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WHICH CONFLICT DO YOU HAVE? NEW CLERGY'S STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Like it or not, conflict is part of the life of churches. The Faith Communities Today 2000 national survey of 14,301 congregations found that, at any given time, about one-fifth of congregations are experiencing active conflict.¹

It's no surprise that recently ordained pastors and priests encounter an array of conflicts in their work in churches and other organizations. New clergy often have to navigate complex conflicts in the places they serve with minimal training in skills such as mediation, negotiation, or conflict resolution.

They also need to navigate the various theological assumptions people make about conflict and assertiveness. Churches especially tend to succumb to the allure of a theology of "niceness," avoiding confrontation and direct communication—and church staff members are certainly not exempt from this tendency.

Pastor Terry, a young, relatively new pastor serving as an associate, encountered such assumptions about conflict and assertiveness in the organizational culture of the church she served:

"The strength of my personality was 'inhibiting' the youth director from being able to 'do his job.' The head-of-staff [senior pastor] asked if I would be willing to sit down with a therapist and work through the issue. I said yes. Nothing ever came of it, and I never sat down with the therapist. What I did do was gain a new awareness of the power of my voice. I now have worked with the same youth director for seven years with a very healthy relationship that has much candor and honesty."

This quote reveals how, even within a conflict-averse system bent on containing assertiveness, one pastor showed remarkable new self-awareness, choosing to adapt her behavior in a way that did not undermine her strengths. It's a story as well about the grace by which two very different people learned to work effectively with one another.

Pastor Terry's experience is but one example of the wide range of conflicted situations that new clergy face. We asked some 350 alumni of [Transition into Ministry \(TIM\)](#) programs about conflict, and more than 250 wrote descriptions of "notable conflicts" they experienced in their current ministry settings. The following are frequently mentioned types of conflicts in these responses.

- [Conflict caused by individual behavior](#)
- [Staff conflicts around authority, respect, and responsibility](#)
- [Theological conflicts](#)
- [Conflicts triggered by change](#)

These types of conflicts are inevitable in almost any faith community. So, how have newer clergy dealt with these kinds of situations?

CONFLICT CAUSED BY INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

Most pastors and priests in ministry for a few years already have "war stories" about people who regularly engage in disruptive or destructive behavior. Janet, an associate for pastoral ministry in a congregation, found that leading pastoral care did not shield her from volatile behavior:

"I deal with small groups at church. Most recently, one group that is growing needed to split, and one woman in the group became volatile and so upset over the whole thing that the leader was warning me she would be calling me to talk about it. It is in the process of being resolved. I am trying to care for the woman and hear what is really going on with her deep down and figure out why she is so angry about it, while at the same time supporting the decision of the group leader (who prayerfully had discussed the split extensively with me as well as the small group before it occurred)."

In this case, care of the individual had to be balanced against care of the group and its boundaries.

In other cases, an egregious act requires more definitive confrontation and clarification of policy—which can itself foster healing and create a healthier atmosphere, even in the wake of emotional upheaval.

"Upon beginning at my current church, I discovered the long-time church secretary had embezzled thousands of dollars from the congregation. I requested an audit upon my arrival and discovered the inconsistencies. Unfortunately, this

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worker was much beloved by the congregation, and the situation was devastating to many in the church. My role was caretaker for the congregation in the aftermath of this situation, while also assisting the prosecutor in gathering evidence against her. When she was sent to prison, I worked through the grief process with the congregation as a whole.”

STAFF CONFLICTS AROUND AUTHORITY, RESPECT, AND RESPONSIBILITY

At the heart of many organizational conflicts are defended positions and beliefs about power and authority, respect, and responsibility. Clear processes and policies can help church leaders deal with such problems when they come up—and can help prevent leaders from getting caught up in their own issues of authority and respect. Pastor Daniel found such help in the structure of his church’s Personnel Committee, and was able to exercise supervisory leadership in a way that restored order and trust.

“Over the last two years, we have had to fire two staff people at the church. There was a concern about job performance and ability. As the pastor, I am the direct supervisor. In both cases there was a lack of respect, and trust was lost through the process that would have made any other decision than to fire very difficult. In both cases I worked closely with our Personnel Committee, tried to be clear about my opinions and listen to others, and carefully weigh the options. Both cases were emotionally draining, but the situations resolved without creating too much additional conflict. The Personnel Committee and I dealt directly with the situation and sought the best solution for the church as a whole. I am pleased to say, as a church, we are healthier and in a better place today having dealt with the issue rather than letting it linger.”

