When Sheep Squabble — Dealing With Conflict in the Smaller Church

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 Message This

The small church revolves around the close relationships formed within the congregation. Because of this, many believe that a small church is a place where deeply caring people who love one another and mutually support each other gather to worship, where conflicts are nonexistent, and where “never is heard a discouraging word.”

While this is true of many smaller congregations most of the time, it is not true of every congregation all the time. Conflict is a reality that confronts a congregation regardless of how loving and caring the people are. The difference between a loving congregation and one settling into patterns of warfare is not the amount of conflict or the intensity of conflict, but the way they respond to and resolve conflict.

Loving churches resolve conflict with minimal damage to long-term relationships. Warring congregations allow conflicts to fester and grow. They never seek resolution and often add new conflicts to their existing problems.

Since conflict is a reality pastors face in small-church ministry, they need to understand the dynamics of conflict within the small church and develop godly methods for resolving it. While conflict can affect a church of any size, when it arises in a small church it can devastate the spiritual well-being of the congregation and undermine its ministry for years to come.

The Dynamics Of Small-Church Conflict

When tensions develop because people disagree, even two or three individuals within the congregation, the small church experiences spiritual stress and emotional upheaval. Conflict can be especially traumatic for the people and pastor as they try to deal with the crisis.

Conflict undermines the morale of the pastor

One significant problem in a small church is the isolation of the pastor. In a small church there are no staff members from whom to obtain emotional and spiritual support. When issues arise the pastor often faces them alone.

This isolation is especially acute when pastors are embroiled in a controversy that involves the board. Because pastors do not have anyone to confide in, they lack the input and wisdom that could be gained from someone who understands the issues and can provide the unbiased counsel needed to resolve the problems.

Many pastors in small churches in isolated communities also experience the compounded effects of isolation. They often feel overlooked and abandoned. Even their denominational leaders may sometimes seem distant and unavailable to them and their congregation.

Some pastors find comfort and counsel from other pastors in the area, but small-church pastors often do not have this option. There may be no local ministerial association and the nearest church may be miles away. As a result pastors become easily discouraged and soon feel overwhelmed by the conflict. When they can no longer maintain a positive perspective, they start seeing the situation as hopeless and soon leave the church or ministry.

Conflict undermines the morale of the small church

The morale of a small church is often fragile. Because the church may struggle with finances, staff, and resources, there is a concern that the church will no longer be viable. A small church can become discouraged if other churches grow and it does not. The people can become discouraged if new families visit, but go to the church down the road because it offers more programs. The positive characteristic they cling to is “we are a loving church.” If, however, the church becomes embroiled in a conflict, it undermines the one characteristic that is the strength of the church. The discouragement this causes adds fuel to the conflict, especially when people start blaming each other for the current problems.

Small churches often mask conflict under the guise of relational unity

A small church has a relational culture. The people can appear unified in public, but conflicts often remain hidden below the surface. Members may be resentful from past hurts and offenses, and even be angry and bitter.

In a small church there exists a cultural obligation for people to get along, to help one another and work together. This cultural expectation pressures people to overlook their differences and look beyond the petty quarrels that divide people. This can often challenge people to resolve their conflicts, but it can also become a mask behind which conflict simmers and festers, and eventually explodes and divides the church. The tensions may never degenerate into open warfare, but a cold war can exist where people manipulate church politics to undermine their opponents’ programs or ideas.

Conflicts affect the whole

A disagreement between two individuals in a larger church may remain unnoticed by the rest of the congregation; but in a smaller congregation, the whole church feels the tension. A small church operates as a whole. People want to know what is going on in every program and ministry, even if they are not directly involved. Consequently, everyone becomes aware of a conflict between two individuals. They will intuitively sense the tension, even if they are not fully aware of the issues.

This can be beneficial if the congregation puts pressure on the individuals to resolve their differences, but it can also be destructive when people start choosing sides. This polarization can happen because of existing bloodlines in the church. When the conflict involves two prominent families, clan warfare can arise as each tribal chief fights for dominance.

