

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS

Archdeacon Bob Barrett

Handling Hurts in the Church

**The first of 2 books on relationships in the church.
We equip ourselves, before hurts and conflict emerge,
to handle disagreements, hurts and conflict
in a Christian manner.
Leaders set the example of the way this is done.**

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS Number 13

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**Leaders may be called to manage conflict in the Church.
This is the first of 2 books on relationships in the Church.
We equip ourselves before hurts, disagreements and conflict emerge so we can
handle them in a Christian manner. We set the example of the way this is done.**

This series of Booklets provide practical ideas to help leaders develop their skills in a variety of ministry areas. Experimenting with them, growing your own ideas, discussion with ministry teams will help both you and others grow in skill. Good modelling, evaluation and training will inspire worshippers to worship, pray and grow in their Christian life and ministry.

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109 Arapiki Rd, Stoke, Nelson 7011, New Zealand
Phone + 64 3 54 777 54

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The book's content, layout, stories, examples and questions are designed to provide inspiration, encouragement and equipping for clergy, lay leaders (and emerging leaders) of the local Church in New Zealand and Australia. It covers the
21 Characteristics of a Leader in the Local Church and
21 Principles for Managing the Local Church.

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From: Bob Barrett

Post: 109 Arapiki Rd, Stoke, Nelson, New Zealand 7011.

Email: bobmargaret@xtra.co.nz

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Relationships in the church are **vitaly important**. As the church we are a group of Christians – together, accepting, relating, caring, supporting, helping, belonging – a community of love.

Sadly **hurts, disagreements and conflicts** sometimes occur. We need to know how to handle such things.

Two booklets' in the Developing Your Skills series, Number 13: 'Handling Hurts in the Church' and Number 14: 'Managing Conflict in the Church', are on **relationships and conflict**. Number 16 picks up the related theme: 'Criticism – How do we respond?'

As Christians we can **learn to handle hurts, criticism and conflict** in a positive manner. I hope reading and reflecting on the issues these booklets raise will help us all better deal with criticism, hurts and “manage conflict”. Discussing the issues in small groups could help us grapple with some of the more complex issues.

Growth in this area is important for all Christians – and vital for church leaders - both lay and ordained.

My **thanks** to the Diocese of Nelson for Sabbatical Study Leave and assistance; and to the St John's College Trust Board for scholarships which enabled my wife and I to undertake Sabbatical Study Leave with a focus on “Conflict Management in the Church”. One result of that study was a two day training seminar we developed on Managing Conflict in the Church – which we have run on a number of occasions. The course we developed taught participants mediation skills so they could assist others in working through conflict. Booklets 13 and 14 were required preliminary reading for that course.

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DISAGREEMENTS, HURT AND CONFLICT

One of the realities of church life – of Christians being with other Christians – is that disagreements, hurts and conflict occur.

There will be **disagreements** in the church. It is OK to disagree – to have different viewpoints

- It would be strange if we always thought alike. We are different – preferences and tastes can be shaped by our personalities, upbringing, culture, gender and age.
- We need to handle disagreements in a mature Christian manner.
- We don't need to avoid disagreements – rather we should learn how to express our differing views and work through them.
- We may find agreement or we may even agree to disagree.

People can be **hurt** in the church. Sometimes our words, attitudes or actions hurt other Christians. Sometimes we are aware of the hurts we create, sometimes we are not.

- Recognising when people are hurting and responding to that hurt is important in the church.
- We need to find a way to work through hurts so that healing can be found.
- When another Christian is the source of hurt we have biblical teaching which helps us find a way forward.
- All Christians can develop the skills to deal with situations where “Christians hurts Christians”. Leaders have special responsibility for this.
- Later in this booklet we will be asked to think about our response to hurting situations.

Sometimes hurts, concerns, misunderstanding, confusion or disagreements develop further. **Conflict can occur.**

- Many Christians run from conflict in the church - even those who are used to dealing with conflict at work.
- Sometimes “fleeing church conflict” is because of past experiences – especially where attempts to resolve conflict have been rebuffed; or where those who take initiative to restore conflict have themselves been hurt in the process.

