

# Finding a Way Through Conflict

By

**Dennis L. Burton and M. Wayne Oakes**

*A unique, step-by-step approach to understanding the dynamics and reality of church conflict. The model invites you to engage the conflict and suggests ways by which your church might find resolution.*

## **About this manual:**

- The *communication model* is based on the Role Renegotiation Model developed by Dr. John Sherwood and adapted by Dr. John Savage, President, L.E.A.D. and Associates.
- Step-by-step guidance is given on how a church might work its way through conflict.
- The *exit strategy* suggests ways to end a relationship so that it minimizes damage to the ministerial family and to the witness of the church in the community.
- Appropriate language is provided for inclusion in a church's *constitution and bylaws* or *policy manual* in order to guide a congregation through a time of difficulty.

### **PLEASE NOTE**

**The information in this manual is provided to encourage your congregation to discover new ways to engage conflict. It has been our experience that when there is a commitment to relationships and persons seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit, issues can be confronted and resolved.**

**We affirm the autonomy of the local congregation. This manual is a tool that may offer you some new insights. However, it is your responsibility and your responsibility only to determine the procedures that will work best in your situation. Every situation is different. Please prayerfully work with others to determine the procedures that will best work in your congregation.**

## **Preface**

I want to recommend the reading and using of the ideas in this booklet.

The Role Renegotiation Model is one of the most profound models I have used.

The approach that Wayne and Dennis have used makes the model pragmatic and useful. I suggest that you give it to all of your church leaders.

One of the things the model does is to give your leaders a common language to communicate around problems and frustrations.

Both Wayne and Dennis have used this model in many ways, thus they bring personal experience about its power and usefulness.

By reading this booklet, you will gain an excellent tool for your ministry.

John S. Savage, Dmin  
President  
LEAD Consultants, Inc.  
Reynoldsburg, OH

(This Communication model is largely based on the Role Renegotiation Model which was originally developed by Dr. John J. Sherwood and John C. Glidewell for use by the business community. Later, Dr. John Savage, President of L.E.A.D. Consultants, Inc., adapted it for use by the church. The following is an overview of the need for a communication model and followed by an adaptation of presentations made by Dr. Savage. While the content is generally true to his insights, the reader should be aware that there are interpretative differences in some of the minor points. My gratitude is expressed to Dr. Savage for allowing me the privilege of placing these ideas in print.)

***WHEN A LEGAL ISSUE IS RAISED***

***If an accusation is made against the minister, a temporary, paid suspension is an option for the leadership while considering the matter. This is done to protect all parties involved.***

Dennis L. Burton is Director of Missions for the **Union Baptist Association**, Monroe, North Carolina. He also serves as a member of the Conflict Resolution Network, a ministry of the **Baptist State Convention of North Carolina** to Baptist congregations within the state. Dennis has taught conflict resolution skills in South Africa and taught in their **Cape Town Seminary**. He is a sought after consultant in assisting churches to move through conflict.

M. Wayne Oakes is a senior consultant with the Congregational Services Group, Pastoral Ministries Team, of the **Baptist State Convention of North Carolina**. In 2000, he and Dennis spent two weeks in South Africa training the **South African Baptist Union** in conflict resolution skills for their churches. Wayne has set up a network of persons, trained by Dr. John Savage, to assist North Carolina Baptist Churches in dealing with conflict. Wayne has also published a widely used manual called "*Finding a New Pastor for Your Church.*" Much of his time is also spent providing training for churches seeking a new minister.

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P. O. Box 1107, Cary, North Carolina 27512-1107  
Telephone 800.395-5102, extension 5658 or 919.459.5658  
Email: woakes@ncbaptist.org  
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# Model for Communication in Churches

M. Wayne Oakes

## Introduction

There is nothing like the relationships that one can build through involvement in the life of a Baptist congregation. At times, it is the best...at other times, you wonder....

Sometimes this is based on faulty assumptions about what it means to be a church member or attendee. For example, much talk is heard today about family systems—about how what happens to one member of the family effects what happens to other members of that same family. In fact, some of the same dysfunction experienced in a traditional family can also be experienced in the context of church.

There is often surprise when a person discovers that not everyone acts “Christian” all of the time in the context of this special family. Also, if the “family” is idealized, a person will soon become disillusioned and disappointed. The church “family” is not always a healthy, wholesome family. Part of this is due to the nature of humanity; another part is due to our inappropriate expectations about what it means to be a part of the church family.

In the context of church family we have two options on which to base relationships. (1) Friends by choice and (2) friends chosen by association.

### Friends By Choice

Occasionally, one meets a person and quickly finds reasons to build a relationship. There are shared common concerns: age, community,

How do you decide the nature of friendships?

Who are the friends that you choose?

interests, family, hobbies, similar health concerns, etc. Persons are drawn to each other and have much in common. All goes well as long as there are no major differences of opinion and there are shared beliefs. Problems may develop when perceptions and views run counter to each other. Unfortunately, in human relationships, this is very likely to occur. If the relationship is built solely on always liking one another, they are set up for problems.

