

INSIGHTS INTO:

Congregational Conflict

This publication is one in a series produced by Faith Communities Today (FACT), a collaboration of American faith communities known as the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP). These periodic publications connect research with strategies for dealing with important issues facing congregations in the U.S. today.

Is your congregation going through a period of conflict that you aren't sure how to handle? Or are you interested in preparing to better handle future conflicts? This publication offers research, tips and resources to help clergy, seminarians, and congregational leaders deal constructively with this inevitable part of congregational life.

Though often spoken of in whispers, conflict is a common characteristic of congregations in

every denomination throughout the United States. Rather than being hidden in the hushed tones of parking lot planning and telephone gossip, if conflict is recognized as inevitable—and potentially even healthy—it can become an opportunity for focus, affirmation, and renewal. Conflict expresses the human side of congregational life—that real people are different, and see the world differently. Conflict also reflects the religious challenge of voluntary communities of faith that are trying to understand, articulate, and live by their highest beliefs and ideals.

Conflict is Widespread

In the FACT 2000 national survey of 14,301 American congregations, 75 percent of congregations reported some level of conflict in the five years prior to the survey (Figure 1). At any given time it appears that about one fifth of congregations have active conflict.

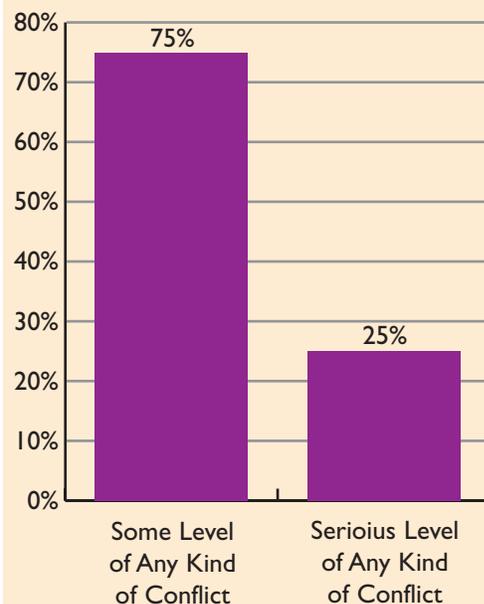
Since “everybody is doing it,” understanding how conflict impacts congregations strikes us as an absolute necessity. Knowing how to avoid or soften its destructive aspects and reap the benefits that can come from handling it are basic skills for leaders today.

Conflict: Both Extensive and Intensive

FACT 2000 shows that disagreements appear in significantly different aspects of congregational life (Figure 2). Money, its use and abuse (42%), was a close second to the most frequently reported area of conflict; agreeing upon and enforcing accepted norms of behavior among members (44%). The style of worship, designed to bring members together in the unity of faith, was an area of conflict for more than two of every five congregations (41%), while the organizational questions of leadership style (40%) and decision making (39%) appeared almost equally troubling.

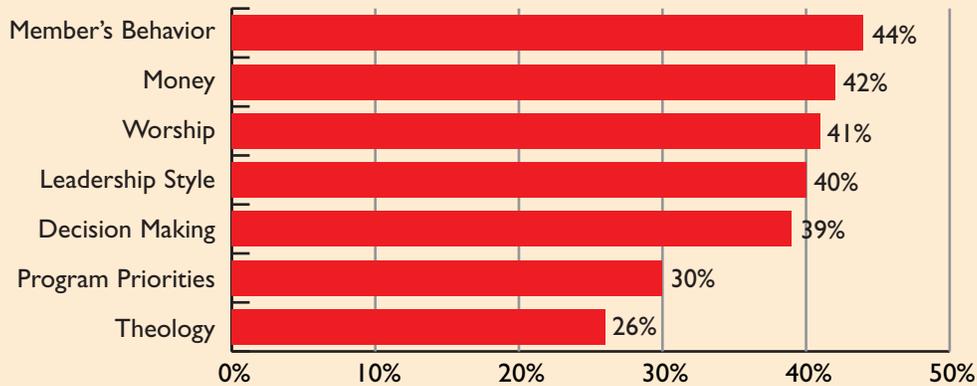
Figure 1:
Congregational Conflict

Percent of Congregations
Reporting Conflict
In the Five Years Prior to the Survey



Based on the **Faith Communities Today 2000** national survey of 14,301 congregations. (<http://fact.hartsem.edu>)

Figure 2:
Sources of Congregational Conflict



Program priorities and theology, although important as sources of congregational conflict (reported 30% and 26% of congregations respectively), appeared significantly less often. Since these are more frequently addressed in the literature and by courses in theological schools, we cannot tell if greater attention has helped or simply highlighted areas of continuing concern. However, as we shall see, careful analysis shows that disputes over personal issues and leadership are the most emotionally intense areas of tension.

