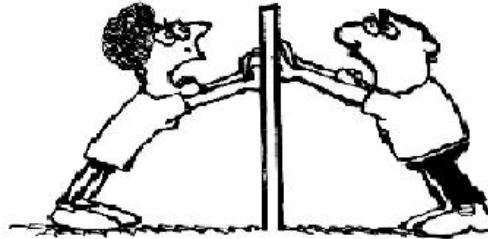


Conflict between Clergy and Laity in the Church

A Theological Analysis by John J. Park

Introduction:

Conflict is commonplace and almost inevitable in our society, which is increasingly more complex and competitive (attached picture taken from



http://www.crs.org.au/Conflict%20Resolution%20Service_files/Images/fence.JPG,

2/4/05). It is part of our daily lives whether it is in the family, in the workplace or even in the faith community. The conflict is not necessarily good or bad. Depending on how we handle it, it would result in quite different outcome. On the one hand, when it is not properly addressed, it can cause varying degrees of negative impact on the people and the community ranging from minor irritation to the people involved to irreparable damage to the relationship among the people in the community. On the other hand, it would provide an opportunity for the community to grow together if we maintain proper perspective toward it. Conflict occurs in the church among the members of the congregation and between clergy and laity. In this analysis, conflict between a pastor and lay leadership will be discussed. The conflict started recently in a local Korean United Method Church surrounding an issue relative to choosing a new pastor. This particular church has been led by a founding pastor for thirty years. The church has adopted a system of lay stewardship, which includes lay elders as common to most of the other local Korean churches still operating under the guideline described in the Book of Discipline of the United Method Church. A typical lay elder assumes leadership roles in the church being

involved in a wide range of activities on ministry and administration working closely with a pastor.

Description of conflict:

The church is trying to select a new pastor to replace a current pastor who is forced to retire by the annual conference as a result of complaint filed by a district superintendent for insubordination. A new pastor has been appointed. However, the current pastor with a support of some members is resisting to having the new pastor received by the congregation. Many members, nevertheless, indicate that they support the decision of the conference. There are sharp divisions among members, especially lay elders.

Facts surrounding conflict:

1. The church has been founded primarily for Korean immigrants by a current pastor, who is a Korean, thirty years ago and become a United Methodist Church several years later. The pastor has maintained an authoritarian leadership style for many years. A few times, there have been major splits among church members and large groups of people have left the church. He is more interested in keeping his control of the church than in building up the church by accommodating different voices from the congregation. He is not reluctant to devise deviant measures to drive out from the church those who he decides are against him. The annual conference has tried to appoint him to a charge somewhere else but he fiercely resisted it, which eventually led to his being forced to retire against his wishes. He expressed on occasion a keen interest in maintaining his influence in the daily life of the church even after his retirement. He harbors bitterness towards officers of the annual conference and tries to make waves in every turn of the event and to

- the last hour. Recently, some of the lay elders shared with him their concerns regarding his way of doing things around the church. To him it was a threat to clinging to his power and he decided to take it personally. Again, he started to find a way in secret to oust the leader of the group of lay elders.
2. The Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) handles the matter working with district superintendent when there is a need for a change in clergy leadership in the local church. Although the members of the committee are normally elected through the Nomination Committee and the Charge Conference, they have been practically handpicked by the pastor. The SPRC have been primarily used in support of the pastor in his effort to resist the actions of the conference.
 3. A majority of the congregation loves the church but is fed up with the current pastor and is yearning for an appointment of a new pastor as soon as possible. However, quite a number of the members of the congregation have a reservation about the new pastor just appointed.
 4. Annual conference is trying to have the new pastor installed smoothly within a few months by the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Perspective:

Dudley Weeks, in his secular book in the area of business/psychology entitled “The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution”, offers a new view of conflict (1):

1. Instead of perceiving conflict as being a disruption of order, a negative experience, an error or mistake in a relationship, we may perceive it as being an outgrowth of diversity that might hold possibilities for mutual growth and for improving the relationship.

