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## Avoiding Division within a Church: A Proactive Approach for Identifying Sources of Conflict and Creating a Healthy Ministry Environment

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AVOIDING DIVISION WITHIN A CHURCH: A PROACTIVE APPROACH  
FOR IDENTIFYING SOURCES OF CONFLICT  
AND CREATING A HEALTHY MINISTRY ENVIRONMENT

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE

BY  
KEN POLLEY  
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA  
MAY 2015



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## GLOSSARY

**Accountability:** Taking responsibility for one's choices or being held responsible for one's choices. Included in this topic are: the importance of accountability, vulnerabilities in a church system that lacks accountability, and application of accountability.

**Church conflict, destructive:** Conflict which is not brought to resolution, produces ongoing and severe interpersonal estrangement, and severely affects positive ministry.

**Church conflict, extreme:** Regular and ongoing disputes involving over 25% of the body which have long-term and residual effects and also result in ongoing loss of attendees.

**Church conflict, heavy:** Frequent disputes which affect 10-25% of the church, have long-term and residual effects, and also result in some loss of attendees.

**Church conflict, light:** Minor disputes involving a small number of people and having no long term or residual effects.

**Church conflict, medium:** Disputes involving several people, noticeable to 5-10% of the church, and having some long-term or residual effects.

**Church goals or ministry plan:** Established strategic objectives which are purposefully pursued over a defined period of time.

**Church priorities or mission statement:** Primary values for church ministry.

**Church theme or vision statement:** A unifying rally point for church ministry.

Church recovery specialists: Individuals who have expertise and experience helping churches recover from serious trauma such as destructive conflict.

Communication: Interaction and information flow between individuals or within a church system. Included in this topic are interpersonal communication patterns, types of destructive communication, and communication flow within the church system.

Differences: Dissimilarity or disagreement in opinion, preference, personality, or ability. Included in this topic are diversity among individuals, accepting differences, the value of differences, the dangers of ignoring differences, and handling differences in a positive manner.

Leadership: Office, role, or capacity, assigned in accordance with church governing documents, which has stewardship of directing and overseeing ministry. Included in this topic are leadership principles of focus, initiating ministry, being emotionally and spiritually healthy, responsiveness to input, and accountability.

Ministry focus: Guiding principles for ministry improvement and advancement. Included in this topic are an unifying theme for the church (vision), ministry priorities (mission), and strategic goals (ministry plan).

Shadow church: Informal network of individuals comprised of non-attendees or people on the periphery of a church who exert inordinate influence on the church affairs, decisions and decision-making process.

Spiritual hygiene: Maintenance of positive relational behaviors through application of basic biblical truths in spiritual habits, actions, and attitudes.



Structure, church structure: Delineated policies, procedures, roles, and responsibilities. Included in this topic are the importance of structure, and grievance and feedback processes.

Unresolved corporate sin: Sin or sin patterns in the church history which have not been intentionally addressed and brought to closure. Included in this topic are the significance of historical considerations, identification of unresolved corporate sin, and corporate renewal.

## ABSTRACT

Serious conflict in a church can damage its vitality and ministry effectiveness. The problem this research addressed was factors in a church ministry which can allow serious conflict to form and expand. In response to this problem, the researcher examined materials which address church conflict and surveyed sample churches.

The research sought to identify the following areas: topics church interventionists consistently address when assisting churches in the recovery process, the primary sources of conflict based upon church experiences, the parallels between the focus of the church interventionists and church experiences, and if serious conflict can be avoided if these areas are proactively addressed.

Seven areas were identified as elements common among church interventionists: acceptance of differences, unresolved corporate sin, church structure, ministry focus, leadership, communication, and accountability.

A survey was designed and administered to sample churches to determine, based on their experiences with conflict, if there was a correlation between conflict and those seven areas. The survey was also designed to measure relative effectiveness of church ministries in these seven areas.

The study did not confirm the research question. The data were inconclusive in establishing a direct relationship between the seven identified areas and the onset of conflict in the churches surveyed. The research did find that the churches surveyed shared

some common areas of deficiency. These areas were lack of church administrative structure, avoidance of differences and conflict, absence of intention and relevant ministry focus, and leadership time focused upon ministry details instead of spiritual development and forward thinking.

## CHAPTER ONE: AVOIDING DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many church interventionists have written about church conflict. These materials are consistently written from an “after the fact” perspective and focus upon recovery and repair. However, as one writer noted, “Aside from anecdotal evidence collected by congregational consultants with significant experience in conflicted congregations, little empirical research exists regarding what causes conflict in congregations.”<sup>1</sup> This project evaluated those materials to determine if there are principles which are common to the different writers. Research was done to discover if sample churches confirm, from their experiences with serious conflict, those same principles.

The problem the researcher addressed was the environment of a church ministry which can allow serious conflict to form, expand, and remain uncontested. In response to this problem, the researcher examined research and printed materials which address church conflict and surveyed sample churches to discover their experiences with serious conflict. Identifying common issues from church recovery experts was one key perspective for this project.

This project was qualitative in nature and case study was the primary research model. The research sought to identify the following areas: topics church recovery

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<sup>1</sup>David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 19.

specialists consistently address when assisting churches in the recovery process, the primary sources of church conflict based upon church experiences, the parallel factors between the focus of the church recovery specialists and church experiences, and if serious conflict can be avoided in churches if these areas are proactively addressed.

### **Delimitations of the Problem**

The research was primarily focused on Faithbridge Church in Park Rapids, Minnesota. The research also included other selected churches. Criteria used for selection of other churches were: evangelical in nature, at least a 20 year existence, regular attendance between 100 and 600 people, the significant evangelical presence within their immediate region, situated in a rural area which has active agricultural, logging, or mining industries, located in a small central or northern Minnesota community, and at least 40 miles from a large metropolitan area. The churches surveyed represented a variety of backgrounds including Baptist, Evangelical Free, Evangelical Covenant, and independent congregations. The research was limited to the study of factors which were consistently addressed during the recovery process following serious conflict within a congregation.

### **Assumptions**

The first assumption is that the Bible is the preeminent source of guidelines and principles in the areas which it addresses. Biblical truth takes precedence over all other forms of wisdom and revelation.

The second assumption is that the church culture as a whole, and not just divisive individuals, needs to be evaluated and changed. There is no simplistic solution to the

issues and challenges related to correcting actions within an environment which is susceptible to serious conflict. There are multi-faceted elements to the solution because the solution needs to address multi-dimensional problems.

The third assumption is that churches of similar background, culture, and composition face a common set of issues and challenges when dealing with serious conflict. These issues and challenges can be identified. To avoid serious conflict, leadership must understand elements within the church culture that allow serious conflict to develop and expand.

### **Sub-problems**

There were six sub-problems in this study. The first sub-problem was to identify biblical texts addressing identified areas which potentially give root to serious conflict. The data needed were texts from a survey of the Scriptures, commentaries and word studies from biblical scholars, as well as personal study and exegesis by the researcher.

The data were evaluated and systematically organized to display the relevant themes for this research project. The data were used to identify biblical standards for the areas addressed in this research project.

The second sub-problem was to study research which addresses serious conflict within the church and the church environments that are most vulnerable to serious conflict. The data needed were materials from various forms of media which address conflict and divisive behavior in the church, and environments that are most vulnerable to divisive behavior.

Data was evaluated and systematically organized to display the relevant themes for this research project. The data were used to increase the researcher's knowledge of

church conflict, contributing factors to church conflict, and strategies used to recover from serious church conflict. The data were also used to increase the researcher's knowledge of key principles related to each of the specific areas of this study and create a basis for the survey instruments used for this research project.

The third sub-problem was to examine select churches to discover issues which they have experienced or identified when encountering serious conflict within their church. The data needed were surveys from pastors (or their designate) of selected churches which meet the delimitations of this study.

Data were secured through surveys. The data were evaluated and systematically organized to display the relevant themes for this research project. The data were used to increase the researcher's knowledge of the surveyed churches and to identify patterns related to the cause of conflict within the churches surveyed for this project.

The fourth sub-problem was the development of a template for churches to use in evaluating if, and where, their church is susceptible to the formation or advancement of serious conflict. The data were secured as described in sub-problems one through three and were in the researcher's possession as a result of research done in sub-problems one through three. The data from sub-problems one through three were organized thematically and used by the researcher for evaluation.

The fifth sub-problem was to evaluate the culture and environment of Faithbridge Church in Park Rapids, Minnesota and its susceptibility to serious conflict and divisive behavior. The data needed were participation from individuals who are pastors and leaders at Faithbridge Church and personal observations of the researcher. The data were

located in the memories and thinking processes of the individuals who were included in this research and in the memories and thinking process of this researcher.

The data were secured through surveys, interaction with leadership, and thoughtful reflection. The data were used to increase the researcher's knowledge of Faithbridge Church and to identify vulnerabilities to serious conflict at Faithbridge Church.

The sixth sub-problem developed recommendations to assist the church leadership in their ability to deal with vulnerabilities to the development of serious conflict within Faithbridge Church. The data needed were collected from sub-problems one through five. The data were in the researcher's possession as a result of research done in sub-problems one through five.

The researcher synthesized the data and used the data to develop recommendations for the leadership of Faithbridge Church. The recommendations were used to assist the leadership at Faithbridge Church in their ability to identify and reduce vulnerabilities to serious conflict and divisiveness within Faithbridge Church.

## **Setting of the Project**

### *Church Overview*

Faithbridge Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota is part of the Conservative Baptist Association of America. Worship attendance averages between 500 and 600 people. Attendance had been at a plateau for about five years, but has seen some limited numerical growth over the past year. Faithbridge Church has five pastors. The lead pastor is the only full-time pastoral staff member. There are nine other paid staff members



including secretarial workers and ministry coordinators. Lead Pastor Martin Giese describes Faithbridge Church as

comprised of nearly equal parts of suburban and rural constituents. The Faithbridge Church congregation is intergenerational and includes young families, middle-aged couples, and over two hundred retirees. There is little ethnic diversity, but significant socio-economic diversity. Working poor worship alongside retired upper middle class and wealthy entrepreneurs. Faithbridge Church is also regional. The three hundred and fifty families that attend Faithbridge Church are distributed over a radius of thirty-five miles, covering a geographic area of nearly 4,000 square miles.<sup>2</sup>

Faithbridge Church is unique relative to its size and rural setting. There are no evangelical churches within the immediate region that can offer comparable diversity and quality of ministry.

#### *Community Background*

Park Rapids is a medium-sized rural based community with roots in agriculture and logging. The agrarian and rural mindset still heavily influences the local culture and politics, even though the population of the area swells in the summer through the influx of vacationers, summer cabin people, and retirees from urban settings. The major employers in the area are the local school system, medical providers, manufacturing, 3M, and a food processing plant.

These characteristics common to the rural, agrarian mindset (compared to cosmopolitan) described in the book *Leading Through Change*,<sup>3</sup> are visible in Park Rapids: survival versus advancement, small is beautiful versus big is better, independent

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<sup>2</sup>Martin D. Giese, "When Cultural Conflict Comes to Church: Understanding the Rurban Collision," (D. Min. thesis project report Bethel Seminary, 2012), 14.

<sup>3</sup>Barney Wells, Martin Giese, and Ron Klassen, *Leading Through Change* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2005), 26-34.

versus interdependent, presumptuous versus essential, jack-of-all-trades versus specialists, uncertain income versus steady income, pessimistic versus optimistic, manual versus mental, relationships versus roles, and grassroots versus top-down.

The region has a high Scandinavian heritage. The local culture has been imprinted with many nuances common to that heritage. These imprints include numerous Scandinavian specialty foods (particularly during holiday seasons), consensus-based decision making, indirect communication patterns, and conflict avoidance instead of resolution and reconciliation. Indirect communication patterns and gossip are prevalent and culturally accepted—summed up in a sign at a local eatery “Not much happens in a small town but what you hear makes up for it.”

A level of local arrogance seemingly drawn from small town pride and self-sufficiency permeates the region. A noticeable number of locals seem to be captivated by the self-assessment of being a big fish in a small pond syndrome and reign, at least in their own minds, as a self-appointed authority and arbitrator of truth. The region is inundated with small, independent churches and privately run house churches.

### *Church History*

Faithbridge Church was founded in 1968 and rooted from a split from an independent Baptist church. The reason for the split is unknown. The charter members of Faithbridge Church who were part of the split covenanted together to never speak of the specifics. There is no evidence or indication the covenant has been violated. However, it has been acknowledged that the split involved issues related to the influence, control, and leadership of the pastor from the original church. The charter members of Faithbridge Church were the most conservative and legalistic element from the previous church.

### *Church Decision-Making*

At Faithbridge Church's inception, decisions were made through informal, social environments with a high level of unity and buy-in. The body was very close knit and all individuals were given voice in the decision-making process regardless of spiritual maturity or leadership standing. Spiritual maturity was typically evaluated based upon conformity to external standards such as attendance at church services and activities, and—in some cases—biblical knowledge. The majority of key influencers during the formation of the church were married women; most of the men were faithful followers rather than leaders.

Decision-making from 1969 through 1985 evolved to primarily a board-centered model, driven by the strong leadership of the senior pastor. There was representation on the board of a sufficient number of the founding families and early attendees, allowing the church to absorb the strong influence of the pastor without insurmountable resistance. A small number of the early attendees did leave the church during this period. The exit process of these individuals was neither quiet nor subtle, leaving behind anxiety and negative ripples within the church. Estrangement of other early attendees resulted from a board decision to not promote the associate pastor when the senior pastor concluded his ministry. Effects of this rift still remain in some of the next generation family members who presently attend Faithbridge Church.

The next senior pastor (1986-1993) led by relationship and reinforced a church decision-making process which gave influence and voice to founding, tenured, or influential church attendees. This pastor's philosophy of ministry included the belief that

a church of any size can operate in a single-cell framework. Additionally, one of his core commitments was the avoidance of any type of church split.

During his ministry, decisions were vetted through coffee shop discussions. A ministry council was formed that allowed every person involved in church committees to have a voice in all major church-related decisions. Lobbying and political-type maneuvering was allowed and deemed to be an acceptable part of the decision-making process—especially when a major or potentially controversial issue was encountered.

The primary leadership board was comprised of individuals who were emotionally balanced. However, they were not strong leaders or deep in their spiritual maturity. In spite of the number of people who were given access to the process, a small number of strong voices ultimately made most decisions. Those strong voices were either directly part of a network of the founding women or under their influence and control. Gossip and personal preferences were intrinsic pieces of this network. This network of women was well-represented (though subtly) through husbands who served on the all-male deacon board which by church constitution was the highest level of leadership and authority.

During the ministry of this pastor, the church became greatly ingrown. New attendees were viewed with suspicion and there were very limited efforts to incorporate new people into church ministries, relationships, or leadership. The major exception involved individuals with whom the pastor built personal relationships. That key relationship provided a bridge for those individuals to gain acceptance and involvement in the church.

Tenured members of the church viewed newcomers as threats who potentially would bring theological error and corruption into the church. Additionally, there developed an aversion to individuals who did not meet, or blend into, the demanded church cultural and behavioral norms. These norms included items like expected attendance at church events and services, non-casual dress on Sundays, hair length, and avoidance of alcohol, tobacco, playing cards, and movies. New people were expected to act or become “like us” before any acceptance was extended. This attitude still pervades the thinking of some of the long-time church members.

The current senior pastor (1994 to present) has sought to move decision-making to the elected leadership. In his initial ministry years, he began a process of strengthening and refocusing the leadership core. He also worked to move the church from a stretched cell to a multi-cell ministry.

The founding families are only minimally represented in this leadership group. The church system has encountered some push-back from those who seek veto power in decisions based upon tenure, particularly because of the access and leverage experienced during the ministry of the prior pastor. There was some disenfranchisement and the reigniting of a fairly influential shadow church.

The shadow church sought to gain voice in church affairs and veto power in the decision-making process. This shadow church has historically been comprised of individuals who held no formal church membership and attended infrequently or not at all. Members of the shadow church maintained an active connection to the participants of the informal network of women.

In the past decade, the strength and impact of the shadow church has receded. A decision to change the church name, and the process used to reach that decision, dealt a near terminal blow to the shadow church. The leverage it is presently able to exert is very limited.

A secondary influence encountered in the church environment is the children of the founding or first decade families who are now retiring to the area or returning after years of not attending any church. Some of these returnees seem to hold the belief that they have the responsibility and authority to stand in the decision-making process as a proxy for their parents, seeking to extend within the church system the preferences (actual or perceived), interests, heritage or desires of their parents. Many of these individuals show signs that they believe they should have influence in the decision-making process based upon the tenure of their parents, family standing or parental heritage instead of based upon spiritual standing or maturity.

### **Importance of the Project**

#### *The Importance of the Project to the Researcher*

The researcher works with churches as an interventionist. The symptoms of churches facing difficulties have many forms and variations, but the root issues have been fairly predictable and consistent. Most of the root issues are directly related to poor spiritual hygiene within the church that provides a breeding ground for divisive behavior in times of disagreement, conflict, or unresolved interpersonal issues. To regain stability over the long term, it is paramount to engage the dynamics in the church environment which allows destructive conflict to gain a foothold or expand.

The researcher also assists churches as a consultant. The examination and evaluation process typically reveals some of the same root issues encountered during intervention. Developing a template for evaluation and a prototype application process within a specific church setting will better equip this researcher for future ministry.

The researcher serves his home church, Faithbridge, part-time in the role of Administrative Pastor. Prior to formal service at Faithbridge Church, the researcher pastored a nearby church for seventeen years and was involved with Faithbridge Church in numerous joint ministry endeavors. The researcher also had close ministry association and friendship with all three senior pastors who have served at Faithbridge Church. The researcher desires to see this local body of Christ protected from the potential of a church split through proactive assessment and action. The research project will also strengthen and enhance the ministry of the researcher within this and other local church environments.

#### *The Importance of the Project to the Immediate Ministry Context*

Faithbridge Church, the base for this project, has not experienced a high level of serious conflict in its history beyond the church split that led to its formation. The church will benefit from an analysis that identifies overlooked and inadequate or unsuccessfully addressed areas from which pockets of infection can develop or expand. The church will also benefit by receiving recommendations for strengthening itself in these areas so a proactive rather than reactive template can be established.

### *The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large*

Challenges related to serious conflict within church settings are not uncommon. These challenges can come to the surface quickly and gain surprisingly quick momentum. They can also bring great damage to the church body, its reputation in the community, and the cause of Christ.

Regardless of the conduit through which the serious conflict comes into the church, a healthy church environment may help limit or repel serious conflict. Churches in general will be helped by this research as it will help them identify weaknesses within their ministry settings that create vulnerability to the formation or expansion of serious conflict within their church system.

## **Research Methodology**

### *Nature of Research*

This project was qualitative in nature. Case study was the primary research model. Faithbridge Church and other select churches were the focus of the research. The main tool used in this project was surveys.

Primary data included a survey of leaders serving churches which meet the criteria listed in the delimitations of this study. Lead pastors or their designate filled out the survey. Data collected was used to identify characteristics common to each setting which prohibit or promote serious conflict.

Secondary data included biblical and theological resources as well as material from individuals who are experts, or experienced practitioners, in the field of church



intervention. This data was correlated with the case study findings to determine areas of similarities and differences.

### *Project Overview*

The researcher examined biblical texts which address identified areas that can give root to serious conflict. The researcher reviewed literature dealing with church conflict. The goal of the review was to discover common characteristics of church renewal processes following severe conflict. These common characteristics were used to establish a template for proactive ministry applications within churches.

The next step in the research was to identify a sample group of churches from similar contexts and cultures as Faithbridge Church using the criteria described in the delimitations section of this document. Pastors (or their designate) from those sample churches were surveyed to discover the underlying issues that resulted in serious conflict in their respective churches. The fourth step in the research was to collate and apply the findings from the first three steps.

The final step in the research was the development of recommendations for Faithbridge Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota. These recommendations included an assessment of issues and needs which presently exist related to susceptibility within the church environment to serious conflict and divisive behavior.

## CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS

The seven areas consistently cited as primary contributors to church conflict are: differences, unresolved corporate sin, structure, ministry focus, leadership, communication, and accountability. A theological framework for avoiding church conflict includes biblical principles and boundaries which pertain to these seven areas.

The Bible calls Christians to be the reflection of Christ, living in a pattern consistent with biblical precepts and principles through the power of the Holy Spirit. Godly relational choices hinge upon the fruit of the Holy Spirit being applied in both actions and reactions.

Paul compares the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit and the deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-23. The fruit of the Spirit includes peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control. The deeds of the flesh include enmities, strife, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, and factions. This text underlies the guiding principle for this chapter: adherence to biblical principles promotes peace in the local church.

### **Differences**

The Bible honors differences among people while at the same time commanding unity. The Bible also calls believers to embrace differences. These concepts are displayed through the imagery of the church as the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12:11, Paul teaches that the Spirit distributes spiritual gifts uniquely to each individual. Craig Blomberg writes, “Verses 13-14 give a twofold rationale for permitting diversity within unity: (1) those who are being saved come from

all ethnic and socioeconomic brackets of the ancient world; and (2) that is how a human body works.”<sup>1</sup> In the comparison between the human body and the body of Christ, Paul underscores the need for each unique part.

Simon J. Kistemaker notes, “Unity and diversity characterize not only the human body but all created bodies. For any living organism to exert itself productively, it must coordinate all its varied parts, function compatibly, and in its diversity show unity in purpose.”<sup>2</sup> David Lowery sees diversity as a necessity for the body to successfully operate.<sup>3</sup>

Craig Blomberg writes, “All the parts serve an important function, regardless of any claims to the contrary. Without the diversity that comes from specialization of function, one no longer has an organism, merely one giant organ, unable to do anything.”<sup>4</sup> For that reason, each individual part is essential.

Paul affirms the intrinsic unity of the body, even if an individual part devalues itself or is devalued by other parts of the body. He writes, “‘Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body”<sup>5</sup> (1 Cor. 12:15-16). Paul adds, “And the eye cannot

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<sup>1</sup>Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 246.

<sup>2</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, “1 Corinthians,” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 432.

<sup>3</sup>David Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 265.

<sup>4</sup>Blomberg, 246.

<sup>5</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible, New American Standard Version* (La Habra, CA, The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor.12:21). The cohesiveness and effectiveness of the church body requires each part to be respected.

The functioning together of diverse parts in unity within the body of Christ gives evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work. Craig Blomberg states, “Whether gifts promote unity or division can help to sift the genuine from the counterfeit.” He suggests that diversity within unity in the church body, in contrast to homogeneity, introduces a paradigm so unique and contrary to human presuppositions that it has evangelistic power.<sup>6</sup>

Differences are essential for the growth and maturation of individuals and the church body as a whole. In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul calls believers to live out their Christianity in a manner worthy of their call, with characteristics comparable to the fruit of the Spirit. He calls believers to diligently “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). This is to be done in the context of the oneness of their faith and the diversity of gifting and roles (Ephesians 4:4-11).

In Ephesians 4:12-16, Paul presents benefits in the church body which spawn from that combination of unity and diversity. God’s people are prepared for service so they can build up the body (verse 12), there is an advancement of unity, knowledge, and maturity, stability in doctrine is increased, and mutual growth takes place (verses 13-16).

William Hendriksen writes, “When all the individual ‘parts’ (members) of the church co-operate, the entire church grows spiritually.”<sup>7</sup> Every member of the body is

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<sup>6</sup>Blomberg, 255.

<sup>7</sup>William Hendriksen, “Ephesians,” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1967), 204.

linked together with a shared responsibility and stewardship. Every member is necessary for the growth of the body.

Warren Wiersbe, a non-academic writer, states, “We realize that, as members of one body and a local body, we belong to each other, we affect each other, and we need each other. Each believer, no matter how insignificant he may appear, has a ministry to other believers.”<sup>8</sup> Max Turner understands the main thrust of the text is the growth of the corporate body rather than the growth of individuals. He asserts that the goal is spiritual transformation of the corporate body, a corporate “new man”, and congregational conformity to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Proverbs 27:17 states that “iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” All differences in the body hold the potential for mutual growth. Differences are also used by God to shape and sharpen the beliefs and theology of the individuals and the church.

The Bible calls for Christ-honoring choices and behavior in all circumstances, including in the area of differences (Col. 3:12-17). The Bible commends peacemaking (Matt. 5:9; James 3:18) and gives guidelines for processing differences. These guidelines include the following: settling conflict quickly and before worship (Matt 5:21-26), pursuing peace (Rom. 12:18; Heb. 12:14; 1 Thess. 5:13), not letting anger linger (Eph. 4:26-27), avoiding factions (1 Cor.1:10-13, 3:3-9), and helping others settle their disputes (Phil. 4:2-3; 1 Cor. 6:1-11). Implementing these biblical exhortations allows conflict to be managed in a God-honoring manner and reduces the potential for destructive conflict.

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<sup>8</sup>Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: An Exposition of the NT Comprising the Entire 'BE' Series*, Vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 38.

<sup>9</sup>Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Formation in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22 (2013): 187-205.

### Unresolved Corporate Sin

The church is designated as the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). It is the presence and representation of Christ as His body (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:15-16). These descriptions of the church's identity affirm its stewardship of holiness. Living out the identity of Christ calls forth the responsibility to facilitate the process of repentance and renewal.

Scripture demonstrates the danger when godly stewardship is compromised. This truth is displayed in Joshua 7. Achan took some things from Jericho which had been devoted to God and, as a result, the anger of God burned against Israel (Josh. 7:1). Because of the sin of a single man, Israel was defeated in the Battle of Ai, about 36 soldiers were killed, and "the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (Josh. 7:5).

Donald Campbell writes, "Achan's sin was in deliberate disobedience to God's instruction (6:18), and it made the entire nation liable to destruction."<sup>10</sup> Joshua and the leaders of Israel mourned and called upon God. God revealed His covenant had been violated and called Joshua to consecrate the people which resulted in the exposure and judgment of Achan (Josh. 7:10-26). Donald Madvig notes corporate responsibility was stressed, but individual responsibility and guilt were not ignored.<sup>11</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebukes the church at Corinth. In their midst was a man who was in an inappropriate relationship with the wife of his father. Paul writes that the sin was not even practiced among Gentiles. Paul's challenge to the church is that they had

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<sup>10</sup>Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 345.

<sup>11</sup>Donald H. Madvig, "Joshua," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 287.

become arrogant, and they should have instead been grieved by the sin and challenged the sin. Simon Kistemaker states, “The verb to grieve refers to sorrow for sin that has been committed either by oneself or by others” and makes a comparison with Ezra mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.<sup>12</sup>

Paul uses imagery of a little leaven affecting the whole loaf in warning the church at Corinth about unchallenged sin in their midst (1 Cor. 5:6-7). “A small sickness can eventually kill a body. The need for church discipline is based upon the same principle.”<sup>13</sup> Ignored sin within the body is a corporate issue.

In Revelation two and three, Christ challenges churches about sin in their midst. Kenneth Quick notes that Jesus speaks to each church as a single entity in which each member of the church carries responsibility because they belong to that local body.<sup>14</sup> In each of these challenges, the corporate unit was held accountable for either the sin that occurred or their indifference to the sin. Also presented was a call to a corporate response of repentance.

There are biblical examples of people sharing the guilt of others based upon their corporate identity with those people. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus identified the scribes and Pharisees with the sins of their forefathers. William Hendriksen writes,

What Jesus is saying, then, is that the blood of all those righteous men whose murder stories, from first to last—that is, from Abel to Zechariah—are recorded in Scripture (the Old Testament) is charged to “this generation” (c.f. Luke 11:50), the Jewish people, particularly Christ’s own contemporaries.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Kistemaker, 157.

<sup>13</sup>Lowery, 514.

<sup>14</sup>Kenneth Quick, *Body Aches: Experiencing and Responding to God’s Discipline of Your Church* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2009), 15.

<sup>15</sup>William Hendriksen, *Matthew: New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1973), 838.

Peter, in preaching to the Jews, held them all responsible for the death of Christ (Acts 2:23, 3:13-15) because of the national unity. Reference is made in Exodus 20:5-6 and Exodus 34:5-7 to the iniquity of the fathers being visited upon “their children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” Walter Kaiser Jr. notes, “This chastisement will be felt to the ‘third and fourth generation.’”<sup>16</sup> All these passages indicate a shared guilt due to their shared identity.

The shared identity also lends to a propensity to the same type of sin.