Conflict is complex. Success at conflict resolution is never guaranteed. This, however, cannot be an excuse for avoiding conflict.

- We **can learn** how to handle conflict. There are skills to learn, approaches we can adopt, roles Christians can fulfil.

The **purpose of these two booklets** is to get you thinking about hurts and conflicts in the church (although the issues will also apply in other situations).

- These Booklets will give you some basic skills – so you can play your part in helping hurt and conflict be worked through in your church.

This booklet, No 13, aims to:

- Get us thinking about the reality of hurt and conflict in the church.
- Provide some background information about church conflict.
- Help us reflect on Matthew 18:15-20 - an important passage in the area of responding to hurts caused by Christians.
- Encourage us to think about how we will handle the hurts we face because of the actions of our fellow Christians.
- Enable us to support our Christian brothers and sisters who are feeling hurt.
- Examine our goals and roles in responding to conflict situations.
- Prepare us for the issues of

The next booklet in the series, No 14 focuses on “Conflict Management” covering:

- The responsibilities of leaders.
- Conflict management styles.
- Ground rules for dealing with conflict
- Steps to take in managing conflict.
- Levels of conflict, and
- Ideas to help us manage conflict.

I hope that these two booklets inspire the need for further reading and encourage you to attend a workshop on conflict management (should the opportunity arise).

Reflecting on these issues should help us when we are one party in a conflict or hurting situation – and help us help others when they are hurt or in conflict.

Conflict is seldom simple and these pages are a summary of some of the things to do. Not all aspects can be covered or even alluded to. Resources listed in the appendices of both booklets will give plenty of helpful advice.

THERE IS CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH!

“It is impossible for a church to be tension free while being simultaneously faithful to all aspects of the Gospel”

Speed Leas “Moving Your Church Through Conflict” page 27

Conflict in churches seems **inevitable**. Christians sometimes fight. It seems to have been that way from the beginning – as the New Testament letters show us.

We don’t always find conflict “pleasant”. Often it is the opposite.

Conflict can be about a variety of issues. For example over: relationships, data, structures, values, power imbalance, decisions, change, control - who is in charge, beliefs, expectations, misconduct, future goals, Church focus, use of resources, uncertainty, methods.

Hugh Halverstadt begins “Managing Church Conflict” by saying:

“Christians not only fight, they often fight dirty. Issues are personalised. Gossip and hearsay fog up reason and commonsense. Enemy-making wounds spirits and shreds long-standing friendships. Moralistic judgments vaporize trust.”

- Sound familiar! For some of us it is.

So **what are we to do** about it? Three things:

- **First** realise that while moral hurts and conflicts do and will occur they can be worked through and the end results can bring greater strength of church.

- **Second** know that not all conflict is bad.

Some, especially minor conflict, can act as a stimulant helping us clarify decisions and get our energy focussed in the right direction.

Some people even find conflict exciting – adrenaline flows, they enjoy it.

Although, of course, most in the midst of conflict are not likely to immediately recognise it as good!

- **Third** develop your conflict management skills. Learn more.

In hurts, disagreements and conflict get people praying for each other

- *“not praying for god to change their life rather pray for god to change your life in relation to that person”*

Richard Blackburn, Lombard Mennonite Centre, Chicago

Never pretend about hurt and conflict.

- Never pretend all is well in the church if it is not.
- Be prepared to deal with conflict but that emerges as we read on

OUR BELIEFS DETERMINE OUR APPROACH

As Christians we have certain beliefs.

- Our beliefs influence the way we approach hurt and conflict.
- Reflect on the following statements. How do these statements change the way you approach hurt and conflict? Discuss your thoughts with others.

We are **created** in the image of God – and therefore we can think, reason, feel, choose, love, forgive. We are also “fallen” and can therefore choose to sin, hurt, disobey and create dissension.

Halverstadt writes *“we repent of the sinfulness of our human-doing while claiming the goodness of our human-being”* p 191.

