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Handling Conflict

Adopt the following saying: "Conflict is expected and welcome!"

Robert Damon | posted December 12, 1995

Imagine a home with a sign on the front door, "Conflict is Expected and Welcome!" Most of us would panic when we saw that sign, especially if it was the location where a small group was meeting.

We live by the maxim, "Avoid conflict at all costs." But conflict and disagreement will happen no matter what you do or how well you do. Someone once said, "The course of truth never does run smooth."

Let me suggest a new understanding for the church just starting small groups (and all the others): "Conflict is expected and welcome!" Conflict will happen, and what you make of it—positive or negative—will have a lasting impression.

Conflict in a smaller church is a more obvious and visible element to deal with; disagreement between two families can be felt church-wide and even community-wide. In a larger church setting, conflict remains part of ministry but doesn't always bring the church to crisis. In either setting, the conflict must be handled.

From the rural church with 25 people to the inner-city church with 500 or more to the mega-church of thousands, there are ample areas for conflict that will arise in a small group setting. There is style of leadership, content of the study, focus or purpose of the group, personalities, details such as meeting times and location, and more. Aside from all that, we should acknowledge that outside of specific *areas* of conflict, there are also *people of conflict*—people who simply thrive on stirring up trouble.

There are some basic principles for handling conflict in a small group.

Churches and groups must learn to acknowledge and address conflict directly and immediately. Don't ignore it. Don't run from it. Make it work for the good of the Kingdom.

You and I have been in situations where conflict has started. And one common solution is to ignore it or work around it, hoping that eventually the conflict will dissolve or the people will get involved with something else. Another response is to "turn tail and run." One man actually changed groups on a regular basis simply to avoid getting personal and getting into conflict. When the behavior was addressed, he left the church for another congregation. These avoidance methods simply take up time and energy and do not resolve the issues or foster any kind of growth.

Please know that your response as a leader will have a strong influence on how the conflict and resolution is perceived by the entire group. If you positively welcome the conflict and potential outcome, the results can be uplifting; if you negatively avoid conflict, the results can be deadly for the group.

Include only those who are immediately affected. People love to involve and be involved. But there are some disagreements that don't need to see the light of day in a group; deal "off-line" with the person or persons concerned. Admittedly, there are times when the entire group should be involved in the problem-solving. But try to keep it controlled and resolution-focused, with only those people that need to be restored in relationship.

Always seek a possible solution while in the midst of discussion. Roll up your sleeves with those involved to positively work through the conflict together. Experience is a great resource in resolving issues, and yours or

another group member's history and willingness to share help facilitate some great possibilities for problem-solving. The group as a whole can use its collective wisdom to reach a solution, but the key is having the conflict in the open and in discussion.

Prayer is the primary way to handle conflict in a group. As we pray—either alone or as a group—usually the self becomes secondary and God is primary. He will soften hearts; he will bring people together; he will provide the focus.

There can be some positive results of conflict for the small group. First, conflict can help pin-point areas of needed change. Second, as ministry continues to grow and change, conflict can help focus direction and energy for the good.

William D. Hendricks has written a book, *Exit Interviews* (Moody Press), about church members who leave. I have conducted exit interviews with people leaving small groups and with group leaders who quit. Those insights have been incorporated into the structure and philosophy of groups. This has been a wonderful resource, and one of the best methods of turning potentially negative conflict into positive results.

Just as real, there are negative results of conflict. Conflict can cause division in a group, ministry, or church. It can also be a distraction, focusing time and energy on the surface or negative issues rather than on the issues of salvation and ministry. It is easier to focus on the color of the pews than to focus on why we can see the color because the pews are empty.

One new group had survived the birthing process, but was a little wounded and worn. They began to heal, and they began to grow. This group grew so much that even after their own birth of another group, the original small group was still quite large. That was when conflict started to surface: several dominant and needy people were expressing themselves, the leaders were more like cattle herders than shepherds, and the group was approaching meltdown.

After several group members began to complain to each other and the group leaders were complaining to me, I suggested a novel approach: talk about it with the entire group.

Interesting results are now coming to the surface. The group is working to resolve child-care issues, apprenticing and new leader issues, leader burn-out issues—all these points of potential conflict are open within the group, and the group as a whole is turning this into positive growth and renewal for the group.

Encountering Jesus Christ in small group settings is a time-tested and life-changing truth. As mentioned earlier, that course never does run smooth. Unresolved and avoided conflict and overall ignorance of the dynamics in groups will damage and harm the potential effort for the Kingdom. Honestly approaching conflict, sometimes painfully open as it may be, will reap positive results and further the ministry.

"Conflict is expected and welcome!" Care to hang that on your door?