Commenting on Matthew 23:30-31, William Hendriksen writes,

Jesus is showing how the scribes and Pharisees, together with all their followers, are proving and are going to prove that they are indeed typical sons of their fathers, who murdered the prophets. History is being repeated. The measure of the fathers’ guilt is being, and is going to be, made full.<sup>17</sup>

Inherited susceptibility, in addition to shared guilt, is linked to national and physical connection.

Identificational Repentance “is a term referring to a type of prayer which identifies with and confesses before God the corporate sins of one’s nation, people, church, or family.”<sup>18</sup> Two examples of identificational repentance are given in Nehemiah 1:1-11 and Daniel 9:4-19. Each of these men stood before God asking forgiveness for the sins of his people and ancestors. Tremper Longman III writes of the Daniel text, “Daniel has been praying not just on his own behalf, but as the representative of the people. He

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<sup>16</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, “Exodus” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 486.

<sup>17</sup>Hendriksen, 836.

<sup>18</sup>John Dawson, *Healing America's Wounds* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 15.



has not confessed his own sins, but rather the sins of the nation.”<sup>19</sup> Moses did the same, interceding before God on behalf of Israel and receiving pardon for them on the basis of his intercession (Num. 14:18-20).

The Bible’s call to repentance encompasses all sin. This includes individual as well as corporate sin. It also includes unresolved issues from the past, as well as present, sinful choices. There is no biblically stated statute of limitations.

### **Structure**

There is biblical evidence of organization and structure within the early church. Structure (a defined method of doing things) is evident in leadership, ministry methodology, standards, roles, and decision-making.

When structure is defined by God, it is to be obeyed. Obeying God’s commands creates an environment which facilitates the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which includes peace. An example of this from the Old Testament is the camping order of Israel’s tribes (Num. 2:1-34). In the New Testament, the Bible gives explicit structure regarding leadership qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-12; Titus 1:5-9). Titus 1:5 demonstrates an established and accepted hierarchy as Paul left Titus in Crete with orders to appoint elders. Paul delineates a defined process in 1 Timothy 5:19 for accusations against an elder. He outlines a process for communion in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Leaders had defined tasks based upon their specific role (Acts 6:1-6, 20:28-31; Eph. 4:11-12; James 5:14).

There are examples that demonstrate development of operating procedures if no exact structure is mandated by God. Two Old Testament examples of this type of

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<sup>19</sup>Tremper Longman III, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 223.

precedent are the organization of leadership by Moses (Exod. 18:13-26) and the organization of the army and musicians under King David (1 Chron. 11:10-47, 15:16-24).

One New Testament example of non-mandated structure is the selection of deacons in Acts 6:1-6. This text describes an organizational decision made by the early church to meet needs within their ministry. Complaints had arisen in the church because the needs of one segment of the church were being overlooked. John Polhill notes, “Even though the Hellenists had the main grievance, the problem involved the whole congregation.”<sup>20</sup> In response to the issue, structure was created. The decision-making process included specifying the core responsibilities of the twelve apostles and a decision-making process by the congregation. The text gives no specific directive from God for the process. It does give evidence of Spirit-directed wisdom in addressing the issue and evidence of God honoring the resulting decision as the process brought a reduction of the conflict between the believers.

Acts 15:1-31 describes a time of dispute and strong disagreement within the early church. Debate had arisen about salvation, Jewish Law and Christian living. The process which took place involved opportunity for individuals to give input and discuss the matter (Acts 15:4-5), consideration of the issues by church leaders (Acts 15:6), and a decision on the matter (Acts 15:7-20).

The text does not make reference to any specific biblically mandated structure for the process. Yet, elements of structure were in place and followed. There was an established authority structure (Acts 15:4, 6, 19-22), a process for giving testimony (Acts 15:4-11), a binding decision (Acts 15:19-21, 23-29), and a process for disseminating the

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<sup>20</sup>John Polhill, *Acts: The New American Commentary*, Vol. 26 (Nashville TN: Broadman Press, 2001), 180.

results (Acts 15:22-29). The process brought positive resolution of the dispute and encouragement among the believers in Antioch (Acts 15:30-34).

Warren Wiersbe provides some helpful insights on this text. He writes that “the leaders and the whole church (Acts 15:22), directed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), made a twofold decision; a doctrinal decision about salvation, and a practical decision about how to live the Christian life.”<sup>21</sup> He describes the letter as expressing a “loving unity” among people who had been once debating. He cites three results from the process: strengthened unity of the church, an ability to give unified witness to the lost, and blessing among the church.<sup>22</sup>

Structure and adherence to established boundaries, as illustrated by Acts 6 and 15, can reduce friction points and bring unity and encouragement to the church. God can bless the church through structure, regardless of whether the structure is specifically established by God or developed by leadership (as long as they are not inconsistent with biblical principles—Heb. 13:17).

### **Ministry Focus**

The New Testament gives evidence for ministry planning in the church. Ministry planning has elements of intentionality and pursuit of defined purposes and goals. The planning and the goals are spiritual decision points guided by the Holy Spirit.

In Luke 14:27-35, Jesus challenges potential followers to process the cost before making a commitment. Jesus uses the examples of building a tower and going to battle as

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<sup>21</sup>Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire 'BE' Series*, Vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 464.

<sup>22</sup>Wiersbe, Vol. 1, 464-465.

illustrations. Making an intentional decision was emphasized over a random or spur of the moment choice.

Walter Liefeld states of this text, “Jesus uses two different circumstances to illustrate his basic point: discipleship requires a conscious advance commitment, made with a realistic estimate of the ultimate personal cost.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus, in calling men to follow Him, cites the idea of forward thinking and planning as part of the decision process.

Norval Geldenhuys, referring to Luke 14:28-32, writes, “In these two instances the main point is this, that before anyone undertakes something important he should first of all make sure whether he will be able to finish the undertaking.”<sup>24</sup> Forward thinking, or planning, is part of the process for choosing and pursuing these or any other goals.

William Hendriksen suggests the story of the tower is about a voluntary choice with the lesson being “look before you leap.” He believes the second story is about constrained choice with neutrality not an option, where one must leap. He sums this up as “be sure to leap . . . in the right direction.”<sup>25</sup> He sees the decisions as sequential and, unlike Geldenhuys, limits the application to a choice to be reconciled with God.

James 4:13-17 endorses the idea of planning while also underscoring the importance of linking planning to alertness and responsiveness to God’s will. Thomas Urrey writes, “Certainly James is not suggesting that Christians not make any plans or to wake up in a new world every day. This would be irresponsible. So he gives directions as

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<sup>23</sup>Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 979-980.

<sup>24</sup>Norval Geldenhuys, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), 398.

<sup>25</sup>William Hendriksen, “Luke,” in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1978), 736.

to how the Christian should deploy his life from day to day.”<sup>26</sup> Thomas Urry sees these verses as an extension of James 3:13-18 and an application of wisdom from above which is, among other things, pure, peaceable and gentle.

In Proverbs 16:1-3 the reader is reminded that though “the plans of the heart belong to man,” God weighs the motives and the plans will be established when they are committed to the Lord. Mark Gaskins notes, “The problem is not their desire to do business and make a decent profit, nor that they are making future plans. The problem is that they are making their plans without any reference to God's will! They are leaving God out of their plans completely—after all, theirs is an economic matter, not a religious one. James' friendly challenge, then, becomes very pointed.”<sup>27</sup> Seeking God's will in planning can be an ongoing process rather than just a point in time decision. Part of seeking God's will and yielding plans to Him results in God's redirection.

David made plans to build the temple, but was redirected by God (1 Sam. 7:1-17). Later David, with God's leading, put plans and preparations in place for Solomon to build the temple (2 Chron. 28:11-19). Paul had plans in place during his missionary journey, but was redirected from those plans by God (Acts 16:4-10). There is no biblical record that either Paul or David was chided or condemned regarding his original plans. These examples provide assurance that God is not opposed to planning and will direct (and redirect, if necessary) the planning of a person whose heart is open and responsive to His direction.

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<sup>26</sup>Thomas C. Urry, “An Exposition of James 4,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (Fall 1986), 37-42.

<sup>27</sup>Mark E. Gaskins, “Looking to the Future: James 4:13-5:11,” *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000).

Ministry focus allows the church to have a shared vision and a God-directed plan to follow. Referring to Philippians 2:2, Homer Kent notes, “This enjoinder to maintain unity in their thought and action is elaborated on in four participial phrases. By complying with these instructions, the readers would create a climate where true unity would flourish.”<sup>28</sup> Planning under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit is enlivened by a faith-filled anticipation of God’s work allowing the body to strive together in unity.

### **Leadership**

Scripture evidences the influence and impact of leadership upon the church body. In 1 Timothy 5:16, Paul instructs Timothy to, “pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” Paul encourages Timothy and Titus to set an example for others “in speech, in conduct” (1 Tim. 4:12) and by “doing good” (Titus 2:7).

The Bible sets a high threshold for leadership qualification. Alexander Strauch suggests that “the most common mistake made by churches that are eager to implement eldership is to appoint biblically unqualified men. . . . This is, however, a time-proven formula for failure.”<sup>29</sup> It also restrains them from being able to provide the protective oversight that is part of their stewardship. The required level of spiritual maturity implies a lifestyle of Spirit-controlled choices and responses.

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<sup>28</sup>Homer A. Kent, Jr, “Philippians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 122.

<sup>29</sup>Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 68.

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:24 that “the Lord’s bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged.” Hendricksen writes that “not only must he be gentle in outward demeanor; he must be *mild* or *meek* in inner attitude or disposition.”<sup>30</sup> The characteristics presented in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 display parallels with James 3:13-18. Warren Wiersbe writes,

there is quite a contrast between the operation of God’s wisdom and the operation of wisdom of this world. It would be profitable for church officers and leaders to evaluate their own lives and their ministries in the light of what James has written. . . . Origin determines outcome. Worldly wisdom will produce worldly results; spiritual wisdom will give spiritual results.<sup>31</sup>

Simon Kistemaker states, “True wisdom has its origin in Jesus Christ and therefore displays the characteristics of Christ in the believer who has received heavenly wisdom. Moreover, the believer reveals this wisdom to everyone who comes in contact with him.”<sup>32</sup> Leaders need this Spirit-directed wisdom, which is interwoven with spiritual maturity and qualifications for spiritual leadership, to navigate difficulties in ministry.

Jim Van Yperen suggests, “Too often pastors address problems from within the flawed assumptions of their culture and training,” resulting in human remedies for issues which “require Spirit-directed discernment, repentance, and forgiveness.”<sup>33</sup> A non-anxious presence regardless of circumstances hinges upon rightly dividing the Word of truth, applying it with spiritual wisdom and discernment, and the faith release of anxiety

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<sup>30</sup>William Hendriksen, “2 Timothy,” in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1957), 275.

<sup>31</sup>Wiersbe, Vol. 2, 365.

<sup>32</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, “James,” in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1986), 122.

<sup>33</sup>Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2002), 39.

to God. Non-reactionary choices are choices determined and guided by God through the illuminating presence of the Holy Spirit rather than being controlled by the choices of another individual or one's own inner weaknesses and struggles. Alexander Strauch writes,

Multitudes of churches are oblivious to the moral and spiritual qualifications outlined in the New Testament for church shepherds. Worldly attitudes of bigness, power, self-promotion, and success in "the ministry" are deeply ingrained in the minds of too many church leaders.<sup>34</sup>

Two texts, 1 Timothy 3:1-12 and Titus 1:5-9, list qualifications for spiritual leadership. Alexander Strauch, speaking in the context of local church elders, says, "They are to model the character and conduct that God desires for all His children."<sup>35</sup> The specific qualities of a good reputation, not double tongued, beyond reproach, not accused of rebellion, sensible, and loving what is good, speak to a lifestyle of spiritual maturity, Christlikeness, and modeling for others the controlling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jim Van Yperen holds the opinion that "*all church conflict is always about leadership, character, and community.*" He believes that people will ultimately respond to conflict based upon their character rather than their training or knowledge—that true character is revealed through conflict.<sup>36</sup> Alexander Strauch thinks many church struggles are the result of leadership which falls short of God's standards for office.<sup>37</sup> He also believes the biblical qualification for leadership protects churches from leadership which is not competent or morally unfit.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Strauch, 12.

<sup>35</sup>Strauch, 70.

<sup>36</sup>Van Yperen, 24-25.

<sup>37</sup>Strauch, 17.



Alexander Strauch, gives this general summary of biblical qualifications for leadership, “Thus, the God-given standards for elders are essential for protecting the local church’s spiritual welfare and evangelistic witness.”<sup>39</sup> A spiritually mature, Spirit controlled leadership sets the pace for the church by exhibiting the fruits of the Holy Spirit and godly wisdom.

### **Communication**

Scripture underscores the power of words and gives clear guidelines for honoring communication. It also warns about the misuse and abuse of communication.

In Ephesians 4:29, Paul admonishes believers to speak words which build up and “give grace” instead of speaking “unwholesome” words. A. Skevington Wood refers to words which benefit as conferring a temporal or spiritual blessing on others.<sup>40</sup>

William Hendriksen, referring to this verse, says words should be spiritually beneficial to others. He writes, “We notice an interesting parallel between verses 25, 28, and 29. In each case the apostle urges the addressed *to be a blessing* for those with whom they have daily contact. Merely *refraining from* falsehood, stealing, and corrupt speech will never do.” He adds that the believer’s words, as Christ exemplified, should be so grace-filled that listeners are amazed.<sup>41</sup>

Harold Hoehner comments on this verse by writing, “One’s words are to be true and pure and also are to contribute to benefitting others. Besides one’s conscience, the

<sup>38</sup>Strauch, 71.

<sup>39</sup>Strauch, 72.

<sup>40</sup>A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 65.

<sup>41</sup>William Hendriksen, “Ephesians,” *New Testament Commentary*, 221.

Holy Spirit also helps guard a believer's speech."<sup>42</sup> Warren Wiersbe suggests the believer fill their heart with love of Christ so that only truth and purity can come out of the mouth.<sup>43</sup> J. Grant Howard writes that the Holy Spirit can produce conversation which displays the characteristics of spiritual fruit and characteristics of wisdom from above. He believes the Holy Spirit provides the ability to discern if words will encourage rather than injure.<sup>44</sup>

The book of James correlates the use of the tongue with validity of one's faith. "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well" (James 3:2). In James 3:5-8, the reader is cautioned about the potential destruction from the tongue "it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison" and warned about the difficulty of keeping the tongue under control.

James 3:9-12 sums up the section on use of the tongue by emphasizing the potential of using it to bless or curse. Simon Kistemaker emphasizes the link of verse nine with the creation account. He states, "God created man in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). In distinction from the rest of creation, man has a special relationship with God. Therefore, if we curse men, we indirectly curse God."<sup>45</sup> Warren Wiersbe creates an application from the text by reminding his readers that the main issue,

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<sup>42</sup>Harold Hoehner, "Ephesians," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 637.

<sup>43</sup>Wiersbe, Vol. 2, 42.

<sup>44</sup>J. Grant Howard, "Interpersonal Communication: Biblical Insights on the Problem and the Solution," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* no. 4 (Fall 1975), 250.

<sup>45</sup>Kistemaker, 115.

ultimately, is the heart rather than the tongue. He links control of the tongue with a heart filled with God's Word and yielded to the Holy Spirit.

The book of Proverbs has much to say about communication. "With the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach will be satisfied; He will be satisfied with the product of his lips. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Prov. 18:20-21). Proverbs contrasts wise and foolish talk (Prov. 14:3, 15:2, 7, 18:6-7) as well as righteous and wicked talk (Prov. 10:31-32, 15:28).

Proverbs compares the results of different types of speech (Prov. 12:10-13, 13:2, 17:20). Some texts reflect the positive impact possible through speech (Prov. 15:23, 16:21, 24, 25:11). Other verses reflect negative impact of speech.

The New Testament affirms these same concepts. It also draws clear distinctions between godly and ungodly communication. Godly communication includes speech that is grace-filled (Col. 4:6), encouraging (1 Thess. 5:11, 14; Heb. 3:13, 10:23-24), building up (1 Cor. 14:3-5; 1 Thess. 5:11), and exhorting (1 Thess. 2:11; 2 Tim. 4:2).

Author Ken Sande notes, "Words play a key role in almost every conflict. When used properly, words promote understanding and encourage agreement. When misused, they aggravate conflicts and drive people further apart."<sup>46</sup> Words can be used positively to build up and bring edification. Godly communication is a manifestation of a Spirit-directed life and allows the church body to reflect the presence of Christ.

### **Accountability**

Accountability is part of a human's relationship with God and other people.

Accountability is manifest as God disciplines those He loves with a goal of their spiritual

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<sup>46</sup>Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 162.

growth and righteousness. Biblical accountability within interpersonal relationships has the goal of spiritual development and, when necessary, restoration and renewal.

Accountability and discipline are a proof of His love commitment and their legitimacy as His children (Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:3-13).

In Hebrews 12:5-11 believers are called to understand the value of discipline in their life. The writer of Hebrews encouraged believers to run the race with perseverance and with a focus upon Jesus who endured great pain “for the joy set before Him” (verse 2). Referring to verse seven, which links hardship to discipline, Leon Morris states, “The word for chastisement [discipline] combines the thoughts of chastening and education. It points to suffering to teach us something.”<sup>47</sup> Simon Kistemaker writes, “The adversaries you encounter are blessings in disguise, for behind your difficulties stands a loving Father who is giving you what is best.”<sup>48</sup> John MacArthur notes that God works through hardship and difficulties to train His children and help them mature spiritually.<sup>49</sup>

That divine investment is a result of God’s love and affirmation of sonship. John MacArthur claims, “Besides the motivation of love, discipline is given because of obligation.”<sup>50</sup> That obligation is based upon a relational connection as legitimate children

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<sup>47</sup>Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 136.

<sup>48</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, “Hebrews,” in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1984), 376.

<sup>49</sup>John MacArthur, Jr, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1983), 385.

<sup>50</sup>MacArthur, 393.

of God. Leon Morris points out the difference between legitimate and illegitimate children is legitimate children are heirs.<sup>51</sup>

The purpose and outcome of discipline is positive. God's discipline is for our good, bringing holiness (verse 10). John MacArthur writes, "If we do not understand our problems as being discipline that the Lord sends for our good, we cannot profit from them as He intends."<sup>52</sup> He believes that when a person subjects themselves to the Father and His discipline, that person will have a richer and more abundant life.<sup>53</sup>

God's discipline also "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (verse 11). John MacArthur, speaking of this fruit, says, "We should consider our troubles as spiritual treatment, which builds our character and our faith, our love and our righteousness."<sup>54</sup> Leon Morris comments that the training a believer receives through discipline (verse 11) "points to those who have continued to exercise themselves in godly discipline. It is not a matter of accepting a minor chastisement or two with good grace; it is the habit of life that is meant."<sup>55</sup> Based upon the fruit of discipline and the example of Jesus enduring hardship to achieve the "joy set before Him", believers are challenged to endure hardship and not forget the long-term rewards God produces through those hardships.

The church and individual believers also have a role in the process of accountability. Matthew 18:15-20 outlines a biblical framework for administering that

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<sup>51</sup>Morris, 137.

<sup>52</sup>MacArthur, 390.

<sup>53</sup>MacArthur, 396.

<sup>54</sup>MacArthur, 397.

<sup>55</sup>Morris, 138.

accountability. This process of challenging sinful choices is positive regarding intent and desired outcome.

William Hendriksen writes that showing the offense is “in the interest of the offender that he may repent, and may seek and find forgiveness.”<sup>56</sup> D. A. Carson notes that all discipline must start with redemptive purposes and be motivated by winning the person back to righteous living rather than motivated by the desire to win an argument.<sup>57</sup>

There is question about the inclusion or omission of the phrase “against you” in this text. Some believe verse 15 should read “if your brother sins” instead of “if your brother sins against you.” Detailed exploration of this textual issue is beyond the scope of this paper. However, William Hendriksen speaks well to the practical application of that text.

Nevertheless, although Jesus is here speaking about private offenses, the underlying requirement of showing love and the forgiving spirit toward all makes it reasonable to state that whenever the interests of the Church demand or even allow it, the rule of Matthew 18:15 should be applied to public sins. However, the qualification, ‘whenever the interests,’ etc. is important! Gal. 2:11-14 must not be ignored!<sup>58</sup>

D. A. Carson agrees, noting that whether or not “against you” is in or out of the text, a process is presented that is an important template to follow.<sup>59</sup>

Some commentators emphasized the process seeks the good of the sinner and maintains their honor throughout the various steps. Hendriksen writes, “To spare the honor of the brother who has sinned Jesus adds that such an interview with the offender

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<sup>56</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 698.

<sup>57</sup>D.A Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 402.

<sup>58</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 698.

<sup>59</sup>Carson, 402.

must take place ‘while you are alone with him,’ literally, ‘between you and him alone,’ that is privately.”<sup>60</sup> He comments on the second step that

the person(s) who accompanied the offended brother will then be able to confirm the latter’s assertion that the matter is indeed as stated by him: that firm but brotherly methods were used to try to persuade the erring one of his fault and to bring him to repentance and confession, but these efforts failed.<sup>61</sup>

Each step of the process involves expanding the number of people involved. The goal is to limit the embarrassment by limiting the expansion as much as possible.

The expansion of the exposure is controlled by the response of the sinner.

Hendriksen writes regarding the final step that “because of his [the sinner’s] own stubbornness he has lost his right to church membership, and it has now become the church’s painful duty to make this declaration—in order that even this severe measure of exclusion may, with God’s blessing, result in the man’s conversion.”<sup>62</sup> Though application of the discipline process can sometimes be uncomfortable, Hendriksen notes that lack of church discipline, when called for, is a curse to a church.<sup>63</sup>

Hendriksen adds, “It is the privilege and duty of the church to set forth these principles [principles of godly Christian living] and to demand that its members strive, with the help of God’s Spirit, to apply them to their everyday living and thinking.” Mutual accountability is a stewardship and a responsibility. Mutual accountability includes challenging one another with biblical truth (Eph. 4:25; Matt. 7:3-5; Luke 17:3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17, 4:2), intercessory prayer (James 5:13-16; 1 John 5:15-17), restoration

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<sup>60</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 698-699.

<sup>61</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 700.

<sup>62</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 701.

<sup>63</sup>Hendriksen, “Matthew,” in *New Testament Commentary*, 701.

following repentance (2 Cor. 2:5-8; Gal. 6:1-2), and intervention in the case of sin in the life of a believer.

Luke 17:3, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, and Titus 3:10-11 also speak to the church's stewardship and responsibility to act in the case of an unrepentant believer. Accountability is a scriptural norm. Accountability keeps in view the process and the intended result of the process. The consistent focus of the church discipline process is the goal of repentance and restoration.

In conclusion, the commitment of this project was to remain tethered to the solid base of God's written Word. Human wisdom and insight pale in comparison to the rich resources provided by God, but have value when yielded to the control of the Holy Spirit and the parameters of God's written Word, the Bible. The insight accepted for this project from field experts was required to meet the litmus test of consistency with Scripture.



### CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Initial planning for this study envisioned a focus upon understanding and responding to disruptive individuals in local church environments. As a church consultant and interventionist, this researcher has experienced first-hand the pressure disruptive people can place upon a church and its leadership. Books which embrace this subject are for the most part decades old; up-to-date materials are very limited.

Preliminary reading altered the focus. The initial focus was the development of a strategy to handle disruptive people in the local church. The second focus involved reducing a local church's vulnerability to the influence and impact of disruptive people. The final focus became discovering factors within a ministry environment which make it most susceptible to the rise of major conflict.

The first wave of materials examined was written by consultants who work with sick or damaged churches. Many of these consultants have in-depth experience with churches either in the midst of moderate or severe conflict or with churches which had been left tattered by serious conflict. These authors were the primary focus of the literary review for the purpose of determining if there were elements common to the consulting and their recovery ministries.

Resources used for literature review were primarily church related articles and materials. Resources from other perspectives and disciplines were incorporated, but not as highly stressed. Strong emphasis was not placed upon qualitative or quantitative resources.

Insights from these materials were collated, grouped, and distilled into seven categories. These categories were sufficiently distinctive to allow them to be evaluated as independent units. However, the categories are closely related leaving some overlap among them.

Many of these materials were in some manner tied to—or influenced by—the Alban Institute. Several materials were also heavily influenced by Family Systems Theory (FST). There was notable consistency in the methods used by intervention and recovery specialists irrespective of their denominational differences.

This researcher questioned if the seven areas identified as common to these writers were the direct result of their shared Alban Institute and FST roots. Some of those similarities may be attributed to a common root system—the influence of the Alban Institute and FST. However, writings of authors from other disciplines unrelated and unconnected to the Alban Institute and FST provide collateral support for the key concepts.

This researcher's experience with conflicted churches would also suggest the common themes are not a result of the common roots. This researcher did not have background with the Alban Institute and was unaware of FST thinking prior to this study, yet has consistently responded to the same seven core issues during the church renewal process.

Once the main categories were established, the literature review was expanded. Resources were incorporated from more diverse disciplines and fields. Religious and secular materials were included in the review. Religious writers included individuals from a variety of denominational and religious heritages. The areas surveyed for this

project included behavioral sciences, organization systems theory, family systems theory, sociology, business development, church growth, church health, church intervention and recovery, church consulting, and negotiation dynamics.

Several topics which surfaced as a part of the literature review were not incorporated as independent items. Important topics which were not specifically addressed are spiritual warfare, personalities, attachment theory, and dysfunctional people.

Spiritual warfare was given primary consideration by many of the biblically conservative writers. Spiritual warfare is not highlighted as an independent topic in the sections which follow in this chapter. This researcher sees spiritual warfare as a legitimate component in discussion of church conflict, but sees it as part of leadership.

Personality tendencies were also not a primary emphasis even though they legitimately factor into a discussion regarding conflict. Personality traits do affect perspectives and responses. Sometimes these traits influence how a person processes and integrates biblical truth. Awareness of personality biases is of value for self-awareness, mutual sensitivity, and ministry placement. Understanding and valuing individual uniqueness is included in the section of this chapter which addresses differences. Jim Van Yperen expands this dimension in the context of a leader's response to anger and conflict.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this project is more upon the system as a whole rather than upon the individual components, like personality.

Attachment Theory also has great benefit as part of the backstory of individuals, as a basis for growth, and for mutual understanding. *Freedom in Christ Ministries*, a

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<sup>1</sup>Jim VanYperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2002).

spiritual warfare ministry, has attachment theory underpinnings with its emphasis on the believer being secure, accepted, and significant. Tools for understanding and development of individuals have merit. The emotional and spiritual health of individuals does exert some influence upon relationships and conflict in the church. However, the direct relevance is limited as the focus of this project is upon the church system as a whole. While these tools have redemptive and growth aspects, they are focused upon a small microcosm rather than upon the corporate entity.

Dysfunctional individuals in a church setting, the preliminary subject of this research, are worthy of focused study. A broader picture, however, is embraced through this research. The basis for the redirected focus lies in the FST influence regarding addressing the church system as a whole. Adjustments to the system are the most vital and strategic; a system willing to tolerate disruptive behavior without challenge or accountability is a greater problem than the dysfunctional individuals themselves.

Keith Huttenlocker observes, “Malignant attempts at conflict resolution invariably focus on the problem makers (as they are so accused) rather than upon the problem.”<sup>2</sup> Arthur Boers supports the theory that “individuals don’t change unless change happens in the system in which they live.”<sup>3</sup> These quotes correlate with the FST concept of the “Identified Patient” and suggest that church conflict is a systemic issue rather than a result of one person’s negative behavior.

Kenneth Haugk lists ways to establish an anti-antagonist environment: following established policies, functional feedback channels, clear job descriptions, a broad base of

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<sup>2</sup>Keith Huttenlocker, *Conflict and Caring: Preventing, Managing, and Resolving Conflict in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 33.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur P. Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior*. (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 31.

responsibility, discipline that works, “anticipatory socialization (let people know what you are planning to do before you do it)”, and presenting a united front (“no room for backbiting or unhealthy friction”). He also suggests a healthy support group for church staff.<sup>4</sup>

Leith Anderson lists these items as warning signs of upcoming problems for churches: excess personnel, tolerance of incompetence, cumbersome administrative procedures, disproportionate staff power, replacement of substance with form, scarcity of goals and decision benchmarks, fear of embarrassment and conflict, loss of effective communication, and an outdated organizational structure.<sup>5</sup> With the possible exception of the idea of losing substance for form, his observations mesh with the seven identified areas derived from the literature review.

### **Differences**

Key sub-units addressed under the topic of differences include diversity among individuals, accepting differences, the value of differences, dangers of ignoring differences, and handling differences in a positive manner.

