have a difficult time holding a steady view of themselves and others. This is most notable in intimate or close working relationships. They experience exaggerated and intense responses.

Such behaviors in churches are not easily recognized, but there are some clues to suggest when you are encountering it. The most likely places will be in the close working relationships of staff, committees, long-term small groups, ongoing pastoral care, and so forth. Borderline instability is most likely to appear when contact is consistent and interactive. If you are adored as a completely trustworthy church servant one day and then, though you have no knowledge of any relational complication, are despised as a traitor to your calling the next, you may have encountered a borderline response. A church member with borderline personality disorder is unlikely to keep a steady view of someone for very long. A borderline reaction may be present when you encounter extremely intense defensiveness and anger the day following your appropriate show of emotional support, because intimacy cannot be tolerated. On the other hand, if you had not shown the support you may have encountered the same thing, because of a fear and expectation of abandonment.

Individuals with full-blown borderline personality disorders regularly set up alliances and opposition camps in organizations they are part of. Researcher Gregory Lester writes:

> I consulted with a professional’s office in which a person with Borderline Personality Disorder had been hired as office manager. Within six months the previously good friends in the office were at each other’s throats, and there was talk of disbanding the office.¹²

People with this disorder do this, at least in part, by treating some members of the group as “all good” and others as “all bad.” They also present themselves very differently to different people or sub-groups within an organization. If the borderline dynamics are not discovered and understood, the result is nearly always polarization within the organization. For example, a social service agency may have trouble coordinating services for a client with borderline personality
disorder, because the client presents so differently to different agency workers. In such situations, it is not unusual for coworkers to doubt the validity of the impressions of their colleagues. Disagreement and conflict may result.

The same dynamics can create severe conflict in churches. Although the borderline party may be unaware of it, his way of operation can soon set up deeply charged factions within a staff, an administrative board, or a committee. The most telltale sign of borderline presence in church life may be the markedly altered state of formerly good working relationships. If the adult education committee generally worked well together and now it seems fragmented or polarized, the possibility of this personality disorder being present may need to be considered.

A second personality disorder that can be the source of church conflict is rooted in narcissism. Every normal person has narcissistic needs and benefits from these needs being met. Affirmation of a good effort is valued. Praise for an award is enjoyed. Special treatment on a birthday is appreciated. Words of admiration are always welcome. And it is usual for family and close friends to be happy with the recipient of such kindness.

At the other end of the continuum is the adult who organizes her life around securing a never-ending supply of praise, affirmation, special treatment, and admiration. For the person with narcissistic personality disorder, no supply of adulation is enough to satisfy narcissistic cravings for long. Such an individual might be thought of as grandiose, arrogant, self-inflated, and having a strong sense of entitlement. Close observation reveals that the person with narcissistic personality disorder is greatly concerned with her image. Appearance, cultivation of reputation, external indicators of status, etc., are all used to bolster an image that elicits the desired attention. The purpose of the image maintenance is to secure feedback. So, contrary to initial impressions, narcissism is not about excessive self-love; instead, a consuming love of image is at its core. Because image, like a reflection, has no depth, individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are relatively empty inside. They have very little self-awareness and an extremely limited capacity to understand someone else’s experience or perspective—to walk in their shoes. Thus, responding with empathy is not possible, and genuine interest in others is not likely.

Relational difficulties for people with narcissistic personality disorder are many, and these can readily cause or contribute to conflicts in churches. For example, they cannot tolerate criticism because it doesn’t support their grandiose image or meet their needs for admiration. Even accurate and well-intended criticism is seen as unfounded or mean-spirited and is responded to with disproportionate defensiveness. Likewise, disagreement is problematic. Since there is both a
limited capacity to see things from another person’s perspective and an elevated sense of specialness, it is surprising, if not unbelievable, that others see things differently. In addition, the differing view or perception is seen as wrong—always—and no effort is spared in establishing the other’s error. Further escalation of the conflict arises when third parties are recruited for support. If they only hear the narcissistic view, they are likely to believe it because the upset presenter genuinely believes it and, therefore, sounds very convincing.