*IF THE RELATIONSHIP IS BUILT ON LIKING EACH OTHER, EVENTUALLY THERE WILL BE DISAPPOINTMENTS THAT WILL IMPACT THE FRIENDSHIP AND THEIR WALK TOGETHER IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. THERE MUST BE CLEAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF SHARED BELIEFS AND APPROPRIATE FAITH PRACTICE.*

### **Friends Chosen by Association**

A person unites with a church family in order to witness to one's faith in Jesus Christ. It also provides an opportunity to participate in the ongoing ministries of the church, including worship. Persons do not join because they necessarily like or even know the congregation as a whole. In fact, persons may sit on adjacent pews for decades and not even know each other by name. Sometimes they discover that they have little in common other than their shared faith. It is very important that persons set boundaries around their behavior and expectations of each other in this relationship in order to have sustained relationships.

*IN A CONGREGATION IT IS MOST IMPORTANT THAT PERSONS CLARIFY HOW THEY WILL RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER AROUND THEIR UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PRACTICE. IF THIS IS DONE WELL, STRONG PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS CAN THEN DEVELOP OUT OF THE ESTABLISHED TRUST RELATIONSHIP.*

The Role Renegotiation Model suggests ways to incorporate this clarity into the life of the individual and the life of the Body – the Church.

*"Strong personal relationships can develop out of established trust relationships."*

## Clarifying Roles and Expectations

### **The Role Renegotiation Model**

Any relationship that one wants to maintain more than three months will go through some natural and recognizable stages. A person would not do this with every relationship, because one may casually meet a person and have no desire to have an ongoing relationship. Therefore, it would not be necessary to include these stages. However, for enduring relationships, these stages are predictable. To most clearly communicate these stages, think of the most basic of human adult relationships. It all begins with courtship.

#### **Clarifying Roles and Expectations**

An ongoing relationship begins by an individual clarifying the role of each person in the relationship and the expectations that go with that role. For example, in young adulthood a person may begin thinking about a person with whom to spend his/her life. The thought pattern begins by thinking in terms of one's own role in that relationship, the expectations that one might bring to the relationship, and one's expectations of the other person. We call this the "*courtship*" phase. It is the "*getting to know you phase*." It is a time of learning about oneself and about the other person. While this occurs in normal human relationships, it also occurs in the life of the church.

Dr. John Savage was serving as pastor of a congregation in New York. He had twelve new members in an orientation class, and he asked them, "*What are your expectations of our church?*"

They responded, "*We really do not have any. We are just glad to be here. The people are friendly; the facilities are lovely; and, you are a wonderful preacher.*"

Dr. Savage asked them several questions. He asked, "*If you were to go to the hospital for surgery, and I did not come visit, would that be okay?*" They responded, "*NO! We would expect the pastor to come and visit!*"

He asked, "*If you were to come to church next Sunday, and we had not dusted under the pews for six months; there were dust balls and torn, old bulletins lying around, would that be okay?*"

Again, they answered, "*No, we enjoy having a clean place to worship!*"

***"People can  
have some  
unrealistic  
expectations."***

*Fuzzy Expectations*

Equals

*Fuzzy Commitments*

Dr. Savage asked, *"If you were to come to church Sunday, and we no longer provide a bulletin--an 'Order of Service,' would that be okay?"*

These twelve new members said that they enjoyed having an orderly service of worship and that the bulletin facilitated their worship. Dr. Savage suggested, then, that they did have some expectations. He divided the twelve new members into dyads (groups of two) and gave them ten minutes to work together on listing their expectations of the church. He brought them back together and wrote on a board the expectations that they had named--after only this brief time of conferring, they listed seventy-five (75) unique and differing expectations that they had of the church.

The fact that persons can name their expectations does not mean that they are all legitimate. Dr. Savage went through this listing with the twelve new members and deleted the expectations that he concluded were unrealistic. (Believe it or not, people can have some unrealistic expectations.) He affirmed that it was appropriate for them to have expectations of the church, however he also reminded them that the church had expectations of them.

He suggested that the church expected them to attend Bible Study and worship unless providentially hindered. They were expected to find and utilize their own spiritual gifts in the life of the church. They were expected to tithe. Certainly, they had expectations of the church, but the church also had expectations of them.

Too frequently, the church and the new member do not clarify the expectations that one has of the other. Then, persons experience surprise or even anger when those expectations are not met. If they are not known, there is little chance that they can be met or even ruled acceptable or inappropriate. This is highly significant for a major reason. It is important to remember a basic fact about our commitments relative to expectations:

*Fuzzy Expectations = Fuzzy Commitment*

We get exactly what we expect, and if we don't clarify those expectations, we get unclear commitment to the same.



## **Commitment to roles and expectations**

## **A time of stability and productivity**

*Only 20% of a healthy church's energy is taken up maintaining stability. This leaves 80% of the energy for missions, ministries, and evangelism.*

### **Commitment to the Roles and Expectations**

After a person goes through courtship, there is likely to be a wedding. It is a time of making a commitment to each other. In fact, this second phase of the relationship process reminds us of a "Wedding. Our commitment to expectations may be formal or informal." A wedding is a fairly formal commitment: two persons stand before God and their witnesses, recite their marriage vows, and witnesses thereof sign a formal license certifying that indeed the ceremony took place at a particular time and place. Most of our commitments are certainly not that formal. Most are informal.