A 2004 *Christianity Today* survey of pastors used different categories to ascertain sources of conflict and a study of its findings provides additional insight. In their survey we see that “control issues” are by far the most common source of conflict with 85% citing it. Vision/direction issues were also frequently mentioned sources of conflict.

Sources of Conflict

Control issues	.85%
Vision/ Direction	.64%
Leadership changes	.43%
Pastor's style	.39%
Financial	.33%
Theological/doctrine	.23%
Cultural/social differences	.22%
Other	.16%

Christianity Today survey, 2004

Fortunately, although some level of conflict was almost universal, only one in four congregations in the FACT study reported conflict serious enough to have a lasting impact on congregational life—not a majority, but still a significant proportion.

Some Negative Consequences of Conflict

To further understand the nature of congregational conflict, FACT 2005 explored the costs of conflict (Figure 3). These follow-up data suggest that, of the congregations experiencing conflict, 39% pay the cost in financial loss, at least temporarily. Members vote with their pocketbooks. “Disturbing the peace” is expensive, partly because some members disagree with the outcome, but also because others are seeking a more tranquil religious setting. On the other side, note that almost two-thirds (61%) of those congregations that experienced conflict reported no loss of income, either because of the same membership increasing their support to the congregation, or because the loss from some donors was compensated for by increase from other donors or new sources.

Figure 3:
Negative Consequences of Conflict



By comparison, the human cost of conflict far outweighs the financial cost. More than two thirds of those congregations that experienced conflict (69%) recalled loss of members, and in at least one quarter (25%) of the congregations the leader (usually clergy) retired, resigned, was fired, or otherwise “left” the congregation. Clearly precious relationships were broken in the conflict, though the FACT survey cannot distinguish cause or effect: did the broken relationships cause the conflict, or result from it?

The *Christianity Today* survey also asked responding ministers about the outcomes of the conflict and found there were both positive and negative outcomes. The negative outcomes they cited were similar to those in the FACT survey with expanded details on the human impact of conflict. Almost 70% reported damaged relationships and over half reported sadness. Positive outcomes are discussed later in this document.

Negative Outcomes of Church Conflict

Damaged relationships	68%
Sadness	58%
Decline in attendance	32%
Leaders left church	32%
Loss of trust	31%
Bitterness	29%
Loss of communication with congregation	3%

Christianity Today survey, 2004

Why Can Congregational Conflict Be So Damaging?

Congregational conflict has the potential to be more damaging than conflict in other organizations due to various factors relating to the nature of religious organizations and people’s relationship with them. Matters of faith are often perceived as aspects of one’s identity and fellow members of a congregation can become like an extended family due to the nature of the community that develops. There is also often a tendency to avoid dealing with conflict openly as it is sometimes perceived as “unspiritual.”

As societal ties are tending to break down congregations take on greater significance for individuals. This is particularly the case among emotionally fragile people who are often attracted to congregations where they can experience acceptance and love. This can lead to a stronger investment in the sense of community provided by the congregation. Another aspect of congregational life which can exacerbate conflict is the often idealized expectations placed upon clergy.

We also know that...

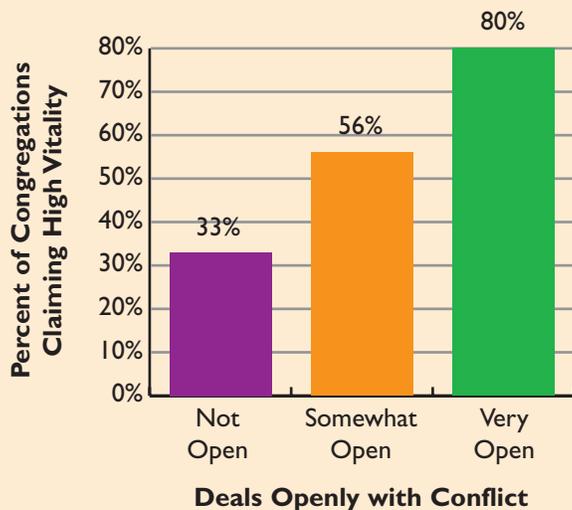
Certain times of the year and events are more likely to cause conflict than others.

- Easter or other busy (and therefore stressful) times
- Stewardship campaigns/budget time
- Addition of new staff
- Change in leadership style
- Pastor’s vacation/leadership temporary absence
- Changes in pastor’s family
- Changes in age demographics
- The completion of a new building – change in leadership focus
- Loss of resources (money or people)
- Increase in congregational membership leading to culture change

Adapted from *Mastering Conflict and Controversy* by Edward G. Dobson, Speed B. Leas, and Marshall Shelley © 1992 by Christianity Today International. www.ctlibrary.com

Figure 4:

Impact of Dealing Openly with Conflict



Using Conflict Constructively

Much of the observed conflict might be avoided, reduced, or redirected if congregational leaders learn how to deal openly with conflict. FACT 2000 demonstrates (Figure 4) that 80 percent of congregations that consider themselves to be “vital and spiritually alive” were able to “deal openly with conflict.” By contrast, the congregations that are least able to manage their conflict were unlikely to be vital and alive.

