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Conflict:

An inevitable part of life
that we need to manage

Conflicts in the Church

By Alex Tang

Conflicts occur whenever people interact and work together. It is a dangerous fallacy to think that because we are Christians, conflicts do not occur. The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship did a large survey of churches, pastors and Christians in 2001. The survey on “the extent of significant conflicts in churches over the past two years” found that:

- * 47.2% say relationships in their churches are generally harmonious;
- * 26.9% say there has been no outburst of conflicts but undercurrents and discontentment are felt;
- * 17.7% say there have been one or more conflicts but they are resolved amicably; and

* 8.2% say there have been one or more conflicts and people are leaving the church.

This survey highlights the fact that all is not well in Malaysian churches, where relationships in less than half of them can be said to be “generally harmonious”.

Reasons for conflicts

In churches, parachurch organizations or any place where people come together, conflicts are inevitable. This is because we are all individuals with different temperaments, ways of thinking, ambitions, desires, likes and dislikes. It is important to recognize this and to recognize that it is pos-

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and ask, “How does God expect us to respond?” I get them to apply what the Bible says and to apologize on the spot. Then I leave the room to give them some time alone.

Michael: Both parties must be willing to listen and communicate. If both parties only want to talk, it won't help.

Doris: God uses conflicts to reveal to us our blind spots. I ask the person I am counseling what he thinks God is showing him.

Michael: Because of my background I don't resolve conflicts easily and I don't handle them well either. So I learnt to ask myself, “Is the conflict because of my past?” If it is, I need to resolve my past in order to resolve the conflict. By understanding my past, I learn how to

minimize and resolve conflicts.

Doris: In my experience the person who is always in conflict needs a lot of love. We need to love that person more ... because of their background.

Michael: Background influences the way we perceive and handle conflicts. We may even create conflicts because of our background, whether we realize it or not.

Doris: We need to help that person see that he needs to change.

The Great Commission: How do we avoid conflicts?

Florence: We cannot avoid conflicts; we can only minimize them.


Michael: We need to build good relationships with others, especially those we work with. That will minimize hurts

when there are conflicts. Paul says to be at peace with all men if possible. Relationship is very important in minimizing conflicts. Does the person know me well? It depends on how much I am willing to open up. Much depends on our attitude.

Albert: Love can cover a multitude of sins.

Florence: Use of words can minimize conflict. Don't say, “You, you, you,” and point your finger. Say, “I feel like that when you do this.”

Michael: Read books about how to resolve conflicts, how to understand yourself and people. Sometimes professional help is needed.

Albert: I don't keep grudges. I'm always relaxed and happy. If I hurt somebody I go and ask for forgiveness. 

A different perspective

sible to resolve conflicts before they spiral out of control and involve everyone and end in a church split.

The conflict spiral

Baden Eunson, who teaches at Monash University, Australia, describes a conflict spiral in his book, *Conflict Management* (2007). He postulates that conflict can escalate sequentially. There are two parts to the conflict spiral. The first part is covert or hidden. Here the conflict has not yet emerged into public view but is mainly between two individuals or groups of people. When the conflict develops further, it enters the overt or public view and the confrontations become more direct and aggressive.

It is important to be aware of the features of these covert and overt areas because early intervention in these areas can prevent a conflict spiral from blowing up. The covert area is where a conflict occurs. This is the start of the spiral. Generally the conflict is tolerated. Moving up the spiral is covert resistance, which involves gossip, rumor-mongering, non-cooperation and sometimes sabotage of the other's projects. If the leadership can recognize that covert resistance is occurring in their congregation or organizations, the conflict spiral can stop there. It is interesting to note that 26.9% of the churches surveyed by NECF could identify this covert resistance but do not know its significance.

If not stopped, the conflict spiral moves into the open or overt phase. Resistance is in the form of nagging and whining, moving on to complaining, anger, blaming and then arguments. Somewhere along here, a critical incident happens which causes a flare-up. It may be something as insignificant as a snide comment or it may be something as major as a church policy decision. The incident or incidents serve to divide the people.