Two categories of church conflicts commonly arise out of narcissism. The first involves a parishioner or leader with the full-blown personality disorder. Such a person is concerned with image and might seek out positions of congregational leadership believed to offer power, prestige, title, and so forth. Problems related to criticism and differing opinions are likely to increase in proportion to the prominence of the church position or office. A senior or associate pastor position within a team or shared power structure would be at risk for conflict. Any pastoral position requiring genuine empathy in pastoral care or counseling would be at risk for problems. High level lay leadership positions that require a good deal of cooperative work would not be likely to go well. Severe and destructive conflicts could arise in any of these situations. On the other hand, if such an individual finds an office that matches his image, it could work out fairly well.16

The second type of church conflict from narcissistic origins is more subtle and more typical. Remember, everyone can be placed somewhere on a continuum of “very few” to “very many” narcissistic traits. The reality is that on some days we display these traits more prominently than on others, but the person with narcissistic personality disorder displays them regularly. It can be argued that certain social factors support the elevation of narcissistic traits. Two such factors that pertain to the position of the professional minister are presently found in Protestant church culture in the United States.

First, by and large, the laity considers the pastor to be a special person called out by God, someone who models an exemplary Christian life. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that they see the pastor as an extraordinarily spiritual person who lives a more godly life than most others can hope to attain. These presumptions are clearly communicated to young adults who decide to enter seminary training and are reinforced at times of transition to new ministerial positions. This is conveyed privately through direct comments and publicly through prayers and special church services. The message is one of admiration, specialness, status, and support.

Second, that message is very appealing to someone with even slightly elevated narcissistic needs. If that person happens to be a young, bright, dedicated church
member, the idea of being a pastor would seem quite inviting. In some ways this is a very good match—the young person gets important needs met and the church gets a pastor. However, certain church conflicts may arise. For example, such young pastors, early in their careers, might be prone to accept positions beyond their level of competency. This would be an understandable response with the convergence of a trait like mild grandiosity being reinforced by church culture messages of specialness. In this kind of position, the young, slightly narcissistic pastor is more likely to make mistakes due to lack of experience and excessive self confidence and is less likely to deal well with constructive criticism or disagreement. This could prompt the pastor to withdraw from the ministerial profession or to continue with a good deal of confusion and inner pain. Or, it could create a dynamic of ongoing conflict between the pastor and the well-intentioned congregational leaders that is not easily resolved. If not resolved, the lack of trust that results can damage the sense of well being for both the pastor and the congregation. The congregation might wonder why they were sent such an inadequate pastor. On the other hand, they might end up being divided in their support—some standing firmly behind the still special pastor and some on the side of other congregational leaders.

**Preparation Strategies**

Conflicts related to personality are best avoided. In order to prevent them, the following strategies should be considered.

1. People that exhibit strong borderline personality disorder traits should not be put in positions of church leadership. If, as is often the case, this is discovered while serving in leadership, they should not be reappointed or rehired. Straightforward support of the individual and clear statements of limitations on their future roles need to be offered simultaneously. If, for their well being or the well being of the group, they need to leave the congregation, they should be supported in this change.

2. Parishioners with strong narcissistic traits need to be well-matched to particular leadership positions.

3. Pastoral leaders with elevated narcissistic traits should be hired for roles suited to their experience and demonstrated competencies.

4. Seminaries do a good service for young pastors in training, and for congregations, when elevated levels of narcissism are identified and appropriate help given prior to graduation.

5. A lowered status for the concept of somehow being special because of “being called to ministry” might eventually help church culture change so that it invites less elevation of narcissism in pastors.