The message seems clear. Conflict, as such, is not the problem. Rather how it is approached and experienced can make or break a congregation. Data seem to underscore that, whatever the presenting cause, human relationships are at stake and must be addressed before, during, and after the issues are considered. Further, these findings support the transitional nature of conflict, that when differences are addressed openly and with appreciation and respect for those involved, congregations can use the energy of conflict for constructive purposes.

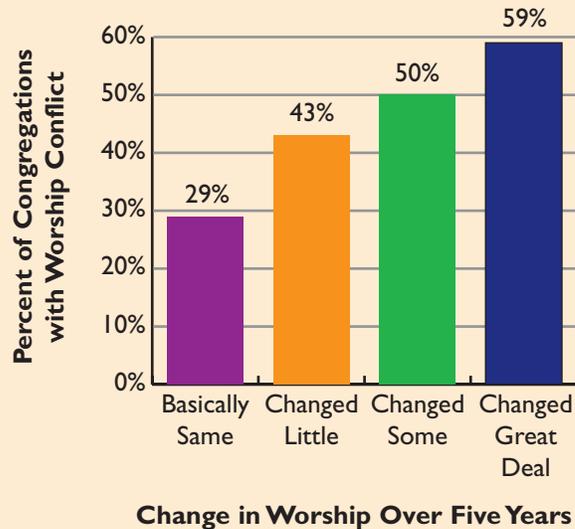
Conflict as Part of Adapting

Though some congregational fights left serious scars, most conflicts appear to be part of the nature of a human organization and far from fatal. Indeed, the research clearly shows that change magnifies conflict, but also that congregational change in a changing world is a necessary condition for vitality. For example, the data gathered by FACT 2000 show that it is important for congregations to adapt as living institutions reaching out to younger generations and to culturally changing populations in their communities. These data show that the degree of conflict is in direct proportion to the amount of change in worship over the last five years (Figure 5). Congregations that attempted little change seemed to weather the transition more easily, congregations that jumped into new forms of worship experienced major disruption. The data suggest the need for more careful planning toward deliberate, well-supported transitions.

The Positive Affects of Conflict

While we have seen that conflict can have a negative impact, particularly if not handled openly, it is reassuring that almost all of the pastors in the *Christianity Today* survey reported positive results (94%) from the congregational

Figure 5:
Impact of Change on Conflict



conflict they experienced. The most common feeling pastors in this survey were left with in the wake of conflict was to feel stronger (60%). About a third reported being thankful and hopeful about the future of the congregation. Far fewer mention negative outcomes.

What were the positive outcomes of the conflict?

Pastor wiser	72%
Purifying process	44%
Better defined vision	42%
Better communication with congregation	35%
Stronger relationships	30%
Reconciliation	16%
Growth in attendance	15%

What were your feelings about the outcomes of the conflict?

Feel stronger	60%
Hopeful	35%
Thankful	32%
Broken	26%
Confused	16%
Conflict isn't over	9%

Christianity Today survey, 2004

So What Does This Mean For Your Congregation?

As the data indicate, the question is not whether conflict is acceptable or not but rather what to do **when** conflict arises. A careful study of the conflict management literature shows that conflict, when handled well, can and will produce important and powerful results.

Here are some tips and questions to ask yourself before, during or after a situation arises to help turn conflict to positive effect.

Questions and Considerations in Preparing for Conflict

- Study conflict-management resources. Do your staff and congregation have the tools, knowledge, and experience to deal with conflict? Who needs training?
- Who are the experts (within or beyond the congregation) to call upon if needed?
- Develop a community with trust for each other that is open to discussing difficult issues. What is the history of the congregation in regards to conflict? Are there any “skeletons in the closet” that have not been dealt with?
- Since conflict often occurs over issues of control and decision-making, be aware of possible issues. Examine if there are ways to change the perception of, or head off, potential problems, such as more lay input in decision-making and more openness in congregational planning and decision-making. Is it possible to more widely disseminate information? Might responsibility be more widely spread?
- What does your faith tradition say about conflict and how to handle it? How will this impact action when conflict arises?
- What do the early stages of conflict and hidden conflict look like? Listen and observe.
- Identify situations that might lead to conflict, such as major changes in worship, leadership or membership. How might changes be implemented so as to minimize conflict?