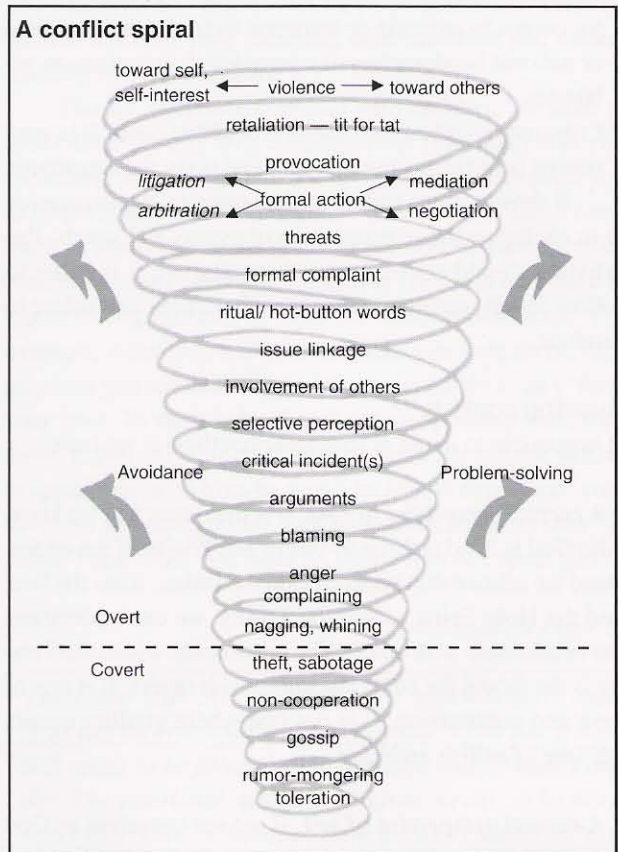
Members begin to take sides, the faults of the other side are highlighted and the conflict becomes personal.

Other issues are dragged into the spiral and threats are beginning to be uttered. Usually at this stage action is taken to try to resolve the conflict. If reconciliation fails, at the next stage provocation, retaliation and even violence occur. In such a situation, the church will split, with one group leaving to start another church, as reported by the 8.2% in the NECF survey.

Managing conflict

Management of conflict involves understanding the conflict spiral and how it escalates from one stage to another. This requires the vigilance of the pastors, leaders and other members of the church or organization. In the covert stage, gossips, rumors, non-cooperation and sabotage must be challenged. These are serious signs of worse to come and so must be dealt with appropriately. Bringing together the parties for an open discussion, prayer, confession, repentance and reconciliation at this stage will avoid more heartache later on.

By the time the conflict spiral comes into the open, it is more difficult to deal with it. Everyone in the church or organization knows something is going on. The worst thing the pastors or leadership can do at this stage is to pretend that nothing is wrong and to try to bury the whole issue. Instead they should challenge the nagging, whining, com-



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plaining and arguments. The issue should be brought into the open and discussed. Critical incidents should be defused as they happen and other issues must not be allowed to be linked to the conflict. What is more important is that members are advised against taking sides.

At this stage, the formal action to be taken is:

- * Negotiation — when the two parties come together and try to reach a compromise, usually by seeking common ground and trading concessions.
- * Mediation — when a third party is brought in to help with the discussion. However this third party can advise but cannot compel.
- * Arbitration — when a third party is brought in to try to settle the issue. This third party has the authority to compel the parties to accept a compromise. This may occur in denominations where someone from the central committee comes to arbitrate or someone from the international or national headquarters of a parachurch organization arbitrates.
- * Litigation — when the case is brought to court. It is surprising how many church issues end up in the courtroom.

If these actions fail, then the response to provocation is to challenge the interpretation of events and words. Retaliation should not be met with retaliation. It is better to follow Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek and refuse to retaliate.

Avoiding conflicts

It is possible to avoid or minimize conflicts if we have:

* **A correct perspective of God.** It is important that we know who God is. God is three-in-one or the Trinity. If we understand the relationship between God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, we can understand our relationship with others. The relationship within the Trinity is the model for our relationship with others. It is one of love and communion. It is not one where conflict occurs because of selfish ambition.

* **A correct perspective of self.** If we see ourselves as God sees us, then there is no need for ego-self dominance. Most

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conflicts occur when we try to exert our ego-dominance over others. We need to prove that we are better, richer, stronger, smarter and more powerful than others in our community. God loves us for who we are, not for what we achieve. Hence there is no longer the need to prove ourselves or feed our egos. Paul instructs us to honor others over ourselves (Rom 12:10).

* **A correct perspective of community.** The source of conflict is ourselves. If we recognize that a community is a minefield of conflicts and if we resolve not to start a conflict and help to break the conflict spiral as soon as possible, then we can avoid conflicts. Paul calls for us to bear with one another in love (Eph 4:2), serve one another (Gal 5:13), and love one another (Rom 13:8). Peter calls for living in harmony with one another (1 Pet 3:8).

* **A correct perspective of the cross.** Our Lord, by His dying on the cross, resolved the conflict of mankind's sin and God's holiness. Jesus has shown by His example that conflicts can be avoided and resolved by putting to death our pride and self-centeredness. Paul calls us to be "living sacrifices" (Rom 12:1) in giving up our pride. This way, we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Jesus challenges us to take up our cross and follow Him (Matt 10:38) by a daily dying to self.

With the correct perspectives, it is possible for us to live in peace with all men. May the Lord help us to avoid conflicts and if they happen, to manage them appropriately. †

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