Acknowledging and celebrating differences was a universal theme among authors surveyed whose work addresses church recovery and renewal. The topic of understanding and celebrating differences was also manifest in the resources examined, including those which focus upon church health and growth. The emphasis in church health and growth materials was primarily upon diversity of spiritual gifting and ministry skills.

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<sup>4</sup>Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1988), 94-96.

<sup>5</sup>Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 158-159.

A major concern, especially emphasized by those influenced by FST thinking, was the aversion to diversity and conflict often exhibited by churches and other organizations:

Norms are unwritten rules that people abide by in order to function as a group. Many organizations have norms opposed to the existence of any conflict. Conflict or difference is seen to be a sign of failure; it is something to be feared and avoided or put down.<sup>6</sup>

Church recovery specialists point to the danger to a church when congregants view conflict and diversity as ungodly or unhealthy. They observed that when conflict is seen as detrimental, the church-wide result is typically an atmosphere which hides from differences and diversity rather than growing as a result of them.

Authors from all examined perspectives emphasized the need to maintain distinction between unity and uniformity. Unity was consistently defined as differences and diversity being complementary and synchronized. Uniformity was identified as the stifling or elimination of differences and diversity.

Topics which dovetail with differences are structure (defined processes for airing, processing, and resolving differences), leadership (unity, protection), communication (godly and ungodly methods of expressing thoughts and differences), and accountability (challenging behaviors which fall outside of biblical norms, a defined process for accountability within the church).

### *Individual Differences*

Three primary spheres of individual differences were identified: personality, gifting, and abilities. Personality differences were not a central theme of most authors

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<sup>6</sup>Speed Leas, *Leadership and Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 88-89.

studied. Most writers simply pointed out the need to appreciate the existence of this dimension and addressed this element as part of their presentation about accepting differences in general. Jim Van Yperen was the exception, correlating different personalities and the manner in which each personality tends to address conflict.<sup>7</sup> There are numerous books, secular and religious, which address biases of differing personalities. Many of these resources identify strengths and weaknesses of those personality types relative to competencies, passions, and tasks. Detailing personality differences was beyond the scope of this project.

Differences in gifting and abilities were typically addressed in the context of working together as the body of Christ. The identified goal was a church environment where each individual served in the niche which matched their spiritual gifting, passion, and skills. The outcome was typically defined as two-fold. First, each member would experience personal contentment and joy by finding significance, value, and security through their spiritual service. Second, a true “body” concept would be fully embraced and appreciated by all.

Church recovery specialists also noted the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the uniqueness of gifting. These authors desired full participation from church attendees in areas of ministry which involved a sense of value and significance and impact.

Marshall Shelley, in the context of keeping disruptive people from creating damage in the church, writes about the value of having people involved in significant ministry. “A ministering laity, not just a busy laity, is a key to suppressing the dragon

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<sup>7</sup>Van Yperen, Making Peace.

[disruptive people] population.”<sup>8</sup> Most of the writers surveyed concurred with the suggestion that when unique gifting and skills are accepted and incorporated as part of a team approach in the local church ministry, divisive behavior and conflict are less likely.

### *Accepting Differences*

A recurring theme in the writings of recovery specialists was the detriment to a church when differences are not acknowledged, respected, and accepted or when conflict is downplayed and painted over with a righteous face. Fear is often a factor that creates conflict avoidance. However, Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus note,

But in our experience the fear of conflict going awry, getting out of hand, of somebody *really* getting hurt, is mostly a product of people’s fantasies. In most situations church people are strong; they can handle conflict and, in fact, enjoy challenging and being challenged. It is the fear of what might happen that gets in the way; it is blind obedience to the norm (especially prevalent in churches) that conflict is wrong or unchristian that sends individuals scurrying to the woods when conflict may be imminent. The problem with conflict, in most situations, is not that it will be destructive of the group—probably just the opposite is true—but its occurrence disregards the group norm that conflict is a no-no.<sup>9</sup>

When conflict is considered sin or avoided, the body also bypasses opportunities for growth. Jim Van Yperen notes, “Those who view conflict as sin focus on the emotional pain generated by conflict. Afraid to hurt others, conflict is avoided, like, well, sin. People are extremely reluctant to confront, to rebuke, to disagree or to offend.”<sup>10</sup> David

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<sup>8</sup>Marshall Shelley, *Well-Intentioned Dragons: Ministering to Problem People in the Church*. (Carol Stream, IL: Word Books Publisher, 1985), 87.

<sup>9</sup>Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1973), 42.

<sup>10</sup>Jim Van Yperen, “Conflict: The Refining Fire of Leadership,” in *Leaders on Leadership: Wisdom, Advice, and Encouragement on the Art of Leading God’s People*, ed. George Barna (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997), 240.



Miles suggests that one incorrect perception of conflict which adds to relational struggles in the church is the belief that conflict is sin and must be avoided.<sup>11</sup>

### *Value of Differences*

Differences were consistently held up by FST writers and interventionists as something positive. These writers believe great benefit results from the dissonance and conflict which arise from diversity. Seeing conflict and differences as a positive part of congregational life and growth was significant to many of the writers reviewed. Speed Leas observes,

Actually, there is nothing intrinsically bad about conflict. It is a fact of life, and often an important ingredient in making possible new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new or renewed relationships. . . . Challenge and encounter, even when accompanied by significant loss, can leave an organization stronger. They can put to rest distorted or misleading assumptions about a matter that has never been tested, stimulate and excite lethargic groups, and even stop injustice, redress wrongs, and rebalance power that has lost restraint.<sup>12</sup>

The authors surveyed expressed the belief that conflict can leave organizations and individuals stronger if it is seen, and responded to, as a growth opportunity.

John Paul Lederach emphasizes conflict transformation over conflict resolution.

He suggests,

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>David Miles, *ReTURN: Restoring Churches to the Heart of God* ( St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2005), 29.

<sup>12</sup>Speed Leas, "The Dynamics of Conflict," in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 10-11.

<sup>13</sup>John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 14.

Keith Huttenlocker affirms conflict can result in immense value for the individuals and the church. He also sees conflict as a means of enhancing communication and disrupting stagnant ministry.<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Haugk views conflict not just as a catalyst for growth, but also for enhanced relationships within the body.<sup>15</sup>

David Miles sees conflict as God's tool to teach important lessons to churches and church leadership.<sup>16</sup> Ron Susek believes conflict is a form of God revealing Himself and draws the conclusion that serious church conflict is "either allowed or caused by God."<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Quick refers to conflict as "bodily pain" designed by Jesus to help a church see its problems. "Jesus puts the pain where their problem is, and He keeps increasing its frequency and amplitude until (hopefully) they finally get the message."<sup>18</sup> Several other authors echoed the concept that inadequate or non-existent response to God's invitation for growth induces greater investment by God to bring about the intended result.

Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus claim, "The larger number of conflicts, the greater stability of the organization."<sup>19</sup> This idea was expanded by many authors. Several writers suggested that allowing discussion and debate over doctrine actually strengthened, rather than weakened, the commitment to the doctrinal positions of a church. Being able to openly ask questions and wrestle through theological ideas increased confidence. They

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<sup>14</sup>Huttenlocker, 35.

<sup>15</sup>Haugk, 36.

<sup>16</sup>Miles, 29.

<sup>17</sup>Ron Susek, *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 116-117.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth Quick, *Body Aches: Experiencing and Responding to God's Discipline of Your Church* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2009), 42-43.

<sup>19</sup>Leas and Kittlaus, 46.

felt where theological questions were muted or eliminated, the confidence about the core beliefs of the church was actually reduced.

Some church recovery specialists also identified conflict as a natural result of a growing and maturing body. Speed Leas forwards the perspective that the resulting conflict which is born out of natural development and growth is not unlike a teenager growing into and pushing toward the ability to make adult type of decisions.<sup>20</sup> Church growth writers also affirm the dimension of conflict which comes as a natural part of developing, the pushing against restraints to test ones “wings” and abilities.

#### *Dangers Related to the Absence of Conflict*

Conformity and absence of conflict were consistently presented as detrimental and dangerous to churches:

Congregations are uniquely vulnerable to fusion. Being idealistic groups, congregations work to maintain high spirits. When premium value is placed on harmony, acceptance, and belonging, people resist information that might disturb their peace. No one wants to speak the truth. . . . Vested in compatibility or likeness, congregations easily reject differences or information that contradicts their experience. They fear anything that might drive the group apart or alienate someone.<sup>21</sup>

FST authors refer to this concept as fusion and emphasized that fusion in groups leads to tunnel vision and group think. This researcher, during church intervention and evaluation, regularly emphasizes that any closed system produces genetic mutations.

Peter Steinke sees too much “togetherness” as potentially distorting the ability to be discerning. He believes groups that are too homogeneous tend to easily reject anything

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<sup>20</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 5.

<sup>21</sup>Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 26.

that contradicts their shared beliefs and experiences. He claims these groups possess a fear of anything which might disrupt the group.<sup>22</sup>

Murray Bowen suggests, “In an anxiety field, the group moves toward more togetherness to relieve anxiety.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, the homogeneity is artificial. Differences within members of the group simply become momentarily invisible as the group becomes focused upon defeating a perceived error or villain. “People who despise each other will create a common enemy to despise together. This doesn’t resolve their problem but gives them a sordid sense of camaraderie as they focus their energy on the object of their joint dissatisfaction.”<sup>24</sup> Focus on a perceived common enemy, according to the writings of the interventionists surveyed, ultimately multiplies conflict in the congregation.

Stifling differences of opinion is one of the signs of abusive churches, according to the book *Toxic Faith*. Anyone disagreeing with the leader’s views are negatively labeled and quieted or removed. The book suggests labeling is used to dehumanize and dismiss those who hold differing opinions.<sup>25</sup>

### *Navigating Differences*

The vast majority of the authors surveyed for this project emphasized the importance of a clearly defined, and consistently followed, process for handling differences and conflict within a church community. Authors who wrote from the perspective of church growth did not highlight this dimension.

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<sup>22</sup>Steinke, 26.

<sup>23</sup>Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1993), 277.

<sup>24</sup>Susek, 96-76.

<sup>25</sup>Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction* (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books, 1991), 184.

Authors who calibrate the stages of conflict consistently identify vilification of differences as part of the conflict escalation. Ron Susek identifies this as part of his stage two. “Diversity starts to be despised, not respected. Differences are accentuated as bad, not good. The desire for uniformity of viewpoints becomes strong. Diversity is feared as a weakness that will topple the church, not strengthen or enhance it.”<sup>26</sup> There was a very strong consensus among the authors that congregations which have not learned to embrace, honor, and celebrate differences risk greater acceleration of conflict.

Embracing differences between people in the areas of gifting and personality was strongly encouraged for a healthy church. Encouraging healthy discussion of differences in theology and opinion was encouraged within parameters. The focus of the authors was a platform or process for honest and positive interaction as opposed to a “head in the sand” environment. None of the authors recommended that a church bend its theology or biblical beliefs to please or appease differences in opinion or theology.

### **Unresolved Corporate Sin**

Primary topics addressed under this heading included significance of historical considerations, identification of historical issues and hindrances, and corporate renewal.

The value and need for a congregation to come to grips with negative events from their corporate history were consistently introduced in the literature reviewed for this project. This emphasis included writers from a wide breadth of perspectives: church renewal experts, spiritual warfare specialists, advocates of family systems theory, church consultants, and church interventionists. Unresolved corporate sin were identified as being directly related to church conflict.

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<sup>26</sup>Susek, 37.

### *Significance*

Church consultant Speed Leas observes that historical reactivity is a major problem in church conflict.<sup>27</sup> Author George Parsons refers to the idea of a “neutralizing history” which is relevant for individuals and groups, though it is typically met with resistance and attempts at denial.<sup>28</sup> Jim Van Yperen, founder of *Metanoia Ministries*, observes,

In every conflict intervention, Metanoia has asked for a history of the church. A clear pattern has emerged. Most conflicted churches have unreconciled conflict in their past. The sins of one generation have been passed on to the next, and the next. Many times, the present leadership is comprised of people who formerly attended another church nearby where they failed or left unreconciled, bringing their unresolved issues with them.<sup>29</sup>

Ron Susek refers to unresolved issues as “dry tinder” and believes those unresolved issues are held deep in a person’s memory. He states, “To assume they will vanish is a grave mistake.” Ron Susek indicates the most typical course is for these memories to smolder until some spark of conflict ignites them.<sup>30</sup>

Author Kenneth Quick, underscoring the importance of corporate history, states, Pastors and lay leaders, much less congregations, have little grasp of the significance of their corporate history—their local church’s spiritual journey—to tell them anything about what God wants to teach them. They don’t know how to listen to corporate history the same way they do an individual’s history. This is true, despite the fact that corporate spiritual history makes up close to one third of the Scriptures is a history from which God expects us to draw and apply lessons.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Leas, 52-54.

<sup>28</sup>George D. Parsons, “Neutralizing a History,” in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 106.

<sup>29</sup>Van Yperen, 104.

<sup>30</sup>Susek, 17.

<sup>31</sup>Quick, 2.

Other writers who addressed this topic agreed with that observation. Several added that it is also very typical to find ignorance of their own personal journey within leaders—especially in biblically conservative, evangelical churches. The detachment in personal history compounds the difficulty of working through the corporate history.

Jim Van Yperen observes that most seminary trained pastors have never been taught “how to anticipate and reconcile patterns of sin and corporate conflict.”<sup>32</sup> This lack of training leaves the local church with a serious deficiency in the area of identifying and addressing unresolved corporate sin.

#### *Identification of Corporate Sin*

There were some small differences in the methods used by various writers to identify and address the historic elements. The differences in the methods were primarily related to the number of people involved in the process—from prayerful engagement by leadership alone to larger scale congregational involvement.

The importance of identifying negative historic elements, influences, and patterns was consistent overall. There was substantial variation between authors regarding the defined focus and content of the historical influences to be addressed. Evangelical writers typically give high priority to spiritual warfare elements and sin issues. These authors regularly recommended a process which culminates in some type of church renewal or restoration service. The FST writers focused primarily upon organizational patterns, roles, expectations, and unwritten rules. These authors desire an end product that produces awareness and alteration of those inhibiting issues.

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<sup>32</sup>Van Yperen, 38.

Spiritual warfare specialists focused upon identifying, addressing, and renouncing past corporate sins as a primary method of dealing with church history. Negative historical events and actions are seen as spiritual strongholds leveraged by forces of darkness to the church's detriment. Neil T. Anderson is one of the influencers in this group.

Kenneth Quick models his approach around the churches of Revelation chapters two and three, encouraging church leadership to prayerfully develop what they believe would be a letter from Jesus to their church. He also emphasizes the importance of identifying the church's spiritual history and "interpreting corporate pain." One of the points of corporate pain which he identifies, corporate attachment disorder, is rooted in attachment theory.<sup>33</sup> All churches experience turnover in the pastoral position. It is Kenneth Quick's contention that few churches corporately process the emotions and grieving of that change which affects their relationship with succeeding pastors and leaves the church more vulnerable to experiencing serious conflict.

### *Corporate Renewal and Confession*

Kenneth Quick, Jim Van Yperen, and Neil T. Anderson (as well as other writers like them who are theologically conservative) culminate their process with some type of corporate repentance or renewal service. They stress that no such service should be attempted until the attitudes are right and the pain from the corporate sin is heartfelt.

Consultants approached the issue of corporate renewal from several different perspectives. Ron Susek writes from an evangelical and problem-solving perspective. He refers to the "dry tinder" and "smoldering sparks" of past unresolved items which

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Quick, *Healing the Heart of Your Church: How Church Leaders Can Break the Pattern of Historical Corporate Dysfunction* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2003), 67-75.



ultimately fuel a quick, furious, and destructive church conflict. The focus of his writing is upon the recovery process after a serious church conflict. He does not give a clear outline for preemptively identifying and addressing the “dry tinder” and “smoldering sparks.” However, embedded within his steps for recovery are action points which can be applied proactively in a local church.<sup>34</sup>

In his book *Healing the Heart of the Church*,<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Quick focuses on the emotional and spiritual health of the church and its leadership. He builds upon some concepts from FST and introduces a concept he calls mediatorial authority:

The kings and priests in the Old Testament *stood for their people* before God. God charged the kings of Israel with upholding and enforcing the legal statutes of the Mosaic covenant...The High Priest likewise stood mediatorially on behalf of the congregation before God in religious things...Pastors and spiritual leadership in the local church now combine both the governmental and religious functions within the church...Those in leadership *can* represent the corporate body and speak for them before God and man, even as a husband can as head of His family...It is the oneness the pastors and spiritual leaders have with the congregation that is the basis for their mediatorial authority.<sup>36</sup>

This approach suggests that leadership make confession on behalf of the corporate entity or stand in the place of former leaders to confess the sins against the body on their behalf.

Jim Van Yperen writes about retooling the church culture. That transformation involves a process that will: (1) examine, identify and confess past failure, (2) identify root needs, causes, or flaws in character, behavior, or thinking, (3) unlearn negative patterns practiced over time, (4) relearn new habits of behavior and thinking, and (5) reconstitute personal character and church culture.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Susek, *Firestorm*.

<sup>35</sup>Quick, *Healing the Heart*.

<sup>36</sup>Quick, *Healing the Heart*, 37-38.

<sup>37</sup>Van Yperen, 37-38.

Consultants who address issues of corporate health and church growth also encourage review of a church's history. Many of those authors recommend some type of church time charts or story boarding.

Consultants and interventionists from a FST perspective also stress the importance of historical review. The FST writers embody their ideas in terminology related to that specific field of study. Their historic review is centered around identifying "automated responses", "reactionary choices", "chronic anxiety", "unwritten rules and roles", clearly "naming" incorrect actions and communication patterns, separating the underlying issue(s) from the "presenting problem", and discovering the deficiencies in the system as a whole instead of simply concentrating upon an "identified patient."

The writers who addressed unresolved corporate sin were united in their belief that unresolved sin take a serious toll upon a local church by festering in the background and surfacing at unexpected times. When the issues re-surface, they believe those issues will significantly disrupt the body and provoke serious conflict. According to those authors, awareness and resolution of these issues will help a church avoid destructive conflict.

The writers who addressed the area of unresolved corporate sin typically wrote from the context of church intervention and recovery. Most noted that when unresolved corporate sin was first discussed, they encountered regular resistance from churches and church leadership. Even in conflicted churches, the preference was to "leave sleeping dogs lie."

While the writers stressed the importance of resolving unresolved corporate sin, they did not give a definition or boundaries for the process. Leaving unanswered how

exhaustive or detailed this process should be, the writers defaulted to general advice about prayerfully seeking God's leading.

### Structure

Identified elements related to structure are the definition and importance of structure, and a grievance and feedback process. The importance of church structure was consistently addressed by consultants and authors studied for this project.

David Brubaker reviews a list a “predictable sources of conflict.” Three of the nine relate to structure: an unclear congregational structure, conflict between the pastor's role and responsibilities, and a structure which no longer fits the size of the congregation.<sup>38</sup> Peter Steinke lists “poorly defined boundaries in the church family (responsibility, expectation policy, decision-making)” as one of three internal conditions which lead to church conflict.<sup>39</sup> David Brubaker states,

Thus structure acts to confer legitimacy on those individuals who are granted authority within the system. . . . And power that is seen as legitimately conferred is less likely to be contested. Thus, a clear and clearly communicated decision-making structure functions to reduce destructive conflict in a congregation.<sup>40</sup>

Speed Leas includes structural issues in his list of systematic factors which shape conflict in organizations.<sup>41</sup> For conflict recovery and resolution, he recommends solid structure throughout the process which is outlined in the beginning and adhered to throughout the process.<sup>42</sup> The area of structure dovetails with four other pressure points consistently

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<sup>38</sup>Brubaker, 2-3.

<sup>39</sup>Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations As Emotional Systems* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993), 107.

<sup>40</sup>Brubaker, 39-40.

<sup>41</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 79.

<sup>42</sup>Leas, “The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations”, 36.

identified through the literature review: leadership, accountability, ministry focus, and differences.

### *Importance of Structure*

Robert Logan and Thomas Clegg are writers with a background in church growth.

They define structure as,

the programs and ministries of the church, the systems and infrastructure that links them together into a unified organism, the written and unwritten forms, institutions and regulations that define church culture, systems for communication and decision-making.<sup>43</sup>

Definitions of structure varied a bit, but not significantly between the writers studied for this project.

Robert Logan and Thomas Clegg state “functional structures is an on-going process of evaluating, planning and implementing.”<sup>44</sup> Included in that process, among other elements, is removing (termination of ineffective or hindering structure), pruning (cutting back some aspects to maximize potential), and shaping (continual evaluation and improvements to structure).<sup>45</sup> They express the opinion that “functional structures are like the skeleton and the organs that enable the body to fulfill its intended purpose.”<sup>46</sup> They also believe that if the church structure is not functioning properly, then the church is sick and will not thrive.<sup>47</sup> FST and church intervention writers see a direct correspondence between an unhealthy church and vulnerability to church conflict.

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<sup>43</sup>Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 5-3.

<sup>44</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-3.

<sup>45</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-3.

<sup>46</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-3.

<sup>47</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-3.

Operating under the wrong structural paradigm can also expose a church to unnecessary conflict risk according to some of the writers. Church growth consultant Gary McIntosh points out the need for churches to adapt their structure based upon the size of the church. He believes that structural adjustments produce greater ministry effectiveness and reduce potential tension points. He outlines ministry differences between small, medium, and large churches in the areas of orientation, structure, leadership, pastor, decisions, staff, change, growth patterns, and growth obstacles.<sup>48</sup>

David Brubaker notes,

Two additional variables have a significant impact on congregational behavior and structure—the congregation’s age and size. . . . An organization’s age, or its point in the life-cycle curve, influences its structure. . . . A size transition could lead to conflict if the decision making structure failed to adapt to the new reality, and decision making came to be over- or undercentralized.<sup>49</sup>

Writers who referenced this aspect of structure, adaptation to changes in congregational size, felt it is one of the most frequently overlooked.

Speed Leas suggests that undefined roles and responsibilities create a built-in conflict among people.<sup>50</sup> He writes, “Sometimes procedures for doing work or problem solving in groups are themselves provocateurs of conflict in organizations. Usually, it is because the procedures are unclear, poorly carried out, or contradictory.”<sup>51</sup> The lack of clarity in church structure can be exploited by individuals who seek to divide or exert inappropriate power and leverage.

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<sup>48</sup>Gary McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: F.H. Revell, 1999).

<sup>49</sup>Brubaker, 5-8.

<sup>50</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 94.

Kenneth Haugk believes that church antagonists have the ability to find and exploit gaps and voids in the power structure of a church.<sup>52</sup> Marshall Shelley defines disrupters within a church environment as “well-intentioned dragons.” Based upon his research he notes,

Dragons thrive when the church’s formal authority and informal power structure don’t match. Whenever the church office holders, elected or appointed, are different from the unofficial but widely recognized power brokers in the congregation, dragons seem to multiply.<sup>53</sup>

Conflict resulting from a gap between the formal and informal power structure is common according to the authors surveyed for this project. David Brubaker concludes, as a result of his research, that lack of clarity in a congregation’s decision-making structure will cause destructive effects between formal and informal leadership.<sup>54</sup>

Christian Schwarz, a church health researcher and head of the *Institute of Church Development*, places church structure on a continuum between what he calls the dynamic and static poles. He correlates the dynamic pole with the concept of the church as a living organism, responsive to organic, Spirit-induced type of development. The static pole sees the church as an organization which needs to be influenced through human stewardship. He illustrates the concepts through the view of the human body with the dynamic pole as parallel to flesh and the static pole as parallel to the skeletal frame. He concludes the danger of imbalance to the dynamic is indeterminate and unfocused spiritualism while the danger of imbalance to the static pole is institutionalism and inflexible rigidity. Schwarz

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<sup>52</sup>Haugk, 39.

<sup>53</sup>Shelley, 44.

<sup>54</sup>Brubaker, 52-53.

urges balance between the two poles as each adds an important dimension to the entity as a whole.<sup>55</sup>

Kenneth Haugk lists items he believes are essential for maintaining an “anti-antagonists church environment.” Four of the eight items he identifies directly involve aspects of church structure. These four areas are following established policies and procedures, functional feedback channels, clear job descriptions, and discipline that works.<sup>56</sup>

The emphasis of almost all writers examined for this project was, like Kenneth Haugk’s, focused upon how well structures were defined and implemented. Outside of strong advocates for Elder run systems, there was no emphasis by other authors regarding the type of church polity and governance.

Writers, especially those from an evangelical perspective, stress the importance of a clearly defined and consistently applied system of accountability and church discipline. This element of church structure aligns with Kenneth Haugk’s identification of church discipline as an effective preventive method against “dragons.”

### *Grievances and Feedback*

Many of the authors surveyed pointed to the importance of clearly defined feedback and grievance processes within the church structure. Many writers also recommended defined rules for fair fighting or rules of engagement for expressing differences. Arthur Boers identifies several options for such rules.<sup>57</sup> This was a common

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<sup>55</sup>Christian A. Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking*, (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999), 16-23.

<sup>56</sup>Haugk, 94-96.

<sup>57</sup>Boers, 72-75.

theme among writers associated with the Alban Institute who stressed the need for a defined process to help people have voices heard and to know their concerns have been taken seriously and thoughtfully considered. Arthur Boers writes,

Churches often get into hassles because they have no established grievance procedures. Where do people go when they have concerns about, or even charges against leaders? . . . Thus [in absence of grievance procedures] concerned and unhappy people may escalate their activities and charges to get action or satisfaction.<sup>58</sup>

Speed Leas suggests that when people feel powerless or without voice, they will default to “fighting dirty” because they believe it is justified to balance the power scales.<sup>59</sup> Many writers observed that much conflict within the church can be averted if people feel they have been heard and that their input has been taken seriously.

Failure to have a clear and consistently followed church structure leaves a congregation exposed to an unnecessary risk for destructive conflict. Clear processes, boundaries and responsibilities can eliminate some tension points by reducing ambiguity and overlap. A legitimate structure for allowing feedback and airing of grievances also lowers risk by giving people a safe and defined venue to express their concerns.

Among the writers surveyed for this project, Christian Schwarz was the only one who specifically addressed the dangers when church structures are either too loose or too rigid. A rigid structure can give inordinate control by a person or a small group through exploitation of the “letter of the law” over truth, righteousness, and Spirit control. A loose or undefined structure can produce gaps or overlaps which bring about confusion and the

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<sup>58</sup>Boers, 75.

<sup>59</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 29.



potential for misunderstandings resulting in innocent (non-malevolent), unintentional, or malicious actions.

### **Ministry Focus**

Ministry focus entails three specific aspects: a unifying theme for the church (vision), ministry priorities (mission), and strategic goals (ministry plan). Stressed is clarity and specificity, not mere existence. Ministry focus also includes using the defined vision, mission, and ministry plan as a basis for decision-making.

Robert Logan and Thomas Clegg identify a clear vision and mission statement as an essential base for functional structures.<sup>60</sup> Peter Steinke identifies “no clear vision” as one of three internal conditions which precipitate and contribute to church conflict.<sup>61</sup> Leith Anderson identifies scarcity of goals and decision benchmarks as a warning sign of upcoming problems in a church.<sup>62</sup> Ministry focus dovetails with several other key components of this chapter: accountability (results, performance), structure (defined roles, responsibilities, spheres of authority), and leadership (initiation, direction, oversight).

### *Vision, Mission and Planning*

For each of these three items (vision, mission, and ministry plan), the guiding principles presented by various writers were very similar. These guiding principles included: buy-in from pastors, staff, and congregants, a day-to-day alertness to the three items, relevance of the items to current ministry and ministry needs, regular review of

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<sup>60</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-3.

<sup>61</sup>Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 107.

<sup>62</sup>Anderson, 158-159.

each item, and the items being used consistently as a basis for ministry decisions. Lyle Schaller notes,

During the past three or four decades, the air over the ecclesiastical landscape has been filled with words and phrases such as “mission statements”, “goals”, “objectives”, “niche”, “ministry plans”, and “statements of purpose.” Most of them include considerable pious language and some are filled with quotations from the Bible. Most are too broad and too inclusive to provide specific direction in the allocation of scarce resources such as time, energy, money, and space. To be helpful, the interventionist has to push to persuade people to focus in on what is their top priority.<sup>63</sup>

The value of having vision or purpose as the criteria for determining ministry initiatives and priorities was cited by numerous authors. Their observations were also consistent regarding the disparity in churches between having an established vision and mission statements and actively applying those statements in ministry. They also find that it is rare that anybody, even leadership, can recite the main concepts from memory.