Five Styles of Conflict Management

1. **Win/lose:** achieving goals at the expense of relationships
2. **Accommodation:** giving up goals to preserve relationship
3. **Avoidance:** neither goals nor relationships can be preserved
4. **Compromise:** give a little, get a little
5. **Win/win:** high concern to reach goals and build relationships.

Questions to ask in creating a win/win situation:

- What are the common goals, values, and mutual interests of those involved in the conflict?
- Are there alternatives that enable all parties to achieve as many of their goals as possible?

Sample “Fair Fighting” Contract:

- Maintain an attitude of mutual respect
- Maintain a commitment to active listening to others
- Maintain a clear focus on the participants’ interdependence and mutual interests

No:

- Blaming
- Interrupting
- Labeling
- Personalizing of issues
- Speaking for others

Resources

Edwin H. Friedman's *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* is a classic and foundational book on congregational conflict.

Other books using family-systems theory include:

- *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights* by Charles H. Cosgrove, Dennis D. Hatfield
- *The Issue is Not the Issue: The Real Causes of Congregational Conflict*, Thomas F. Fischer
- *Our Community: Dealing with Conflict in Our Congregation* by Susan M. Lang
- *From Stuck to Unstuck: Overcoming Congregational Impasse* by Kenneth A. Halstead

Other Ways of Viewing Conflict:

Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life by Penny Edgell Becker.

Angry People in the Pews: Managing Anger in the Church by Leroy Howe.

Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict by Kenneth C. Haugk.

Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences by Gil Rendle.

Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration by Norma C. Everist.

Church Research Report: Managing Church Conflict, the Source, Pastors Reactions, and its Effects, Christianity Today International.

Conflict Management in Congregations edited by David B. Lott.

Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them? by Daniel Goleman.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Moral Courage: Motives and Designs for Ministry in a Troubled World by Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed.

Levels of Conflict: An Overview of Conflict Management, the Alban Institute.

Managing Church Conflict by Hugh F. Halverstadt.

Moving Your Church through Conflict by Speed B. Leas. A step-by-step approach to conflict management that helps congregational leaders identify various levels of congregational conflict and respond to conflict in healthy and productive ways.

Resolving Church Conflicts: A Case Study Approach for Local Congregations by G. Douglass Lewis.

Strife in the Sanctuary: Religious Schism in a Jewish Community by Phil Zuckerman.

“Chapter 4: Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nancy T. Ammerman et al (eds). An earlier (1986) version of this is available online (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/Congstudieshandbook/congstdhdbk-ch4.pdf>).

This House We Build: Lessons for Healthy Synagogues and the People Who Dwell There, No. AL323, by Terry Bookman and William (Kahn <http://www.alban.org/BookDetails.asp?ID=1948>).

Web Resources

- Congregational Resources website, www.congregationalresources.org/Index.asp
- “Growing through Conflict,” Dr. Donald E. Bossart, www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=297
- Dr. Neil Chadwick, www.joyfulministry.com
- “Seven Ways Pastors Can Deal with Conflict,” Monday Morning Insight Weblog: www.mmiblog.com
- “What is Distinctive about Church Conflict?” Bridge Builders at the London Mennonite Church, www.menno.org.uk
- *The Congregation* – film, PBS www.pbs.org/thecongregation/
- *Mastering Conflict Survival Guide*, Christianity Today International, (<http://buildingchurchleaders.stores.yahoo.net/macossugu.html>)
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu>

Making Use of this Document

In order to get the most out of the research, tips and resources provided in this document you may want to consider these questions either individually or in consultation with others in your congregation.

- Do you need more information on any of these areas and where will you go to get it?
- What in the findings encourage you to make change?
- Which of the suggestions might be worth pursuing for your congregation?
- Are there any insights you gained that you want to act on immediately? If so, what might be your first steps?
- Who else would benefit from reading all or part of this document?

Insights Into Congregational Conflict was written for **Faith Communities Today** by Carl Dudley, Theresa Zingery, and David Breeden.

Carl S. Dudley, one of the founders of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, is Professor Emeritus, Hartford Seminary and Hartford Institute for Religion Research. He is a recognized authority in congregational studies, with several books available on Amazon.com.

Theresa Zingery is on the Steering Committee of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership and has been involved with it for over a decade. She works at the Bahá'í National Center as manager of its office of congregational leadership development.

David Breeden is a freelance writer with more than ten books and hundreds of poems and articles to his credit. He is currently seeking a Master of Divinity degree from Meadville Lombard Theological school.

The ***Insights Into*** series is edited by **David Roozen**.



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Hartford Seminary and the
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fact@hartsem.edu

Hartford Seminary
77 Sherman Street, Hartford, CT 06105
(860) 509-9543

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