2. Instead of perceiving it as a battle between incompatible self-interests or desires, we may perceive it as one part of a relationship, a part that involves needs, values, perceptions, power, goals, feelings, and so on, not just interests or desires.
3. Instead of perceiving it as an isolated event we allow to define the entire relationship, we may perceive it as occurrences that punctuate a long-term relationship and that can help clarify it.
4. Instead of perceiving it as a struggle only between right and wrong, good and evil, we may perceive it as a confrontation between differences in certain aspects of a relationship, but not to the exclusion of other aspects that are still there to build on.

With a new perspective described above, Weeks proposes “Conflict Partnership Approach” to focus on both the immediate conflict and the overall relationship, of which a particular conflict is but one part. Conflict partnership approach provides skills that are not only conflict resolution skills but also relationship-building skills. Such an approach would provide us with a capability to reach a satisfactory and lasting resolution. Conflict partnership approach is designed to come to a desired result when the parties in conflict reach a resolution that strengthens the relationship while meeting individual and shared needs and resulting in mutual benefits. Although the approach is proposed for solving conflicts in secular communities, the principle is essentially the same as given in the scripture in Ephesians 2:19-22:

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the

whole structure is joined together and grows into holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place of God.”

The ingredients of conflict:

In order to characterize the conflicts, we may now review the seven ingredients of conflict as suggested by Weeks.



Diversity and Differences - Diversity is a blessing to a community. It helps to go outside the box we could be confined in. It opens up our horizon to see opportunities and possibilities. Diversity is something to celebrate, not to fear or perceive it as a threat (attached picture taken from <http://www.ous.edu/aca/diversity.gif>, 2/4/05).

We also have differences in needs, perceptions, power, values and principles, feelings and emotions, and internal conflicts. As related to the issues at hand, the scripture passages of 1Corinthians 12:4-7 and 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.....that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Needs - Needs are conditions that we perceive are critical to our well-being. The most fulfilling relationships are those where needs of the parties are met. Conflict occurs when needs are ignored, one's own as well as those of others (attached picture taken



from <http://www.unitedwaytriangle.org/2004/artdownloads/needs.jpg>, 2/4/05).

Often, needs are confused with desires. Needs are critical to our lives while desires are not as critical, they are wanted. Damaging conflict could occur from the confusion. Relative to the issue, three passages of scripture come to mind; Timothy 6:8, Philippians 2:3-5 and Acts 2:44-46:

“...but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”



Perceptions – different people can perceive Reality differently. Conflict could occur as a result of different perceptions of parties involved. Perceptions should be clarified before any attempt is made to resolve conflict (attached picture taken

from http://bfarber.com/screens/%5B1241%5DUntitled_14gghhhhhhhh.jpg,

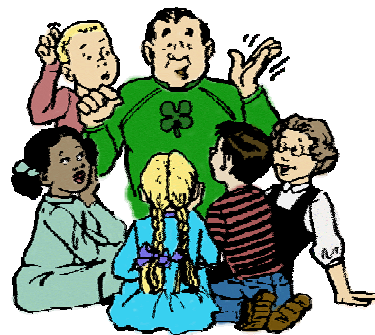
2/4/05). Types of perceptions, which cause conflict, include self-perception,

perception of the other party, differing perceptions of situation, and perceptions of threat. We need to have wisdom and understanding to see things clearly with proper perspective. James speaks of two kinds of wisdom in James 3:13-18:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.....But the wisdom from above is first pure, the peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

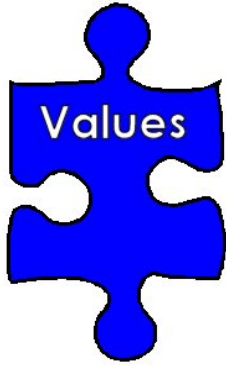
Power – Power is the ability to influence and a capacity to get things done effectively.

