Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Congregation

One of the significant challenges for a new minister is the reality of conflict in congregational life. Most new ministers will be aware that conflict exists in churches, but may be surprised there might be issues that require attention in this church to whom he or she has been called. Yet, the opportunity of learning healthy and life-giving responses in the face of conflict is an essential dimension of effective ministry.

Conflict ministry is the description I give to all that one does in dealing with conflict in congregational life. It includes the preparation one makes in anticipating conflict, the responses to it, and rebuilding of relationships in the aftermath of tears in the fabric of church life. There is ministry to be done in every situation of conflict, even those that are unhealthy and unproductive. Some conflicts are opportunities for solving real problems and growth and learning are the outcome. Others are intense fights in which persons are offended, individuals are attacked, people leave, and everyone looks on the events experienced as negative. Growth and learning can be the outcome of those events also. Whatever the intensity of pain, there is ministry to be done when there is neither resolution nor management of the “wildfires” that can sweep through the church.

There are multiple dimensions to effective conflict ministry. The first is adequate preparation for understanding conflict, how it develops, and its impact on both ministers and churches. Let’s begin with what Hugh Halverstadt calls one’s “gut theology” of conflict. Many clergy and laity have a theology that all conflict is sin against God and is to be avoided at all costs. Jesus and the leaders of the early Church would have difficulty with such a perspective; they embraced the understanding that God works in and through those issues that arise about which there is disagreement and even painful warfare. The apostle Paul understood in II Corinthians 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” The church is a human community and will experience all of the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of families and all human organisms. Developing a theology of God’s presence in the ways in which we work in the midst of tension is an important learning for all ministers and laity.

The second important dimension of conflict ministry is accurate diagnosis of the realities of existing or developing conflict. If a new minister has not engaged in specific study of conflict in seminary, or the church has never engaged in training in dealing with conflict, it is important to develop a framework for how one will respond when conflict occurs. During the early months of one’s service in a first full time ministry, reading and reflecting on conflict processes will be useful preparation. Such resources as George Bullard, Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict; Peter Steinke, Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times; or David Sawyer, Hope in Conflict will be useful guides in diagnosing the intensity and nature of conflict realities.

Third, it is important for the new minister to have a sense of the stories of past conflict in the teaching congregation. They are clues to how the church will respond in the future. The Member Support Committee can be a valuable resource in teaching by being honest about problems in the church in the past. Responding to the following questions can be a learning opportunity for the minister that may help avoid serious mistakes:

- What are the conflicts the church has experienced in the past ten years?
- How were they handled?
- Who are the people most affected who are still present?
- How did the church change as a result of the conflict?
• How can I best respond in this context when difficult issues arise?

Fourth, the development in one’s mind and inner being of anticipated responses one might best make to potential or real conflicts can be helpful. A set of “guidelines” for how one will respond can be helpful, such as:

• I will speak directly with persons with whom I minister rather than about them to someone else.
• I will be lovingly honest about important decisions being made within the church, expressing opinions cautiously and with sensitivity to those who differ.
• I will seek to be fair with others.
• I will expect criticism for what I may do and will listen when it comes.
• I will attempt to stay connected to those who may not be in agreement with me.
• I will make every effort to work cooperatively with those in leadership within the pastoral staff and lay leadership of the congregation.
• When I make mistakes, and I know I will, I will willingly confess them and ask forgiveness of those I might offend or harm.

Fifth, it is important there be timely and honest feedback from key leaders to the new minister about how he or she is functioning. When the first challenge arises, have a conversation that is non-threatening, but direct, about the actions of the new minister. Certainly the pastor or staff supervisor should do such. But a conversation between a member or two of the Member Support Committee will be helpful in building confidence and growth in ministry effectiveness. A quarterly conversation between the support committee and minister offering practical suggestions for improvement in ministry and an annual evaluation of how well the minister is functioning will provide important learning. A mutual conversation about the quality of the relationship between committee and minister will help both grow in effectiveness.

Finally, it is important to be realistic in one’s expectations in situations of conflict. Some conflicts are like exercise—they build strength and health. Others are like debilitating diseases for which there is little healing. Even the best of God’s leaders, both lay and clergy, fail in the face of conflict and require forgiveness. Healthy teaching churches can model both health and forgiveness for those who need experience in becoming clearer about their calling, responding to challenges with confidence, and staying connected with their critics.
Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church Action Guide

Summary:

This module acknowledges the reality of the presence of conflict in congregations and stresses the value in preparing for conflict. In dealing with conflict the module gives attention to discussing assumptions and experiences with conflict, sharing stories of previous church conflicts, and engaging in honest and caring conversations to reflect and provide feedback on actions in previous situations.