Unfortunately, not all recently ordained pastors and priests have such solid examples to follow in the area of church administration. Senior pastors and rectors can get caught up in their own stress, anxiety, and ways of perceiving power—with unfortunate consequences for those who report to them. Consider Sandra’s story:

“I was assigned the task of creating a summer children’s curriculum on diversity and was not informed by my supervisors that the start date had been bumped up to a day that I had already secured as a vacation day. When I discovered the dates had changed and realized that I would not be ready to pass the launch of the program on to volunteers, I asked about delaying the start of the program for another week. There had been some tensions between myself and my supervisor, so I know I didn’t articulate myself well as I made this request because I was nervous about how she would receive it. She cut me off in the middle of my request, criticized my way of expressing myself, yelled at me for dumping this in her lap while dumping everything she was struggling with in mine. I was so taken aback by the way she launched into me that I stepped back from the conflict. I did what I could to prepare the program for launch and solicit volunteers before going on vacation.



“I requested time to sit down and talk with her when I got back. When we did, she talked and made it clear that it was time for me to listen. I heard about how my behavior had been inappropriate and heard her talk about our conflict as an ‘unproductive conversation.’ She accused me of trying to embarrass her, when I had been trying to figure out clear expectations of my job. This conversation made it clear to me that we had such different experiences of the same encounter that to maintain a continued working relationship, it wasn’t safe or even possible to confront the conflict head-on. As the lowest member [on] the totem pole, I was expected to fall in line and never give the appearance of dissent or differing opinion. Keeping a smile on my face has lessened the tensions to the extent that day-to-day interactions are now less volatile than they were immediately following the conflict. However, it does not feel resolved.”

Even in such a situation, in which Sandra partly contributed to things going awry, the supervising pastor’s response sent a poor message. The “lesson learned” in this leadership system was to smile and toe the line—and not communicate directly. This negative experience might have had unfortunate future repercussions for Sandra were it not for her TIM peers and mentors, who helped her reflect on her situation and eventually find a new position.

THEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

“Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company....”

Acts 15:37-39a

Many church conflicts could be understood as at least partially theological, but some are primarily caused by theology. Clergy can stumble upon (or intentionally focus on) differing understandings of the Church, salvation, sacraments, scripture, and Christian discipleship and formation.

Consider the following example of a theological disagreement between co-pastors leading a new congregation.

“The first large conflict I had with my co-pastor came only a few months into our time together. Our small house church was already celebrating communion on a regular basis. It came to our attention that one of the integral people in this house church had not yet been baptized, and in fact had no desire to be baptized, seeing it as an ‘empty sign.’ Our

denomination's polity requires (in theory) that all communicants first be baptized. My co-pastor, having then a higher view of baptism than I and being more of a stickler for the rules of the church, wanted to exclude this young woman from communion. I was afraid that excluding her would destroy the relationships that we were seeking to build in our fledgling community. We agreed that eventually she should be baptized but could not agree on how to teach her the meaning of baptism or what to do about communion in the meantime.

"During a prolonged argument about whether or not she should take communion, my co-pastor insisted that she should not receive communion, while I insisted that excluding her would destroy the relationship we had already built. Eventually we agreed to let her continue to receive communion in the expectation that she would be baptized (an expectation that was fulfilled a year and a half later). My co-pastor only agreed to this, though, because of a mutually agreed-upon understanding that certain provisions of our denomination's polity did not apply to our church community until we chartered as a self-sustaining congregation. For him, the primary concerns in the conflict were orthodox understanding and practice of the sacraments and obedience to our denomination's rules. For me, the primary concern was maintaining the relationship that we had with our unbaptized communicant."

Several theological differences combined in this situation: differing theologies of baptism and communion; differing theologies of church order and authority; (unstated) differing theologies of the work of the Holy Spirit in individual spiritual journeys. It is commendable that this team found a solution together.

CONFLICTS TRIGGERED BY CHANGE

As churches struggle to reconcile the need to change over time with their desire to hold onto traditions they love, conflict is a natural result. These conflicts present opportunities for new clergy to learn how to pace and manage organizational change.

Daphne, a young church-planting pastor, learned the hard way to manage her own impulse toward rapid change, by intentionally listening to people about the impact that her behavior had on her new congregation.

"When I began my position creating a new church start with about a dozen members of a congregation that had closed, I made too many assumptions about the energy and flexibility that they had for the new start—and probably tried to change too much too quickly. They were almost all angry at me. I sought them out for one-on-one conversations and called meetings to discuss the issues. I readily apologized for my actions and tried to non-defensively explain my intentions, lest they believe I had acted with ill will toward them. Some of the members refused to speak to me; some went through the process and decided to leave; others agreed to keep working together. There is deeper mutual respect between myself and those who stayed. I still feel some guilt (and to be honest, some resentment) regarding those who refused to speak with me. With the others who chose to leave, I feel that we parted amiably, though with different visions for the Church and our respective places in it."