Peter Steinke, commenting on his review of more than 100 reports he had prepared for troubled congregations, listed as one of five recurring issues a “*lack of clear sense of mission* (even if a mission statement was in place, it did not inform their action, and most people were unaware of it).”<sup>64</sup> Lyle Schaller agrees with that concept, asserting that disagreement between the pastor and church leaders over a central organizing principle is one of the sources of destructive conflict in the church.<sup>65</sup>

The preferred outcome of writers studied on this subject is a ministry focus which is identifiable and well understood. Peter Steinke notes,

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<sup>63</sup>Lyle E. Schaller, *The Interventionist: A Conceptual Framework and Questions for Parish Consultants, Intentional Interim Ministers, Church Champions, Pastors Considering a New Call, Denominational Executives, the Recently Arrived Pastor, Counselors, and Other Intentional Interventionists in Congregational Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 129.

<sup>64</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 47.

<sup>65</sup>Schaller, 137.

By articulating a sense of where a group is going, the leader gives it a direction and a destiny. Peter Senge of MIT's Sloan School of Management has also identified the leaders as the 'steward of the vision'. The leader advances the vision through steady oversight. What matters most, Senge adds, is not so much what the vision is but what the vision does. The vision is the group's way of defining itself and chartering its purpose.<sup>66</sup>

Peter Senge is an expert in organizational systems. His observations apply to the church as well as to secular organizations. Many of the principles espoused by church growth writers and church interventionists have a direct correspondence with principles of organization systems theory.

A mission statement delineates the top values and ministry priorities of a church. Robert Logan and Thomas Clegg define mission as "the specific 'who what, and hows' of achieving your vision. It defines and details your intended strategy... Your mission establishes 'why' your ministry exists."<sup>67</sup> Dan Cousins affirms the value of a mission statement. He suggests signs of a well-managed church include a clearly defined and widely understood purpose. "Whatever it is, the specific purpose of the church ought to be spelled out. The life of the church will be only as directed as its purpose, only as orderly as its philosophy and strategy."<sup>68</sup> Leith Anderson also highlights this as an important element for ministry. He states, "The best organizations are purpose driven. They know *why* they exist."<sup>69</sup> A result of a clear statement is a focus that people can rally around it, identify their role with respect to it, and appreciate their contribution for its forward progress.

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<sup>66</sup>Steinke, *Church Family*, 103.

<sup>67</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-6.

<sup>68</sup>Don Cousins, Leith Anderson, and Arthur H. DeKruyter, *Mastering Church Management* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1990), 26.

<sup>69</sup>Anderson, 111.

Ministry planning involves the defined process for successfully realizing the mission objectives. Robert Logan and Thomas Clegg suggest outcomes reflect the health of an organization. They define outcomes as “the expected results of ministry. They are the specific results from which success or failure may be measured.”<sup>70</sup> Terry Walling lists four commitments as essential for effectively carrying out his “ReFocusing” process. One of the four key leadership commitments is a “commitment to implement the agreed upon initiatives.”<sup>71</sup> Most authors emphasized the importance of congregational “buy-in” as one measure of success in the goal setting process.

One of Ron Susek’s recommendations for heading off church conflict as unrest begins is to develop ministry focus. He also recommends a yearly meeting to take the church leadership and the church body through the “approved master plan.” He cautions that distrust can develop if the master plan is perceived to be a personal plan of the pastor.<sup>72</sup>

Another important element is the actual achievement of the goals. Natural Church Development (NCD) is a process that goes far beyond taking a church survey. Progress toward church health involves development and implementation of specific and measurable strategic goals. Citing one church example where the NCD process failed, Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk note,

During a feedback session the source of this surprising result was revealed: they had discussed numerous steps they wanted to take *without ever implementing*

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<sup>70</sup>Logan and Clegg, 5-7.

<sup>71</sup>Terry B. Walling, *Focused Ministry Resource Kit* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999), 9.

<sup>72</sup>Susek, 29.

*them*. Their discussions had created the impression that something was being done but, in reality, nothing had changed.<sup>73</sup>

These authors were not alone in the belief that plans and goals without actual implementation or completion is a common occurrence in churches. Other authors expanded the idea by suggesting that planning without implementation can result in frustration within the church body which then, in turn, may give root to unanticipated, serious conflict.

### *Decision-Making*

Church conflict recovery writers consistently stressed the need for churches and leadership to make decisions based upon a clear standard and set goals rather than pander to the complaints or demands of individuals within the church. Author Gilbert R. Rendle states,

Rather than trying to solve problems and fix causes of complaints, leaders in many congregations today are most appropriately trying to manage differences and make decisions based upon the congregation's defined purpose or goals. The search for congregational 'happiness' is not only difficult for leaders, but damaging to the ministry.<sup>74</sup>

A clearly defined, and applied, vision or mission statement was frequently cited as a protective device against pandering to demands, complaints, and personal preferences.

Gilbert R. Rendle also notes that too often leaders want to avoid or fix complaints. His advice is to develop decisions around the church's call to ministry. He suggests absence of complaints is not valid criteria for effectiveness. Rather it belays a bias toward

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<sup>73</sup>Christian A. Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 18.

<sup>74</sup>Gilbert R. Rendle, "The Illusion of Congregational 'Happiness'" in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 82.

the status quo. Trying to fix complaints causes an internal focus and draws the energies of leadership away from eternal ministry. He adds,

In a seeming paradox, efforts to ‘fix’ congregations actually bring an end to complaints less often than they create opportunities for additional and competing complaints. . . . any change in one part of an interdependent system will cause responding and rebalancing changes in other parts of the system. In a highly interrelated and interconnected system, to ‘fix’ one part is to throw the rest of the system into disequilibrium.<sup>75</sup>

Gilbert R. Rendle was not alone in this type of warning (which is based in FST thinking). One of the strong points of the NCD survey is that it provides an objective and neutral starting place for the next steps of ministry. It also allows the process to bypass trying to align the diverse individual passions, preferences, and opinions which are so frequently part of a ministry environment.

Loss of vision and planning was presented various ways by writers. Sometimes the loss was seen as the cause of conflict and other times it was viewed as the result of conflict. Marshall Shelley, speaking of individuals who disrupt the church, suggests the first casualty of this type of extended encounter is vision and initiative:

The effect on pastors is equally serious. They sap the pastor’s energy and, just as damaging, goad them into reacting instead of acting. “The real problem isn’t so much their overt actions,” observes a veteran pastor. “But they divert your attention and keep you off guard even if they never openly oppose you. You find yourself not planning, not thinking of the future, not seeking a vision for the church—you’re just trying to survive.”<sup>76</sup>

Reaching a plateau and heading toward decline in a church life-cycle also typically correlated with loss of vision, internal focus, and the onset of internal conflict.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Rendle, 83-85.

<sup>76</sup>Shelley, 41-42.

<sup>77</sup>Kingdom Works Online, “The Life Cycle of Too Many Churches,” Kingdom Works Online, [http://www.kingdomworksonline.org/uploads/Life\\_cycle\\_of\\_too\\_many\\_churches\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.kingdomworksonline.org/uploads/Life_cycle_of_too_many_churches_1_.pdf) (Accessed Sept 11, 2014).

Ministry focus was universally presented as a key element for church development and recovery from conflict. Clarity in these areas provides a buffer against individual agendas, demands, and complaints which can often be the starting point for destructive conflict within a church. The writers who addressed this topic did not advocate rigidity or dependency on human wisdom to the point of rebuffing God's redirection

### **Leadership**

Primary topics introduced in the materials were leadership which is focused, initiating, healthy, responsive, and accountable. Writers from the perspectives surveyed for this project underscored the impact of leadership upon the organizations they oversee. Among those writers, the ones who wrote to the topic of the local church also emphasized the influence of leaders in the area of conflict within the church.

Peter Steinke writes, "Because of the leader's position in an emotional field, the leader affects the whole most significantly."<sup>78</sup> This researcher found that observation interesting coming from a FST biased writer. Edwin Friedman, however, also affirms the idea. In Edwin Friedman's opinion the "overall health and functioning of any organization" (including families) is primarily dependent upon the top one or two people in the organization.<sup>79</sup>

David Brubaker, based upon his church consulting experience, suggests that unless leaders change, the organization will not tend to make any major changes. The leadership change he refers to can either be the replacement of key leaders or significant

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<sup>78</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 67.

<sup>79</sup>Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1985), 221.

personal change within key leaders.<sup>80</sup> Peter Steinke views leaders as “pivotal in creating and maintaining healthy boundaries” and therefore, the ones who must establish a safe environment with clear procedures.<sup>81</sup>

Evangelical writers greatly emphasized godly character, spiritual alertness and growth as well as responsiveness to God’s leading as key elements for leadership. FST writers placed more emphasis on qualities in leadership related to emotional health and balance—exhibiting a non-reactive, non-anxious, and self-differentiated presence. Church growth writers typically framed up leadership through the lens of ability and skills, setting vision, and pursuit of defined goals.

An in-depth examination of leadership theory is not within the scope of this project. This document provides a summary of concepts regarding leadership (as related to conflict management) which most consistently surfaced in the resources reviewed in the research. Topics which dovetail with leadership are structure (formal and informal leadership, job descriptions, organization charts), communication (biblical patterns, interaction among staff, information flow to and from the church body), and accountability (growth and choices, completion of job responsibilities, relational hygiene).

### *Focused*

Focused leadership was generally defined as decision-making based upon vision, mission, and goals rather than as a reaction to complaints or demands. It is making pro-

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<sup>80</sup>Brubaker, 11.

<sup>81</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 82.



active choices as opposed to choices constrained or controlled by complaints, reactivity, and the agendas of those outside of formal leadership.

Peter Steinke speaks of people he terms as challenge leaders or survival leaders. Survival leaders, he suggests, act based upon emotional pressures whereas the decision basis of challenge leaders is thoughtful action and willingness to risk goodwill instead of only trying to preserve stability.<sup>82</sup>

Comparing focused leadership with individually focused leadership, Jim Van Yperen states,

A church founded on principles of individualism will respond to conflict out of its cultural values. . . . Fairness and tolerance take precedence over obedience and mutual submission. . . . All individualism leads to consumerism. . . . When a church focuses on meeting the needs of individuals, Jesus and the Bible become a personal, need-meeting machine. The church becomes a collection of individuals who are fundamentally at competition with one another—competing to have their needs met.<sup>83</sup>

Peter Steinke has observed that people under pressure demand answers and quick solutions from their leaders.<sup>84</sup> He equates healthy leadership to the immune system of the human physical body. When engaging people he defines as “Me Only” individuals who are determined to have their way, regardless, and are so perverse that cultivating relationships or engaging them in reasoned discourse is nearly impossible, he cautions against a choice to avoid these types of people or to capitulate to their demands, but instead make a choice to place appropriate boundaries.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Steinke, *Church Family*, 149.

<sup>83</sup>Van Yperen, 29-30.

<sup>84</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 121.

<sup>85</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 93.

The warnings regarding leadership decisions controlled by complaints were frequent and emphatic. Writers consistently underscored the damage caused by allowing the decision-making process to be taken hostage to the demands to please.

Speaking in the context of people leaving a church ministry and the fear many churches have over the potential of people leaving the church, Arthur Boers writes,

While we need to connect with and visit those who withdraw or threaten to withdraw we must be firm with such tactics. To cave in to ultimatums about leaving is to err on the side of fusion rather than moving in the healthier direction of differentiation. Differentiation includes the ability to let others go.<sup>86</sup>

Jim Van Yperen was one of several other authors who also underscored this point. He was very blunt in stating the opinion that leadership can never allow decision-making to be manipulated or sabotaged by threats to resign or to leave the church.<sup>87</sup>

According to writers surveyed for this project, churches and their leadership can be overly susceptible to threats due to their bias toward servant-based ministry and desire for peace among the brethren. Peter Steinke feels too many leaders become pleasers, especially when resistance is communicated in a loud or rude manner.<sup>88</sup> He thinks peace mongering is common in churches because tranquility and stability are often embraced as premium values. Peter Steinke believes these values leave a church very susceptible to being leveraged by threats and tantrums of immature people. He cautions that yielding to constant complaints and complainers will multiply the problems.<sup>89</sup> Peter Steinke claims,

Friedman believed that the antagonism of the anxious is proportionate to the niceness of the leader. If the leader adapts his functioning to the weakest

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<sup>86</sup>Boers, 126.

<sup>87</sup>Van Yperen, 159.

<sup>88</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 121.

<sup>89</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 102.

members, he enables their dependency, encourages their happy ignorance, and reinforces their helplessness. . . . As a result, . . . the weakest, most dependent, most emotionally driven people will control the congregation.<sup>90</sup>

Several authors researched for this project suggest that, in addition to “niceness” of leaders, a confused or distorted understanding of love and peacemaking within churches and church leadership also fuels these vulnerabilities.

Within the framework of focused leadership, evangelical writers added a strong emphasis upon the spiritual component for decision-making. These writers consistently drew distinction between operating through human knowledge and operating from a base of Divine guidance. Spiritual dependency and alertness, as well as receptivity and responsiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit, were included as key factors.

Referring to his observation that local churches do not pay attention to their history and learn God’s intended lessons, Kenneth Quick states,

Failing to grasp these fundamental truths, church leaders arm themselves instead with fleshly weaponry to deal with spiritual issues. We lean on management acumen and experience, our intuition and education. We attend “equipping” conferences where attendees gobble up principles of leadership straight from business or the military with a dash of Bible verse. Following those “road maps,” we “sit at the well,” determine and articulate a visionary direction, set management goals and objectives for our year, work to influence influencers and get the slow adopters on board for our strategy.<sup>91</sup>

Neil T. Anderson and Charles Mylander suggest Christianity gets reduced to an “intellectual exercise” when academia takes the place of godliness.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 77.

<sup>91</sup>Quick, *Body Aches*, 3.

<sup>92</sup>Neil T. Anderson and Charles Mylander, *Extreme Church Makeover* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005), 38.

Ron Susek goes a bit further, suggesting that destructive conflict is sourced in the shift from faith to human wisdom. He believes when a shift of that type takes place, God's protection over the decision is lost.<sup>93</sup>

### *Initiating*

Leaders initiating action, as opposed to passivity or dormancy was specifically emphasized by church recovery specialists. They noted that, on a consistent basis, extra damage occurred in conflicted churches when the leadership, hoping things would just go away, chose passivity and inaction. Ron Susek observes,

Church boards are often made up of well-intentioned people who become paralyzed by indecision when conflict strikes. It's a basic law that the longer a board takes to make tough decisions, the harder these decisions will become. If leaders wait long enough decisions will be made for them, with worse consequences than if they had made the tough decisions earlier.<sup>94</sup>

Authors attribute inactivity or passivity in leaders to several different causes. Sometimes, as Ron Susek claims, there is misunderstanding about peacemaking. In some cases, the leaders' personalities or theology are inclined toward quiet reserve and softness. In other cases, some writers suggest the leaders simply do not know what to do or fear making a mistake so they do nothing.

Jim Van Yperen believes passivity "is ultimately cruel, unloving, and hurtful because it does not keep watch or warn against sin." He also believes that evasive responses breach both truth and trust.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Susek, 110.

<sup>94</sup>Susek, 23-127.

<sup>95</sup>Van Yperen, 120, 132.

### *Healthy Leadership*

Attention was given to the topic of emotionally and spiritually healthy pastors and leadership teams by FST and church recovery writers. Healthy was consistently defined by principles such as the ability to openly communicate and disagree in a spirit of love and mutual respect, no fear of rejection when sharing, and ability of each team member to acknowledge and own their own feelings and their own attitudes. Marshall Shelley writes,

The most effective boards can see issues from different sides and examine them fully, even when it means disagreeing with the pastor. At the same time, healthy boards are united in purpose and plan, respecting one another's differences. The strongest board is a team of coworkers willing to honor God not only with their decisions but the decision making process. Their relationships are as important as their righteousness, and the relationship between pastor and board is cemented with trust; without that, the pastor's ministry will inevitably come unglued.<sup>96</sup>

Some of the best experiences this researcher has had with church boards included times of honest, though sometimes heated, exchanges. The members' ability to be authentic and fully share their hearts is encouraging and refreshing.

Unity was another important factor identified for effective and healthy team leadership. Unity was distinguished from uniformity (everyone being in agreement on every point). Unity involved the willingness to yield to the direction and leading of God through His movement in other team members. Board unity was cited by church recovery experts as one of the greatest defenses against church conflict.

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<sup>96</sup>Shelley, 95-96.

Marshall Shelly observes that the primary defense against church antagonists is a healthy church. He also believes that the place to begin in an unhealthy church is to build a healthy leadership board.<sup>97</sup>

One hindrance Ron Susek cites to pro-active or prompt response to conflict is a divided leadership board.<sup>98</sup> Numerous authors pointed to board division as one of the key areas from which conflict was given leverage within a church environment. Writing about antagonists in the church, Kenneth Haugk states,

“Divide and conquer” is the principle by which an antagonist seeks to render church leaders ineffective. If an antagonist can incite leaders to disagree or fight among themselves. . . . many of his or her goals are met. . . . Good communication among leaders will serve as your best shield against an antagonist’s attempts to divide.<sup>99</sup>

According to writers, particularly those from a conservative evangelical perspective, attempts to divide and conquer can be thwarted when leadership establishes clear, biblical, and protective protocols for receiving information. The protocols can be designed to limit the ability of an individual from outside the board to play one member of the board against another member.

Character qualities for leadership received attention from a number of authors. Evangelical writers most strongly emphasized this aspect. Jim Van Yperen believes that people will ultimately respond to conflict based upon their character rather than their

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<sup>97</sup>Shelley, 95.

<sup>98</sup>Susek, 127.

<sup>99</sup>Haugk, 153-154.

training or knowledge—that true character is revealed through conflict.<sup>100</sup> Ron Susek thinks desperation (often the case during conflict) unmasks a person’s “true character.”<sup>101</sup>

The potential for destructive choices by what are labeled “unhealthy, reactive and undifferentiated” leaders was a common theme among FST and church recovery writers. Destructive choices of leadership teams included: developing an “us against them” mentality, “circling the wagons” for self-protection, arrogance, judgmental attitudes, seeing any opposition as enemies and agents of Satan, veiled communication and secrecy, resistance to accountability, overlooking the need for spiritual growth and development (individually and as a team), and attempts to alleviate pain rather than to grow as a result of it. Some of the most destructive choices cited by the writers involved manipulation of truth and people by leaders or leadership teams.

Kenneth Quick makes an interesting conjecture,

I have become convinced that this path I followed is “common to humans.” The pattern is this: God sovereignly arranges for the call of a man with such a problem to a local church with a *similar* struggle. . . . God meanwhile works to *heal both the church and the pastor* of their paths of pain so they can fulfill the vision and accomplish the mission.<sup>102</sup>

Kenneth Quick was the only writer to suggest a parallel path of this type. He did not cite any research support or validation for his observation. This concept is supported by this researcher’s observations and personal experiences working with conflicted churches.

Related to the corporate healthy leadership was a strong focus upon the health of individual leaders. Author Sam Rima, along with numerous other writers, emphasizes the importance of what Rima terms “self-leadership.” Self-leadership is the active process of

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<sup>100</sup>Van Yperen, 24-25.

<sup>101</sup>Susek, 54.

<sup>102</sup>Quick, *Healing the Heart*, 29.

engaging in personal evaluation, development, growth, refocusing, and renewal. Rima provides a wide spectrum of ideas from personal discipline to evaluation of life goals and skills and competencies.<sup>103</sup> The value of a leader understanding and coming to grips with their personal weaknesses and “dark side” was sprinkled through the writings of authors from the perspectives studied (with the exception of church growth writers who did not address the subject):

“The leader has the responsibility to pursue personal mastery” says our colleague Alain Gauthier, “not just for his or her own sake, but for everyone else in the organization. Unless the leader has a degree of self-knowledge and self-understanding there is risk that he or she may use the organization to address his or her own neurosis. This can have a tremendous impact on the other people.”<sup>104</sup>

Many of the authors examined for this research confirm this principle as being vividly played out in church settings. Friedman believes success of spiritual leadership has more to do with the leader’s ability for self-definition than with their ability to motivate others.<sup>105</sup>

Brubaker affirms this concept. Noting five traits he believes are true of successful leaders, he writes,

All have to do with awareness or skills, thus all can be developed or improved by current leaders. . . . *Successful leaders become self-aware.* Without exception, the most destructive leaders I have encountered in my conflict consulting practice have been remarkably unaware of their impact on others. . . . Healthy leaders, by contrast, are consistently aware of others and of their impact on them, and they monitor their own behavior to ensure healthy interaction.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>Samuel D. Rima, *Leading from the Inside Out: The Art of Self-Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

<sup>104</sup>Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Currency, Doubleday, 1994), 197

<sup>105</sup>Friedman, 221.

<sup>106</sup>Brubaker, 86.



Many writers researched for this project underscored the negative effects of unhealthy leadership, particularly as a causal factor in church conflict. The need for healthy leadership in conflicted churches was also emphasized.

One unhealthy and very destructive pattern, cited by numerous church recovery experts, was pastors who seek to lead by manipulation and intimidation. This type of pastor also had the tendency to respond by labeling any negative input or lack of agreement with their opinions as disloyalty. It is typical in these situations for the pastor to stack the leadership board with individuals who give complete allegiance. Often a corresponding action is threatening to quit if challenged or questioned. This type of manipulation was specifically addressed by several writers. Jim Van Yperen writes,

If a leader uses resignation as a play for power or sympathy, you do not want that person leading your church. Period. . . . Any leader who uses the threat of resignation for sympathy or for power should not be in leadership. The church should accept the resignation immediately. If you don't do this, the problem will grow worse. In fact, in every church we served where a leader threatened to resign, the church ended up firing or forcing the leader to resign later. In each church, the emotional and spiritual turmoil was made worse by not accepting the first resignation.<sup>107</sup>

Blackmail is not a biblical principle. Nor is it a characteristic of spiritual maturity or a leadership quality.

### *Responsiveness*

The ability to accept and process input and complaints with a non-reactive, learning posture was emphasized as a deterrent to the acceleration of church conflict. Gilbert R. Rendle suggests it is foolish to ignore or dismiss complaints. He states,

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<sup>107</sup>Van Yperen, 158-159.

“People need to be heard and responded to.”<sup>108</sup> Ron Susek believes “people want their positions heard and felt”, especially in times of conflict.<sup>109</sup> David Brubaker states,

*Successful leaders invite disagreement.* Successful leaders demonstrate in a variety of ways that they value input and feedback and create mechanisms to encourage input. Whether through an open door policy or through skillful listening, healthy leaders demonstrate that they care deeply about the views of their congregational members. Leaders who communicate a ‘you’re either for me or against me’ mentality inevitably find that they cut out critical feedback—the kind most needed to avoid disastrous decisions.<sup>110</sup>

Receiving input and criticism is not parallel to being controlled by criticism. Writers were very clear about this type of distinction. Dangers on both ends of the spectrum were emphasized.

On one side are the dangers of leadership being held hostage to complaints and the agenda of others. On the other extreme was the danger of being autocratic and unreceptive (or even aggressively opposed) to input and felt needs. David Brubaker asserts that “over time autocratic leadership disempowers other members and engenders dependency, whereas pure consensus disempowers leadership and can result in a tyranny of the minority.”<sup>111</sup> This observation speaks to the importance of finding and maintaining a good balance between the two ends of the spectrum.

Marshall Shelley states the goal should not be to silence all complainers, but to deflect or redirect criticism and learn the lessons God intends through the input.<sup>112</sup> He notes, “Often the greatest damage is not done by the dragons themselves but by the

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<sup>108</sup>Rendle, 91-92.

<sup>109</sup>Susek, 48.

<sup>110</sup>Brubaker, 86.

<sup>111</sup>Brubaker, 39.

<sup>112</sup>Shelley, 119-120.

overreactions they provoke in others.”<sup>113</sup> Processing criticism and input in a positive manner was an ability emphasized for leadership—both individually and as a team. The driving principles in handling criticism and input were similar in both the team and individual aspects. One book suggested each person has two buckets available—water and gasoline. Each leader must choose which they will pour onto the fire.<sup>114</sup>

Speed Leas underscores the dangers when approached by someone speaking critically about fellow staff members, especially given the potential for this to result in destructive conflict. He also gives insights on developing a policy to address how to redemptively handle situations of that type.<sup>115</sup>

In his book *Making Peace*,<sup>116</sup> Jim Van Yperen compares personality types with the type of responses to criticism which are typical for each personality. Along with the insights he gives suggestions and exercises for growth.

### *Accountability*

Writers surveyed most frequently referenced accountability in the context of pastoral leadership. However, the need of accountability across the whole spectrum of the primary church leadership was not ignored. Leadership accountability was consistently addressed by recovery specialists and FST writers. Almost without exception, in the resources which spoke to leadership, accountability was viewed as a primary aspect of functional and positive leadership. Lack of leadership accountability was cited as a frequent factor in church conflict.

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<sup>113</sup>Shelley, 120-121.

<sup>114</sup>Anderson and Mylander, 248.

<sup>115</sup>Leas, “The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations”, 118ff.

<sup>116</sup>Van Yperen, *Making Peace*.

There were significant variations among the writers related to the focus of the accountability. Areas of leadership accountability encompassed tasks, morals, emotional development, and spiritual growth. The evangelical writers placed the highest emphasis upon accountability in the areas of moral and spiritual development. The primary emphasis of church growth writers was vision, roles, and tasks. FST writers emphasized relationships, communication, and emotional development.

Arthur DeKruyter states power is accountable. “The responsibility of power brings with it to be always accountable, either to a person or to a group. . . . Accountability also means I must be open with the board; I must never be covert or keep secrets.”<sup>117</sup> He also notes the inherent danger and potential for abuse of power which derives from people’s unwillingness to challenge a pastor they respect and have grown from spiritually.

Several authors noted that questions concerning accountability usually surface during times of conflict and are used as “weapons of war.” Questions about accountability are rarely asked of pastors and church leaders, especially during times of peace and tranquility within the church settings.

Leadership does indeed have a great influence upon the church and its ability to avoid or handle conflict. Churches have greater immunity when their leadership is initiating, emotionally and spiritually healthy, growing spiritually, responsive to input, and accountable.

With the exception of the evangelical writers, most of the authors drifted toward defining effective leadership based more upon characteristics from leadership theory than

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<sup>117</sup>Cousins, Anderson, and DeKruyter, 33-34.

biblical qualifications. Servant leadership was typically not emphasized, nor God's standard of looking at the heart rather than outward appearance (1 Sam.16:7).

### **Communication**

The primary elements of communication include interpersonal communication patterns, types of destructive communication, and communication flow within the church system.

Without exception, church restoration specialists identified negative communication patterns as a primary cause of church conflict and a key issue to address for church recovery. Writers from other perspectives also saw communication as an important aspect for church health, vitality, and growth. FST writers tended to see communication patterns as both a cause and a result. Church health and growth writers mainly focused upon institutional, rather individual, elements of communication. Institutional communication includes communication among leadership and staff as well as communication from leadership to the corporate body.

Speed Leas sees distorted or interrupted communication as one of the destructive patterns in church fights.<sup>118</sup> Neil Anderson and Charles Mylander make a similar observation, contextualizing their argument through the historical backdrop of the Tower of Babel:

Good communication is the key to successful operations. All the Lord had to do to totally stop the Tower of Babel building program was to destroy the people's ability to communicate with each other. . . . That is about all the devil has to do to stop the progress in your church. Find some disgruntled member, whisper a lie in his ear and he will wreak havoc in your church. The father of lies is very effective at creating havoc and confusion in the church.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Leas, "The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations", 29.

<sup>119</sup>Anderson and Mylander, 60-61.

Author Ken Sande identifies misunderstandings from poor communications as one of four primary causes for church conflict.<sup>120</sup>

An in-depth examination of the nuances of communication and specifics related to communication theory are not within the scope of this project. This project provides a summary of topics related to communication which were consistently identified by the sources reviewed as specific causes of church conflict and division.

Topics which dovetail with communication are structure (an appeal process and feedback loop), leadership (exemplifying), and accountability (the process for challenging inappropriate communication patterns and enhancing personal responsibility).

### *Interpersonal Communication*

The primary focus in discussions concerning communication, by the majority of authors examined, was direct and biblically appropriate communication between individuals. The exceptions were church growth writers who did not address this aspect of communication.

Arthur Boers claims, “Churches are hotbeds of rumor, gossip, secrets, third-party complaints and murmuring.”<sup>121</sup> Ken Sande, in a section of his book identifying where people are most likely to sin against others when in conflict with them, suggests that one

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<sup>120</sup>Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 30.