This married couple lived approximately twenty miles from his office. The office building just happened to be on a perimeter road across from a regional shopping mall. One Saturday, the husband suggested to his wife that they go to town; he would work in the office for a couple of hours while she shopped in the nearby mall. At noontime they would go out for lunch together. No formal papers signed--they just go. That is an informal commitment. It is the most frequently made type of commitment. Just do it!

### **Stability and Productivity**

Once a commitment has been made to clarify expectations, there is "the honeymoon." This is an exciting time to celebrate the new relationship. Couples go away in order to give their full attention to being with one another. It is a time free of concerns and the problems of everyday life. The relationship is strongest and at its best. This is similar to what happens in all human relationships. Once commitments are made, there is the possibility of stability and productive outcomes in the relationship. This means that the relationship is stable because expectations are clear and jointly accepted. It does not mean that productivity will automatically ensue but rather that the possibility for productive outcomes is there.

This is seen in a church that understands who it is and what God has called it to accomplish. It is a congregation that is focused on productivity -- missions, ministries, and evangelism. It is focused on the tasks of the church. Since persons understand the role of self and others in the relationship, there is a stable environment. This is the church that every pastor longs to serve, and it is the church to which every member wishes to belong. It is a perfect church!

It is a healthy church environment. Since it is stable, only twenty percent (20%) of its energy is taken up maintaining stability. In actuality, studies have shown that a mere 10% of the energy keeps

everything stable and another 10% is available when it is necessary to deal with crises. That also means that eighty percent (80%) of the energy is available for missions, ministries, and evangelism. This does not assume that if a congregation is stable, the other will naturally evolve. It just means that the potential is there for productivity. It is the ideal. It is the fulfillment of perfection.

There is another name for this phase -- "*Fantasyland*." The reality is--it does not exist! There are neither perfect churches nor are there any perfect ministers or even perfect Christians. In reality, the church has had flaws since its inception. Two examples:

*"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a **complaint** arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food."* Acts 6: 1, NASB

*"And there occurred such **a sharp disagreement** that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord."* Acts 15: 39-40, NASB

There have always been conflicts and brokenness in relationships, even in the church. That is why persons are pointed not to the perfection of the "church" but rather to the Perfection of Jesus as the Son of God.

### Pinches

It is inevitable that even in strong, loving relationships, there will be disagreements. It is true in marriages, and it is also true in churches. The reason the former is "*Fantasyland*" is because of the "*pinch*." It is an "ouch." It is the breaking of the "honeymoon" due to a first fight. Remember this:

*In human relationships, you cannot "not" get to the pinch!*

What is a pinch? A pinch is one-sided; it is generally private; it is frequently perceived personally. What does that mean? It is one-sided in that it is only experienced by the "pinchee" and may not even be known to the "pincher." It is private for the same reasons. It is a matter of perception what the pinchee perceives that he/she has received a pinch even though the pincher is not aware of doing it. Therefore, it is felt personally.

## **Pinch**

*"In human relationships, you cannot not get to the pinch!"*

A pinch around something that is said.

A pinch around something that is done or not done.

A pinch is a broken expectation. It is where something is said or done, and it is experienced painfully. Or, it is where is not said or not done, and that is experienced painfully.

Remember: *In human relationships, you cannot not get to the pinch.* Here is an example of a pinch around something that is said.

The pastor is standing near the exit of the church after the morning worship hour. A person comes by to shake his hand, and with tear in eye and tremor in voice, the person says, *"I never thought I would hear my pastor preach a sermon on that topic from our pulpit!"* That is a voiced pinch. However, that is not the more typical way that a pinch occurs.

Another example...

A pastor has been at a church for eight years. During his time at this church, he has wanted to have a personal, private ministry to the elderly persons of the community. He doesn't tell the church secretary nor does he tell the deacons. He wants to perform this ministry, not for the praise of man but for the glory of the Lord. So, during his eight years at this church, he fulfills this personal goal. He makes sure that every elderly person in this small crossroads community receives on his/her birthday a card that he has designed for just that person. He selects appropriate colors, images, and text to convey to this person his own high regard for them and the role that the person plays in the community. He also makes sure that the person receives the card in their mailbox on the "special" day. He does this for eight years until he is called away to pastor in another community.

A new pastor comes to this church. After a few months, it is Miss Sally's birthday. She goes out to the mailbox on her birthday, but there is no card from her pastor. She is upset, but she would never call the pastor to tell him that--it might hurt his feelings. What does she do? She calls Miss Susie and says...

*"Can you believe this? For the first time in nine years, I did not receive a birthday card from our pastor on my birthday?"*

*"How much do birthday cards cost anyway?"*

*"You know, I don't believe this new pastor cares anything about us old folk!"*

*"Why, I'm not even sure that he is a man of God!"*

Guess what Miss Susie does with this information? She calls Uncle Frank, and by late afternoon everyone at the convenience store on the corner is talking about how Miss Sally got her feelings hurt. How the pastor should have known it was important to send cards. The pastor is sitting up in the church office without a clue that he is the subject of much debate. *In human relationships, you cannot not get to the pinch.* It will happen in the best of relationships--even in church.