Humans have **choice** – to act or not to act; to sin or to repent; to continue actions or to change behaviour; to hold views or adapt them; to accept or reject forgiveness; to fight fair or dirty; to be open or closed to different viewpoints and methods.

God will have a way to deal with every hurt and conflict – His Spirit is able to guide us through and empower solutions. We can trust God – even when we feel insecure among hurting and conflicting others. The work of **God's Spirit**

- enables us to cope
- guides us to find a way through
- brings wisdom and new ideas
- transforms people and relationships
- surprises us – for example with thoughts of hope
- brings re-creation and new beginnings.

God alone can bring reconciliation – we can help each other create the climate of openness.

“Thus, our ‘work’ in conflict management cannot be the creating of reconciliation. That is God’s work. Our aim, rather, is to help one another to be faithful, to seek to create environments in which the possibilities of reconciliation are increased. We are to invite others into new relationships and to invite ourselves into those new relationships – not to force them.” Speed Leas.

The importance of **community** – especially the church as the fellowship-family of Christians who are called to be together in unity, not uniformity.

This means:

- Differences are allowed and expected because we are each a unique child of God (one of the things which make a variety of ministries possible).
- In the church we should be inter dependent – not dependent – not independent.
- Servanthood is a part of our community life.
- Accountability is also important.
- Many Christians wrongly believe the church will always be in harmony, at peace and in unity.

God's love is always with us and therefore we have nothing to fear.

- In the Christian community we can find acceptance, compassion, forgiveness and new beginnings.
- Failings are not held against us.

It is OK to have differences in the church and

- it is OK to stand for what we believe, even if conflict results.....
- provided we are prepared to be in the process of managing that conflict.

Conflicts are **problems** to be solved **not contests** to be won.

- We do not want differences to disappear and evaporate into thin air – rather our differences can provide a catalyst for working to a greater good.

We look for God's future.

- We build on the past rather than preserve the past.
- We are not taken down by the past.
- We are not destroyed by past mistakes.
- We do not rest on the laurels of past achievements.
- We look for what God has for us beyond the past and into the future.

In hurting or conflict situations **Christians are called to show** (for each party) such attributes as

- love and respect
- justice
- truth
- forgiveness
- acceptance of each other and our differences
- mutual accountability
- individual rights held in balance with the togetherness and purpose of the church
- willingness to seek harmony
- Christian ethical behaviour
- Christian values
- desire for "peacemaking" in relationships.

The church should be a place of positive **healthy relationships**. Such good relationships in the church:

- reduce the possibility of conflict in the church
- make it easier to work through hurts and conflicts
- raise the level of expectation that hurt and conflict can be worked through
- make it less likely that people will "run away" from the church because of hurt or conflict
- raise the level of the "norm" – that natural and normal church behaviour is for us to work through hurts and deal with conflict.

Among Christians we are called to "*speak the truth in love*" (Ephesians 4:15) but we are not told to expect that to be painless.

- We are told to "*no longer be children*" (verse 14).
- As adults we all, equally, have the **right and responsibility to explore what to do and not just be told what to do.**

Christians desire more than personal contentment. We live for **God's purposes** – especially the good of the whole Christian church and its witness to and love for the world.

We don't want hurts or conflict (or the way we deal with them) to destroy our credibility for **Christian witness and service**.

- Our witness and the impact of our life on the not yet Christian is important.
- In the church we live for the good of others. We are a family, a community of brothers and sisters.
- The church is vital – and a more healthy Christian community should be the ultimate outcome of any hurt or conflict. The church community should work together towards this.

So, **do not see conflict as a negative thing**, see it as normal.

- A sign of difference.
- A reality of bringing different people together.
- Potentially positive.
- Something that can bring greater strength to the church.
- Conflict is a means to an end
 - a church more open to God,
 - closer to the Lord and
 - empowered by the Spirit.

For discussion:

1. Which of the above issues most **inspire** your desire to see a way forward through any hurt or conflict that emerges in your church?
Why is that important to you?
2. Are there other biblical or theological truths that should inspire our **willingness** to work through hurts and handle conflict?
3. Are there biblical passages or theological truths which do or should **guide the process** we use to work through hurt and handle conflict?