6. Churches with concern for leaders with pronounced personality issues should suggest therapeutic help and thus make it possible to transition out of the
leadership role more easily. With professional help, it may be possible to reemerge later as a useful leader.20

Conflicts Related to Family of Origin

Family-of-origin conflicts might also be thought of as transference conflicts. The roots of this type of church conflict are found in unresolved family-of-origin issues that are transferred to the church setting. As is the case with the personality conflicts, these conflicts involve strong reactions from the participants. Parishioners or church leaders in these conflicts might not be aware of why they feel so strongly about the perspective they support because the connection to family-of-origin experiences is not easily recognized. These conflicts are thoroughly discussed in literature about church conflict dynamics written from the “family systems” theoretical perspective. The writings of Edwin H. Friedman are a good example.21

Families are not perfect. Even in well-functioning families, parents are acutely aware of their failures or mistakes in child rearing. Everyone enters adulthood with some psychological baggage from their family of origin.22 Churches represent another place to have a family-like experience of being valued and cared for. It is no wonder that church members and church leaders alike hope that a church family will treat them well. When someone comes from an especially disturbed home, this need for a better experience can become pronounced and influence behavior, attitudes, and expectations in church relationships. Church participants who experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, mental illness, or addictions in their families of origin may be especially hopeful of an altruistic and healing experience. Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against bringing this hope for human love to the believers’ community, it seems nearly unavoidable.23

Toward this end, the pastor24 may be idealized as the loving father or mother25 that didn’t exist in the years of childhood. Pastoral mistakes or failures in relationships may be especially painful for such parishioners. Extended or potent church conflicts that involve pastors can elicit responses of extreme disappointment, disbelief, or even abandonment. Failures of love are common in churches as well as families. When this happens in a church conflict situation, it may trigger deeply rooted protective responses, which can intensify the conflict within the church.

One example is the family-of-origin situation of alcohol abuse by the father. Because a child is dependent and has no other father, it is common for the child to develop (or maintain) an intense loyalty, even in the face of parenting that is neglectful, inadequate, abusive, or in other ways undeserving. When the child grows up, this same dynamic of undeserved loyalty, if never resolved, may be
transferred to the church pastor. During church conflict centered on a pastor’s poor performance, it may show up as unswerving loyalty and serve to intensify an already painful situation.

Other dysfunctional family-of-origin survival dynamics such as enabling irresponsible behaviors, behaving in excessively controlling ways, victimization responses, or conflict avoidance can all cause or complicate church conflict. Problems with these kinds of transferences are especially prevalent when the conflict involves church leaders.

**Preparation Strategies**

Conflicts related to family-of-origin issues cannot be avoided in church settings, but some can be minimized or contained. The strategies below may be useful.

1. Pastors need to develop awareness of their own transference issues so that they do not unknowingly act these out in their work setting. Peer consultation or supervision can be helpful in identifying these issues. When a pastor notes that intense responses similar to those experienced during painful family-of-origin circumstances are happening at work, therapeutic help should be sought.

2. Pastors do well to educate themselves about the concept of transference. During times of church conflict, parishioners with overly intense responses may need to be referred to psychotherapy in order to get the support they need and to avoid being hurt again, or even traumatized. Pastors who know the histories of their church members might be especially helpful in making such referrals.

3. When a highly intense church conflict does arise, members with notable transference issues should not be given central roles in the conflict resolution process.

**Conflicts Related to Domination**

Church conflicts related to domination of one type or another continue at a church-wide and congregational level. Usually these are couched in terms of biblical interpretation, theological positions, or formal church traditions, although they might also be understood from the “spiritual priorities” perspective referred to earlier. Domination is at work when any group of people is held in less-than-equal status because of something that cannot be changed. Race, gender, and sexual orientation have all been dealt with through domination dynamics in the church—both historically and currently. More subtle elements of domination can be seen in economic or class divisions, attitudes toward age as it pertains to the elderly and to children, or even the status attached to a person’s last name. Any way of establishing who the “insiders” are can be explained, at least in part, by the dynamics of domination,
because establishing “insiders” also establishes “outsiders,” and “outsiders” have limited power.

Church conflicts are likely to arise whenever a dominant group is asked to share power. Whether the power is realized formally in terms of position and status, or informally in terms of inclusion and acceptance, conflict emerges. The nature of church conflict is often about differing perceptions of how to move forward, and all of these domination dynamics in the church are about differing answers to the question of how to move forward.