How we use it could affect greatly the occurrence and nature of conflict in our relationships. Attached picture taken from



<http://fourh.ucdavis.edu/4hresource/clipart/people/pics/leader.gif>, 2/4/05). Paul speaks of power in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10:

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”



Values and Principles – A value is something intrinsically important and desirable as honesty, fidelity and decency. A value could involve a belief or a principle we perceive as most important in our lives. Some values are so important to a person that there is little chance that the values will be sacrificed in any situation (attached picture taken from

<http://www.usas.ohio-state.edu/images/values%20puzzle%20piece.jpg>, 2/4/05).

When we conclude that one of values or principle is violated, conflict could ensue.

When the conflict is about values and principles, we tend to defend our position fiercely and to go after what we want passionately. Often, however, the conflict is over preferences rather than values or principles. Paul speaks of values in

Colossians 3:1-3:

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

It is interesting to note that the values Paul referring to are not likely to cause conflict but most likely to help to resolve it.

Feelings and emotions Feelings and emotions play a role to varying degrees almost in any conflict. Often, we let the feelings and emotions control the situation. Sometimes, we ignore them even when the conflict is about them. We need to deal with them properly.

Analysis of conflict:

There could be many probable causes for the conflict the particular church is going through. The causes could include one or more causes mentioned above involving the pastor and the congregation especially the lay elders. It could also involve preferences of the parties for a new pastor. It may involve the relationships developed between the pastor and the congregation and/or among members of the congregation, and the relationships among lay elders. It may involve a dispute regarding the qualifications of the elders or a questionable process to elect them. The dynamics of the conflict is quite complex.

A simplified analysis is given below:

We start with the situation involving the pastor. He has good education in theological schools here in America and back in Korea. He is friendly and personal as a person. He is smart and diligent. He has made a lot of contribution to help the church grow. He grew up in Korea in a culture where pastors are considered as men of authority to have final say in any matter relative to ministry in the church. He thinks it is his personal ministry and all other members of the congregation including lay elders are there only to assist his ministry in a subservient manner. Since he has founded and served the church for so many years, he feels that he is entitled to run all the church matters in his own way. It is hard for him to imagine that any one would dare to raise questions about his decisions or to stand up against him. Although he has been trained in a seminary in America, he is not well adjusted to the American culture as a case with most of the first generation Korean immigrants. Since his refusal to new appointment to other charge from a bishop, his relationship with annual conference has gotten worse every year. The

rough relationship with the conference eventually led to his agreeing to retire earlier than he is expected. He harbors bitter resentment towards the conference and still is determined in resisting the intent of the conference to have a new pastor installed. He is skillful and surreptitious so that most of the members would not know exactly what he is trying to do. It is his ego that has imprisoned him and driving the congregation into confusion and turmoil. Many members of the congregation doubt if his values and principles are Christian.

Most of the lay elders are aware of what is wrong with him. Several lay elders urge him to get rid of the hidden bitterness toward the conference and to start cooperate with them to have a smooth transition in clergy leadership change. However, other lay leaders have been extremely reluctant to join the first group of leaders because of the relationship built-up for so long between them and of fear of him. Again, there is a conflict in values and principles between the groups. He is taking advantage of this split effectively.

The congregation is also split in two large groups. Many people without knowing exactly what is going on belong to these two groups mostly based on perceptions not on facts. One group supports the pastor and the other not. Among the members of each group, there are subgroups with different perceptions.

Meanwhile, annual conference is determined to go ahead with their new appointment with less flexibility now. There are also two groups formed depending on whether supporting the conference or not. It can create another conflict in the church.

Conclusion:

It appears that the first key of resolving the conflict is in the hands of the current pastor. When he decides to cooperate with the conference, the conflict is expected resolved.

However, the damaged relationships among lay elders and among the congregation would take some time to be healed.

The second key appears to be in the hands of the conference with strong and consistent action. Again, there is going to be some repercussions.

Bibliography:

(1) The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution, Dudley Weeks, Putnam, New York, 1994

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