<sup>121</sup>Boers, 82.

sin is the use of communication as a weapon. He also refers to reckless words, spoken without thinking or in haste, as inflaming conflict.<sup>122</sup>

Marshall Shelley, who refers to divisive people as dragons, creates a broader framework which focuses on the intent of communication. Regarding abuse of words, he suggests, “the strategy is one of planting questions in people’s minds, at first seemingly innocent questions but with the result of raising doubts...”<sup>123</sup> He also believes that dragons are best identified by—and known for—what comes out of their mouths. He comments,

How do you know a dragon if you see one? . . . The distinguishing characteristic of a dragon is not what is said but how it’s said. . . . Often they have a spirit that enjoys being an adversary rather than an ally. They have a consistent pattern of focusing on a narrow special interest rather than the big picture, which leads to tangents rather than a balanced church life. Theirs is a spirit quick to vilify and slow to apologize. Dragons usually cannot bring themselves to accept responsibility for something that has gone wrong, and hence, they resist asking anyone’s forgiveness.<sup>124</sup>

Many writers identified veiled communication as one of the challenges encountered in conflicted churches, a subtle, but destructive, abuse of communication by individuals who undermine through their words while not transgressing “the letter of the law.”

FST writers predominately focused upon the process and why people err in communication issues. Authors from this perspective had a definite bias toward placing responsibility for poor communication patterns upon reactivity rather than sinful choices—attributing communication breakdowns and poor communication to the root of anxiety. These authors also focused upon the process and flow of communication.

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<sup>122</sup>Sande, 121.

<sup>123</sup>Shelley, 51.

<sup>124</sup>Shelley, 51.

Biblically conservative writers consistently attributed communication breakdowns to sloppiness in spiritual hygiene—accenting the sin dimensions related to personal communication choices which are inconsistent with biblical norms. Some saw these breakdowns as a result of attrition and graying of biblical boundaries. Most writers from this perspective focused upon the sin aspect. Some of these writers added a spiritual warfare component to their discussions regarding disruptive communication patterns.

Some writers focused specifically upon divisive and destructive individuals within the church body; those who intentionally employed negative and unbiblical communication patterns to further negative or personal agendas and to intentionally cause division and strife. However, Arthur Boers writes, “It is tempting to point fingers at people who gossip, spread rumors, anonymously accuse, and backbite. But such behavior exists only if the system itself permits and enables it.”<sup>125</sup> This project adopts a posture consistent with that statement, focusing upon the church as a whole system rather than a focus upon specific individuals.

Most authors added warnings about negative communication patterns in their writing. The context of those warnings most frequently was a systems context—that poor patterns exist (and multiply) because the church community tolerates negative patterns instead of intentionally and consistently challenging them. Church structure (clear and consistently applied policies) and accountability (challenging poor behavior and holding individuals responsible for negative choices) provides protection to the church and prevents negative communication patterns from metastasizing.

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<sup>125</sup>Boers, 84.



Often individuals and churches lose sight of biblical principles or fail to accurately define things like gossip due to lack of separation from accepted social and environmental norms. Toleration of destructive communication patterns can sometimes be unintentional rather than purposely ignored or malicious.

### *Destructive Communication Patterns*

Destructive patterns consistently identified by the writers are triangulation, rumors and gossip, manipulation, secrecy and anonymity, minor issues and splitting hairs, and the breakdown of interpersonal communication.

#### **Triangulation**

Writers influenced by FST consistently addressed the inappropriateness and dangers of triangulation. Triangulation was also challenged by a number of other authors.

VanYperen states,

Relational triangulation occurs when a believer who has a problem with another believer talks to a third party (a friend, a wife, a co-worker) about the problem before talking to the person in question. This is called triangulation because it brings a third party into a matter between two. Triangulation is always sin.<sup>126</sup>

Jim Van Yperen is one of the more biblically conservative writers surveyed for this project. Another biblically conservative writer, Ken Sande, correlates triangulation with gossip and rumor-mongering.<sup>127</sup>

Jim Van Yperen notes that triangulation multiplies most problems. People brought into the loop speak to others who are not part of the loop, expanding the network of recipients. He states,

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<sup>126</sup>Van Yperen, 165.

<sup>127</sup>Sande, 121.

Triangulation can kill a church. We have seen it destroy many pastors and leaders—both victims and perpetrators. In some churches we have served, we can “map” or “survey” the church conflict by following the communication triangles. Yet we frequently find leaders and members who have convinced themselves that their “special circumstances” make them exempt from following Matthew 18:15.<sup>128</sup>

All the authors who addressed this subject were very adamant in their belief that indirect communication creates, fuels, and extends church conflict.

### **Rumors and Gossip**

Speed Leas sees rumors, talking about people “behind their backs”, covert contention, and underground dissention are potentially as damaging to a church as blatant fighting.<sup>129</sup> Ken Sande includes in his definition of gossip the betraying of a confidence and discussing unfavorable personal facts about a person with a third party who is not part of the problem or the solution. He asserts that even if the information is true, it is still gossip and sinful. He believes it is often gossip that starts and energizes conflict.<sup>130</sup>

Arthur Boers believes exaggeration and distortion tend to be produced when information is indirectly and secretly communicated.<sup>131</sup> He writes,

Churches can be debilitated by gossip and accusations. When people make accusations without addressing either the proper authorities or the offenders, they hurt the community. . . . Viruses cannot spread if we do not spread them. We disable rumors, gossip, secrets, third-party complaints, and murmuring by refusing to pass them along or perpetuate them. “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases” (Prov. 26:20).<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>Van Yperen, 164,166.

<sup>129</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 63.

<sup>130</sup>Sande, 121.

<sup>131</sup>Boers, 82.

<sup>132</sup>Boers, 85.

Several church recovery specialists surveyed for this project emphasized this biblical strategy for combating rumors and gossip. Arthur Boers' observation that poor communication and secrecy enable rumors<sup>133</sup> also has credibility based upon the descriptions from other church intervention writers.

### **Manipulation**

The abuse of communication to manipulate others was pinpointed by several authors. Most identified the use of deceitful words, "half-truths", "white lies", and skewing of facts as common means of the manipulation. Ken Sande identified speaking false and malicious words about another person as slander.<sup>134</sup> He also notes,

*Falsehood* includes any form of misrepresentation or deceit (Prov. 24:28; 2 Cor. 4:2), including lying, exaggeration, telling only part of the truth, or distorting the truth by emphasizing favorable facts while minimizing those that are against us. Anytime we use words that give a false impression of reality, we are guilty of practicing deceit.<sup>135</sup>

Observations and definitions from other writers closely paralleled Ken Sande's comments. Some writers say manipulation is parallel with triangulation, others did not.

### **Secrecy and Anonymity**

Arthur Boers expresses concerns about indirect and secret communication. While he is concerned about how secrecy hinders communication, his greatest concern lies with the effect, rather than the content, of hidden communication.<sup>136</sup> Speed Leas suggests anonymous communication damages churches. He believes the best scenario is a person

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<sup>133</sup>Boers, 83.

<sup>134</sup>Sande, 121.

<sup>135</sup>Sande, 121.

<sup>136</sup>Boers, 82.

sharing their thoughts directly. If circumstances require a third party to communicate the concern, he recommends those concerns always be accompanied by the name of the individual who originally raised the concern.<sup>137</sup> He advises that all anonymous communication (including letters) be completely ignored.<sup>138</sup> Speed Leas warns,

I can't say enough about the problems of confidentiality in organizational settings. In my experience the norms of confidentiality are serious barriers to managing conflict. Secrets inhibit rather than open up communication, secrets raise fear, secrets keep out people who might be able to help, secrets presume that truth will enslave rather than set one free, secrets are often lies that keep the accused from confronting them because he or she supposedly doesn't know the 'charges.'<sup>139</sup>

Writers were universal in condemning anonymous communication. Others noted anonymous communication is often the accepted norm in deeply conflicted churches.

### **Minor Issues and Splitting Hairs**

Several authors noted that a type of destructive and distorted communication involves splitting hairs and making major issues out of minor items. The Bible is clear regarding this type of communication (e.g. 2 Tim 2:16-17). The writers who emphasized this element do so in the context of describing behavior patterns of individuals who sought to manipulate or control, usually with malicious, exploitive, or self-seeking intent. Some of those writers allowed for the possibility that some who fall into this pattern are simply ignorant of biblical norms.

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<sup>137</sup>Speed Leas, *A Lay Person's Guide to Conflict Management* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1979), 6-7.

<sup>138</sup>Leas, *A Lay Person's Guide to Conflict Management*, 7.

<sup>139</sup>Leas, *Leadership and Conflict*, 116.

## Breakdown of Communication

Breakdown of interpersonal communication was noted as a cause (and a sign) of growing discontent and developing tensions within the church and impending major conflict. The book *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* suggests communication breakdowns are occurring when people begin to impatiently finish one another's sentences or are quick to interrupt each other.<sup>140</sup> Some of the signs of communication breaking suggested by Leas include people talking only to those they think will agree with them, use of information which is made up, and guessing about the intentions and actions of other people.<sup>141</sup>

Speed Leas identifies five levels of conflict (Problems to Solve, Disagreement, Contest, Fight/Flight, Intractable Situations). He states, "The two identifying characteristics of each level of conflict are the parties' objectives and the way they use language."<sup>142</sup> At Level One, information is fully shared. At Level Two, he suggests people are not yet hostile, but cautious and language used to describe the problem moves from specific to general. He notes hostile humor and barbed words which puts down or undermines the other are also typical of Level Two conflict. Leas sees vilification and personal attacks as becoming "endemic" at Level Three and beyond. He lists numerous

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<sup>140</sup>Jim R. Herrington, Robert Creech and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 63.

<sup>141</sup>Speed Leas, "When Conflict Erupts in Your Church," in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 17.

<sup>142</sup>Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1985), 19.

other ways communication degenerates at Levels Three, Four, and Five.<sup>143</sup> Ron Susek lists similar communication breakdowns as church conflict develops and escalates.<sup>144</sup>

### *Institutional Communication*

Most recovery experts and experienced church interventionists identified intra-church communication as significant. The church growth writers who addressed the issue of communication did so in the context of intra-church information flow. Intra-church communication encompasses: staff to staff and leadership, leadership to leadership and staff, leadership to congregation, and congregation to leadership.

Writers emphasized that positive interpersonal communication patterns must be modeled by leadership and exemplified institutionally (intra-church). All writers who addressed this subject, with the exception of church growth writers, emphasized the same communication hygiene principles for institutional, intra-church communication as govern the interpersonal boundaries for communication: no secrets, no indirect communication, no manipulation of words, etc. Clear, open, direct, honest communication was emphasized as both a preventive and restorative process.

Healthy communication can help a church avoid serious and destructive conflicts. Maintaining good communication among staff and to the congregants reduces the effect of rumors, misinformation, and misunderstanding. Unhealthy communication can produce and expand conflict in a local church.

Authors surveyed for this project encouraged honest and transparent communication, especially between leadership and the church. The authors did not give

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<sup>143</sup>Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*, 19.

<sup>144</sup>Susek, *Firestorm*.

much attention to defining the balance between open communications and what would be appropriate levels of discretion and confidentiality.

There was some mention related to the challenges of intra-church communication relative to church size. Large churches typically have leadership directed intra-church communication with specific communication channels for self-informing. These churches possess congregants who are somewhat less connected and have minimal expectation of being “in the loop” about all the ministry plans and decisions. Small churches are typically highly networked and follow a consensus based decision-making paradigm. Medium to medium large churches most often are built upon a small church foundation, leaving an expectation of direct and personal communication and a “fully informed” status for all congregants. Even when established communication methods are in place (bulletin boards, newsletters, email), there is often still the expectation for personal individual notification by the church.

### **Accountability**

This section includes the importance of accountability, vulnerabilities in a church system that lacks accountability, and application of accountability. The need for accountability as a defense against conflict was stressed by authors from all the different perspectives researched. The type and focus of the accountability fell into three general groupings. Many of the authors stressed the importance of the role of leadership in the sphere of accountability—as both facilitators and examples. Accountability was mentioned in the context both of individuals and as a corporate entity.

The first grouping came primarily out of church growth writers and related primarily to performance, tasks, and accomplishment of defined goals. Secular business

writers stressed this same theme. One the five reoccurring issues Peter Steinke identifies in troubled congregations is the avoidance of problems.<sup>145</sup> Leith Anderson lists “tolerance of incompetency” as one of the warning signs for churches that there are upcoming problems.<sup>146</sup> Three of the five dysfunctions of a team listed by Patrick Lencioni have relationship to accountability: fear of conflict, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.<sup>147</sup>

The second grouping focused upon accountability for relational, behavioral, and spiritual growth aspects; this grouping was consistently stressed by biblically conservative writers and FST authors. Those influenced by FST had greater emphasis upon a healthy system with more of a peer influenced accountability process. Several FST writers emphasized the concepts of “identified patient” and “over/under functioning” to the accountability mix.

The biblically conservative writers primarily focused upon the process of challenging sin—individual and corporate. These writers consistently stressed biblical principles which set forth the importance of, and process for, holding people accountable regarding relational, spiritual and behavioral choices which are inconsistent with biblical standards. Many of these writers stressed that bypassing accountability leaves a church vulnerable to serious conflict and by-passes or short circuits God’s intended cleansing and a divinely appointed growth process.

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<sup>145</sup>Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 47.

<sup>146</sup>Anderson, 158-159.

<sup>147</sup>Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 188-189.



An additional area of significance mentioned by a number of resources was the unique vulnerability of churches, particularly to disruptive individuals, when accountability is not in place. Topics which overlap with accountability are structure (clear and consistently followed policies and procedures, job performance and responsibilities), leadership (accountability, initiating and growth), communication (negative patterns), ministry focus (development and achievement of goals), differences (accepting uniqueness, avoidance of conflict), and historical issues.

### *Importance of Accountability*

Most writers underscored the value of or need for accountability for churches. This need was related to protecting the church as a whole from conflict, achievement of the church mission, and assisting people in the emotional and spiritual growth. Jim Van Yperen comments,

We frequently receive calls from denominations asking for advice about how to manage sin. Our response is to say “you don’t manage sin, you renounce it.” “But this issue will split the church [or ‘hurt people’ or ‘ruin a reputation’],” they say, “if the sin becomes public knowledge.” Our experience is that practicing redemption is always less painful to the church and always more helpful to the sinner. When sin is confessed as soon as it becomes known, the sinner and community can embody reconciliation. Silence and cover-up, on the other hand, invites heaviness and harm.<sup>148</sup>

Most writers surveyed for this research noted the reluctance of many churches to hold people accountable by confronting sin, even in the cases of overt and public sin. When sin is confronted, there are typically long delays in the process. Jim Van Yperen stresses the need for quick action when accountability needs to take place, suggesting there is a biblically mandated urgency to confront the sinner as soon as the sin comes to light.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>Van Yperen, 226.

<sup>149</sup>Van Yperen, 212.

*Church Vulnerability in the Absence of Accountability*

A variety of writers were very emphatic regarding the dangers and susceptibility of a church in the absence of accountability. When individuals are not challenged and held accountable for choices which are destructive to others and to the church as a corporate body, destructive conflict can result.

In his book Arthur Boers, in addition to his own thoughts, collects valuable insights from a variety of writers regarding the unique vulnerabilities of the local church to damaging behaviors. One of the insights is that churches tolerate behaviors which would not be tolerated elsewhere and that churches tolerate emotionally unhealthy and “maladjusted” people due to an inaccurate view of Christianity and love. Another insight is that in many churches, especially smaller churches, the emotionally weakest person is the most powerful as others organize around meeting the demands of that person. Such actions are seen as encouraging, enabling, and promoting immaturity, irresponsibility, and aggressive or controlling behavior. Another item listed as a vulnerability in churches is the fear of losing the attendance, service, or financial support of attendees if disruptive or unhealthy behavior is challenged.<sup>150</sup>

Ron Susek lists an additional hindrance to a board actively and successfully confronting conflict. He claims most boards are confused concerning the difference between judgment and “judgmentalism.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Boers, 17-23.

<sup>151</sup>Susek, 127.

*Application of Accountability*

Writers stressed the importance of accountability. They also stressed the importance of accountability being properly focused, having balanced parameters, and being consistently applied.

FST writers strongly emphasized the systems aspect of accountability. Speed Leas is of the opinion that the system itself creates and fills a “gadfly role.”<sup>152</sup> Arthur Boers writes, “Difficult behavior is a sign that something else is amiss. The behavior is not the problem but indicates that something deeper has gone wrong. Yet another function of difficult behavior may be to keep people preoccupied and distracted from real issues.”<sup>153</sup>

FST writers strongly emphasized that substantive change cannot take place unless the root issues are identified and confronted. Two FST concepts, identified patient and over-functioning-and-under-functioning, were often blended into the topic of accountability by FST writers.

The identified patient concept often undermines accountability by determining a single cause for focus or blame-placing when stress or anxiety is encountered. In the context of church accountability, this concept would be in play when an individual is seen as the single cause of a tension point or failure within the organization. FST instead seeks to identify all the contributing factors to the disruption instead of simply finding a scape-goat to blame.

Over-functioning-and-under-functioning takes place when one party consistently covers for the shortcomings of another. Ronald Richardson states,

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<sup>152</sup>Boers, vi.

<sup>153</sup>Boers, 31.

Overfunctioning happens when one person takes increasing amount of responsibility for the functioning of one or more other people. Overfunctioners can take over the thinking, feeling, or actions of the underfunctioners. As the underfunctioner does less in one or more of these areas, the overfunctioner does more. As a consequence, the overfunctioner looks more responsible, healthy, mature, and adequate, and the underfunctioner looks less so.<sup>154</sup>

Over-functioning bypasses accountability for poor performance, enables ongoing failure, and encourages future irresponsibility. Most FST writers expressed the opinion that churches ooze with over-functioning-and-under-functioning people.

Clear, well defined, and consistently followed policies and processes were also presented as vital to the proper application of accountability. Kenneth Haugk notes that if discipline is required, it must be carried out. He also writes, “When specific disciplinary actions are called for, the leader’s responsibility is not to equivocate or bend the regulations, but to carry them out. In this area there is no room for improvising.”<sup>155</sup> Based on the observations from the church interventionists studied, the importance of adhering to established policies in situations involving the challenge of sinful behavior and church discipline cannot be understated.

Some FST and all biblically conservative writers made observations about the Matthew 18 process. Kenneth Quick also observes that church discipline in a healthy church strengthens the church, but church discipline often brings damage to a sick church.<sup>156</sup>

Arthur Boers strongly urges that discipline be done with balanced perspective and be focused on difficult behavior and difficult relationships rather than upon difficult

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<sup>154</sup>Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 133.

<sup>155</sup>Haugk, 156.

<sup>156</sup>Quick, *Body Aches*, 89.

people.<sup>157</sup> He writes “Yoder sees several possible errors when applying Matt. 18—first, focusing on punishment rather than reconciliation; second, concentrating on the offense rather than the individual; third, worrying more about rules and standards than about the person.”<sup>158</sup> This researcher has observed how easy it is to lose sight of the restorative goal during the implementation of church discipline.

Kenneth Quick observes,

Situations like pastoral immorality bring out strong voices on the justice side and the mercy side of the issue. Congregations in such situations normally divided around their spiritual gifts, the strongest voices coming from those with gifts of compassion or mercy who want to forgive and restore; those with more prophetic and discernment gifts also speak strongly, wanting to insure their spiritual leaders enact appropriate justice.<sup>159</sup>

Based upon this observation, inattentiveness or disregard to uniqueness among the church body can amplify the stress points when church discipline is implemented.

Several writers pointed out that the sincere desire for—and hope of—repentance and renewal by the sinner often derails the accountability process. Many authors observed how easy it is to lose sight of the necessary firmness and consistency during the implementation of church discipline, even when there is a clearly defined process.

Matthew 18 is very clear that the person with the direct knowledge of the sin is to do the confrontation rather than to pass it along to the pastor to act. It is a body-system responsibility and stewardship, not one to be passed off to leadership or paid staff.

Patrick Lencioni identifies this as a negative issue in work environments:

One of the most difficult challenges for a leader who wants to instill accountability on a team is to encourage and allow the team to serve as the first

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<sup>157</sup>Boers, 14.

<sup>158</sup>Boers, 89.

<sup>159</sup>Quick, *Body Aches*, 79.

and primary accountability mechanism. Sometimes strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving themselves as the only source of discipline. This creates an environment where team members assume that the leader is holding others accountable, and so they hold back even when they see something that isn't right.<sup>160</sup>

Several writers pointed out the dangers inherent to a church when the pastor becomes the sole party responsible for initiating and carrying out church discipline. Some of the inherent weaknesses noted include the leader being placed in a position of taking action based upon second-hand information and becoming entangled in triangulation and gossip.

Churches operating solely on a high trust philosophy, without checks and balances regarding job performance, are also at an increased vulnerability to conflict. Paul Alexander writes that in churches often nice people hire nice people. Conflict is temporarily avoided as the services of some people are retained “well after the work has surpassed their capacity. The result of avoiding the brutal facts of reality leads to sacrificing ‘the flock for the sake of one sheep.’”<sup>161</sup>

Patrick Lencioni writes about accountability within business settings, along with the difficulties and discomforts which come when holding others accountable for their job performance or disruptive behaviors. He identifies lack of accountability as one of five dysfunctions of a team. He suggests the refusal to hold others accountable involves avoiding the personal discomfort of challenging another about their disruptive behaviors. He writes,

Failure to hold one another accountable creates an environment where the fifth dysfunction can thrive. Inattention to results occurs when team members put their

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<sup>160</sup>Lencioni, 215-216.

<sup>161</sup>Paul Alexander, “Why Nice People Kill Churches”, <http://www.paulalexanderblog.com/leadership/why-nice-people-kill-churches/#.VD7QkvldUXs>. (accessed June 13, 2014).

individual needs or even the needs of their divisions above the collective goals of the team.<sup>162</sup>

Patrick Lencioni also notes that when accountability is not present it creates resentment among team members, encourages mediocrity, and misses important deadlines.<sup>163</sup> All these have the potential to engender conflict within organizations, including churches.

The authors surveyed for this project were adamant about the need for accountability within a church. They did not give much attention to presenting the potential dangers to the church if the accountability was so rigidly applied that there was nitpicking, legalism and a loss of grace. The writers also did not give specific ideas or parameters regarding how to achieve the appropriate balance between the two extremes of too much or too little accountability in the church.

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<sup>162</sup>Lencioni, 189-214.

<sup>163</sup>Lencioni, 189-214.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH METHODS

### **Research Methodology**

This project was qualitative in nature. Holistic multiple case study was the primary research model. Research was conducted through surveys. All surveys used were designed for this project and were mixed questionnaires which included open and closed questions. Most of the questions were designed with a five response Likert scale. The surveys were web-based surveys self-administered by the participants. Each survey included an informed consent. Each survey blocked individuals from participating unless they affirmed their agreement with the informed consent statement. Surveys were administered in an anonymous manner. Letters were sent out explaining the research project and requesting participation. The letters also included an Internet link to the survey. No tracking element was in place to identify the survey respondents.

### **Informal Test Survey**

A prototype survey was developed for this project and administered to the staff of Faithbridge Church. The purposes of the survey were to test the online survey software and receive input for the development of the formal surveys used for this research project.

All fourteen paid staff members of Faithbridge Church were invited to complete a survey. Invitations were given verbally, by letter, and by email. The survey contained no background questions about the participants because questions of that type would have



threatened anonymity. The individuals invited to complete the survey were five pastors, seven ministry coordinators, two secretaries, one bookkeeper, and two custodians. Staff tenure fell on a spectrum between five and 45 years. One of the staff members is a charter member of the church and one of the pastors has been at the church for over 18 years. The average tenure for the staff is about ten years, with individual service ranging from one year to over 30 years. The lead pastor was the only full-time staff member at the time of the survey. Eleven staff members completed a survey. An Internet link to the survey site was provided. A two-week time-frame was available for participation.

Questions were drawn from the seven areas identified by this research project (differences, unresolved corporate sin, church structure, ministry focus, leadership, communication, and accountability). The number of questions for each topic varied because of the different number of sub-units for each topic. Assessment of the survey results was done by weighted averages.

Questions were randomly organized rather than grouped by topic. Participants of the trial survey indicated that grouping questions topically would make it easier to contextualize the intent or meaning of the questions if they had any doubt regarding how to interpret particular questions. The question order was revised for the formal surveys.

Evaluation of the trial survey induced a number of other improvements as the formal survey instruments were developed. Adjustments were made in the types of questions used, re-wording of some questions, adding and eliminating questions, and the general flow of the survey.

The trial survey had benefits beyond the improvement to the survey. The survey results also provided an informal baseline for comparison with the survey of Faithbridge leadership team (deacons and pastors).

### **Survey of Sample Churches**

This survey was administered to churches which met the criteria for this research project. The list of churches was developed through informal visits with pastors and input from several denominational leaders, in addition to this researcher's knowledge of regional churches. A total of 21 churches across the evangelical spectrum were selected for the study.

Letters requesting survey participation were sent to the senior pastor of each church. Request was made for the senior pastor, or a chosen designate, to complete the survey. The letter explained the purpose of the survey and included an Internet link to the survey. A window of three weeks was made available to survey recipients for completion of the survey. Seven responses were received. The survey was divided into nine parts.

#### *Part One: Background Information*

Background information questions included the informed consent statement, the size of community where the church is located, the position the respondent holds at the church, and the length of service in that position. The intent of these questions was to determine some general background information, what role the participant holds in the church ministry, and the length of his or her service in that role.

The participant was also asked to provide the average attendance of the church over a five-year period and the average tenure of the recent senior pastors of the church.

The intent of these questions was to determine if conflict resulted in major drops in attendance and the frequency of turnover in the senior pastor position.

### *Part Two: Conflict History of the Church*

The first section requested background information regarding the frequency of severe conflict in the church and asked if the senior pastor was held responsible for the occurrence of the conflict in the church. The intent of these questions was to determine the conflict history of the church and to discover if the pastor was the perceived cause of the church conflict. Respondents were asked to provide a conflict history over the most recent ten years and to classify the conflict as light, medium, heavy, or severe.

The second section asked the respondents to give details regarding the two most recent serious conflict experiences in the church and the most severe conflict experience in the history of the church. Details requested included the number of people involved in the conflicts, the percentage of the congregation affected by the conflicts, changes in attendance and giving as a result of the conflicts, and the perceived cause of the conflicts. The intent of these questions was to gain an understanding of the type, severity, effects, and cause of the several cases of conflict experienced by the church. The information received was used to discover if severe conflict was linked to the seven areas identified by this research as possible primary causal agents for serious conflict in the local church.

### *Part Three: Ministry Focus of the Church*

The first section was comprised of questions related to a unifying theme (or vision) for the church. The initial question asked if a unifying theme had been developed. The respondents who gave an affirmative response were asked when the theme was developed, if it had been officially approved and implemented, if it was known and

implemented by the church staff and congregation, if it was used as a basis for ministry, if it was reviewed on a regular basis, and if it is relevant for the current ministry setting. The intent of the questions was to determine if a unifying theme was in place, if it was known, and if it was a viable part of the church ministry.

The second section was comprised of questions related to ministry priorities (or church mission statement). The initial question asked if ministry priorities had been established. The respondents who gave an affirmative response were asked when the priorities were developed, if they had been officially approved and implemented, if the priorities were clear and specific, if the priorities were known and implemented by the church ministry leaders, staff, and congregation, if the priorities were used as a basis for ministry, if the priorities were reviewed on a regular basis, and if the priorities were relevant for the current ministry setting. The intent of the questions was to determine if ministry priorities were established, if they were well-known and embraced, and if they were a viable part of the church ministry.

The third section was comprised of questions related to ministry goals and objectives (or a strategic ministry plan). The initial question asked if ministry goals and objectives had been established. The respondents who gave an affirmative response were asked when the ministry plan was developed, if it had been officially approved and implemented, if the goals and objectives were clear and specific, if the ministry plan was known and implemented by the church ministry leaders, staff, and congregation, if the ministry plan was used as a basis for ministry, if the ministry plan was reviewed on a regular basis, and if the goals and objectives were relevant for the current ministry setting. The intent of the questions was to determine if ministry goals and objectives were

established, if they were well known and embraced, and if they were a viable part of the church ministry.

The final section asked if an outside, objective observer could easily identify the church ministry focus. The intent of the question was to determine if the ministry focus of the church was clearly reflected in the church programs and ministries.