Conflicts affect the testimony of the church

The future ministry of the church can be affected when people become angry and bitter with one another. This is especially true for churches in smaller communities where the population remains static. People in the community say, “Well, I used to attend that church, but. …”

The ongoing conflicts that hinder the outreach of the church may not only stem from internal conflicts within the church, but also from conflicts within the community. When invited to attend the church, people say, “I would go to church, if so-and-so did not go there.”

A church that has a history of conflict may become known as “the church that can’t get along.” These scenarios are especially true when a past conflict was never resolved. Before the church can begin any significant outreach into the community, it may need to bring resolution to issues that happened decades ago.

Stress Points In The Small Church

Many issues can cause tension within a church. People have conflicts over values and goals. They disagree over issues of power and authority. Conflicts can also arise because people are discouraged and morale is low. These can undermine unity within the congregation. The small church is no more exempt from these issues than a large church. There are issues, however, to which a smaller congregation is more susceptible.

Conflicts because of cultural tensions

In the past, small churches, especially those in rural areas, were a homogeneous group unified around established cultural norms and values reflecting the homogeneous nature of the whole community. In recent years, however, there has been a dramatic shift in rural areas. People moving back into rural areas from urban areas create the potential for cultural tensions when traditional rural values and culture collide with urban values and culture. This not only affects relationships within the community, but it also affects relationships in the church.

Congregations become involved in tensions over music, versions of the Bible, dress codes, and other cultural differences. Concerns that are cultural become biblical issues when the division between cultural values and biblical values becomes clouded. When tensions arise, people not only disagree, but also see the opposition as being liberal or legalistic, and thus ungodly.

Conflicts also develop over nonreligious issues such as the environment, land-use policies, and other political issues being debated within the community. These political hot potatoes not only dominate the political landscape, but they also infiltrate the church. People on opposite ends of the political arena may be sitting on the same pew on Sunday. The tensions they experience in the secular world create tensions within the congregation and affect the congregation’s interaction and involvement with the secular community.

As these opinions collide, the church can provide reconciliation within the congregation and community. The church can have a significant witness, not by taking sides in the cultural battles, or remaining indifferent to them, but by demonstrating the ministry of reconciliation between people and pointing people to spiritual reconciliation with God (2 Corinthians 5:18–21).

Tribal warfare

Quite often a person or family within a small church becomes the tribal chief. This individual or family, because of past involvement, possess significant authority and influence in the church. This person may be in an official position of authority such as on the board, or he may not hold any recognized position. His influence, however, significantly controls the decisions and direction of the church. The congregation looks up to him.

Conflict arises in a small church when the tribal chief’s authority and influence are challenged. Often the challenge comes from the pastor as he finds himself at odds with this individual over the decisions and direction of the church. The result is tribal warfare in the congregation.

When the conflict is between the pastor and the tribal chief, people often will not openly oppose the pastor, but they will begin to withdraw from ministry positions and from financially supporting the church. In many cases, when the tribal chief conflicts with the pastor, the rest of the congregation will support the tribal chief and the pastor becomes isolated from the church and is eventually forced to resign.

Change

Change inevitably leads to conflict, even when the change is unavoidable. Change creates a conflict with the past as the church seeks to move forward to the future. Small churches have often been criticized for being rigid and unwilling to change. While this at times is true, in most cases people are willing to change, but they do not want to be forced into a change they do not understand or do not perceive as beneficial to themselves and to the church. When making a change creates a problem, most often it is not a reflection of the people’s attitude toward change, but the way the leader has introduced and handled the change.

Because the small church is relationally driven, people are not willing to embrace changes that may negatively affect relationships within the congregation. They will not embrace a change that is perceived to destroy a relational connection with past and present members who have built the church. For example, the church may resist changing the pews even though the old pews are terribly uncomfortable because John, who was a founder of the church, purchased the pews. For them, the issue is not the discomfort they feel during a service. The pews are a testimony to the heritage John left the church. Changing the pews would destroy the visible and tangible testimony of that heritage.

When making changes, the pastor must determine what the relational connections are and how to maintain them during the process. In the case of the pews, it may mean placing a plaque on the new pews that recognizes John and his contribution to the church.

