

Encourage that they treat each other with respect.

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“Conflict”

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In my 47 year career I’ve negotiated too many church conflicts. Incredible, I know, to imagine conflict in churches. Too often, sadly, folks enter the Fellowship Hall wishing those they disagree with will reconcile by agreeing with them. Sure, that works out well.

When the woven blanket starts unraveling, the weave separating, the blanket stops being a blanket and no one sleeps warm at night. Do you make peace with friends? Or do you reconcile with those with whom you’re in conflict? The Mayans marked their community buildings with carvings of a basket weave. They thought of themselves all woven together. Pretty cool. Perhaps here’s an addition for the front of the White House.

A conflict resolution workshop taught that when there is a church conflict, there are four basic first steps (which apply to work disputes, marriages, the Oval office), assuming the disputants want reconciliation. Sometimes they don’t.

Rule 1: Lower the tension. When the kettle boils over, dial down the temperature. Are arms folded? Knuckles tight? Time for some breathing exercises. Listen to their language. Is it accusatory, personalized? Are emotions overruling reason? Are they interrupting each other or making noises or gestures when others speak? What self-interest motivates the folks? Do some in the room simply want to solve a problem? Are others looking for a fight, defending an agenda? Get the room to agree how people will address each other. Encourage that they treat each other with respect.

Rule 2: Balance the power. I once was summoned by a church board that was angry with me. Yes, they summoned me, like a principal ready to spank a naughty school boy. I thought it would be fun as well as useful, so I agreed. I walked into the room to see 15 church members seated at the tables. My chair faced them. It was me versus 15, which in my case meant that I had the advantage. I’m from Jersey. After a while, tired of their venting, I got up and said, “We’re done.” They wanted an imbalance of power. You gang up so you can intimidate, inevitably intensifying the resentment. A balance of power means giving time for all to express themselves rather than allow bullies to dominate the discussion. In the case just described, there also was something I needed to do. What did I need to look at in myself? What was my self-interest? Where was I wrong? What had I said or done that triggered them into choosing conflict? We cannot make anyone happy or sad or angry. That’s their choice. We can, however, cultivate the conditions for their choice. What in me must die?

Rule 3: Remove obstacles to communication. This begins with folks willing to listen to each other, increasing trust. Building trust can happen in other ways than arguing across a table. Change the conditions. Don’t fuss over the conflict. Turn it into a meal together. Play a game. Accomplish a task together. Vital is to ask questions rather than rushing to conclusions or offering solutions before the conflict is defined. Keep away from ‘You’ statements and encourage ‘I’ statements. Not: “You believe this!” Rather: “This is where I’m coming from.” I say this because I’ve always understood my job as a pastor is not to beat the drum of any bandwagon or to try to enforce or manipulate what I believe the gospel requires. Instead, my responsibility is to present our gut-wrenching gospel in such a way as to

challenge persons toward repentance, to do the hard work of examining themselves and responding to how Jesus claims their behavior.

Rule 4: Agree to a common narrative as to how you got to where you are. Name it. Define the real underlying problems. Be smart enough to admit what we don't know. Identify areas of agreement. Examine areas of disagreement and why there is disagreement. Get the facts, jack! Once you listen to somebody say their piece, repeat what they said to make sure you heard them right. Folks usually operate from assumptions, rumor, hearsay, or their opinions, often half-baked. These need to be clarified and tested. The chance for reconciliation requires agreement to the facts, appreciating the majesty of truth. A line from the movie, "Inherit the wind" warns us: "...fanaticism and ignorance is forever busy, and needs feeding."

Once you have walked these four steps, then you have opened up a chance to begin seeing the path toward resolution. The trick is to help the decisions become apparent.