WHY DOES CONFLICT EXIST IN THE CHURCH?

CONFLICT SEEMS INEVITABLE.

All churches sooner or later have conflict. It has been that way from the beginning – as evidenced in the New Testament letters (e.g. 1 Corinthians).

BUT WHY? THERE ARE MANY REASONS

People are not **perfect** – so we sometimes “get it wrong”. This side of the grave we are in an imperfect world – including being alongside imperfect Christians (and they alongside us!). Imperfect things happen. Disagreements occur – hurts come our way – conflicts develop.

People are **different** – our experiences, personalities, gifts, passions, thoughts, tastes, hopes and dreams are great – but they are not all the same. We see things certain ways, express ourselves differently – so conflicting ideas emerge.

Life is complex. It is not always easy. Things go wrong. Communication misses the mark. We misuse power, make assumptions or confuse roles.

Misunderstandings occur – hurts result and conflict is around the corner.

God is in the business of **changing us**. We may not find that comfortable –so we get into conflict with God and/or our fellows. God is also bringing change to the church - because we are ministering in a different generation who have, for example, different experiences and attitudes. That is not always easy. We disagree about how much, over what, when and how.

Not forgetting the **power of evil**. The Devil likes to drive a wedge between Christians. He will try to use the conflicts we are in to push us further apart.

BUT IT'S NOT “ALL WRONG” – IF WE KEEP IT CHRISTIAN

There are a number of issues we **should ‘disagree’ over**, and maybe fight over – as we seek the Lord’s way forward – but we never need to have conflict in an unchristian way.

Conflict in itself is **not evil** – but the way we sometimes carry it out is very unchristian. Conflict may not be sinful but sinful behaviour can occur.

We need a **Christian way** of engaging in conflict – enabling constructive outcomes, bringing reconciliation and helping Christians grow together in Christ.

Understanding the “why” of conflicts we are involved in will help us work through them.

THERE ARE OTHER REASONS ?????

For discussion:

1. Consider the reasons for conflict listed above.
Which ones are more applicable to you personally? Why?
2. Which ones are more inclined to apply to your church? Why?
3. How do you help your fellow church members see that there can be underlying issues which have caused someone to either ‘create hurt’? or cause ‘conflict to develop’?
4. In your experience which other factors lead to the existence of hurt and conflict?
5. How do you respond to the above statement: **Conflict** in itself is **not evil** – but the way we sometimes carry it out is very unchristian. Conflict may not be sinful but sinful behaviour can occur.

WHEN CHRISTIANS HURT CHRISTIANS

- *Parts of the following have been used in a teaching sermon which explores Matthew 18:15-20 – entitled ‘When Christians Hurt Christians’.*
 - *Read it with an attitude of openness. What is the Spirit of God speaking about your response to hurts in the Christian community? Hurts you suffer? Hurts others suffer?*
 - *Find a group of Christian friends with whom you feel comfortable discussing the issues raised. See the section following the sermon for some discussion questions.*
-

A STUDY IN MATTHEW 18: 15-20

WHEN CHRISTIANS HURT CHRISTIANS

DEALING WITH HURTS IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

We are exploring one of the most neglected gospel passages.

1. One of a very few passages where the gospel spells out a step by step process for dealing with a problem. It says “if such and such happensthen “do this”
2. As we approach the passage there is a question to consider
 - Do we want God to answer our prayers?
 - And do we want the Lord to be with us?
 - This passage gives a pathway to God’s blessing and presence.
3. We need to listen carefully to the words - but even more listen to the voice of the Spirit – especially those things that speak about our personal attitudes and behaviour.
4. As Christians we want nothing to come between us and another church member. So if relationships are broken what are we to do about it? How do we sort relationships out?
 - the passage gives us the way to deal with wrong doing and hurt.

