

# RESOLVING CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Experts offer practical guidance.

BY KELLY BOYER SAGERT

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you. . . . If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. —Matthew 18:15–17a*

New Testament advice about conflict resolution is clear. Yet it can be hard to put into practice. Really hard. So, *Presbyterians Today* asked five experts for their insights. While their advice pertains to congregational conflict, it can be applied to deeper denominational divisions.

## Sarah Shofstall

*Episcopalian priest and conflict-resolution consultant*

Church is a place where people often bring their best intentions and their worst behaviors. Some think that any behavior is acceptable if they believe it's for the good of the church, while others want to believe that conflict doesn't even exist in the church.

Conflict has been part of the Christian experience from the beginning. Take, for example, Peter, who held Jewish nationalist beliefs, and Matthew, who worked for the Roman government that Peter despised. In a typical situation, Peter wouldn't have spoken to Matthew at all, but Jesus put them in a position where, not only did they need to speak, but they were also commanded to love one another.

Painful as church conflict can be, it is an opportunity that can strengthen relationships and help members discern where God is calling a congregation. Studies indicate that growing churches typically have conflict,

whereas those with no apparent conflict are usually in serious decline, because people are afraid to try anything new.

Congregations should draw up covenants that list behaviors that they embrace and agree to encourage—such as kindness, grace, forgiveness, and active listening—as well as ones they agree to eliminate, such as shouting, interrupting, and other disrespectful behaviors. Covenants are usually easy to create. Members should sign the covenant, which can then be displayed in a prominent place.



## Leanna K. Fuller

*assistant professor of pastoral care, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

Conflicts within a congregation tend to center on one or more of four issues: pastoral leadership, worship, mission, and finance. Conflicts might surface over smaller issues—for example, the color of the church's new carpet—but that probably masks something bigger.

There are two unhealthy responses to church conflicts:

- Refusal to engage: "Open conflict might destroy us, so I just won't say what I think!" Resentment continues to fester until it explodes.
- Brutally divisive and denigrating language

When conflict becomes entrenched, members often polarize and struggle to meet in the middle. Warning signs include the following:

- Secret or exclusive meetings
- Extreme points of view getting airtime, with more moderate views silenced
- People stop attending church, with no explanation
- Whispers about the church splitting

Healthy conflict resolution involves church members allowing everyone to be heard and then working together to resolve the challenges. Leaders should model desired behaviors, including hearing constructive criticism without becoming defensive.

## Marcia Chang Vogl

*pastor and author of The Path Forward*

It's a familiar scenario: someone believes the organist played too fast, too slowly, too loudly—or chose the wrong song. In fact, the pastor isn't doing much right either!

Although some church conflict is helpful, much is unnecessary. In these cases, the solution is simple: forgive the other person for not living up to your expectations. Say to yourself, "I forgive the worship leader for allowing the music to be too loud." That clears up the atmosphere and is much better than churning up trouble by getting together with others who also believe the music is too loud. Refuse to grouch, because whatever you feed will grow.



If conflict is more serious, work through these steps:

- Recognize your part in the conflict.
- Repent of your unhelpful contributions.
- Forgive others and yourself.
- Pray, but don't ask God to "fix" someone else.
- Ask God where you should be planted.

## Rob Henson

*church fundraising consultant and pastoral counselor*

If your church isn't already experiencing conflict, then try fundraising. It's sure to bring any simmering discord to the surface—and the conflict is seldom about what it initially seems. A massive conflict about steeple design, for example, may actually represent differing beliefs about the church's denominational heritage.

Try this approach:

- Get agreement that conflict can be healthy—a growing process that clarifies mission.
- Start in a place of positive intent, agreeing that people with different opinions have the same mission you do.
- Back off from the specific issue and go through a discernment process where members hear Scripture passages about listening and forgiveness.



## Tecia Evans

*clinical psychologist with expertise in Christian counseling*

Groups that take issue with a leader should follow these steps: Pray about the issue and seek guidance from the Bible. Identify protocol for addressing the person/issue. And choose a point person to present your concerns. That person should proceed with care:

- Hold the discussion in an appropriate time and place.
- Use nonjudgmental "I" statements to share thoughts and feelings.
- Request that the leader work with the concerned members to find acceptable solutions.
- Avoid ultimatums.
- Avoid an attachment to a particular outcome, and acknowledge that the solution may not be the one you would have chosen.
- Keep reminding yourself how much you love your brothers and sisters in faith, and remember that, at church, you are on holy ground.
- Have faith in God.