Preparation Strategies

Conflicts related to domination are likely to be reduced by a number of direct steps.

(1) Educating parishioners about the presence of various kinds of domination dynamics within the congregation is often fruitful. Raising awareness is an important first step, because many participate unknowingly in subtle forms of domination, such as insensitive use of language or perpetuating “insider” dynamics, and will discontinue it when they become aware of it. Intentional assimilation of new adult church members into the active life of the congregation can reduce the “insider” dynamic and inject new energy into the system at the same time.

(2) Prevention of church conflicts about more entrenched forms of domination can be based on many of the same strategies suggested in the spiritual priorities section.

(3) Sermon illustrations can also convey how Jesus included the disenfranchised of his historical period. Further stressing Christ’s stance of compassion as a new church rule may be helpful. This could be reinforced by having study groups identify those in the community who endure current forms of domination, or by having them develop rules of Christian living based on Christ’s model of compassion toward such groups.

Conflicts Related to Church Structure

A final type of church conflict is rooted in structural or organizational issues. These are more straightforward. Nonetheless, they can be difficult because they represent a change in the way things have been in the congregation. A common example is the structural conflict that follows a significant size change in a congregation—for example, when a young congregation of forty people becomes a larger congregation of three hundred people. The informal, relaxed system of communication that worked for forty people does not do as well for three hundred. A pastor-centered leadership which allowed for decisions to be made easily for a smaller group may not have the same results in the larger group.
Figuring out how to change, or even that change is needed, can be a surprisingly painful process. A pastor with different interests and abilities may be needed, or an additional pastor may be necessary to help with the increased amount of work. A formalized system of self-governance with written job descriptions will need to be developed. All of these changes have to be discussed, and with discussion comes conflict because there is often more than one idea about how to move forward.

**Preparation Strategies**

Conflicts about church structure can be prepared for and minimized.

1. Pastors do well when they educate themselves and their parishioners about the usual dynamics and needs of congregations that change size. Helping church laity anticipate the needed changes is likely to reduce negative outcomes.

2. Training the congregation’s leaders about formal and informal systems of operation can help deliberate choices be made about which system, or what combination, could best meet the church’s current needs.

3. Undertaking the task of regularly clarifying matters as simple as what kinds of memorial gifts can be accepted and how the donors can expect the gifts to be handled will help the congregation avoid many small conflicts. Regular reviews or revisions of staff job descriptions, and basing staff evaluations on these, can reduce the number of conflicts related to unclear expectations. Task descriptions of committees also need regular review.

4. The congregational mission statement can be used to help coordinate organizational effort overall and to refine organizational structure.

**Conclusion**

Work dedicated to preparing for church conflict is likely to translate into a reduction in the amount of conflict-related pain endured by the congregation. Some common church conflicts are best avoided, while others need to be embraced. Knowing the difference is crucial. The church’s sense of community is affected greatly by choices about how conflict is handled, and preparation for good choices deserves increased effort. Handling conflict well is a worthy demonstration of Christian love and benefits all those involved.

**ENDNOTES**

1. In a recent study of organizational conflict, author Susan Meyer found that adaptive conflict-handling styles reduce the amount and intensity of future conflicts. Forceful styles increase the amount and intensity of future conflicts and inhibit productivity in the work place. It is reasonable to think that these findings would apply to church organizations as well (Meyer, “Organizational Responses to Conflict: Future Conflict and Work Outcomes” *Social Work Research* 28 (2004), 183-190).

2. A recent book suggests that we have much to learn about this (D. B. Lott, ed., *Conflict Management in Congregation* [Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001]). In part, this is because many church conflicts are
complex, and simple approaches to resolution are usually inadequate. The struggle is to find usable approaches that are also sophisticated enough to deal with the complexities.

