

Choosing the Right Response to Conflict

Different conflicts call for different responses. Many can be resolved quickly and easily. Some require decisive involvement of the church leadership. In other cases, the church will need to ask for outside help to resolve the conflict to avoid serious, long-term damage to the church. Answer the following 10 questions to determine which category your church's conflict falls in.

1. Do some people hold back from giving their honest views because they feel that those who hold different views do not want to hear what they have to say or for fear of being attacked ?
Yes No
2. Are there one or more conflicts serious enough that they are hindering the church's ability to make unified decisions on significant issues?
Yes No
3. Is bad behavior within the church--such as name calling, gossiping, showing disrespect to leaders, intimidation, quarreling, disrupting meetings, lying, insubordination, attributing negative motives to others, etc.--being allowed to continue without people being held accountable for their behavior?
Yes No
4. Has ongoing conflict become a hindrance to the mission and witness of the congregation?
Yes No
5. If so, has the church's leadership clearly defined a process for dealing with the conflict? Is that plan being diligently implemented?
Yes No
6. In these areas, have you seen substantial progress on resolving the conflict during the past four months?
Yes No
7. Is the senior pastor perceived as being so identified with the divisive issues that he or she cannot be effective as a neutral facilitator in resolving conflict?
Yes No
8. Do a critical mass of your leaders agree that the situation is serious and urgent?
Yes No
9. Has the pain of *not* doing the hard work of change become greater than the pain of doing the hard work of change?
Yes No
10. Are your leaders committed to understanding the root causes of the conflict and doing the hard work of making fundamental changes to restor health rather than just "putting out the fires?"
Yes No

What your answers mean

Question 1 relates to conflict avoidance. Most churches have a culture of conflict avoidance--sweeping conflict under the rug in hopes that it will take care of itself. While some minor conflicts dissolve on their own, a pattern of conflict avoidance always eventually leads to volcanic eruptions.

The irony is that churches that avoid or ignore conflict end up being bitten by it. In a healthy church the leaders are equipped to “mine for conflict,” to make healthy, vigorous conflict a part of every decision-making process. (See *Why Your Church Needs Conflict*.)

The correct answer to Question 1 is *yes*. Surprised? The answer is *yes* because in every church, even those that are most proactive about making teams a safe place for conflict, there are always “some” people who hold back from expressing their views out of fear. This is why in the healthiest churches, ministry team leaders must constantly be intentional about creating safety for those who are afraid to express their views and rewarding people for saying difficult things even if they disagree with those views. A church never outgrows the need to work vigorously at making it safe for people who are hesitant to weigh in.

An answer of *no* suggests a general unawareness of the fear of conflict that exists to some degree in every church. Without an awareness of this, the church will not be proactive in equipping leaders to facilitate healthy conflict.

Questions 2 through 4 identify unhealthy conflict that is damaging the church. If you answered *yes* to one or more of these questions, your situation calls for a prompt, decisive response. Allowing it to continue without intervention cripples the church and demonstrates a failure of leadership.

Questions 5 and 6 are about the church leadership’s response to crippling conflict. If you answered *yes* to both of these problems, you are on the right track and probably well on your way to resolution. If a significant conflict has continued for more than four months without clear progress toward resolution, that is a major danger sign. Your leadership needs to act immediately to develop and implement an action plan to address the issues. If you do not see progress within four months, you may need to seek outside help.

Question 7 is a dead giveaway that outside help is needed. In conflicts between two or a few people, sometimes the pastor is not perceived as a party to a conflict and can help to mediate a resolution. However, when a congregation is divided, the senior pastor usually becomes identified with one group or another, regardless of whether the pastor has actually contributed to the conflict. However well-intentioned the pastor may be, if the pastor is not perceived as neutral by all sides, he or she is not in a position to facilitate the resolution process. This is true even if the pastor is trained and highly skilled as a mediator.

Questions 8 through 10 show whether a church is ready to benefit from outside help. Just because a church *needs* outside help doesn't mean it is *ready* for outside help. A lot of people need marriage counseling, but if they don't want marriage counseling, they are not likely to benefit from being dragged to the counselor's office.

For a church to be ready to invite outside help, a critical mass of the church's leaders must be convinced that the situation is serious and urgent. We have worked churches in crisis whose pastors or board members do not believe the church is in crisis. We cannot help those churches.

A church in serious conflict is only ready to do the hard work of dealing with the root causes of the conflict when the pain of not changing has become greater than the pain of changing. If the needed changes had been easy, the church would have done them a long time ago. Dealing with the issues will be hard, and the leaders must be committed to doing that hard work.

Finally, some people go to counseling when the pain becomes unbearable, but as soon as the pain subsides to a bearable level, they quit going without dealing with the root issues. When they do this, they waste a great opportunity to learn and grow. Some churches do the same thing. Painful church conflict is the cumulative result of unhealthy systems and practices in a church. Inviting in outside help gives the church a rare opportunity to gain insight into the church's core health and to make deep changes that can enhance the church's health and effectiveness for the next decade. When a church abandons the process as soon as the pain subsides, it wastes an amazing opportunity for growth and transformation.

Working through conflict presents a church with an amazing opportunity to make fundamental changes that can take the church to a much greater level of effectiveness. During a time of crisis, people are open to considering changes they would not consider at other times. Wise church leaders will make the most of the real opportunity created by seasons of conflict.