The words of Matthew 18: 15-20 are quite a challenge

- and they are also a wonderful encouragement
1. The passage applies to two different situations
 - One: where a Christian is committing sin
 - Two: where a Christian has hurt us.
 2. Here we primarily focus on the second – working through hurts and keeping positive relationships between us by using the pattern of these verses.

3. Understanding the passage is so important - because, perhaps the greatest harm to Christian witness, is quarrels among Christians
 - therefore we must improve our ability to handle any hurt, concerns, disagreements, misunderstandings or quarrels.
4. The verses lay out a very simple process to work through hurts.

Step 1 – Verse 15: GET TOGETHER – ONE TO ONE

1. There is absolutely no doubt in the mind of Jesus, that his followers would have concerns about the behaviour of their fellow Christians.
2. There is also no doubt in the mind of Jesus that the way to deal with those concerns and the way to deal with any hurt or quarrel is to get together.
3. Sadly – that is not what we feel like doing. We find it easier to go to everybody else rather than the person concerned.
4. But the way of Jesus is different
 - we do not go to others – even if we feel like getting the support of a wider group
 - and we don't involve others – even if we think it would be good for them “to be aware of the situation”.
5. The way of Jesus says – instead of moaning to others go **only** to the person who is causing us pain – with an exception we will explore later
 - however normally we aim to get together and explore the issue
 - maybe they don't know the pain they are causing
 - maybe they are not aware of the implications of their actions
 - or – maybe **we** are misunderstanding – things are not what we thought they were
6. So the way of Jesus is “be honest” – but be honest to the right person. No matter how honest we are – we are wrong if we take honesty to the wrong person.
7. This means when we feel wronged we put complaints into words
 - prayer words with God
 - and direct words with the person who is the source of our complaint or hurt.
8. It is also wrong to keep it to ourselves and brood about it
 - that poisons our Christian life
 - it colours our attitude to the other person
9. Resolution comes by meeting together in love, to explore
 - personally – face to face
 - not even writing a letter which could be misunderstood
 - face to face we can immediately clarify.
 - in practical terms raise the issue when both people will have time to sit and explore concerns - do not dump concerns and then almost immediately leave.

10. Of course we are not going with a judgmental condemning attitude. We are open to explore – remembering it may be us who is at fault.
11. Notice “who goes to who? Who initiates the conversation?”
 - in verse 15: if someone has hurt me – I must go to them
 - but what if I’ve hurt someone else?
 - Jesus addresses that in Matthew 5:23 – it says – “*if my brother or sister has something against me*” because of what I have done then I must go to them.
 - in other words – whether it could be my fault or their fault – if I know about it then I am responsible for initiating the contact
 - so I never have any excuse for doing nothing.
12. People have fear about that type of one to one conversation - yet it is amazing how often this approach brings positive results
 - time and again there are reports of hurts overcome, reconciliation reached and maturity gained by using this process.
13. People appreciate that personal approach
 - they are relieved to have the issue drawn to their attention
 - they are willing to work it through
 - clarification emerges for both parties
 - maturity is gained and
 - relationships are kept in tact.

STEP 2: VERSE 16 - GOING BACK WITH OTHERS

“If you are not listened to, take one or two others along

1. We’ve not been able to deal with it on our own – so we go back with one or two others to try again.
2. One or two means literally one or two – and they are told so that they can go with us - now only four people in total are involved – only four know about the hurt.
3. Here we must be careful - there is a danger that the 2 or 3 can be seen to be ‘ganging up’ on the one.
4. These witnesses are not to put the offender on trial
 - not to “prove” the person is wrong
 - we do not go with an attitude of “we’ll sort you out”.
 - rather we’re going in love to share and to communicate - to explore the concerns together.
 - and the witnesses help both of us understand the issue and find a way forward
 - they will ensure we are hearing each other
 - they will watch our use of facts and openness to see each other’s point of view.

5. Witnesses are a safeguard
 - for me
 - for the person I'm going to
 - and for any later reporting that could be needed.
6. So **who do we take?**
 - witnesses need to be mature Christians who have shown that they know how to live out the passage in their own life
 - they'll be people who know what to do - know how to listen - and know how to help us listen to each other.
7. So – we have tried again – and that if fails what next?