This is definitely a case of learning something the hard way—the price was particularly high for this solo pastor. Trying to change too much too quickly is a problem commonly faced by eager church planters. It is unfortunate that this very typical impulse of creative new pastors is rarely addressed through any training in organizational change.

Periodic insurrections do occur; people unhappy with the direction of leadership will find opportune moments to muster opposition. Ben, an associate pastor, was forced to deal with the fallout from open conflict—and as a result, he learned how to handle movements of resistance to change and to support senior leadership.

"The church I currently serve holds a lot of anxiety about its future: it has been declining in membership and in income for the past 50 years, and there are real, significant questions about whether it can make it in the years to come. In our situation, change is clearly necessary. The process of discerning what this change should be and how to bring about transformation has led to considerable conflict that is somewhat constant from a certain subset of the congregation. Recently, several folks in the church mailed out a letter that was critical of the senior pastor's ministry and of a position the church council was recommending, only days before the congregation was scheduled to gather and vote about whether or not to support the recommendation. There were 14 signers on the letter. My role was serving as a support person for the senior minister as well as others who were wounded in the process of receiving this letter: providing pastoral care, listening, and making sure not to feed into anxiety-driven triangulation and fear. I continue to be intentional about not engaging in behavior that fuels that unhealthy way of functioning."

In this case, Ben was charged with care for those hurt and with unified support of leadership. Through the experience, he learned about the pastoral cost of internal conflict—an invaluable reminder of the importance of setting up parameters and procedures that discourage the types of behavior that fuel conflict and wound people.

As the quote from Theresa, below, illustrates, clergy and the churches they serve benefit greatly when they learn to anticipate potential conflict, slow down, and open and extend conversation in order to pave the way for smoother change.

"We are presently exploring next-step options for the life of the congregation I serve. There is some feeling that we must move ahead quickly with action steps, but it is clear that there is not unanimity about what those might be. I have encouraged us to be intentional about listening to one another and not to take concrete action until there is some clarity about the best vision for the life ahead in the congregation."

CAPACITY TO STAND AND BE APPROPRIATELY ASSERTIVE

This article began with a discussion of how assertiveness and direct communication sometimes run counter to the culture in place in individual congregations. However, our survey found evidence that some church bodies are becoming more aware of the importance of effective conflict management—and the role that appropriate assertiveness plays in that.

Terry, the young pastor whose assertiveness was blamed for causing conflict with the youth pastor, reported that she has become more aware of the power of her assertiveness and has found positive ways to use it. Furthermore, regional leaders have sought Terry out for her capacity to deal with difficult issues and forge clear-headed solutions. She has had the opportunity to use her assertiveness to forge a clear and just process for churches in deep conflict with their denomination.

“As the only non–conflict-averse clergy on a multi-clergy staff, I often ‘take on’ divisive issues. Most recently, I’ve seen this work out in the life of the presbytery and in the church over the theological divide regarding ordination of gays and lesbians. I was appointed by the presbytery moderator to work to create a document for churches who desire to leave the denomination with their property without cost. I gave myself to hard work, much prayer, and intense networking in places where I didn’t know how to proceed. Now, churches have an exit and are leaving in droves—so it must have worked.... Am I happy about the deconstruction of our presbytery? No. In addition, in the particular church I serve, we have a gay inquirer, so [we’re] in the process right now of [figuring out] how we work with our leadership in terms of navigating discipleship, leadership, and discernment as a Body of Christ in a particular place. Hard work—lots of prayer, conversation, not ‘taking stands’ but listening with a willingness to shift—mostly, [it’s about] honoring people’s stories.”

Clergy with stronger capacities to utilize assertiveness and to work with rather than avoid conflict are the clergy who will be sought out for their strengths. These individuals, who can be both assertive and cooperative, are likely most capable of working with and for the good of people representing very different interests and positions. As a result, clergy who are most capable of engaging conflict effectively may be asked to handle more of it, accomplishing profoundly important work for the life and health of the Church.

[Note: All personal names, geographic locations, and names of churches or other organizations in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of study participants.]

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¹ Carl Dudley, Theresa Zingery, and David Breeden, *Insights Into Congregational Conflict* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today and the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, 2011). Available at <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-based-products-congregational-leadership#ChurchConflict> .