

GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Diffuse Arguments: Part I

Pastors take it as a sign of failure if someone argues with them. But, it's not a failure. Indeed, it may be an indication of success.

It's best to recognize that a certain amount of disagreement, tension, and conflict is (or ought to be?) a normal part of a church.

If a church is more than a simple fellowship group, a natural level of debate and disagreement will exist. When a church has a sense of *mission*, that is, it's moving toward a big goal, there'll be disagreement about how to get there.

A church on mission must make choices about values, methods, priorities, expenditures, goals, techniques, and approaches. Debate on such issues is normal.

Disagreement clarifies what the church believes, and signals that something good is going on.

Arguments empower us to get out of our lethargy and force us to look at our deeply held beliefs. Moving forward implies change, and change means movement. Movement creates friction, friction causes heat, and heat results in conflict.

A church with no conflict or disagreement is a weak church, suffering from weak pastoral leadership.

A lack of some argument or conflict means a pastor is failing to inspire movement toward mission or vision. It might also point to a pastor or board who are repressing or avoiding conflict.

If disagreement is avoided or repressed, eventually the tension rises up and creates an explosion of unhealthy conflict.

Thus, if you have some level of disagreement in your church, it's a good sign. It likely means you're taking the church toward a fresh vision or in a new direction.

Fresh Perspective

It may sound counterintuitive, but a pastor and board must commit to seeing conflict and disagreement as good. As leaders model the idea that dissent is okay, it frees the church to acknowledge differences, and deal with them.

The most dangerous type of disagreements are the quiet ones. If a church doesn't allow open sharing of conflicting views, it causes people to bury their perspectives where they can smolder for weeks, months, or years before exploding.

It's far better to acknowledge differences of viewpoint, perspective, and opinion. Doing so opens up avenues for discussion, which at least leads to a realization that there are two ways (or more) of looking at a situation.

Taking initiative to encourage open sharing of disagreement is frightening. Pastors, perhaps most of them, would rather walk away from disagreements (more likely run away). But, it's part of leading and managing a church.

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Practical Steps

What's a pastor to do? Here's some basic suggestions.

First, evaluate yourself to determine how you've responded to disagreements and arguments in the past? Do you tend to fight or flee?

Second, take a self-test to learn clues about your personal style in conflict management. What are your natural tendencies?

Three, do a thorough study of how disagreements were dealt with in the Bible? The disciples argued and fussed, but Jesus used them.

Four, read four or five books on this subject. A simple Internet search brings up multiple good ones.

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