STEP 3 VERSE 17 - INVOLVING THE CHURCH

- *“If the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church – the ekklesia – the body of believers”.*
1. This passage says at this point others can now be involved.
 2. Yet here we need to be careful because it is not just a matter of telling everybody or jumping up on a Sunday. That just confuses people and creates even greater hurt.
 3. Often the appropriate approach is to go to the small group of appointed church leaders because effectively we've tried all we can do and we need their wisdom.
 4. The emphasis of the verse is still on getting people to listen and the appointed leaders of the church are now in the position to best bring that about.
 5. Experience shows that seldom, if ever, does the issue need to go any wider than a few leaders. In fact, by this stage, things are often sorted out.
 - if we've lovingly and prayerfully followed the steps we have usually worked through what ever needed to be deal with.
 6. This step is not saying “take it to the law courts”. Troubles for Christians are never satisfactorily settled that way
 - we need the atmosphere of Christian love and prayer
 - and a deep desire to keep our relationships alive as we work though hurts.
 7. But – what if – all of this doesn't work?

Step 4: Verse 17 A NEW WAY TO TREAT THEM

“If they refuse to listen

. treat them as a pagan or tax collector”

1. Some immediately jump in and say “excommunicate!”
2. Well ?
 - pagans were outside the community of faith
 - and tax collectors were hated people because of the taxes they collected for the Romans and the extra personal commission they took with the tax
 - so treat the person who hurts us with whom we disagreed as a hated outsider ???
3. We check that interpretation by asking how Jesus treated such people
 - he sat down to meals with them (Matthew 9:11)
 - he was criticised for being their friend
 - the very people Jews hated Jesus befriended.
4. So how do we treat such a person who won't listen?
 - Jesus is our example
 - Jesus never abandoned people,
 - He was sad if people abandoned him.
 - Like Jesus we keep reaching out - loving, befriending
 - so it is not us who breaks the relationship.
5. Jesus did not see tax collectors and sinners as hopeless
 - he always saw hope - Matthew and Zachaeus were two he befriended and saw change
 - our ongoing love can touch even the hardest heart.
6. Jesus also stressed **forgiveness**
 - as this passage concludes we are immediately reminded of our calling to constantly forgive each other
 - in verse 22 Jesus says “*forgive seventy times seven*” – meaning our forgiveness is unlimited
 - that is comforting because even in going to people to sort out hurts we will make mistakes and need their ongoing forgiveness.

NOTICE VERSES 19 AND 20.

About answered prayer and Jesus being in our midst.

1. The context of the passage implies the issue for “agreement and prayer” is praying for the very process of reconciliation we have been working through and praying for the people involved – especially the person who has not yet listened.
2. It is important to notice verse 20 - *“Where two or three gather in my name, I am there among them”*
 - That verse – that promise – is in the context of Christian brothers and sisters who work hard to handle hurts and disagreements in the right way.
3. When we live our relationship that way we’re allowing Jesus to be at the centre
 - when we get together in twos and threes to sort out relationships we’re effectively inviting Jesus to be present
 - we’re doing it the Jesus way so He can be “among us”.
4. **Is it therefore a reasonable to ask this question:** “Why is it we sometimes have difficulty sensing the presence of Jesus?”
 - “Is it because we do not handle our relationships by the way of the Gospel passage?”
5. **Whether there are hurts, pain, misunderstanding, confusion, disagreement, conflict whatever**Using the steps here are vital for keeping close to Jesus
 - close as a church and close as individual Christians.
6. These steps are aimed at keeping Christian brothers and Christian sisters together - no barrier between us - and therefore no barriers between us and Jesus.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER FACTORS WE NEED TO KEEP IN MIND.

Here are just a few:

1. Occasionally there are situations where an adjustment needs to be made to this process - most importantly where there are situations of **power imbalance**.
 - perhaps where there has been some kind of abuse or questionable control
 - where, for some reason, there is an undue level of anxiety
 - in these situations immediate help must be sort from Church leaders.