Focus:

The focus of this module is to help the new minister build awareness and understanding of the church’s recent history with conflict. Healthy discussion about differing views and experiences of conflict will lead to an increase in understanding of one another’s views and how to approach conflict in the future.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and given to the group members.

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee:
In preparation for the next session on Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church review and plan to share your responses to the following:

1. What is your “gut theology” of conflict? (This doesn’t need to be any longer than a 2-3 minute response)
2. Please prepare your answers to the following questions prior to the next meeting:
   - What are the conflicts the church has experienced in the past 10 years?
   - How were they handled?
   - Who are the people most affected who are still present?
   - How did the church change as a result of the conflict?
   - How can I best respond in this context when difficult issues arise?

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee:
In preparation for the next session on Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church review and plan to share your responses to the following:

What is your “gut theology” of conflict? (This doesn’t need to be any longer than a 2-3 minute response)
Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)

Phase 1: Discussion on the “gut theology.”
Begin the session together by asking and allowing each member of the committee and the new minister to share their responses to the question, What is your “gut theology” of conflict? Ask for each person to take a turn and share his or her response. (They will have prepared these in advance). Suggest that this needs not be any more than a 2-3 minute statement. Allow for everyone to share his or her response before making any comments on what people have shared. Once everyone has shared their response, ask one or more of the following questions to stimulate a general discussion:

- What have we heard in the responses made?
- Where are the similarities in our views?
- What are the differences in our views?
- What does this tell us about how we might enter or discuss a situation of conflict?
- How might this help us to understand one another?

Phase 2: Sharing the church’s story and recent history with conflict.
Each person on the committee was to prepare for this session by identifying conflicts the church has dealt with in the past 10 years. The process for sharing these and discussing them has the potential to accomplish the following four things:

1. This will be of great service to the new minister in telling the church’s story and helping him or her be able to understand references that are made to these situations, being knowledgeable about the people involved in these.
2. The process will reveal how within your group people in the church experience the conflict differently, what people actually identify as conflict, and gain some consensus on what has been conflictual.
3. Some clarity may result.
4. Be aware that within this group there may be individuals who still see a particular issue differently, and may still have disagreements about the outcome.

The process here is to first identify the conflicts people know and remember in the form of a list. Ask this as a general question and take responses as people share them. No need to go in any particular order. List these on the board or some type of chart so that everyone can see them. (This helps to get them out in front, and provides a means for people to get perspective on the conflict). After the list has been generated lead the committee members to prioritize these in the following manner.

- Which conflicts are the most broadly known and experienced in the church?
- Work from the most visible and involved to the least in your priority list.
- In other words, which of these would the most people in the church know about, and which the least.

Once a priority list has been identified, as a group, share the story about this conflict. Use the questions from the essay (listed below) as the guide for sharing this story. Allow for the new minister and others, if necessary, to ask clarifying questions. (Remember, here it is important to share the story as people remember the story and as they experienced it.)

- How was this particular conflict handled?
- Who are the people most affected who are still present?
- How did the church change as a result of this conflict?
Phase 3: Dealing with future conflicts
Discuss and agree upon how the committee and new minister will plan to surface and address conflicts that arise in the future. (Review of the guidelines in the essay is a good place to start this discussion).

Additional Comments
If the new minister has not read one of the books recommended, then perhaps this should be an assignment.

The point person here may want to obtain at least one of these books and read it, in his or her role as the leader for this module.

It will be important for the new minister to know and be encouraged to bring questions regarding conflict, tensions and possible brewing conflict, and to bring to the committee issues that arise for the sake of exploring them, and learning how to handle them effectively, rather than how to avoid them.

A periodic check-in with conflict may be helpful. One approach is to have a quarterly conversation regarding suggestions for improving ministry. The committee and new minister might choose to set both a 6 month and 12 month meeting check in after the two year process.
Member Support Committee Assignment

In preparation for the next session on Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church review and plan to share your responses to the following:

1. *What is your “gut theology” of conflict?* (This doesn’t need to be any longer than a 2-3 minute response)

2. Please prepare your answers to the following questions prior to the next meeting:

   - What are the conflicts the church has experienced in the past 10 years?
   - How were they handled?
   - Who are the people most affected who are still present?
   - How did the church change as a result of the conflict?
   - How can I best respond in this context when difficult issues arise?
New Minister Assignment

In preparation for the next session on Conflict Ministry and the Teaching Church review and plan to share your responses to the following:

*What is your “gut theology” of conflict?* (This doesn’t need to be any longer than a 2-3 minute response)