Personalities

People disagree because people have different personalities. Some people enjoy country music, some enjoy classical music, and some enjoy contemporary music. Some people like red carpet, some prefer green, and some want no carpet at all. A church of 75 people has 75 different personalities. In a small church, people freely express their preferences and desires. While people may develop skills to work through the personality differences, there are times when those differences clash profoundly. Individuals become hurt and angry if they interpret the rejection of their ideas as a rejection of themselves. What seems to be a minor disagreement becomes a full-blown war as individuals fight for their personal identity.

While pastors encourage people to live out their faith as Paul challenges us in Philippians 2, placing the needs of others above their own rarely happens. People remain self-serving rather than self-sacrificing due to their uncontrolled carnal nature. Leaders must foster an atmosphere where people value the differences they have and realize that the strength of the church is not found in the homogeneity of the group, but in the diversity of the group, both in giftedness and personality.

Resolving Conflict Within The Small Church

Conflict in itself is not wrong or necessarily destructive. What is wrong and what causes the destruction of relationships is how people respond to conflict. The key to dealing with conflict is not to avoid it, but to properly resolve it. Many resources are available that can assist the pastor and board in conflict resolution.1 The following issues are relevant to resolving conflict in the small church.

Personal interaction

Because the small church is relationally driven, the first and most crucial element of conflict resolution is personal and direct interaction with the other person. Many conflicts between two people can be handled by a personal phone call or visit. The pastor can serve as an informal mediator between the two parties, helping them understand one another and come to a common and agreeable solution. The foundation of this approach to problem solving is the relationship the pastor has with the two people. If a pastor develops solid relationships with his people, they will respect and welcome his involvement in the situation. If the pastor, however, remains aloof and distant from his congregation, his involvement will be seen as an intrusion and cause the conflict to escalate. When issues arise between people that cause tension, the pastor should be able to go to them, listen and assess the issue, and provide suggestions for a quick and fair resolution. In a small church, the pastor is quickly aware of conflicts and usually has a positive, personal relationship with the people involved. This relationship provides opportunities for pastoral involvement in conflict resolution.

Board intervention

If the conflict affects a group of individuals, the whole congregation, or if the pastor becomes involved in the conflict, then the board must be included in the resolution process. The issue may be minor, and it may be one the pastor can address. But if the conflict is on a church issue, the board needs to be aware of it.

The board can provide prayer support for the people involved and emotional and spiritual support for the pastor as he seeks to bring about the resolution. It is a mistake for a pastor to make decisions that affect the congregation without first communicating to the board. The pastor then becomes the center of the conflict and is without any support. If the pastor has communicated clearly with the board and is acting on decisions that were jointly made, the board will unite and support the pastor even when people are critical.

Active intervention

A small church has a tendency to overlook conflict and sweep it under the carpet. This does not bring resolution, but creates subversive hostility. The people involved begin to develop bitterness and anger toward each other. When tensions arise, it is important for the pastor and board to become actively involved in making sure the issues are resolved.

To resolve the problems, the pastor and board chairman need to first meet with the individuals involved and determine the issues that gave rise to the hostilities. Second, once the issues are identified and clarified, then the pastor and board need to meet to discuss the problem and the kind of intervention needed. Third, in many cases the pastor and the board need to meet with the people involved to help them find a solution to the problem. When meeting with the individuals, the board should try to find a solution that both parties can support. Once a solution has mutual support, the people involved need to be asked to make a covenant with the other party stating that they will work toward the solution. Finally, once both parties agree to the solution, it is the responsibility of the board, not just the pastor, to hold the people accountable by ensuring that the agreement is lived out.

Preventing Conflict In The Small Church

While all conflict cannot and should not be avoided, many conflicts within the small church can be prevented. Many tensions can develop, not because of sinful behavior, but because pastors fail to communicate clearly and learn how to work with others.

Working with the tribal chief

Pastors can avoid being entangled in controversy by learning to work with the tribal chief of the congregation. Remember, this individual has considerable influence in the church. A pastor sometimes wrongly assumes that the tribal chief disagrees with his ideas because he is carnal and power driven. In most cases, however, the tribal chief has risen to the rank he holds because of his faith and long-term involvement in the church. A tribal chief often provides the spiritual stability small churches need during changes in pastoral leadership.