2. There is no place in the Christian lifestyle for **two-faced behaviour**
 - it is just plain unchristian to say one thing to a persons face and another thing behind their back
 - being pleasant to a person and then going around moaning about them creates confusion and negativity
 - it drives a wedge between people
 - and ultimately causes us to all miss God's purposes.
3. Not using the steps shows we are not yet a mature Christian – and even worse restricts our progress towards maturity.
4. Sometimes we get so frustrated we want to vent our feelings at someone we regard as safe
 - we need to be very careful about that – it could be seen as gossip and it involves additional people.
5. Using this process demonstrates the love we have for each other and therefore makes a very positive Christian witness to those non-Christians who watch our behaviour.
6. Going to our fellow Christians is very important because
 - *“How else will I know I've hurt you if you don't tell me?”*
 - *“Unless I'm told I cannot correct my ways”*
7. For many of us facing a person in this way can be stressful
 - yet ultimately it is less stressful than brooding on an issue or gossiping to others.
8. With regard to gossip - it is really good if we refuse to receive gossip but instead find a way to challenge the original gossiper to sort out their relationship with the person concerned.
9. It is also good when we can encourage each other to live out this passage - even when we don't know what kind of hurt others are going through
 - and even when it is us they want to come to because we've hurt them.

So

1. There is so much we can help each other with - and that includes helping each other not to be afraid of this passage.
2. It is a wonderful passage – an exciting reality to live
 - living it does great things for the church, the witness of the Gospel and for us as individuals.
3. Living it out is the Jesus way to “be the church”
 - as members we will be prepared to face the pain of hurt and disagreement
 - and we'll enjoy the presence of Jesus as we do.

DISCUSSING AND LEARNING WITH OTHERS

Use the following in your Home Group, Vestry, with Christian friends, Christian colleagues

1. You may, or may not, feel comfortable sharing any personal “message” of comfort, inspiration, correction or direction that the Spirit of God brought to you as you read that study in Matthew 18: 15-20.
 2. Discuss the 4 Step Process:
 - Why don’t Christians always use this process to deal with hurts and disagreements?
 - When is it important to do so?
 - Why is it important to use a process like this?
 - What are some good examples of using this process well?
 - Have you ever been at the “receiving end” of this process? How did it feel?
 3. There are times when this process needs “some adjustment and amendment”
 - In what situations would you consider amending the process? How? Why?
 - Do others agree with you? Why? Why not?
 - What are examples of “power imbalance”?
 4. Discuss Step One.
 - How should we go about approaching someone who has hurt us?
 - How would we “set up” a meeting?
 - What words would we use to raise the issue?
 - What are our biggest fears about going to the person who has hurt us? How do we overcome them?
 5. Discuss Step Two.
 - What qualities would you look for in a witness?
 - How would you discover and approach a suitable witness?
 6. It is possible to avoid step 2 coming across as two or three people “ganging up” on the one being approached? How would you avoid this danger?
 7. Discuss Step Three.
 - At what stage would you approach church leaders?
 - What response and assistance would you expect from them?
 8. Discuss Step Four.
 - What are appropriate ways to follow Jesus’ example today when we have people who should perhaps be treated as “pagans and tax collectors”?
 9. Discuss what we could imagine might happen if this process was, when necessary, used in your Church.
 - Would this process work in your church? Why? Why not?
 10. The final section raises a few difficult issues. Are there any your group needs to discuss - those listed in the section, or other practical issues?
-

IT IS USEFUL TO UNDERSTAND

The more we “manage conflict” the more we will understand ...

...about it and the differing responses we can make. Reading will also increase our understanding. Here are a few things to be aware of:

RECONCILIATION CANNOT BE FORCED

While reconciliation and harmony between parties must be an ultimate goal we must accept this can never be forced. People are free individuals who cannot be “made” to do anything. They can be encouraged to work towards reconciliation.

We can help create an environment and give positive encouragement but we cannot make people choose any particular pathway.