***"Family secrets are like plaque in the arteries of the body, and they will cause a heart attack!"***

A "pinch" may be around something said or not said; done or not done. It is inevitable. Given its inevitability, persons have struggled for centuries as to what to do about these "pinches." Some of us preacher types have suggested to congregations that one should just stuff the pain--don't talk about it. The thinking is if one talks about it, that will create confusion in the church and since "God is not the author of confusion," the Christian must not bring up anything that sounds like conflict. Unfortunately, observations of church life have shown that while something may be buried for a long time, it will surface and later it will surface with a vengeance. Dr. Savage says, *"(church) family secrets are like plaque in the arteries of the body, and they will cause a heart attack!"*

While presenting this model to approximately three hundred people in a conference recently, the attendees were asked how many of them were married and about 95% of the audience raised their hands. Then, those who were present and married were asked how many had never had a significant disagreement in their marriages. No one raised a hand, except for one gentleman sitting up near the front. As quickly as he got his hand in the air, this little dainty hand reached up and pulled it back down. Think about it--even in these most significant of relationships, there are major disagreements.

There is a couple that has been married thirty-four years, and over the years, they have had some significant disagreements. In the context of their marriage, it was going through the pain of the tough times that helped their marriage and relationship grow stronger. Jesus taught us repeatedly that it is as persons are willing to enter the pain of their circumstances that His Power and Grace are available to deliver.

*In human relationships, one cannot not get to the pinch.*

The question is not "How does one avoid conflict in human relationships?" The truth is--conflicts cannot be avoided. If they

**"Oops!"**

**Planned  
Renegotiation**

cannot be avoided, then persons must find ways to manage the conflict or to see it as an opportunity to bring about needed change in order to grow better and stronger relationships. There are two basic ways of dealing with pinches so that persons find resolution and the possibility of growing the relationship. These are: the quick fix and planned renegotiation.

### **The Quick Fix**

A quick fix is an "oops!" It is saying, "Wow! I am so sorry; I really blew that!" Remember the earlier reference to the couple that traveled twenty miles on a Saturday morning so that he could work in the office while his wife went shopping at the mall. Let's assume that they were to meet for lunch at twelve o'clock noon, but he gets busy and forgets to look at the clock. About 12:15 pm, his phone rings. It is his wife asking where is he? Realizing that he got too busy with his work and that he is late going to meet his wife, he apologizes profusely and rushes to the mall to meet her for lunch. He can get by with this one time; the next time he does the same thing, it becomes a pattern, and they will have serious things to discuss.

### **Planned Renegotiation**

Planned renegotiation means that there is a basic problem in the expectations that persons have of each other in the relationship. It is systemic. It goes to the foundation of the relationship. The only remedy is to go back and renegotiate the basics, if the relationship is to thrive, and then to recommit to those new expectations. In reality, it is difficult to renegotiate expectations in the midst of the "pinch." It can be done, but because of the emotional involvement around self-preservation and expressions of anger, it is difficult. A better plan: begin the relationship by acknowledging that it is inevitable that there will be pinches and that they must be confronted.

This means having an agreement with the other person that because you both want the relationship to grow, neither person will stuff the pain. One minister said this to his wife upon first learning this material...

*"You are important to me. As we go along together, it is inevitable that I will say or do something that you will find painful. Or, I will not say or will fail to do something, and you will find that painful. I want a commitment from you that when that happens, you will come to me, and we will talk about it and*

*resolve it. We do not sit on our pain--we do not internalize it. We do not stuff it!"*

He also made a commitment to her that whenever he received a pinch, he would come immediately to her. From a practical standpoint, this is simply putting in place the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18. Jesus said...

*"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* Matthew 18: 15-17, NASB

This may sound like one should give others permission to criticize his/her words and/or actions or lack thereof. It is really a matter of choosing one's pain. No one likes being called to task for some perception or misperception. To receive negative feedback is somewhat like being shot with a pellet from a BB gun. It hurts--it is an ouch! However, if a climate is created where one is encouraged to stuff the pain, the pellets accumulate, maybe even into the hundreds of unresolved hurts. Therefore, it is a matter of choosing one's pain. Is it better to be hit by one BB pellet (ouch!) or to be hit by hundreds of pellets (a shotgun shell blast.)? Yes, one will hurt, but the other can kill!

Sometimes problems develop in the way we go about applying the model of Jesus. It is extremely important to use the proper vocabulary in doing this.

A ministry team was providing a conference for a group of persons. Each team member was responsible for making a forty-five minute presentation during the daylong event. However, it did not go well. As a team member was talking, the leader of the event would interrupt the presentation and make comments, and it became difficult for the presenter to maintain focus. When the day was over, the team members were not too happy with their leader. The question in one team member's mind was: *"Do I confront this person or do I just back away and let this person control the event?"*

The next day this annoyed team member goes to see the leader. Their conversation goes something like this...