3 While not all kinds of church conflicts can be anticipated, many can. Those are worth preparing for.

4 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster). Not that Peck does this in his writing, but we readers may be prone to do so. Peck emphasizes that love among people of different stages of spiritual development is a necessary ingredient to the attainment of community.

5 Stage 1: chaotic, antisocial; stage 2: formal, institutional; stage 3: skeptic, individual; stage 4: mystic, communal (Peck, *Different Drum*, 187-200).

6 The core element of “spiritual priority” is not from Peck’s book.

7 Obviously, these are not rigid categories. Fluid captures it better. Some people are organized around one priority primarily, but may have moments of acting from one of the other priorities. And it is also possible to fit one group in one aspect of spiritual life and another group in another aspect of spiritual life. It might be said that all priorities are inside each of us to varying degrees.

8 At this point, the survival perspective is still more motivated by fear and self-survival. The rule validity conflict is both too risky and the behavior of others may be beyond this church member’s scope of concern. Meanwhile, the inquirer questioning of the role, if it happens at all, is usually done privately or outside the church’s boundaries. (A notable exception is on the Christian college campus.)

9 Psychological and spiritual stability, for someone from the orderliness group, correlates with clearly defined, well-categorized, and consistent interpretations of faith. This could also be explained, at least in part, by Piaget’s concept of “concrete thinking” (non-symbolic thinking) in his theory of cognitive development. From this cognitive perspective, it is not surprising that the orderliness individual is likely to favor many views (political, world, marital, parenting, etc.) that are clearly defined, well categorized, and consistently interpreted. Likewise, the psychological and spiritual stability, for someone from the integration category, correlates with interpretations of faith that account for the gray between the black and white, that are more centered on similarities, inclusiveness, and interrelatedness, and that rely on restating the essence of faith in response to new situations. This could also be explained, at least in part, by Piaget’s concept of “abstract thinking” (symbolic thinking) in his theory of cognitive development. From this cognitive perspective, it is not surprising that the integration individual is likely to favor views (political, world, marital, parenting, etc.) that are sensitive to cultural variations and communal values.

10 Personality disorders are generally attributed to troubles in certain stages of development in childhood. Brain functioning and genetics are also being studied as potential causes for these disorders. Ten types are identified in the *DSM IV*, a diagnostic book used by mental health professionals.


14 In the ancient myth, Narcissus didn’t fall in love with himself, but with the image of himself in the pool—with his reflection.

15 Unless they have learned that appearing to be interested can be self-serving.

16 For example, if a wealthy narcissistic executive has a self-image of being a “kind and generous guy,” he might do quite well as someone in charge of charitable giving to needy people in the broader community. He could do especially well if he could make the deliveries and personally receive the words of thanks and appreciation, and even better if he had an opportunity to regularly update the congregation on how many people had been helped. These experiences would support his image, serve his needs for admiration and status, and simultaneously help the congregation function well. A senior position in a highly hierarchical structure, a structure where the new senior pastor is expected to hire their own staff immediately, a church where the new senior pastor is expected to be a charismatic leader with high levels of authority and little responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the church, or a solo position might be able to meet narcissistic needs and work well or even flourish.

17 Psychodynamic theory suggests that a marked lack of empathic and understanding responses to normal (primary) narcissistic needs during childhood produces an adult with high levels of unmet narcissistic needs. The healthy push towards growth means that such adults continue to try and get those needs met by generating empathic and understanding feedback.
This can be further supported by the broader professional culture that values advancement in status and pay. The internal pain is related to a “narcissistic injury”—specialness is doubted. Seminaries do well to inform congregations of a student’s readiness in the area of personality issues. Congregations who are considering hiring a minister with a history of pronounced church conflict would be wise to ask for a formal psychological evaluation and to have it interpreted by a skilled professional psychologist.

Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985). Because a high percentage of church conflict literature uses this basis of explanation, it is referred to only briefly while discussing conflicts in this section.


Or any other respected member of the church community.

Sister or brother, son or daughter.


Conflict dynamics commonly found between the orderliness and integration groups are often present in domination conflicts.