#### *Part Four: Unresolved Corporate Sin*

The first section included questions about church leadership's knowledge of significant items of the church history, if leadership had identified long-term patterns in the church environment and understood the impact of unresolved sin and sin patterns upon current ministry endeavors. The intent of the questions was to determine if church leadership was aware of historical corporate sin issues, and patterns, and if leadership understood the significance of those items to present church ministry.

The second section focused on how leadership had responded to past corporate sin issues. Questions asked if negative long-term patterns were still present, if those patterns were consistently challenged, if past sins had been confessed and forgiven, if reconciliation had been sought with damaged individuals, and if a public renewal service acknowledging those patterns and sins had taken place. The intent of these questions was to discover if the church leadership had taken action to address and correct negative corporate sin issues and patterns.

#### *Part Five: Church Leadership*

The first section included questions related to how leadership was chosen, if leadership demonstrated spiritual growth and maturity, received training, and demonstrated board unity, and if leadership handled confidentiality in an appropriate

manner. The section also included a question asking participants to evaluate leadership style with descriptive terms ranging from aggressive and domineering to passive. The intent of these questions was to evaluate the criteria used by the church to select leadership, characteristics of the leadership board, and general characteristics of the leaders.

The second section asked respondents to identify the most significant influences in the decision-making process and the basis for leadership decisions. This section included questions related to the leadership's responsiveness to input and criticism from individuals in the church. The intent of these questions was to determine if leadership decisions were inordinately influenced by individuals outside of formal leadership, if leadership decisions were based upon ministry focus, individual preference, complaints, or other factors, and if input was received by leadership with a responsive or defensive attitude.

The third section asked about how leadership meeting time was used. The intent of this question was to determine if leadership meeting time was invested in administrative tasks, leadership and spiritual development, ministry planning, pursuit of God's direction, or dealing with complaints or the enforcement of church rules.

#### *Part Six: Communication in the Church*

The first section asked questions related to communication flow among church staff and church leadership. Also surveyed was the communication flow from leadership to the church body. The intent of this section was to determine whether there was effective and appropriate communication among, and between, pastors, staff, and

leadership. This section was also developed to evaluate if communication flow from leadership to the congregants was open and honest.

The second section asked respondents to identify specific communication patterns within the church. These patterns included direct communication between individuals, patterns related to sharing grievances and concerns, rumors and negative undercurrents, encouragement, affirmation, sarcasm, and gossip. Also included was a question related to the general response to verbal sins. The intent of this section was to discover positive and negative communication patterns within the church and to see if the congregation, in general, had a tendency to participate in verbal sins, ignore those sins, or confront those sins.

The final question asked if Ephesians 4:29 was modeled by pastors and leadership, church staff, and the congregation. The intent of this question was to discover the perception of how each of those groups implemented that specific biblical principle.

#### *Part Seven: Differences in the Church*

The first section asked questions related to how the general topic of differences is perceived by the church. The intent of this section was to determine if differences were perceived to be positive and beneficial, negative and destructive, something to be embraced, or something to be avoided.

The second section asked whether a process was in place for handling disagreements, and how disagreements were typically handled among the church body and within church leadership. One intention of this section was to discover if a clear process for handling disagreements was defined and followed. An additional intent of this

section was to determine the normal response pattern of the congregation and the primary leadership board to disagreement in their midst.

The third section was comprised of questions related to the general attitude of the congregants to individual differences in gifting, opinions, and personalities. The intent of this section was to discover if individual uniqueness was celebrated, encouraged, tolerated, ignored, or stifled.

The final section asked about the typical responses within the church to differences in theology, and if conformity to specific doctrinal or culturally established standards was necessary for acceptance within the church. The intent of these questions was to discover if the church environment was conducive to theological discussion and debate, and to determine if people felt rejected or accepted based upon formal, or informal, norms in the church.

#### *Part Eight: Accountability in the Church*

The first section focused upon accountability for job performance. The intent of this section was to determine if church employees who fall short of performance standards receive correction, extra training or mentoring, are removed from their positions, or if the substandard fulfillment of their responsibilities was ignored.

The second section included questions related to whether or not rules of conduct, protocols and policies were established and followed. Also included was a question asking respondents to identify who in the church typically tried to hold people accountable if the rules, protocols, or policies were ignored or transgressed. The intent of this section was to determine if policies and standards were in place, if those policies and standards were enforced, and who took responsibility for enforcement.



The third section was comprised of questions about the church discipline process and what situations activated the church discipline process. The intent of this section was to determine if a church discipline process was defined, was the process followed, was the church discipline process consistently applied, and what types of circumstances or behaviors were challenged through the church discipline process.

The final section contained specific questions about how sin and negative behavior among the leadership were addressed by the church. The intent was to discover if members of the church leadership were held responsible for negative attitudes and actions, whom was responsible for holding them accountable, and if those sins were publicly acknowledged to the body.

#### *Part Nine: Structure in the Church*

The first section included questions about church operational policies and a church organizational chart. The intent of these questions was to determine if church operational policies and an organizational chart were established, clear, consistently followed, regularly reviewed and updated, and appropriate for the church size and ministry needs.

The second section asked respondents about details related to several specific church policies. These included policies on input, grievances against leadership, and handling disputes or disagreements. The intent of these questions was to determine if these policies were established, clear, well-known to the congregation, fair to all parties, consistently followed, and resulted in clear outcomes.

The final section focused upon expectations and job descriptions for paid staff and ministry leaders. One intention of these questions was to discover if job descriptions:

existed for these roles, were clear and specific, defined job performance standards, and included a cyclical evaluation process. Another intention of these questions was to determine if the employees understood the limits and extent of their authority, where they fit into the church organizational structure, if they received adequate training for their job, and if they were consistently asked or required to do things outside of their job descriptions.

### **Survey of Faithbridge Leadership**

This survey was administered to pastors and deacons who have served at Faithbridge Church up to ten years prior to the survey. The ten year time period was established so that input received was relatively current, but also included a varied spectrum of experience. The deacon board is the highest form of elected leadership in the church and works together with the pastoral staff to oversee and direct the affairs of the church. Each potential participant received a letter inviting them to participate in the survey. The letter explained the purpose of the survey and included an Internet link to the survey. A window of three weeks was made available for completion of the survey. Invitations to participate were sent to 22 individuals. There were seven responses completed. The survey was organized in nine parts.

This survey, with the exception of some minor adjustments, replicated the survey used for the churches. Adjustments were made to three parts of the survey. Only the survey parts which included adjustments are included in this section.

#### *Part One – Background Information*

Background information questions included the position the respondent holds at the church and their length of service in that position. The intent of these questions was to

determine some general background information, what role the participant holds in the church ministry, and the length of the participant's experience in that role.

*Part Two – Conflict History of the Church*

The second section omitted the question about the most severe conflict in the history of the church. Respondents were only asked to give details regarding the perceived cause of the two most recent serious conflict experiences in the church.

*Part Five – Church Leadership*

Added to this section was a question asking participants to evaluate leadership style with descriptive terms ranging from aggressive and domineering to passive or avoidant. The intent of this question was to discover how the lead pastor's leadership style was perceived by members of the primary leadership board.

In conclusion, the surveys were developed and administered to test the research question. Each survey was made available to participants for three weeks. The survey of churches was open from July 25, 2014 through August 15, 2014. The Faithbridge leadership survey was open August 11, 2014 through September 1, 2014.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The research consisted of two surveys. Each survey was comprised of eight sections. Section One was focused upon demographic and background information of the churches surveyed. Sections Two through Eight solicited responses to specific questions related to the seven areas identified as possible root causes for the conflict experienced by their church. The purpose of these sections was to identify strengths or weaknesses of the church in each of these seven areas and then determine if these weaknesses could be demonstrated to be the root causes of conflict in the church.

The surveys contained three question types. Text entry questions were designed to solicit short descriptive responses from the survey participants. Ranked choice questions asked the respondents to prioritize a list of variables into a sequential order. Likert scale questions requested responses of strongly disagree (value of one), disagree (value of two), neither agree nor disagree (value of three), agree (value of four), and strongly agree (value of five). For questions of this type, a score of three (neither agree nor disagree) was considered neutral or average. Evaluations related to the Likert questions describe scores as negative or positive, based upon being above or below that neutral norm. Only the Likert scale questions were used to calculate the averages for each section.

Scores for questions have been adjusted so that the results above a value of three are consistently reflected as positive responses and scores below a value of three are consistently reflected as negative responses. For example, the most positive response for

a question asking if gossip is a pattern in the church is a response of strongly disagree. For the purposes of scoring and evaluation, this response was given a weight of five (even though a response of strongly disagree would normally be scored with a value of one).

Adjustments were also made for accurate scoring of sequential questions. Sequential questions first asked if the church had a particular aspect of ministry established. A “yes” response released a second question which requested specifics about that particular ministry item. A “no” response prevented the respondent from seeing and responding to the follow-up question. For example, if the respondent indicated the church had no vision statement, the respondent had no opportunity to answer specific follow-up questions related to the church vision statement. When creating an average for the combined surveys, a value of one was added to each of those specific follow-up questions for each survey question which had a “no” response to the initial question of the sequence. This was done to maintain a viable weighted average. The “no” response, indicating that the document did not exist, would parallel a “strongly disagree” response to the specific follow-up questions.

The date surveys were administered, August 2014, was used as the baseline for time-related questions. For example, the data listed in Table One takes bearings from August 2014.

### **Survey of Churches**

Eight responses were received from the surveys sent out to churches, representing a return rate of 38 percent. Most survey participants provided clear and succinct answers in describing the conflict experienced by their church. Two surveys were returned

incomplete. One incomplete survey had only limited responses in the first section; it was not included in any of the combined results nor used for comparative analysis. The other incomplete survey had four of eight sections completed. Results from the completed areas of this survey were included in the combined results.

### *Section One: Background*

The data in this section was collected for the purpose of documenting the general demographics of the responding church. The questions were not directly tethered to the research question. However, analysis of the data collected in this section was done to determine if any patterns emerged which could be linked with conflict.

Attendance was one factor evaluated. Two churches had attendance under 200. Four churches had attendance between 200 and 300. One church had an average attendance over 300. No clear conclusions could be drawn linking the size of a church and the amount of conflict experienced. Two of the four churches with an average of 200-300 recorded the highest levels of conflicts while the other two reported two of the lowest levels of conflict. The sample size of the other two categories did not provide adequate data for a conclusion to be drawn.

Pastoral tenure was also evaluated. Two churches reported an average tenure of over ten years for the prior three senior pastors. Three churches reported the average tenure was seven to ten years for the previous three senior pastors. The remaining two churches indicated the average tenure was three to five years for the previous three senior pastors. However, at the time of the survey, the tenure of the present pastor of one of those two churches was over ten years.

No clear conclusions could be drawn from the surveys between conflict and pastoral tenure. Of the two churches with the average tenure of three to five years, one reported significant levels of conflict while the other did not report significant conflict. However, the present pastor of the second church has been with the church over ten years.

Of the two churches reporting pastoral tenure of over ten years, one reported significant conflict and the other did not. Two of the three churches with an average tenure of seven to ten years experienced heavy and severe conflict. The other church had experienced minimal conflict.

Types of conflict and perceived underlying causes for those conflicts varied widely in the responses received. There were no similarities in the responses given based upon church size or pastoral tenure. Table One provides a summary of the conflict reported on the surveys. Table Two summarizes the perceived causes of the two most severe recent conflicts.

Table 1. Conflicts in churches surveyed

	7-10 Years Ago	4-6 Years Ago	1-3 Years Ago	Previous Year
Church A	3 Medium Conflicts 2 Heavy Conflicts	2 Medium Conflicts	2 Medium Conflicts	2 Medium Conflicts 1 Heavy Conflict
Church B	4 Light Conflicts 4 Medium Conflicts	3 Light Conflicts 1 Medium Conflict	3 Light Conflicts	2 Light Conflicts
Church C	None	Light Conflict	Light Conflict	Light Conflict
Church D	5 Light Conflicts 2 Medium Conflicts 2 Heavy Conflicts	7 Light Conflicts 2 Medium Conflicts 2 Heavy Conflicts	3 Light Conflicts 3 Medium Conflicts 1 Heavy Conflicts	2 Light Conflicts 2 Medium Conflicts 1 Extreme Conflict
Church E	1 Heavy Conflict	1 Extreme Conflict	2 Light Conflict	1 Light Conflict
Church F	Medium Conflicts	Light Conflicts	Light Conflicts	Light Conflicts
Church G	Light Conflict	Extreme Conflict	None	None

Table 2. Perceived causes for recent conflicts in churches surveyed

	Most perceived cause							Least perceived cause
Church A								
Conflict 1	Acct	Other	Sin	Ldrshp	Diff	Comm	Focus	Struct
Conflict 2	Ldrshp	Struct	Sin	Focus	Comm	Diff	Acct	NR
Church B								
Conflict 1	Sin	Other	Ldrshp	Comm	Acct	Diff	Struct	Focus
Conflict 2	Sin	Ldrshp	Other	Diff	Acct	Comm	Struct	Focus
Church C	Ldrshp	Sin	Struct	Focus	Comm	Diff	Acct	NR
Church D	Acct	Ldrshp	Comm	Sin	Struct	Diff	Focus	NR
	Focus	Sin	Diff	Comm	Struc	Ldrshp	Acct	NR
Church E	Sin	Ldrshp	Comm	Focus	Struct	Diff	Acct	NR
	Sin	Ldrshp	Struct	Comm	Focus	Diff	Acct	NR
Church F	Struct	Other	Comm	Focus	Past	Lead	Diff	Acct
	Other	Comm	Sin	Ldrshp	Struct	Focus	Diff	Acct
Church G	Diff	Sin	Ldrshp	Comm	Acct	Focus	Struct	NR
	Diff	Sin	Comm	Ldrshp	Acct	Struct	Focus	NR
Combined Results	Sin	Ldrshp	Comm	Acct	Struct	Diff	Other	Sin
	Sin	Ldrshp	Comm	Struct	Diff	Focus	Acct	Other

Chart Key: Acct = Accountability    Comm = Communication    Diff = Differences    Focus = Ministry Focus  
Sin = Unresolved Corporate Sin    Ldrshp = Leadership    Struct = Structure    NR = No Response

### *Section Two: Ministry Focus*

Ministry focus was the second lowest average of the combined scores. Table Three provides a summary of the individual church rankings based on the section averages. The combined results showed the greatest weakness in the subsection related to a church ministry plan, followed by the subsection dealing with a unifying theme for the church. The subsection with the highest results pertained to ministry priorities.

Only three of the six churches had a plan for ministry goals and objectives. Only one of these ministry plans had been developed within a year of taking the survey. Those churches with a ministry plan in place indicated there was no one specifically assigned to oversee or implement the elements of the ministry plan. The surveys indicated the



ministry plans were well known and embraced by paid staff, ministry leaders, and the congregation. The surveys affirmed the ministry plans were relevant for ministry needs and used as a basis for ministry decisions. The overall scores for the churches who reported the presence of a ministry plan were very positive and indicated that goals and objectives were relevant for ministry.

Five of six churches had ministry priorities established. The ministry priorities for three of the churches were at least six years old. The surveys indicated the priorities were approved and implemented, clear and specific, relevant and effective for ministry needs, and consistently used as a basis for ministry decisions. However, the surveys also indicated the priorities were not reviewed on a regular basis nor were they well known and embraced by the congregation.

Overall scores for this section were influenced by the fact that not all churches had a unifying theme, ministry priorities, or ministry plan established. The elements which were in place for the different churches were, for the most part, not very current and not very well-known by the congregation.

Assessing the results from the individual church surveys, three churches had ministry focus as their lowest factor of perceived root causes for major conflict experienced by their church. Two of those churches reported high levels of conflict. The third church had a relatively minor amount of conflict. The research would not support the belief that this factor, in and of itself, is a primary cause of church conflict. No church perceived ministry focus to be one of their top three root causes of conflict. Table Three lists the ranked order of sections for the churches surveyed.

Table 3. Possible conflict causes from church survey averages (the lowest averages represent the most likely cause of conflict).

	Lowest average						Highest average
Church A	Focus	Struct	Acct	Ldrshp	Comm	Diff	Sin
Church B	Focus	Struct	Diff	Acct	Sin	Ldrshp	Comm
Church C	Struct	Diff	Acct	Focus	Sin	Comm	Ldrshp
Church D	Focus	Struct	Diff	Comm	Acct	Ldrshp	Sin
Church E	Comm	Acct	Diff	Ldrshp	Focus	Struct	Sin
Church F	Struct	Comm	Diff	Acct	Sin	Ldrshp	Focus
Combined Results	Struct	Plan	Acct	Diff	Past	Comm	Ldrshp

Chart Key: Acct = Accountability    Comm = Communication    Diff = Differences    Focus = Ministry Focus  
 Sin = Unresolved Corporate Sin    Ldrshp = Leadership    Struct = Structure    NR = No Response

### *Section Three: Unresolved Corporate Sin*

This section was among the strongest of the combined averages. The average score for this section was the third highest of all the categories. The average scores for each of the subsections in the combined results were above three. This was the highest averaging section for three of the seven individual church surveys.

The highest averaging questions from this section gave affirmation that wrongs committed against the church had been identified by church leadership and intentionally released. Leadership's awareness of significant events of their church's history, behavior patterns (positive and negative), and identification and confession of wrongs committed by the church had the next highest averages for this section.

Three churches agreed, or strongly agreed, that their church had held a public renewal service to confess corporate sin. However, public acknowledgment of sinful patterns, wrongs committed against others, and wrongs committed against the church

were among the lowest averages in each of the subsections. In addition to the public acknowledgment, other items which had an average of three were a lack of understanding among leadership that unresolved issues impact current ministry and that unresolved issues can inhibit God's work in the church.

One of the seven survey participants strongly agreed that sinful historical patterns still had an influence in the church. Four respondents did not believe historical patterns still had an influence in their church. The other two surveys neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Corporate issues were among the top three strengths for all of the churches surveyed, giving strong indication these issues had been resolved. Yet, unresolved corporate issues were perceived to be the most common root cause of conflict experienced by the churches. Because of the results of the survey questions targeting this specific area, the research would not support the belief that this factor, in and of itself, is a primary cause of church conflict.

#### *Section Four: Leadership*

Leadership had the top average for the combined scores. Leadership ranked in the top four in each of the individual church surveys. It had the highest cumulative average of all the categories. The lowest score among the subsections was 3.33. The survey questions about leadership included several ranked choice questions.

Leadership was scored high in all surveys regarding response to input and the ability to differentiate between valid and destructive criticism. Six of seven surveys indicated ministry decisions were made by designated or elected leadership. However, two surveys indicated decisions were inordinately affected by influential people in the

congregation and one indicated decisions were inordinately influenced by unwritten rules or norms. The lowest single question score, among all the subsections, was the absence of clearly established accountability partners for pastoral staff and church leaders. The highest score from the single questions, with all respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, was that pastoral staff and church leaders demonstrated spiritual growth and maturity.

The first ranking question asked the basis upon which leadership was chosen. The top five, in order from highest to lowest, were: spiritual maturity, competency, leadership qualities, agreement with church priorities, and emotional maturity. The lowest ranked (beginning with the lowest) were: financial contributions, role or standing in the community, age, agreement with the lead pastor, and tenure at the church.

The second question asked respondents to choose the two most accurate descriptions for the present primary leadership board of the church. Compliant and non-directive were chosen most frequently. Assertive, firm, and avoidant were each selected twice. The options of aggressive and domineering were not chosen in any of the surveys.

Respondents were asked to identify the basis of leadership decisions. The top three, in order from lowest to highest, were biblical principle, church purpose and priorities, and compelling need or issues. The lowest ranked (beginning with the lowest) were: individual preference, complaints or making people happy, congregational preference, and dominant or influential voices within the church.

When asked how leadership responded to criticism, the two highest results were responsively and with a learning posture. The two responses which ranked the lowest

were in an aggressive or reactionary manner and seeing the criticism as a spiritual attack. The descriptions passively and defensively ranked third and fourth.

The final ranking question asked how leadership meeting time was used. Prayer ranked second among the twelve options. Spiritual development was ranked fifth, diligently seeking God's direction seventh, and leadership development ninth. Dealing with conflict or complaints was ranked eighth. All the other options related to administrative functions, reporting, ministry and oversight details, and finances.

The results from the ranking questions were very positive and, in many ways, mirrored the results of the Likert scale questions. The weakest result from the ranked questions involved how leadership meeting time was used. The surveys indicated the time was mostly absorbed by administrative and operational details as opposed to spiritual or developmental pursuits.

The church with the highest number of severe conflicts had leadership as its second highest average. The church with the second most severe conflicts had leadership as its fourth highest average. Churches which had experienced less severe, and less frequent, conflict also had high leadership averages. The research would not support the belief that leadership, in and of itself, is a primary cause of church conflict.

#### *Section Five: Communication*

Communication was the second highest of all the cumulative averages. The cumulative average for each of the subsections was above three. Communication had the most variation among the average rankings for individual churches. The ranking ranged from being the worst score in one church to being the best score in another church. No two churches had communication in the same ranked position.

This section measured two aspects of communication: institutional or intra-church communication and interpersonal communication. The survey questions about communication included one ranked choice question.

The ranked choice question asked respondents about the general response to verbal sins within the church. Active participation was the response with the highest average. The response with the second highest average was passively remaining part of the situation. The response with the lowest average was actively challenging the verbal sin. The second lowest average was being diligent to avoid these types of situations. Mid-range responses were excusing oneself from the situation and asking someone else to challenge the verbal sin. This ranked choice question was negative overall. The most negative choices had the highest average while the most positive choice was ranked last.

Among the Likert scale questions, the subsection about intra-church communication had the highest average. Respondents indicated there was effective and meaningful communication between pastors, paid staff, and church leadership and there was meaningful communication from the leadership to the congregation. Five of six surveys believed communication from leadership to the congregation was open, honest, and without inappropriate secrecy or any intentional lack of forthrightness.

The lowest averaging scores for this section were questions related to the presence of, and adherence to, processes for airing grievances and giving input. This would indicate that some of the intra-church communication tends to be more of a one-way flow.

Respondents were asked to rate a number of different types of communication patterns in the church. The majority of the surveys indicated that interpersonal

communication was direct and honest, that there was a spirit of affirmation and encouragement, and that people did not speak negatively about others who were not present. However, in the same subsection, the majority also indicated that negative patterns like the presence of gossip and people speaking anonymously for others were also patterns in the church.

The majority of respondents felt that verbal sins were well-defined and identifiable by church attendees. Most respondents believed Ephesians 4:29 was modeled in their church by pastors, church leadership, and church staff. Three survey participants agreed Ephesians 4:29 was modeled by their congregations while two disagreed.

No other segment of the survey gave more varied results. The majority of the surveys identified both negative and positive types of speech patterns were simultaneously part of their church. There also was noticeable difference between the responses to the ranked choice question and the Likert scale questions.

The results from individual churches were also mixed. The church with communication as its lowest average also had a history of conflict and one of the lowest levels of conflict in the year prior to the survey. The two churches with the highest levels of past and current conflict had communication in the highest half of their averages. A church with communication as its second lowest average and a church with communication as its highest average were churches with the least amount of overall conflict. The research would not support the belief that communication, in and of itself, is a primary cause of church conflict.

### *Section Six: Differences*

This section of the survey fell in the middle of all the combined averages. Within the individual church results it was the second lowest average for one church. Four churches had it as their third lowest average and one church had it as its second highest average. The overall average for two of the subsections was under three. None of the subsections averaged higher than 3.43. The survey questions included two rank choice questions.

The first subsection examined general perspectives among church attendees about disagreements and conflict. This subsection had the lowest cumulative score of all the subsections. While disagreements and conflict were not seen as sinful, most agreed that the absence of conflict in the church was a sign of God's favor. Disagreements and conflicts were not seen as part of God's refining process for the church nor were they seen as an opportunity from God for personal growth.

Not seeing disagreements and conflict as sin, but seeing the absence of disagreements and conflict as a sign of God's favor, indicate somewhat contrasting opinions. Most respondents also did not see God at work to produce positive things in the church or in the individual as a result of disagreements and conflict. This data would lend to a conclusion that both conflict and disagreements were viewed negatively (even though they were not classified as sin).

The subsection which had the second lowest cumulative average asked if a clear process for handling disagreements and conflicts had been established for the church, if the process was well known throughout the church, and if the process was consistently followed. Three surveys indicated a process had been established in their church, two



neither agreed nor disagreed, and one disagreed. Only one survey indicated the process was well known or consistently followed.

The third subsection had the highest overall average in the section on differences. Most of the surveys indicated that differences in spiritual gifts were accepted and encouraged.

The subsection which requested responses about acceptance of differences in personalities and opinions had slightly less favorable responses than the subsection on differences in spiritual gifting. The results indicated that in most of the churches, differences of this type were accepted and given opportunity for dialogue. However, most surveys also indicated these types of differences were not actively encouraged and two surveys indicated these types of differences were attacked rather than accepted.

The final subsection invited response regarding how theological differences and questions about the church's established theological stance were perceived. Four of six surveys indicated those types of items were tolerated. Surveys were fairly evenly divided between whether or not those items were actively encouraged, given opportunity for dialogue, or allowed and accepted. Three of six surveys indicated conformity to certain doctrines and standards were required for feeling accepted in their church. Three of six surveys indicated that thinking the same theologically was highly valued among church attendees.

One of the ranked order questions asked how people generally responded to disagreements in the church. The top response was people took sides and gossiped. The second highest response was the disagreements simmered for long periods of time. These were the two most negative choices offered. The most positive choice of disagreements

being intentionally moved toward resolution was the lowest averaging response. Avoidance of conflict and hiding conflicts were the two mid-range averages.

The second ranked choice asked how disagreements were handled within the primary leadership board of the church. The most positive response, that disagreements were handled with healthy and direct discussion, had the highest average. The most negative choices were, by average, the lowest ranked. In general, the surveys indicated that most of the primary leadership boards handled disagreements in their midst in a healthy manner.

The topic of differences included many diverse subsections. Even with the diverse subsections, certain overall trends surfaced. First, disagreements and conflict were not perceived positively. Second, there were tendencies to avoid, ignore or mute differences. Third, disagreements most commonly led to negative results instead of resolution.

The results from individual churches for this section were inconclusive. The church which had differences as their second highest average reported the second highest amount of conflicts. The church where differences were the second lowest average had one of the least amounts of conflicts. The church with the highest number of recent conflicts had differences as their third lowest average. The research would not support the contention that differences, in and of itself, are a primary cause of church conflict.

#### *Section Seven: Accountability*

Accountability ranked as the third weakest among the cumulative averages. The cumulative average was under three. Accountability was not the lowest averaging section for any of the individual churches. It was also not among the top two sections for any of

the individual churches. The survey questions included one ranked choice question and one text entry question.

The ranked choice question asked for responses regarding who in the church held people accountable. Pastors, church leadership, and ministry leaders averaged out as the top answers. The lowest averaging choices were people outside the church system, a designated church employee, and a self-appointed “cop.” The three mid-range responses were peers or friends, accountability partners, and no one.

The answers were clearly skewed toward the belief that those in leadership functions had the role of maintaining accountability. The most negative choices were ranked last.

The text entry question asked who held leadership responsible for their decisions and sin. The most common responses indicated leadership held itself accountable. Two surveys mentioned the congregation as a source of accountability, one survey listed God, and one survey indicated that nobody held the leadership accountable.

Accountability of leadership was one of the subsections evaluated. An overall neutral average was the result of the Likert style question asking if pastors and church leadership were held accountable for negative attitudes and behaviors. Two surveys disagreed, two surveys agreed, and two surveys gave a response of neither agree nor disagree. However, three of the six surveys agreed or strongly agreed that sin in leadership was not swept under the rug instead of being publicly confessed. The other three surveys gave neutral responses to the question.

In general, the surveys indicated some forms of accountability for leadership were in place. The survey results would also indicate that the method and means of accountability were not well-defined and intentionally implemented.

One of the subsections focused upon accountability for job performance and outcomes. Four of six surveys indicated that training, mentoring, or correction took place when employees fell short of job expectations. Three of six respondents agreed that employees who consistently fell short in their job performance are removed from their position. One respondent strongly disagreed and the other two responses were neutral.

Four of six surveys indicated that appropriate rules of conduct were established and followed in their churches. However, only one agreed that people who ignore or bypass established protocols were held accountable. Three disagreed and one survey gave a neutral response. Three respondents disagreed when asked if congregants were held accountable for sinful choices and actions. One agreed there was accountability, two indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed. Five of six churches agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that only blatant, overt, or grievous sins were challenged in their church. The other survey gave a neutral response.