*"I have a problem...."*

*"Oh, really. What is your problem? Let me help you!"*

*"Thank you. You are my problem!"*

*"Really! What do you mean...?"*

*"Yesterday, when I made my presentation, I was constantly interrupted. I felt like I was not being allowed to make the presentation that I had planned."*

*"I am sorry. I guess my enthusiasm for the event caused me to interrupt when I should have not done so. In the future, please do not hesitate to stop me if I ever do that again!"*

*"I will. And thank you for understanding how this made me feel!"*

The next day the entire ministry team met to evaluate their earlier daylong event. The leader asked everyone for an appraisal of how the conference had gone. Several replied that a lot had been accomplished and much had been learned. When asked if anyone had a problem with the day's events, no one acknowledged there being a problem. Finally, the leader said to the group, *"Yesterday one of you came to me and said that I interrupted each person's presentation, and I want to apologize to you for doing that."* The others on the team then said, *"Well, now that you bring it up...."*

The model Jesus presented suggests that if a person has offended someone, the offended party has the responsibility of going to the offender. Please note: the offended takes the initiative to resolve the matter. While clarifying one's expectations and perceptions around an event, it is also extremely important to use the proper vocabulary -- as long as a person uses the personal pronoun "I," no one can disagree with the offended. A person has a right to his/her perception of reality and experience around those events. Problems develop when a person uses the personal pronoun "You," because that puts the other person on the defensive. When two or more persons get into an attack-counterattack mode, there is no listening--there is no communication. Usually, anxiety levels increase along with the volume and the ferocity of the dialogue. When things are said "in the heat of the moment" they do immeasurable damage to the relationship.

## ***Role Confusion***

*Positives And  
Negatives but a  
"window of  
opportunity!"*

## ***CRUNCH!***

## ***Mute Termination***

*"This is extremely  
painful in the life of the  
pastor, the pastoral  
family, and in the life  
of the church."*

## **Role Confusion and Disruption**

If persons stuff their pain or cling to their clusters of unresolved hurts—also called "Anxiety Provoking Events" (apes), the relationship will move into a time of role confusion and disruption. This is a time of high anxiety and uncertainty. This is normally when a couple will seek marriage counseling. It is when a congregation will reach outside itself to find help dealing with its issues. There is a sense among those involved that if something is not done, the relationship (the "Body") may die. Because of that, this is also a time of opportunity. However, there are positives and negatives.

In the Old Testament the role of the prophets was to confront the sins of Israel and Judah with the hope of returning them to the worship of God Jehovah. This was certainly a positive. In reality, it was also a time when the prophets frequently endured stoning, beatings, and other physical attacks. This was certainly a negative. Telling people what they need to hear can be risky -- in the New Testament, it was called crucifixion.

## **Crunch!**

When pinches that begin as personal, private, one-sided affronts are not resolved, they often become known by others. That is, they go public. Instead of only being known and experienced by a few, they become known and experienced by many others. Others become aware of the pinchee's pain. It is called "Crunch." It is called that because the energy in the relationship begins to shut down around these unresolved but shared perceptions. When a situation moves to "Crunch," there are five potential and recognizable outcomes and only the last one is a good, though painful choice.

### **a. Mute Termination (Exit)**

The deacons coerce the minister to resign or announce the termination by suggesting that the minister "has resigned to pursue other ministry. Regardless, it is immediate dismissal. This is extremely painful in the life of the pastor, the pastoral family, and in the life of the church. There is no gathering of learnings about what went wrong or even why this may be happening; there is no closure.



It generally is a negative experience for those who initiate the process. Frequently, deacons experience the leadership of the pastor as one who is persecuting innocent victims in the life of the Body. With the best of intentions and in order to "save" the church, the deacons vote to terminate that pastor's responsibilities. What they fail to realize is the effect of this classical triangle.

Whenever there is a persecutor and victim scenario, whoever becomes the rescuer will ultimately become the victim. The deacons end up with church members challenging their authority to dismiss the pastor without vote of the congregation. The ones who sought to rescue the church end up being despised by all.

## ***Ennui***

*"Resigned to an uncomfortable state."*

The phenomena of corporate pain

### ***b. Ennui***

*"Ennui"* is a French word that means *"boredom."* Dr. Savage defines it as a time where the church is *"resigned to an uncomfortable state."* On one occasion, Dr. Savage had a lady from the Bahamas listening to his presentation. When he defined *"ennui,"* she said that there was no word for this in the Bahamian language. After describing this experience further, Dr. Savage asked her what word would she use for this phenomenon. She concluded that it was like the Bahamian word for *"treading water."* It is, indeed, expending a lot of energy just to stay in the same place.

It is in *"ennui"* that one experiences the phenomenon of corporate pain. Corporate pain is experienced like this. Something happens in the present tense, but it triggers an ancient memory of a similar event at a conscious or sub-conscious level. When the reaction to an event is way out of synch with its severity, that is an example of reaction being driven by corporate pain. Corporate pain may have a long history. It has been traced back as far as thirty years; that means that some unresolved pain from thirty years ago can influence how one responds to a similar experience today. In addition the memories may have originated in another place (church) and when a person comes to this new place, they bring that unresolved pain with them.

