
GROWTH POINTS

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Church Conflict

“It’s all about power and control.”

When it comes to church conflict, the above statement is pretty much reality. Multiple studies reveal about 85% of all conflict in churches is related in some manner to different groups or persons seeking to gain power and control over a decision.

Unfortunately, conflict often is not settled in a gracious manner. Angry outbursts lead to damaged relationships, further misunderstanding, and decline in attendance.

It’s common for people to rationalize conflict theologically. Yet, debate over doctrine is found in less than 25% of church conflicts.

Power and control issues are the primary reason for church conflict. This is especially true in churches with less than 200 attendees.

One in five pastors (20%) are experiencing some level of conflict in their church right now. And, it’s likely confined to a small group of people, with less than one-fourth of the congregation knowing what’s going on.

Pastors are easy targets for criticism from disgruntled folks. Due to their position, pastors appear spiritually and emotionally strong. However, pastors are not as strong as many perceive, and some pastors are rather fragile.

The top criticisms of pastors circle around their approach to ministry, preaching style, or leadership vision for the future of the church.

About 40% (two out of five pastors) have left a church due to conflict. The hurt and pain is not easily forgotten or forgiven. Most of the time it’s a small number of people—less than ten—who cause enough pain to push the pastor out.

Lessons Learned

All conflict is not bad, and pastors who have experienced it are wiser. One pastor noted, “There are two ways to gain wisdom. One is by making mistakes; the other is by watching others make mistakes.”

What are some points of wisdom pastors have learned while going through conflict?

1. Conflict doesn't go away on its own. Ignoring it usually makes it worse. The longer conflict is ignored, the longer it has to fester. Conflict scarcely heals while being ignored.
2. What first appears to be a small issue may evolve into a larger problem. Don't take small issues lightly. Instead, keep them in view being ready to face them if they start growing larger.
3. It's best to address conflict earlier than later. Looking back, most pastors report they wish they'd dealt with the conflict sooner. One pastor put it this way: “You can have short-term gain with long-term pain. Or, you can have short-term pain with long-term gain.” It was his way of expressing it's better to face it and get it over with as soon as possible.
4. Some people thrive on histrionics or drama. They enjoy creating disagreements or making others upset. Pastors soon learn that those who create conflict one time are likely to do it again. “Past practice is future practice” is a way to say it.
5. Reckless words are not helpful. It pays to keep one's cool in the midst of conflict. The person who appears calm and collected has the advantage.
6. Listening skills are crucial to mediating conflict. While it helps to mirror another person's actions to show you're listening, in a conflict it's best to do the opposite. For example, if a person is angry and stands up, it is often best for you to sit down. If they sit down, you might stand up.
7. During conflict, a pastor always has an ability to calm things down—prayer. If conversations become too heated, call a time out for prayer. Things get better after doing so.

These are few words of wisdom from other pastors. What words of wisdom can you add?

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