The survey results of this subsection indicate that somewhat low levels of accountability were common in the churches surveyed. This is also confirmed by the survey questions regarding the existence and implementation of a church discipline process. Four of the surveyed churches agreed they had a clearly defined church discipline process in place. However, only two churches indicated that church discipline was implemented when needed and that the established process was consistently followed.

Evaluating the results from individual churches, no clear pattern emerged correlating accountability with church conflict. The church which had accountability as the second lowest average had one of the lowest occurrences of current conflict. The church with the highest level of conflict had accountability as its second highest average. The research would not support the premise that accountability, in and of itself, is a primary cause of church conflict.

#### *Section Eight: Structure*

Structure had the lowest cumulative average of all the sections. The cumulative average was under three. Two individual churches had structure as their lowest average. Three churches had structure as their second lowest average and one church had it as its second highest average.

All the questions for this section were Likert scale based. The lowest average for a subsection was 1.74. A second subsection also fell below an average of two. The highest average for a subsection was 3.38.

Respondents were asked to give input on specific aspects of their church operational policies and organizational chart. Most surveys indicated the documents were not regularly updated. This was the most negative response for both categories and was the only question in this subsection to receive a score under three.

The most positive responses regarding operational policies identified those policies as consistently followed and flexible enough to meet ministry needs. The responses to the specific questions about the church organizational chart were some of the highest averages for this section. The majority felt their organizational charts were consistently followed, flexible enough to meet ministry needs, appropriate for their

church size and needs, gave a clear picture of the accountability and reporting hierarchy, and included sufficient checks and balances for all paid staff.

The next subsection asked if clear processes had been established for lodging complaints and grievances against those in leadership and whether a clear process for handling conflicts and disputes had been established. Only two of six churches had these two policies in place. The churches with the documents in place had positive results for all of the subsequent follow-up questions. Both agreed the policies were consistently followed. The averages for this subsection were very negatively impacted because so few of the churches had these policies in place.

One-half of the churches surveyed had established a clear process for giving input and suggestions to the church leadership. Those with a policy in place indicated the policy was fair and safe, allowed the person to feel they had been heard and taken seriously, and provided a timely follow-up to the person making the suggestion. However, while one respondent agreed that their policy was well known to the congregation, another respondent believed the policy in their church was not well known to the congregation. The third survey gave a neutral response.

The final subsection asked specific questions about the employees and their jobs. Three of the twelve questions averaged less than three. Six questions averaged above 3.6. The other three questions had a 3.2 average.

The lowest ranked questions asked if employees were rarely asked to do things outside their job description, adequately trained prior to starting their job, and had regular opportunities to advance their skills.

The highest averaging questions confirmed the existence of job descriptions, an understanding of expected job performance levels, employees feeling they had adequate authority to perform their tasks, and also knew the breadth and limits of their authority, where they fit in the organizational chart, and where to go if they had questions or needed extra authority to act.

The remaining questions asked if employees had a written document outlining job performance expected of them, their job performance was reviewed on a regular basis, and they were held accountable for job performance and meeting deadlines.

This was the overall highest ranking subsection. However, the results indicated clear weaknesses related to training. This section also reinforced the lower than average scores from the accountability section as job performance review and accountability were not substantially above the neutral mark of three.

Sequential based questions adversely affected the averages for this section. However, even when policies were in place, the survey data indicated the policies were not frequently updated. This could bring into question the overall relevance and actual utility of the policies for the churches which have them in place.

Of the individual churches, the two churches with the highest levels of conflict had structure as their second lowest averages. Of the three churches which had the lowest levels of conflict, two had structure as the lowest average and one had structure as its second lowest average. The remaining church had low amounts of recent conflict and structure was its second highest average. Based upon the survey data, structure in a church, in and of itself, is not a primary cause of church conflict.

There were substantial differences in the order of ranking by perceived root causes and the ranking of those seven items based upon averages of the responses from the specific questions about each of those seven items. This variation was true for the combined results as well as for the individual church surveys. No clear conclusions could be drawn from the comparison between the perceived root causes and the averages from the detailed questions asked for each of the seven areas.

The two segments were measured from somewhat different time perspectives. The conflict events were assessed from a historical perspective while the other responses were given from a more real time, contemporary perspective. The listing of perceived causes asked for an opinion while the second used specific questions to solicit data to test a theory.

The comparison between the two sections would not support the thesis question due to the lack of correlation between the two sections. No other clear conclusions can be drawn from this comparison.

### **Individual Church Survey Results**

Individual church surveys were analyzed for patterns which would be relevant to the research question. Churches H and G were not included in this section because the incomplete surveys did not provide adequate information for comparative analysis.

Church A had the lowest cumulative average. It had the lowest average in the areas of leadership, communication, ministry focus, and structure. It had fourth highest average in the areas of unresolved corporate issues, differences, and accountability. This church reported one of the highest levels of conflict, both historically and over the year preceding the survey. The church also had the lowest average for pastoral tenure.



Church B had the second lowest cumulative average. It had the lowest average of all churches in the areas of unresolved corporate differences and accountability. It had the second lowest averages of all churches in the areas of leadership, ministry focus, and structure. It had the second highest average in the area of communication. This church reported some of the lowest levels of severe conflict historically and only light conflict over the previous year. This church had one of the highest averages for pastoral tenure (over ten years).

Church C had the third lowest cumulative average. For averages of individual sections, it was the second lowest for leadership and differences. Accountability and structure were the third lowest averages among the churches. Communication was the third highest among the churches while leadership and ministry focus were in the center of the averages. This church reported the least amount of historic and recent conflict of all the churches. The average tenure for senior pastors was seven to ten years.

Church D was in the middle of all the churches in cumulative average. It ranked third lowest in the individual categories of ministry focus and differences. It was the highest average of all churches in the areas of leadership and unresolved corporate issues. It had the third highest average for accountability and structure. Communication was at the middle when compared with all the other churches. This church was the most heavily conflicted, historically and recently, of all the churches. The average tenure (over ten years) of the senior pastors was one of the highest of the churches returning surveys.

Church E had the third highest cumulative average of the churches. It had the second highest averages in the individual categories of unresolved corporate issues, ministry focus, and structure. It had the third highest average for leadership. This church

had the second lowest averages for communication and accountability. This church experienced heavy and extreme conflict over four years prior to the survey but only experienced light conflict within recent years. The average tenure of senior pastors was seven to ten years.

Church F had the highest cumulative average of all the churches. It had the third lowest average of all the churches for the area of communication. All the other individual categories averaged among the top four of all the churches. This church reported some of the lowest amount of conflict historically and recently. The average tenure of senior pastors was one of the lowest, but the current senior pastor had over ten years of service.

Results of the individual church surveys were mixed and did not lead to any clear conclusions. There was no clear pattern that correlated the cumulative average of the seven areas tested with the frequency or severity of conflict experienced by the church.

Church A returned the results expected if church conflict was directly correlated with the seven identified factors tested in this research project. Church A had the lowest cumulative average and the lowest average in four of the seven categories. Church A also reported high levels of conflict.

Church B, however, had significantly different survey results. Church B had the second lowest cumulative average and was among the lowest of the churches in five of the seven individual categories. Yet this church reported very low amounts of conflict. None of the conflict was defined as heavy or severe.

Church D reported the highest amount of conflict, historic and current, and the highest amount of heavy and extreme conflict. Church D had one of the top three

cumulative averages. The gap between the cumulative averages for the top three churches was not large. The averages ranged from 3.56 to 3.64.

The seven identified areas were grouped in a variety of combinations possible with the groups ranging in size from two variables to six variables. No clear patterns emerged from the survey data. No combinations of factors consistently correlated with the presence or absence of conflict in the churches studied.

The church surveys examined ministry focus, unresolved corporate sin, leadership, communication, differences, accountability, and church structure to discover if these variables were related to the onset of severe church conflict. The survey data did not confirm that these variables, either singularly or in some combination, were related to the severe conflict.

Based on these findings, the survey results cannot be used to help develop a conflict preventative strategy for Faithbridge Church. However, the results can be used as a comparative template for Faithbridge Church. This template can be used to determine Faithbridge's strengths and weaknesses relative to these churches in the areas surveyed. The template can also be used to create recommendations for ministry advancement at Faithbridge Church.

## **Survey of Faithbridge Leadership**

### *Section One: Background*

Deacons, pastors, and ministry coordinators comprise the primary leadership board of Faithbridge Church. Surveys were made available to individuals who were in active service in any of these capacities at the time of the survey. Former leaders, who had served in those capacities within ten years or up to ten years prior to the survey, were

also included. Twenty-two people were invited to participate in this survey. Seven responses were received. Six of the participants had seven or more years of experience as part of the leadership team. The survey was administered in August 2014.

According to the surveys, no extreme conflict has been experienced by the church over the past ten years. The majority of the conflict was listed as light or medium. Only one respondent indicated that a major conflict has been experienced over the past year.

Respondents were asked to define the two most serious conflicts experienced by the church and the most severe conflict in the history of the church. There was a wide variety in the events described in this section; there was no consistent agreement between the surveys in the conflicts described. Table Four gives a summary of the conflicts identified in the Faithbridge leadership survey.

Table 4. Conflicts listed in Faithbridge leadership surveys

	7-10 Years Ago	4-6 Years Ago	1-3 Years Ago	Previous Year
Leader 1	4 Light Conflicts 4 Medium Conflicts	3 Light Conflicts 1 Medium Conflict	3 Light Conflicts	1 Light Conflict
Leader 2	None	1 Light Conflict	1 Light Conflict	1 Light Conflict
Leader 3	No Response	No Response	No Response	No Response
Leader 4	Light Conflict	Light Conflict	Medium Conflict	Heavy Conflict
Leader 5	No Response	No Response	No Response	No Response
Leader 6	None	1 Light Conflict	1 Medium Conflict	1 Light Conflict
Leader 7	No Response	No Response	No Response	No Response

There was no consistent pattern in the individual survey responses to the perceived root causes of the conflict possibly due to the variation in described conflict events. When the perceived root causes from the surveys were averaged for the most severe recent conflicts, unresolved historical issues and leadership related issues were

identified as the top causal factors. Unwillingness to accept differences was the next most frequently identified causal issue, followed by communication. The next three factors, in order of frequency, were ministry focus, accountability, and church structure.

Combining the averaged results for the two most recent and severe conflict events reported by each survey did produce a pattern. Leadership was the main perceived root cause of conflict, followed by differences, unresolved corporate issues, and communication. Accountability, ministry focus, and church structure were closely grouped as the least perceived causes of the conflict experienced by the church. Table Five provides a summary of the perceived causes of the recent, and most severe, conflicts identified by the Faithbridge leadership survey participants.

Table 5. Perceived causes of conflicts from Faithbridge leadership surveys

	Greatest perceived cause							Least perceived cause	
Leader 1									
Conflict 1	Ldrshp	Diff	Comm	Acct	Other	Struct	Focus	NR	
Conflict 2	Sin	Ldrshp	Diff	Comm	Sin	Others	Struct	Focus	
Leader 2									
Conflict 1	Ldrshp	Focus	Struct	Comm	Sin	Acct	Diff	NR	
Conflict 2	Sin	Diff	Struct	Acct	Ldrshp	Comm	Focus	NR	
Leader 3									
	Acct	Diff	Sin	Comm	Ldrshp	Struct	Focus	NR	
	Comm	Diff	Ldrshp	Acct	Struct	Focus	Sin	NR	
Leader 4									
	Ldrshp	Focus	Comm	Struct	Diff	Acct	Sin	NR	
	Ldrshp	Focus	Comm	Struct	Diff	Acct	Sin	NR	
Leader 5									
	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	
Leader 6									
	Other	Focus	Diff	Sin	Acct	Comm	Struct	Ldrshp	
Leader 7									
	Sin	Diff	Comm	Ldrshp	Struct	Focus	Acct	NR	
Combined Results	Ldrshp	Sin	Diff	Comm	Focus	Acct	Struct	Other	
	Ldrshp	Diff	Comm	Sin	Struct	Acct	Focus	Other	
Chart Key: Acct = Accountability    Comm = Communication    Diff = Differences    Focus = Ministry Focus Sin = Unresolved Corporate Sin    Ldrshp = Leadership    Struct = Structure    NR = No Response									

The survey listed these seven areas as potential root issues. Respondents were also given the opportunity to identify other primary factors in addition to the seven which were listed. No respondents added additional categories or root causes.

Table Six summarizes the ranking by average from sections two through eight of the Faithbridge leadership survey. These sections solicited specific responses concerning the seven areas identified as possible root causes of destructive conflict in churches.

Table 6. Possible causes of conflict from Faithbridge leadership survey averages. The lowest averages represent the most likely cause of conflict

	Lowest average						Highest average
Leader 1	Focus	Sin	Diff	Acct	Struct	Ldrshp	Comm
Leader 2	Focus	Struct	Diff	Acct	Comm	Sin	Ldrshp
Leader 3	Focus	Sin	Struct	Diff	Acct	Ldrshp	Comm
Leader 4	Focus	Sin	Struct	Comm	Acct	Diff	Ldrshp
Leader 5	Acct	Diff	Focus	Sin	Struct	Comm	Ldrshp
Leader 6	Sin	Struct	Comm	Acct	Diff	Focus	Ldrshp
Leader 7	Sin	Acct	Diff	Struct	Comm	Focus	Ldrshp
Combined Results	Focus	Sin	Diff	Struct	Acct	Comm	Ldrshp
Chart Key: Acct = Accountability    Comm = Communication    Diff = Differences    Focus = Ministry Focus Sin = Unresolved Corporate Sin    Ldrshp = Leadership    Struct = Structure    NR = No Response							

The next sections of the survey asked participants questions about specific items related to the seven areas identified as possible root causes for the conflict experienced by their church. The purpose was to identify the relative strengths or weaknesses of the church in each of these seven areas and then determine if these weaknesses were root causes of conflict in the church. Based on section averages, the results (listed from

strongest to weakest) were leadership, communication, accountability, differences, ministry focus, unresolved corporate issues, and structure.

### *Section Two: Church Focus*

Ministry focus had the lowest average of the combined scores. The averaged total was under the neutral score of three. The weakest subsection was church goals. The strongest subsection was ministry priorities.

Four of seven surveys indicated that a unifying theme for the church existed. Three of those respondents indicated the theme had been developed one to two years prior to the survey while one indicated the theme was developed over ten years prior to the survey. All of the scores for the individual questions in this subsection averaged less than three. Those surveys which indicated a theme existed also indicated the theme was used for ministry decisions, relevant for present ministry, and embraced by leadership and ministry leaders.

The average for this section was negatively influenced by the fact that three of the surveys indicated that no unifying theme existed for the church. One of the two former deacons who took the survey affirmed the existence of a unifying theme, the other did not. Two of the five current ministry leaders did not think the church had a unifying theme. One of the three current leaders who affirmed the existence of the unifying theme believed the theme had been developed over ten years prior to the survey. In spite of that data, some survey results indicate the theme is current and used for ministry decisions.

Six of the seven surveys indicated that church priorities had been established. This subsection had the wide diversity regarding when those priorities had been developed. Two respondents indicated the priorities were over ten years old, three

respondents indicated the priorities had been established three to five years prior to the survey, while one response said the priorities were between one and two years old. This subsection also had the highest number of mixed opinions for the specific questions. Only half the respondents who believed priorities existed felt the priorities were used as a basis for ministry decisions, well known, and embraced by the church staff, leadership, ministry leaders and the congregation. The other three respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. The same type of split occurred in the question which asked if the priorities were clear, specific and focused. Three survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, three surveys agreed or strongly agreed. The data would imply that the priorities are not clear, specific and focused. Such characteristics should lend to more consistent survey results.

The subsection on church goals averaged just above two. Only three surveys affirmed the presence of church goals and only two of those respondents answered the detailed questions for this subsection. Averages for the individual questions of this subsection, without factoring in values for those who did not believe goals existed, all averaged above four.

The two surveys with detailed responses indicated the church goals were relevant for ministry, reviewed regularly, and brought to completion. However, one of those surveys indicated the goals were three to five years old while the other survey indicated the goals were over ten years old. The difference in the responses regarding the age of the goals indicates the goals lack clear definition. The survey did not ask respondents to delineate the church goals, priorities, or theme. The averages for each of the subsections were adversely affected because of surveys which did not affirm the existence of a theme,



priorities, or goals. Every aspect had mixed results. It can be concluded that if the surveyed aspects of ministry actually do exist, either they are hobbled by lack of visibility and clarity or are somewhat insignificant due to inattentiveness by some in leadership.

### *Section Three: Unresolved Corporate Issues*

The average for unresolved corporate issues was the second lowest of the combined scores. There was a strong consensus that the leadership of the church was knowledgeable about significant events of the church history. Leadership also understood the impact of unresolved corporate issues upon church ministry and God's blessings upon the church.

Most respondents believed that negative or sinful patterns from the church's past were consistently challenged and no longer had an influential presence. Two respondents believed those sins had been confessed to God by leadership, two respondents did not feel this had taken place. The other responses were neutral. Three of seven survey respondents indicated the sins had not been publicly confessed, while one person thought they had been confessed. Three respondents surveyed had a neutral response.

The subsection with the lowest average evaluated leadership response to sins committed by the church against others. The average of this subsection was under three. The lowest averaging individual question asked if the sins against others had been publicly confessed. Three survey respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed. One survey respondent agreed that public confession had occurred. The other two respondents surveyed had neutral responses.

Three respondents believed sins committed against the church by individuals had been identified and released through forgiveness. Three survey respondents gave neutral responses.

A summary question for the section confirmed results from the subsections. Six of seven survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that that church had held a public renewal service to address corporate sins. The other survey response had a neutral response. The public acknowledgment element received the lowest score in each of the subsections.

Overall, the results from this section were positive. One area which was consistently affirmed was that leadership was aware of negative corporate issues and felt they had addressed these issues in an appropriate manner.

#### *Section Four: Leadership*

This section had the highest average of the combined scores. The cumulative average was just under four. The results of the ranked choice questions were also very positive. The lowest subsection average was 3.79. The highest subsection average was 4.14.

The first ranked choice question asked for the basis upon which members of the primary leadership board was chosen. Spiritual maturity was the top factor, followed by competency, leadership qualities, agreement with church priorities, and emotional maturity. The lowest ranked was financial contributions followed by role or standing in the community, age, agreement with the lead pastor, and tenure at the church.

Respondents were also asked to rank the basis of leadership decisions. The top three were biblical principle, followed by ministry focus (church purpose, priorities and

goals), and compelling need or issue. The lowest factor was complaints and trying to make people happy, followed by dominant or influential voices in the church, and individual preference.

Each respondent was asked to select, from a list of six options, the two which best described the primary leadership board and the two which best described the lead pastor. For the leadership board, assertive was chosen five times, firm was chosen five times, and passive was chosen four times. The other possible choices (which were not chosen at all) were domineering, avoidant, and aggressive. The results for the lead pastor were similar. Firm was chosen six times, assertive five times, avoidant twice and aggressive once.

Pastors and church leadership received high scores in all the surveys for spiritual growth and maturity, unity, and handling confidentiality in an appropriate manner. The lowest scores in this subsection related to an absence of intentional accountability partners and the lack of developmental or training opportunities.

All the survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that ministry decisions for the church were made by elected or designated leadership. All the survey respondents also agreed that ministry decisions were not inordinately impacted by influential members of the congregation or by unwritten rules and norms.

Five of seven survey participants affirmed that leadership was responsive to input and could differentiate between valid and destructive criticism. One survey respondent disagreed and one survey respondent had a neutral response.

Survey participants were asked to rank the leadership board's normal response to criticism. With a learning posture and responsiveness were the two answers with the highest

average. There was a sizable gap between these answers and the remaining responses. The averages of the remaining answers were tightly bunched together. The most positive responses were ranked the highest and the least positive responses were ranked the lowest.

The final ranked choice question asked how leadership meeting time was used. Responses could be grouped together into four units with a distinctive gap between each group. The highest averaging group was ministry details and reporting. This was followed by a group consisting of administrative matters and prayer. The next group was comprised of diligently seeking God's direction, ministry planning, and ministry oversight. The lowest averaging group included dealing with church problems and complaints, spiritual accountability and growth, implementing rules, leadership development, and finances.

The evaluation of leadership meeting time was the weakest part of this section. Of the highest averaging responses, three involved administrative details while only one was related to any type of spiritual pursuit of discipline. Of the three options which focused upon spiritual aspects, one (spiritual development) was part of the lowest group. Leadership development was also part of the lowest grouping.

#### *Section Five: Communication*

Communication was the second highest average of the cumulative scores at 3.86. All of the subsections scored over three. There was one ranked choice question in this section.

The ranked choice question asked respondents how the church, in general, responded to verbal sins. The top three responses, in order from best to least, were

passively remaining part of the situation, diligence in avoiding situations, and excusing oneself from the situation. The lowest ranked response was asking someone else to challenge the verbal sin. The second lowest ranked response was to actively challenge the sin when it was encountered.

The results from the ranked choice question were a bit inconsistent with the section responses. The most positive response was ranked fifth out of the six options. The most negative response was the highest ranked.

The subsection on institutional communication received positive responses overall. No single question had a below average score. All the surveys validated that communication was good between pastoral staff and church leadership and from leadership to the church congregation. Six of seven respondents indicated that communication from the leadership to the church congregation had no inappropriate secrecy or intentional lack of forthrightness. One survey respondent disagreed with that assessment.

Neither content of intra-church communication nor the acceptance level by the congregation were surveyed. Although intra-church communication received positive responses, the survey section on church focus indicated some levels of disconnect. Major guiding principles for the congregation, a unifying theme, ministry priorities, and goals were not considered to be well known by the congregation.

The majority of the survey participants felt interpersonal communication within the church had no inappropriate secrecy, was not critical or demeaning, did not involve sarcasm or veiled messages, had an absence of rumors and gossip, was characterized by people speaking directly with one another, and was positive and encouraging. The

respondents surveyed indicated that one negative communication pattern in the church was that people spoke anonymously for others. Overall, the responses regarding interpersonal communication patterns were positive in nature.

Five survey respondents agreed that verbal sins were well defined and easily identifiable by church attendees, one survey respondent strongly agreed and the other survey respondent gave a neutral response. All the survey participants affirmed that Ephesians 4:29 was modeled by pastors and church leadership. Six respondents agreed this was also true for church staff and employees while one survey respondent gave a neutral response. Six agreed it was true for the church, in general, while one survey disagreed.

The survey results showed communication to be a church strength. Both intra-church and interpersonal communication received very high ratings. There was strong support that Ephesians 4:29 was modeled well throughout the church. The greatest weaknesses were the absence of defined and formal processes for airing grievances and giving input to the church leadership.

#### *Section Six: Differences*

This section was the third lowest cumulative average. Three of the subsections averaged less than three. The survey questions included two rank choice questions.

One of the ranked order questions asked how people generally responded to disagreements in the church. The top response was that people took sides and gossiped. Two choices tied with the second highest average: that disagreements simmered for long periods of time and that disagreements were intentionally moved toward resolution. Close

in average to those two responses was the belief that disagreements were hidden or often swept under the rug.

The most positive response for this subsection tied for second. However, it was tied with one of the most negative responses. The highest ranked response was also the most negative choice available. People taking sides and gossiping when disagreements occur does not align well with the results from the communication section which indicated gossip and rumors were not a norm in the church. Either the surveys indicate a contradiction, or the church has a very low number of interpersonal disagreements, or disagreements are truly hidden and swept under the rug.

The second ranked choice asked how disagreements were handled within the primary leadership board of the church. The most positive response, that disagreements were handled with healthy and direct discussion, was the highest averaged choice. The most negative choices were the lowest ranked. The surveys, in general, indicated that the primary leadership board handled disagreements among themselves in a healthy manner.

One subsection evaluated general perceptions about conflict. This subsection averaged 2.94. Two survey respondents agreed that disagreements and conflict were sinful, four survey respondents disagreed. Three respondents agreed that absence of conflict was a sign of God's favor and blessings while three disagreed with that statement. Four survey participants did not feel disagreements and conflict were an opportunity from God for personal growth. However, five of seven respondents believed disagreements and conflict were part of God's refining process for the church. This was the only question in this subsection to receive an average response over three. Overall, disagreements and conflict were seen in a negative light with limited positive value.

Four survey respondents affirmed a clear process for handling disagreements had been established and implemented. Two survey respondents disagreed and there was one neutral response. However, only one respondent believed the process was well known among the congregation. Three responses were neutral and three responses either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the process was well known. The survey responses were fairly evenly divided regarding whether or not the process was consistently followed.

The subsection on differences in spiritual gifting had very positive results. Most of the surveys indicated that differences in spiritual gifts were accepted, encouraged, emphasized, and celebrated.

The subsection which requested responses about acceptance of differences in personalities and opinions had slightly less favorable responses than the subsection on differences in spiritual gifting. The results indicated that differences of this type were accepted, given opportunity for dialogue, and not attacked. However, most surveys indicated these types of differences were not actively encouraged and were tolerated in the church.

The final subsection invited response regarding how theological differences and questions about the church's established theological stance were perceived. The results were very similar to the section on differences in personalities. However, four of seven survey respondents indicated conformity to certain doctrines and standards were required for feeling accepted in the church while one respondent disagreed. There was one neutral response. Five of seven survey respondents indicated that thinking the same theologically



was highly valued among church attendees while one respondent disagreed. There was one neutral response.

The topic of differences was the most difficult to survey because it included many diverse subsections. Even with the diverse subsections, certain overall trends surfaced. First, disagreements and conflict were not perceived positively. Second, there were tendencies to avoid, ignore or mute differences.

### *Section Seven: Accountability*

Accountability ranked as the third highest among the cumulative averages. The survey questions included one ranked choice question and one text entry question.

The ranked choice question asked for responses regarding who typically tried to hold people accountable in the church. Responses fell into two clear groupings. The highest ranked grouping had pastors as the highest averaged response followed by church leadership. Tied for third were accountability partners, ministry leaders, and peers. The lowest averaged response was people outside the church followed by a response of no one, and after that a designated church employee, and a self-appointed “cop.”

The answers clearly indicated that those in pastoral or leadership functions had the perceived role of overseeing accountability. The most negative choices were ranked last.

Accountability of leadership was one of the subsections evaluated. Most respondents felt the pastors and church leadership were held accountable for negative attitudes and behaviors. Five respondents believed sin by leadership was publicly acknowledged rather than swept under the rug.

The text entry question asked who held leadership responsible for their decisions and sin. The most common responses indicated leadership held itself accountable. God was mentioned three times, the congregation once, and one respondent said no one held the church leadership accountable.

In general, the surveys indicated some forms of accountability for leadership were in place. The results of the text entry question indicate that the method and means of accountability were not delineated and intentionally implemented.

One of the subsections had specific questions related to accountability for job performance and outcomes. This subsection had the lowest overall average in the accountability section and was the only one to average under three. Only two of seven respondents agreed that training, mentoring, or correction took place when employees fell short of job expectations. One respondent disagreed, four gave neutral responses. When asked if employees who consistently fall short in their job performance were removed from their position, two agreed, two disagreed or strongly disagreed and three gave a neutral response.

Four of seven survey respondents indicated that appropriate rules of conduct were established and followed in the church. There were two neutral responses and one survey participant disagreed that rules of conduct were established and followed. Four respondents thought people were held accountable if they ignored or bypassed the established norms while two did not believe people were held accountable. There was one neutral response.

Surveys were fairly evenly divided on the question of whether or not people were held accountable for sinful choices and actions. One was neutral, three agreed, and three

either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Four of seven survey participants believed only blatant, overt, or grievous sin was challenged in the church. One participant disagreed and two gave a neutral response. Five of seven respondents did not believe there were areas of ministry where sin was allowed to go unchallenged. There was one neutral response and one survey participant believed there were areas where sin went unchallenged.

Six survey participants agreed that there was a clearly defined church discipline process in place while one disagreed. Three felt the process was implemented when necessary and consistently followed. One disagreed, one strongly disagreed, and there was one neutral response.

The survey results of this subsection indicate an above average level of accountability. The overall score was affected by the low average of the subsection on employee accountability.

#### *Section Eight: Structure*

The average for structure fell in the center of the cumulative averages for the surveys and scored just slightly above the section on differences. All the questions for this section were Likert scale based.