Because small churches tend to experience rapid turnover in pastoral leadership, people in the church do not always look to the pastor to provide the stability needed to see the church through difficult times. Rather, the tribal chief is the stabilizing influence. When a pastor seeks to unseat a tribal chief, he finds himself not only at odds with the tribal chief, but at odds with the congregation. When the church becomes unsettled because the pastor and the tribal chief have entered into conflict, the people will not look to the pastor for stability and security, but will turn to the tribal chief.

If a pastor desires to have influence in the growth and stability of the congregation, he must learn to work side by side with the tribal chief, gaining his trust and support. When the pastor enlists the support of the tribal chief for a new ministry or a change in ministry, the entire congregation will readily adopt the idea. They will no longer see the change as a threat to the stability of the church.

Orchestrate change carefully

Most change results in conflict as the desired new methods clash with the established old methods. As a result, change involves a loss as well as a threat to the stability of the church. This is especially critical to a church that is struggling to exist. Even though the change may be necessary for the church to remain viable, people fear that the change may be the final action that pushes the church over the edge.

When a pastor seeks to make changes within a small church, it is important to orchestrate the change in a way that minimizes the threat and loss to the congregation. This involves clearly communicating why the change is necessary, communicating both the positive and negative effects the change may have, and then allowing people the freedom to accept or reject the change. It is important to gain the people’s consent and support when seeking approval for a change. The people need to give their support to the proposed, otherwise it will not be effective.

Maintain communication

Pastors often create tension because they assume everyone has heard and understood what has been communicated. Conflict usually arises because pastors have under-communicated rather than over-communicated. The rule of thumb is: the more significant the issue and the more it affects congregational life, the more pastors must communicate clearly and continually what is happening and why. This is especially true in the small church. The people want to know what is going on in every aspect of the ministry. The adage, “communicate on a need to know basis,” does not work in the small church. Communication in a small church is as critical and necessary as it is in a larger congregation, perhaps even more so. The people are interested in the church’s ministry and have a need to know.

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| Conflict Intervention:   * What is the issue that is causing the conflict? * Who are the individuals involved? * What needs to occur for resolution to happen? * What are the possible solutions to the disagreement? * What is the best solution? * Are the parties willing to accept the solution? |

Conclusion

Conflict is a reality in every church, whether it is large or small. The task of pastoral leadership is not to eradicate every conflict in the church, but to help people resolve the conflicts in a way that honors Christ, protects the people, and manifests love within the congregation. To achieve this, the pastor of a small church must be proactive in conflict resolution. Too often, pastors assume that love will override the conflict because a small church is relationally driven and enjoys close interpersonal relationships. This is often not the case.

Unresolved conflict becomes the seedbed of dissension and division and can destroy the closeness of the church and undermine its ministry. Pastors need to be active in assisting people to communicate openly and honestly about disagreements and to work toward mutually agreeable solutions.

When the board becomes involved in the resolution, the effects of the tension on the whole congregation will be minimized. When the congregation knows the board is united, they are more willing to remain on the sidelines rather than become involved in the dispute. Furthermore, when they see the issue being resolved by the board, they are less likely to become stressed by the crisis. Instead, they will remain confident that God is at work in the church.

When pastors resolve conflict in a godly manner and communicate clearly with the board, they maintain a spiritually healthy and vibrant church even in the midst of disagreements. Conflict does not need to destroy the ministry of the pastor or the church. It can become a springboard for spiritual growth as people learn to communicate clearly, love unconditionally, and forgive completely. It is not the absence of conflict that distinguishes a loving church, but the resolution of it. When pastors successfully resolve conflict within the church, it distinguishes the church from an unloving world where bitterness, anger, and hostilities destroy relationships. When the people in the church love their enemies, accept one another in spite of their differences, and resolve their disagreements, then all men will know that they are Christ’s disciples from the love they have for one another (John 13:35).

Endnote

1. Norman Shawchuck, ***How To Manage Conflict in the Church, vol. 1***and***2***(Glendale Heights, Ill.: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1984). Also, Edward G. Dobson, Speed B. Leas, Marshall Shelly, ***Mastering Conflict and Controversy***(Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1992)