Corporate pain may also originate in a variety of places. It can originate in a person's community, their culture, their job, even in their relationship to another person where the impact of those factors influences the behavior of a group of persons. Take for example a hurricane hits an area and causes flooding. That can create corporate pain. When the crisis hits, the energy of the

body moves to coping with the disaster. However, after everything is supposedly back to normal, it is not unusual for the corporate pain to surface.

One church experienced minimum damage in a hurricane. However, there were members of this church that lost their homes and businesses. After everything was supposedly back to normal, persons in the church began to call for the termination of the pastor. In reality, they were having a crisis of faith.

Their experience in the church had taught them that if they believed in God, attended worship, tithed, exercised their spiritual gifts in the life of the Body, God would take care of them. Baptists even sing a song that affirms "*God will take care of you!*" What does a person do when their core faith and beliefs tell them that this is true, but when the storm comes, God allows so much to be destroyed? The normal human response is to have some anger over the loss, but how does one get angry at God? It may be difficult to voice anger at God, but it is certainly possible to blame His servant, the pastor, and they did.

There are some symptoms that indicate that corporate pain is present. Among these are:

- ◆ **Low energy in the life of the Body.** The emphasis is on doing church, not being church. It is important to keep the lights on and the doors open. There is no energy in singing hymns. There is no excitement or anticipation about worship or reaching persons for Christ.
- ◆ **Rapid turnover of leadership.** Pastors and key leaders do not remain in place for long. They will be coerced to leave or they will abort the position. Sadly, healthy persons are the first ones to leave a dysfunctional church. They have the personal ego and strength, and they will leave in order to not be made sick emotionally by the dysfunctional remaining congregation.
- ◆ **Bonfires of controversy.** Leadership finds that there is always something "burning." There is always a crisis to resolve. It may move from group to group but it is always present. Leadership comes to church each week asking, "*Okay, What is the crisis this week?*"
- ◆ **Inappropriate use of religious language.** Christians have a particular vocabulary that they use to lift their

## **Premature Recommitment**

voices in praise to God. It is used in church worship to offer praise to God. It is used in private as a vocabulary for meditation. Whenever religious language is used to attack another person, that is an inappropriate use of the vocabulary. For example, one person looks at another and says, *"I just want you to know that I am going to be praying for you!"* All the while, the recipient of this comment knows that what the person is really saying is this: *"I am going to be praying for you, because you aren't right. You need a lot of prayer!"*

It is the same effect as when someone comes into a meeting where the participants have been wrestling with some idea and have finally come to agreement. This late arrival comes into the meeting to announce *"The Lord spoke to me about that just this morning and...."* Only, this person's conclusion is diametrically opposed to the conclusions already reached by the group. This is the ultimate trump card. How does a congregation combat *"God told me to do it!"*

- ◆ **Scapegoating.** A frequently seen symptom of corporate pain is simply scapegoating. It is the suggestion that all of our problems are due to one person, and if the "church" can simply get rid of this one person, all problems will be over. It is seldom that simple or clear-cut. Conflict is always multi-leveled. Even if there is one problem person, in reality, the "Body" somehow empowered that person to act out. The question is: why did that happen?

### **c. Premature Recommitment**

When crunch is a reality, one option is called "premature recommitment." This is the option that best appeals to a Baptist Christian. It suggests that if there are problems in relationships, persons just need to go to each other and acknowledge the problems but commit harder to work toward resolution. This is seen in a church when the pastor or the evangelist asks persons to respond to the invitation by coming to the altar and praying that God will help them to just do better, be better, and try harder. The people are being asked to make a recommitment. It sounds so right, but the results are seldom productive.

Generally, about two weeks after this very "spiritual" service, everything blows apart! Not only is the problem not resolved,

## ***Planned Renegotiation***

## ***Planned Exit***

The decision may be that it would be better if the persons no longer continued their walk together

but also now everything is worse. There is a reason. The problems in the congregation revolved around people's expectations of each other. If the perception is that their expectations are not appropriate or that their expectations are not being met, a break in the relationship will develop. There is a need to clarify those expectations, but that is not being addressed. Rather, the emphasis is on the need for persons to recommit to what was not working well in the first place. As the tension and heated exchanges grow, so will the pain being inflicted on the "Body" by the failure to clarify or fulfill these expectations. However, it is still true that if people are willing to work toward resolution (not just recommitment), it can work. If the commitment to the relationship is there, virtually any situation can be resolved. It does take effort!

### **d. Planned Renegotiation**

This is similar to the experience noted in resolving pinches. The ideal is to clarify the expectations or re-clarifying what persons can expect from one another in the context of a relationship. This can still be effectively accomplished during the "crunch" experience, but it will be with a deeper sense of the stress due to the accumulation of unresolved pain.

### **e. Planned Exit (Termination)**

After the affected parties have re-clarified their expectations on how they will relate to each other, the decision may be that it would be better if the persons no longer continued their walk together. Earlier a Scripture passage was cited where Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey together and experienced "a sharp disagreement." Barnabas had insisted on bringing John Mark whom Paul found to be lacking in personal commitment. The end result was that they went in opposite directions: Barnabas and Mark went in one direction while Paul and Silas went in another. God used their discord to double the missionary journeys being undertaken.

*Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them to Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that*

*they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. Acts 8: 37-40 (NASB)*

For persons to walk away from a relationship with each other does not mean that they have failed. In the case of Paul and Barnabas, it just meant that while they would take different routes they could still affirm each other as brothers in Christ. Sometimes there are disagreements in churches about such things as core beliefs or appropriate leadership styles. The fact that the partnership ends does not mean that the relationship must also end. Is it not possible to believe that God is open to a diversity of creation so that the needs of persons might be addressed in ways that might be appropriate to them? I do not like *sushi*, but I am grateful that there are restaurants for those that do. There is room for diversity, even in Baptist life.

## Communication and Exit Strategies For Congregations and Ministers

Dr. Dennis L. Burton

***The goal is reconciliation and resolution of the issue.***

In the event of a disagreement between the church and its minister(s), our greatest desired outcome ***is the resolution of the problem(s) with a genuine reconciliation occurring between the church and its minister(s).*** However, in recognizing the reality and frailty of human relationships, we acknowledge the need for an agreed upon plan between the congregation and its ministerial staff, should the relationship become unworkable. The goal of this plan is to seek to minimize the pain caused by the ending of our relationship, in circumstances that are less than we would desire.

**Toward that end, your congregation may wish to develop a process that enables clarity of communication and appropriate consideration of persons should working relationships need to be resolved. The following is a suggestion of options that you may wish to consider. However, it is your responsibility to determine the policies and procedures by which your congregation can do all things "decently and in order."**

*Areas of disagreement, or "pinches" in the relationship, may be submitted to a process of mediation or negotiation with the intention of resolving the issues and returning the relationship to a productive level. (This terminology has been defined in the Model For Communication in the prior chapter.) The local congregation must determine whom the appropriate leadership group would be to assist in this process. It may be the deacons, the church council, the personnel committee, the minister-church relations committee or another appropriate group.*

The process of mediation and/or negotiation to be followed in the event a "pinch" or a "crunch" occurring in the relationship between the congregation and a member of its ministerial staff may be as follows:

1. If a congregational member or a small group of members has a concern regarding the minister, they go directly to the minister with their concern before asking for the assistance of church leadership. (If requested, an appropriate leadership person, i.e., deacon, may go with the member and listen.) The goal of this dialogue is reconciliation and

***The Issues should be submitted only after all other options have been attempted.***

***Issues submitted to the leadership group will be in writing with specific concerns identified.***

***The congregation should vote on all decisions affecting the tenure of the minister.***

resolution of the issue between the member and the minister.

2. If the issue is not resolved by step one, the member(s) or minister may request that a mediation team be formed to negotiate the matter. A team might be composed of up to three persons, with two from within the congregation and one who is not a member of the congregation. (This could be another pastor or agreed upon leader [deacon] from another church.) These persons should be persons who are neutral on the issues at hand. Members of the current leadership committee [deacons] should not serve on this team. The Model For Communication will be used to help clarify the expectations and to specify the steps of resolution.
3. Should resolution not be reached by step two, the member(s) or minister may request that the appropriate leadership group [active deacons] hear their concerns. The issues will be provided to the leadership group *in writing*, with specific concerns identified. The mediation team may be invited to participate with the leadership group in the discussion of the concerns.

The Leadership Group has the following options available:

- a. It may conclude the issue is not resolvable, but no value will be gained by further discussion and the concerned parties will be encouraged to consider the matter closed. (The risk of increased corporate pain may become an issue.)
- b. It may arbitrate the dispute and mandate the solution.(The risk of increased corporate pain may become an issue.)
- c. It may recommend that the congregation enter into a conflict resolution process. Recommended sources for a consultation are the Pastoral Ministries Team of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- d. It may conclude the issue cannot be resolved, and it is in the best interest of the minister and the congregation to begin a process of separation in

***Forced termination of a minister could cause severe damage to the reputation of the church.***

which the minister may take up to (nine) months to relocate. *[Experience has shown that it takes a minimum of 9-12 months for a minister to relocate.]* The congregation will be apprised of their action and an opportunity given for input from the membership. The decision of the leadership group must be affirmed by a vote of the congregation. Should the pastor not relocate within the (nine) months, the Care Portions of the Planned Exit Strategy will begin.

- e. It may refer the matter to the congregation with a recommendation that the congregation vote on the tenure of the minister.