Respondents were asked about specific details related to their church operational policies and organizational chart. Overall, survey participants gave very positive responses to these two areas of church structure. Most survey respondents indicated the operational policies were consistently followed, not governed by unspoken rules or norms, regularly updated, and appropriate for the church size and ministry needs. All the specific questions about church operational policies received a positive score.

All the questions about the church organizational chart also received positive scores. Respondents felt it was clear, consistently followed, flexible enough for ministry needs, appropriate for the church size, and with a clearly established hierarchy. The responses to the specific questions about the church organizational chart were some of the highest averages for the section on structure.

The next subsection asked if clear processes had been established for lodging complaints and grievances against those in leadership and whether a clear process for handling disputes had been established. Only two of the survey responses confirmed the presence of a policy for lodging complaints or grievances against church leadership. Those two respondents felt the process was safe and fair, consistently followed, and resulted in correction if the leader was found to be in error.

Six of seven survey participants affirmed the presence of a policy for handling disagreements and conflicts within the church. The detailed questions returned strong positive results from those who believed a process was in place. These individuals felt the process was safe and fair, brought about a timely response and resulted in resolution of the issue. The question asking if the policy was well known to the congregation had the lowest average of the subsection.

One-half of the respondents believed a clear policy was in place for giving input and suggestions to the church leadership. Those who believed a policy was in place indicated the policy was well known to the congregation, was fair and safe, allowed the person to feel they had been heard and taken seriously, and provided a timely follow-up to the person making the suggestion.

The final subsection asked specific questions about the employees and their jobs. Two of the twelve questions averaged less than three. Five questions averaged above 3.71.

The lowest ranked questions asked if employees were rarely asked to do things outside their job description, had a written copy of the expected job performance, were adequately trained prior to starting their job, and had regular opportunities to advance their skills.

The highest averaging questions confirmed an understanding of expected job performance levels, employees feeling they had adequate authority to perform their tasks, awareness of the breadth and limits of their authority, where they fit in the organizational chart, and where to go if they had questions or needed extra authority to act.

Sequentially based questions adversely affected the averages for several of the subsections and for this section as a whole. Otherwise, most of the subsections would have positive results overall.

### **Summary of the Faithbridge Leadership Surveys**

There were substantial differences in order of ranking between perceived root causes and the ranking based upon the averages from the specific questions for each of those areas. The two sections used different perspectives and measuring tools.

Overall averages from the individual averages ranged from 2.7 to 3.84. There was a fairly even distribution within that range; no single survey noticeably skewed the results.

There was some consistency between the informal trial survey taken by members of the church paid staff and the formal survey completed by church leadership. For both

surveys, structure, ministry focus, and differences received three of the lowest four averages. Three of the top four averages for both surveys included leadership and accountability. Some differences between the two results can be attributed to the fact that the actual survey questions were not identical.

The only substantial difference between the two surveys was in the ranking of unresolved corporate issues. This was directly affected by the low leadership survey scores for questions related to public confession and a public renewal service. Questions of that type were not asked by the informal survey.

Comparison between the Faithbridge leaders' survey and the combined surveys of the other churches showed relatively minor differences. The Faithbridge leadership survey had a slightly higher cumulative average. Four of the individual sections from the Faithbridge leadership survey had higher averages than the combined results from the other surveys (structure, accountability, communication and leadership).

The Faithbridge leadership survey had lower averages in the areas of ministry focus, unresolved corporate issues, and differences. The average score for differences, however, only had a differential of .12. The largest differential was in the area of ministry focus. The average from the Faithbridge leadership survey was 1.25 less than the score from the combined result for the churches. In comparing the results from the individual church surveys, Faithbridge's score in that category would have been tied for the second lowest average. Table Seven summarizes the results from the surveys used for this research project.

Table 7. Comparative list of data.

	Most probable cause or highest area of weakness						Least probable cause or highest area of strength
Perceived causes, combined church surveys	Issues Issues	Ldrshp Ldrshp	Comm Comm	Acct Struct	Struct Diff	Diff Focus	Issues Acct
Averages, combined church surveys	Struct	Focus	Acct	Diff	Issues	Comm	Ldrshp
Perceived causes, combined Faithbridge Leadership surveys	Ldrshp Ldrshp	Issues Diff	Diff Comm	Comm Issues	Focus Struct	Acct Acct	Struct Focus
Averages, combined Faithbridge leadership surveys	Focus	Issues	Diff	Struct	Acct	Comm	Ldrshp
Averages, informal survey of Faithbridge staff	Focus	Diff	Struct	Comm	Acct	Ldrshp	Issues
Chart Key: Acct = Accountability    Comm = Communication    Diff = Differences    Focus = Ministry Focus Issues = Unresolved Corporate Issues    Ldrshp = Leadership    Struct = Structure    NR = No Response							

Both the Faithbridge leadership survey and the combined results of the churches had leadership as the highest averaging section. Both had communication as the section with the second highest average. Differences were rated as third weakest in the Faithbridge leadership survey while it was the fourth weakest in the combined survey. The other four areas showed no correlation in ranking order between the surveys. No clear conclusions could be drawn for Faithbridge church as a result of comparing the surveys.

It also cannot be concluded, based upon the survey results, that any applications of the data will help Faithbridge avoid serious or destructive conflict. However, the research project did surface areas which can be addressed to help develop, at minimum, a more effective ministry environment.

The Faithbridge survey identified two areas for potential improvement. Averages for two areas of the survey, ministry focus and unresolved corporate sin, fell below the survey neutral point of three. The below neutral scores indicate that development in these two areas would be beneficial for the church.



## CHAPTER SIX: EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

### **Strengths of the Project Design**

#### *Demographics*

The research invited participation from churches with different denominational backgrounds. This strengthened the project and increased the validity of the research. The project was designed so that the results were not influenced or constricted by denominational bias. Though the areas tested were not directly related to doctrine, the cross-denominational approach also helped to neutralize the skewing of the results due to a specific doctrinal belief.

The scope of the survey was not restricted to a specific community. While churches surveyed were selected according to certain restrictive criteria for inclusion in the study, the geographic region from which the churches were selected was broad enough to prevent undue influence from a single unique subset or community.

An additional strength was the involvement of churches from different community sizes. The study was targeted to rural based churches which had a significant evangelical presence in the community or region where they served. This retained a breadth of perspective that allowed more effective comparison of the survey results to Faithbridge Church, which was the primary focus of this research.

### *Survey Tool*

The surveys were set up as an Internet-based survey. This approach allowed simple access for the participants and a single-step return process which by-passed the need to assemble and mail the completed survey. The web-based option provided increased confidence of anonymity to the participants.

Anonymity contributed to quality and credibility of the study. Anonymity was used to help reduce barriers or fear-related potential stigma of reporting church conflict details. This design was also chosen to encourage the highest amount of detail and honesty in the survey. The value of anonymity was affirmed through unsolicited verbal comments personally received from individuals who participated in the informal test survey.

The variation in question type was also a positive in the survey design. The Likert-type questions provided clear and precise data for analysis of specific concepts. Those questions were also designed to reduce the margin of error due to misinterpretation of a question. The ranked order questions created a forced choice environment which allowed for comparison of relative strengths and weaknesses. The text entry allowed each participant to give details important for the study. The text entry allowed for results that gave a good view of unique circumstances and details for each church. These results would have been difficult to obtain with a different type of format.

The design of the surveys with two corresponding but distinct sections was also a positive dimension. The background segment of the survey allowed more subjective responses. Respondents were able to provide their assessment of the frequency and severity of conflict experienced in their church and the influence of, and damage from,

the most severe conflicts in their church. Additionally, they were given the opportunity to provide their opinion on the perceived causes of the most recent conflicts.

The second major segment of the survey solicited responses about specific aspects of the seven identified areas being tested. Being able to compare the results of this section with the results of the first section was helpful for assessing the survey data and drawing conclusions from the research. Close alignment of the data from these two sections of the surveys would have provided significant validation of the research question.

The detailed nature of the questions in the second section of the survey was also a strong point of the project design. Each of the seven areas studied was comprised of several distinct subsections. The detailed questions provided sufficient data to evaluate the results by subsections, thus allowing a more refined analysis of the research.

Using three surveys for this study was also one of the strengths of the project design. The informal test survey was helpful for the overall project design. Evaluation of the test survey allowed for refinement of the church survey and the Faithbridge leadership survey. The informal test survey also gave some verification to the results of the Faithbridge leadership survey. The ability to compare the Faithbridge leadership survey results to the surveys of other churches enhanced the project.

## **Project Weaknesses**

### *Project Design*

The primary weakness of the study was the use of surveys as the primary research tool. While the survey returned useful information, the information was not as effective as desired with respect to the main research question. The surveys captured snapshots and

point-in-time assessments. The research would have been better served through long-term case studies of select churches or qualitative research through interviews.

Another weakness of the project was the limited number of survey responses. The sample size was relatively small even though both surveys received a response rate of about 30 percent. The potential respondents for both surveys were restricted by project design. The region selected for the survey of churches was not a large region. The criteria for participating churches further reduced the number of qualifying churches.

The Faithbridge survey was made available to present and former members of the primary leadership board. Restricting the survey to this group limited the number of available respondents.

### *Survey Design*

The survey design itself had several weaknesses. The survey was designed around the seven areas which were the focus of this project. Bias might have been created as those options were presented to the survey participants for choices as potential root causes for the major conflicts experienced by their church. Some respondents took advantage of the “other” option, filling in perceived root causes outside of the seven options offered. Most did not use that option, perhaps leaving the survey unduly influenced in favor of the seven listed areas.

Another weakness was the allowance for more subjectively based responses in the first segment of the survey. The impact of this element was most noticeably evidenced in the responses to the Faithbridge leadership survey. Even though guidelines were included in the survey, there was wide variation in the church conflicts described, how respondents graded the severity of the conflicts experienced by the church, and the perceived causes

of those conflicts. How individuals interpreted and responded to that section might have significantly skewed the survey results. For example, if the conflict of Church “B” had been graded as more severe by the respondent, the survey results would have given some confirmation of the research question.

One weakness was that the surveys were anonymous. Anonymity was chosen as the preferred platform for specific reasons. However, that dimension of the survey process hindered the assessment process and limited the ability to follow-up with the surveyed churches. To protect anonymity, respondents were not asked to identify the denomination of their church or the specific geographic area served by the church. This removed the ability to confirm that churches from diverse denominational backgrounds actually participated in the survey. It was also impossible to determine if responses were actually region-wide rather than clustered in one part of the region.

Because the responses were not tracked, there was no ability to follow-up for clarity or further information. The survey process would have been strengthened if there had been, at minimum, an option for the respondents to voluntarily identify themselves and give permission for a follow-up contact or interview. Interviews, in conjunction with the surveys, would have enhanced the study.

Anonymity also made it impossible to make follow-up contact with churches which did not respond. One church elder contacted this researcher to explain that the senior pastor of their church had just left under adverse circumstances. He apologized that he did not have the emotional energy to complete the survey on behalf of the church. This researcher is aware that several churches which received the survey were under

heavy stress or in a period of pastoral transition. Access to data from these churches was potentially lost because of the project design.

Another weakness, because of the research design, was the inability to gather information from more than one source in each church. Responses from multiple sources, with different perspectives, might have influenced the results and findings.

There were several weaknesses in the survey instrument itself. Likert-type questions designed with a five point scale allowed for a neutral response of “neither agree nor disagree.” The neutral responses were not frequent enough to significantly affect the survey. Crisper results might have been obtained if those questions had been designed with different choice options. First, adjusting to a six point response scale would have forced non-neutral response. Second, adding a seventh option of “not applicable” would have provided a mechanism for individuals to exempt themselves if they felt they had no valid response to the question.

The questions were developed, in part, from the findings of the literature review. That influence led to some questions being disproportionately over or under valued. The most striking example is embodied in the survey section which focused upon unresolved corporate issues. Literature reviewed for this project, especially from church interventionist authors, strongly emphasized corporate renewal services. That emphasis was reflected in the survey. Questions tied to that emphasis had more influence than any other single concept in that section. Those questions significantly lowered the average on surveys, some of which had very high scores in other areas of that section. The scores for churches which affirmed some type of public service had some of the highest overall

averages, even though the responses to other questions were significantly lower than other churches.

Using an Internet-based survey removed some flexibility in question design and text entry responses. While this limitation had some effect on the survey design, the ease of access and use potentially outweighed the drawbacks.

### **Suggestions for Modification and Project Improvements**

#### *Project Design*

The research would have been enhanced through the use of a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study would allow conflict to be tracked across the spectrum of the church's history. Identifying the root cause of destructive conflict would be more effectively accomplished through a study which is able to engage fuller contextualization. That process would be greatly assisted by an extended examination of the church history and objective assessment of the intra-church relational dynamics.

The project design would benefit by moving away from anonymous data collection protocol. The benefits of anonymity are outweighed by its disadvantages. The project should also be modified to include more data collection methods, including interviews.

A larger sample set would also improve the study. A variety of data collection methods and a larger sample set would reduce some of the subjective impact upon the study. The criteria for selecting target churches, such as the geographic region, could be expanded without significant dilution of the study.

The data acquisition for Faithbridge should also be expanded. Development of a general survey for administration to ministry leaders and members of the church body

would increase the strength of the data. Questions related to the internal dynamics and working of the primary leadership board would be reserved for a specific survey created for the primary leadership.

### *Survey Design*

Several modifications should be made in the survey design to increase effectiveness. The surveys should be modified to include a method for follow-up with participants. A two-phase survey design would have value with the initial phase focused upon background information. The second phase would allow survey questions to be better targeted for more efficient data acquisition.

Effectiveness of Likert scale questions should also be enhanced by adding a sixth rating option and inclusion of a “not applicable” response to allow survey participants the chance to opt out of the question. These adjustments would provide a purer data stream.

Questions used in some sections of the survey should be revised. The revision should be made so that concepts are all evenly weighted. The influence of the literature review upon question formation should be a contributing factor rather than being the primary determinant for their construction and composition. All redundancy should be eliminated by allowing some questions to apply to multiple sections when those questions address subjects which cross over between the surveys sections.

### **Research Findings**

Several of the individual church surveys affirmed the damage that can be caused by conflict in a church. Two examples are Church E and Church G. Church E reported a conflict that affected the whole congregation, resulted in a loss of 39 congregants, and a financial decline of thirty percent. Church G reported a conflict that affected 90 percent



of the congregation, resulted in the loss of thirty attendees, and a financial decline of thirty percent. The total cost of conflict to the cause of Christ would be difficult to measure. That cost would include discouragement among the believers and compromised Christian testimony.

This research project was designed to identify root factors in a church which create fertile ground for development and expansion of destructive conflict. The study did not confirm the seven areas studied in this project as root causes of serious church conflict. However, the study did produce some clear findings which allow for ministry application.

#### *Finding One: Church Structure*

The research revealed that structure was a neglected area in the surveyed churches. Structure encompasses church policies and procedures which exist, are defined, clear, functionally applied, and consistently followed. Structure also includes documents which define job roles and responsibilities, as well as the church operational and authority configuration.

Structure was the lowest averaging section in the combined results. Additionally, questions in the other sections related to policies and procedures were typically the lowest segment of those sections. This neglect, according to the survey data, was manifest in two ways. First, many churches did not have policies established for significant ministry areas. Second, the churches which had some policies in place did not review and update those policies on a regular basis. Some policies also lacked sufficient clarity and detail to be effective.

The literature review underscored the importance of structure. Church health, church growth, and church intervention writers identified structure as a vital element for ministry effectiveness. Church intervention and recovery specialists emphasized how lack of structure makes a church more vulnerable when it encounters conflict. These writers also highlighted how, without clear protocols in place for handling disagreements, conflict can quickly multiply and increase in severity.

The theological review section affirmed the value of structure in ministry. Though the Bible does not mandate specific steps or protocols, it does provide examples of structure and how God used structure for the betterment or development of the church.

#### *Finding Two: Ministry Focus*

The research revealed that ministry focus was a neglected area in surveyed churches. Ministry focus is comprised of the guiding principles for intentional and strategic ministry. The three primary elements of ministry focus are a unifying theme for the church, defined ministry priorities, and established ministry goals.

According to the survey data, few churches had an established ministry plan which outlined goals. If a church had established goals, they had not been updated for current use. While most churches had defined priorities, those priorities were not well known among the congregation. Unifying themes, if in place, were typically not current or well known.

The literature review highlighted the value of ministry focus. Focus was identified as essential for ministry effectiveness by the authors surveyed for this project. The importance of ministry focus was affirmed by church health, church growth, and church intervention writers. Parallel principles for businesses were emphasized by secular

writers. All writers who addressed the topics of focus and planning stressed the dangers of ministry becoming aimless and lukewarm without intentionality and planning.

The theological review section confirmed general principles of planning and intentionality. The Bible does not prescribe details regarding planning methods and methodology. However, Scripture does warn of the dangers of making plans apart from, or independent of, God's direction. The Bible also demonstrates the need for flexibility and openness to God's redirection of established plans.

### *Finding Three: Differences*

The research demonstrated how differences were viewed and processed in the churches surveyed. Differences involve dissimilarity or disagreement in opinion, preference, personality, or ability. Differences included the topics of the importance and value of differences, acknowledging and accepting differences, the dangers of ignoring differences, and handling differences, even differences which result in conflict, in a godly manner.

Differences, based upon the survey data, were more apt to be swept under the rug, ignored or tolerated rather than celebrated (with the exception of the subsection on spiritual gifting). Differences, and conflict arising from differences, were both viewed in a negative light. Overall, differences were not seen as a means for individual or corporate growth. There was also a tendency to avoid differences. These responses to differences were demonstrated in most of the sections of the survey, the data were not limited to the specific section on differences.

The most common response to relational differences was gossiping and taking sides instead of seeking resolution. The second most common response was that

disagreements usually simmered for a long time. Both these responses evidenced avoidance of direct encounters and purposeful pursuit of resolution.

In the specific questions related to communication, two negative forms of communication, gossip and speaking anonymously for others, were consistently affirmed as active in the churches surveyed. Both of these communication patterns involve avoidance. The most common responses to situations involving verbal sin were to passively stay in the situation or diligently seek to avoid those types of situations. The option of challenging the sin was the least common response.

Some churches indicated church discipline was not implemented, even when appropriate. When discipline was implemented, it was typically related to overt and grievous sin. Both of these responses can indicate avoidance if discipline is carried out only when it is unavoidable. Avoidance of conflict and differences may also explain, at least in part, the absence of public acknowledgement of corporate sin. It may also help explain the absence, in most churches surveyed, of a defined process for addressing differences and grievances.

Church growth, church health, church intervention, and church recovery writers studied for the literature review all emphasized the value and importance of differences for the church body. The authors who addressed the topic of differences from the perspective of differences being ignored, downplayed or hidden were emphatic and uniform in presenting these behaviors as extremely damaging to the church. Most felt, however, that these choices were very common in churches.

The theological review section addressed the topic of differences more directly than any of the other findings. The Bible gave strong support for differences being part of

God's design for the church and essential for spiritual growth and maturation. Scripture gives clear principles for handling differences in an honoring and godly manner.

*Finding Four: Use of Leadership Meeting Time*

The surveys showed that leadership meeting time was primarily used for administrative and reporting type of activities. The survey data demonstrated that no significant time in leadership meetings was devoted to leadership training, spiritual growth, pursuit of God's direction, and development of ministry goals. This would indicate a ministry outlook which lacks forward thinking and is absorbed by the present, the tyranny of the urgent, and the status quo.

The literature review gave some support for the need to strengthen this ministry area. The leadership section did not directly address this sub-topic. However, the literature review revealed some corresponding principles.

The literature review did emphasize the value of leadership which used ministry focus as a basis for decision-making and was initiating instead of being passive. These leadership principles are inconsistent with leadership meeting time which is devoted to administrative and reporting details rather than forward thinking. The ministry focus section of the literature review also supported the importance of intentional and purposeful planning.

The evangelical authors surveyed for this project accentuated the importance of leadership being spiritually healthy, spiritually growing, and mutually accountable. These elements would also invite different leadership meeting time priorities.

The theological review section also gives indirect support to making changes in the way leadership meeting time is used. Primary to this support is a spiritually based

paradigm for church leadership which emphasizes Christian maturity, spiritual growth, the pursuit of God's leading, and seeking first the Kingdom of God as paramount. This paradigm is substantially different than the secular and business frameworks which emphasize management and leadership theory.

### **General Applications**

One benefit of the research project was the formation of a comparative basis for regional churches in the seven areas studied. In spite of a relatively small sample size, the results established a norm for comparative use. The survey tool, with or without modification, can provide churches a basis for self-examination. Modifications can make the survey more effective, but any modifications will reduce the comparative aspect.

One effective application of the survey tool is to simply use it as an evaluative template. Churches can use the sections and subsections of the survey for a quick look at their church ministry and as a catalyst for discussion. An executive summary of this research project can also be used as a tool for church evaluation and discussion.

### **Specific Applications for Faithbridge Church**

Comparison with other churches shows that Faithbridge fell below the norm of the combined churches in three areas. The largest negative differentials are in the areas of ministry focus and unresolved corporate issues. These two areas were the lowest among the Faithbridge leadership survey averages. It is recommended that Faithbridge leadership intentionally address the weaknesses in these two areas. A recent addition to the ministry staff and a planned church-wide event leaves Faithbridge positioned to intentionally address both of the recommendations during 2015.

An Administrative Coordinator joined the staff of Faithbridge in January 2015. This addition brings expertise to the area of ministry planning and may provide the ministry time necessary to bring about improvements. Faithbridge's leadership survey showed a great deal of inconsistency with regard to a ministry theme, ministry priorities, and ministry planning.

Intentional effort toward a ministry theme, ministry priorities, and ministry goals should be invested into one or more of the following actions: developing these elements of ministry, confirming their existence, increasing their clarity or making them more visible and well-known within the leadership core and the church.

The survey results for the area of unresolved corporate issues were very positive overall. Leadership has a strong awareness of the church history and has acted to break negative historical patterns, address corporate sin, and release offenses committed against the church. The average for this area, however, was dramatically lowered because of the lack of public acknowledgment and a dedicated time for corporate confession and renewal.

A week-long prayer summit is planned for the church in the summer of 2015. This event provides a good and viable venue for addressing the public dimension of unresolved corporate issues in a positive and productive manner.

The actual need for public acknowledgment of corporate sins and a renewal service must be evaluated by the leadership team. Many of those who filled out the survey may not be aware, for example, that the issues of the church split had been addressed at a church business meeting several decades ago. A letter of reconciliation

was sent to the other church. Even as a pastor of the church, this researcher was unaware this action had taken place until a recent check of church records was performed.

It is also recommended that the leadership board develop clear and specific protocols for addressing future negative corporate issues. These protocols should include guidelines regarding what type of offenses should be publicly addressed and formation of a general outline defining how and when to implement public process.

### **Application Challenges**

The four highlighted findings of this research involve items which can easily be overlooked in the face of other ministry needs and the tyranny of the urgent. Taking time for the development of structural policies and ministry focus is one of the challenges encountered for each of these two areas. Other challenges include keeping policies and focus well-known, consistently implementing them, and renewing them on a regular basis.

The survey data showed how ministry time was used. There were no questions to determine if the ministry time was being used in accordance with intentionally established priorities. At minimum, meeting time priorities should be established and followed. Adjusting to and maintaining those priorities for the leadership meeting time can also be a substantial challenge.

Avoidance of differences was very pervasive in the survey results. Echoes of this attitude were present in almost all of the seven surveyed areas. Adjustments based on this finding involve a major re-orientation of perspectives and the culture of the church itself. The greatest challenge might be the long-term process which would likely be necessary to make significant improvements in this area.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTION

### **Further Research**

Several ideas for future research are prompted by this study and its findings. First, an expansion of this study is recommended. Testing the same research question with a wider sample and more varied data acquisition may yield different results. Adjusting the research questions would also have value. This study tested the seven identified areas as potential root causes for conflict. An adjusted research question could evaluate if the seven areas have sufficient influence to avoid the expansion of severe conflict (or possibly even reduce or remove it).

Second, further research is needed to determine if the seven areas used by experts for church recovery would be most effectively applied in some type of sequential order. The literature review did not identify any prioritized order among the seven areas. Even if the greatest value of the seven areas is limited to church recovery and renewal, identifying a sequential order (if one exists) would enhance effective application of the concepts.

Third, further research to examine the avoidance of differences and conflict in the churches would be significant. Several variables for study would be worth consideration. The present study examined churches which were rural in nature, located in areas with high Scandinavian influence, with some passivity among leadership and located in a region heavily influenced by harvesting vocations (farming, timber, and mining).

One variable would be whether or not the avoidance is related to the rural culture. Another would be to examine if the avoidance is related to ethnic heritage. A third would be the impact of the personality, strengths and weaknesses of the lead pastor upon avoidance in the church. Additional variables to be tested include vocational influence, personality types, church and community size, and where the church lies on the church life-cycle curve.

Fifth, a study of similar variables in the context of church structure and ministry focus would have merit. Helping churches advance in these areas would be enhanced by the discovery of whether these are typical weaknesses in churches overall or if the weaknesses are intrinsic to churches with certain common characteristics.

A final area of research would explore the use of meeting time by the primary leadership boards of churches. One evaluation would be whether the use of meeting time corresponds with leadership and churches priorities. A second evaluation would be to determine if there is any correlation between how leadership meeting time is used and overall church ministry effectiveness.

Studies could also be developed to compare similarities and differences in meeting time usage between growing, stable, declining, and conflicted churches. Comparison can also be made to the leadership meeting patterns of successful parachurch ministries or businesses. Research in these areas may identify characteristics or principles that will allow churches to enhance leadership quality, stimulate growth and expand outreach opportunities.

### **Personal Reflections**

The research process stimulated professional, academic, and personal growth in my life. On a professional basis, the study of writers from diverse disciplines and philosophies provoked a deeper appreciation for how unique and different pieces can produce a synergetic result. Blending principles and learnings from diverse sources produced a more integrated outlook in my life. The integrated philosophy enhanced personal growth and multiplied ministry capability and competency.

This rich tapestry was boosted through the classroom experiences. Interaction with students and faculty from diverse backgrounds and doctrinal perspectives, in a high level academic setting, consistently challenged me. The classroom time brought vividness to my appreciation of the body of Christ. I found myself truly blessed.

Access to advanced study honed my research skills, expanded my ministry capabilities, and challenged my thinking processes. It also instilled an appreciation for God's gracious provision in providing that access as well as for the many other learning opportunities which were part of the process.

Research into systems thinking has dramatically shifted my approach as a church interventionist. Difficult people, some intentionally so, will always be part of ministry. A systems approach, however, frees me to be better able to minister to both the church and the difficult people. Bringing positive changes to the ministry environment proved to be a more complete and long-lasting solution than simply focusing upon poor choices of select individuals.

Study and research into the dynamics of church conflict, from the perspective of recovery and restoration, has increased my effectiveness in ministry. The cross-

disciplinary readings related to the seven areas selected as the basis for the research gave me a richer understanding of the concepts. They also provided extra documentation, background, and support for introduction of those concepts in ministry settings.

That focused study also affirmed the significance of those seven areas for effective ministry. The inherent dangers to churches, when those factors are lacking, was startling to me. Affirming the value of those elements of church ministry, some of which I took for granted and overlooked, will pay rich dividends in the years ahead.

I entered my present season of ministry with the desire and intention of helping churches advance and excel in ministry. God has chosen to redirect my path into church intervention and recovery. While God has blessed my investment in broken and damaged churches, my heart still yearns for the opportunity to work with churches from a more positive entry point—moving away from triage. This study process strengthened that heart desire. It also better equipped me to effectively engage churches at both entry levels.

The research process affirmed the value of professional development through ongoing academic study. I have always been a student of my environment and enjoy learning through practical life experiences. However, I had pushed aside reading and learning in favor of ministry demands and became content with a more transient learning process. I forgot the value, honing, and skill development that academic learning produces. My appetite for study through reading and classroom experiences is now revived.

The study findings have ministry application. Some of those findings also challenged me on a personal level. The absence of forward planning was a theme

common to both the ministry planning and leadership sections. That finding of the study is consistent with my own ministry experience and bias. Forward planning and spiritual pursuits are often sacrificed to the constant pressure of ministry opportunities and details.

This research process consistently created a potential for being a spiritual detriment. The spiritual growth has not come through new insights or in new spiritual heights which have been scaled. Rather, the spiritual growth stimulated has been more in the areas of endurance and resistance against the project obscuring or swallowing up spiritual development. The personal spiritual development that resulted from this endeavor has been a basis of praise and thanksgiving to God for His grace, mercy, and loving provisions.

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