**Please Note:**

*Both the appropriate leadership group and the minister are asked to carefully consider the impact of a vote on the tenure of the minister. Such a vote rarely is helpful and almost always is destructive to the minister, the ministerial family and to the congregation. Often, such severe damage is done to the reputation of the minister and the church that it will take years to overcome the negative reputation. This action should be seen as a “Last Resort” action on the part of the church. It is also to be stated, that the “care” needs of the minister, the ministerial family, and the congregation will be far higher if this option is exercised.*

**Any one of the following actions by the minister may result in the call for immediate resignation or a vote on tenure by the congregation:**

- ◆ Moral Failure - Immorality, infidelity, promiscuity, etc.
- ◆ Repeated, inappropriate or abusive behavior such as name calling or uncontrolled anger.
- ◆ Gross misconduct, dereliction of duty, or incompetence in office
- ◆ The teaching/preaching of doctrine not in accordance with the church's doctrinal stance, as stated in the governing documents of the church
- ◆ Embezzlement of church funds



*The care provisions of the Exit Strategy apply, if the minister is asked to resign or is, by vote of the congregation, removed from office.*

### **Implementation of the Care Portions of the Planned Exit Strategy**

Implementation of the Care Portions of the Planned Exit Strategy is achieved by one of the following actions:

◆ **The minister tenders a resignation as a result of a forced or planned exit**

The minister will, in consultation with the appropriate leadership group [deacons,] agree on an effective date for the resignation. It should be noted that some circumstances could dictate an immediate resignation. The appropriate leadership group will accept the letter of resignation and inform the congregation. The congregation will not vote on the minister's resignation. It should also be noted that some circumstances could dictate a brief period of time between the announcement of the minister's resignation and the effective date. This can occur when the minister and the appropriate leadership group agree that it is in the best interest of the minister, the ministerial family and the church to have a final closure experience. Once the resignation is submitted, the "Care" portions of the Planned Exit Strategy will be immediately applied.

◆ **The minister does not tender a resignation and the appropriate leadership group calls for a business conference to vote on the tenure of the minister**

The appropriate leadership group [deacons] will call for this conference in accordance with the prescribed process in the church documents, such as the church constitution and bylaws. Attention will be given to the percentage vote required to end the tenure of the minister. The vote will be by written ballot and the ballots will be preserved following the announcement of the outcome of the vote. Should the congregation vote to end the tenure of the Minister, its effect will be immediate, and the "care" portions of a "planned exit strategy" will be applied (see below).

### **CARE PORTIONS OF THE PLANNED EXIT STRATEGY**

◆ **Care of the minister and family in the event of a forced or planned exit in exchange for a full release to the church. (The "full release" stipulates that the minister will not bring legal action against the church.)**

***The term of the care portion is based on the minister's years of service.***

***The term of the care portion for the congregation is also based on the minister's years of service, but may need to be longer to restore the church to health.***

1. The minister shall receive full salary and benefits based on one month for each year of service to this congregation, with the suggested minimum amount of time being three months.
2. If living in a parsonage, the minister may remain in the parsonage or receive a housing allowance equal to the rental value of the parsonage, based on one month for each year of service to this congregation, with the suggested minimum amount of time being three months.
3. The church will provide and pay for counseling, as needed, for the minister and the ministerial family for up to six months. The minister will be encouraged to seek a Career Assessment, available through the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and/or Lifeway Publishing, Nashville, Tennessee.
4. Where possible, an exit interview will be conducted with the minister and the minister's spouse. This interview may be conducted by an appointed or outside representative of the church, if it is felt that this would be more productive. A report of the interview will be provided to the leadership of the church (deacons, personnel, church council, minister-church relations committee, etc.).
5. The church will seek a special prayer team of five persons minimum to pray daily for the minister and the ministerial family for a least the agreed upon period of time of the exit strategy.

**◆ Care of the congregation in the event of a forced or planned exit**

1. The appropriate leadership group [deacons] may seek pastoral care for the church through an organization skilled in such care. Recommended resources are: The Pastoral Ministries Team of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina or the Center for Congregational Health in Winston Salem, North Carolina.
2. The appropriate leadership group [deacons] will consider a recommendation that the church enter into a conflict resolution process as provided by the Pastoral Ministries Team of the Baptist State Convention, the Center for

Congregational Health, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, or other qualified and competent consultation.

3. A special prayer team, of five persons minimum, will be sought to pray daily for the church for at least the agreed period of time of the exit strategy.
4. The appropriate leadership group [deacons] might consider recommending the engagement of an intentional or transitional interim pastor to the congregation during the interim period. Information regarding the intentional interim ministry program may be obtained through the Center for Congregational Health, Winston-Salem, NC. Information regarding the transitional interim pastor may be obtained through LifeWay Publishing, Nashville, Tennessee.
5. Appropriate leadership group [deacon] care teams may be formed to visit members of the congregation requesting such a visit.

It is important for persons to have their viewpoints heard regardless of whether others agree with these opinions. This can be a helpful time of going just "to listen." This is not the time to become defensive or to offer rebuttal. It is honoring another person enough to listen fully and intently to the individual.

The purpose of these visits will be to listen to the concerns of the members and to pray for healing and/or reconciliation in the congregation. Please be careful not to spiritualize the visit so that the person is made to feel unspiritual because of their views. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict. It is the responsibility of the Christian to love, even the unlovable.

### Please See the Appendix

In the appendix there is suggested wording that could be included in a church's constitution and bylaws or church policy manual. It would need to be properly located and rewritten to fit within the context of the church's written documents. Ideally, this enclosure should be done at a time when there is minimum conflict in the life of the Body. The wording would simply provide a methodology to assist the congregation in finding its way through a time of conflict.