The only person we have control over is ourselves. We choose our attitudes and actions. We can (and should) take initiative in dealing with conflict.

Because reconciliation cannot be guaranteed many people prefer to use the term “**conflict management**” rather than “conflict resolution”.

THE ENVIRONMENT CAN CAUSE OR INCREASE LEVELS OF CONFLICT.

A variety of factors within or surrounding the church can make conflict more likely or more intense. Those involved may not be aware of these factors. Conflict may emerge in one area but the underlying issue may be (even unknowingly) provoking it.

They include:

1. Issues of the past.

Learned responses to conflict (from superiors and peers, as children and adults); unresolved conflict; hurts from previous conflicts; adjustments to previous clergy, including the grief over recently departed loved (especially long term) clergy; recently completed building programmes (especially where vision for the next phase of ministry is not clear).

2. Issues of the present:

Individuals with unresolved grief or needs (e.g. for power or recognition); emotional problems; adjusting to change; fear of further changes; misunderstanding; lack of clear communication; shortages of money; uncertainty regarding vision.

3. Issues in the church:

Rumours; gossip; misunderstanding; worship style changes; sermons (content or style); new members creating uncertainty or bringing new ideas or moving into leadership; structures that empower some and disempower others; communication systems; financial shortages; people leaving; decreasing attendance; lack of vision; greater depths of relationships.

4. Issues to do with Clergy leadership:

Insecurity of roles; lack of skill in some areas; family or financial pressures; health or addiction; unresolved hurts; behavioural problems.

5. Issues of lay leadership:

Power struggles within lay leaders or with clergy; uncertainty; need for recognition; values or goal disagreements; unclear job descriptions and expectations; lack of support and training; the way leaders are appointed; misuse of power.

6. Issues to do with the wider community in which the church is placed:

Depopulation; job loss; tension; crime.

THE EFFECT OF FEAR.

Conflict produces stress and fear.

We are designed to survive. Sudden stress or fear situations cause our systems to prepare for fight or flight – producing adrenaline, heightening some body functions and shutting down others – notably shutting down that part of the brain which enables us to think clearly and deeply about what is happening around and in us. This is why, in some conflict situations, we may find ourselves (and others) not functioning as rationally as we (they) should.

Therefore we will need to use approaches which keep this reality/ possibility in mind.

Fear increases when people feel out of control.

According to Speed Leas (from personal experience I would agree) research has shown that **three things can reduce fear in conflict:**

- **Physical exercise**, but more stress is reduced by
- **gossip**, but stress is reduced even more by
- **talking to the person** we are in conflict with.

One of the basic things to do when managing conflict is to seek to **reduce** people's (ours and others) **levels of fear** and help people get control of themselves.

Fearful people are also less likely to be committed to any agreement they make.

THE PLACE OF ASSERTIVENESS.

Hugh Halverstadt (chapter 3) stresses that this is one the most important aspects of our Christian life – *“the task of becoming a Christian conflict manager is practicing being assertive Christian assertiveness (is) to respect and stand up for self without putting anyone else down.”*

- It is not aggressiveness, and does not seek to control or exploit others.

- Assertiveness stands for ones own rights while respecting others and their rights and working towards the common good.
 - Self worth, self respect, self honesty, self responsibility all help us “fight assertively for a constructive process of managing conflict situations”.
 - However, we need to be aware that other parties may not be assertive.
-

MANAGING CONFLICT MEANS MAKING CAREFUL DECISIONS.

Conflict means a lack of agreement although lack of agreement may not mean conflict.

- Conflict may occur where decisions have not been made or when made are not liked by some.
- Managing conflict includes getting decisions made although that does not mean all will therefore be happy.
- Decisions should be made in a way that encourages a commitment to the decision – with a willingness to stick with and implement the consequences of that decision.

This requires three things:

- a careful **process** towards reaching the decision (see booklet 14);
 - the **involvement** of as many people as possible in influencing the decision; and
 - the giving of **time**. Decision making to avoid conflict and overcome conflict cannot be rushed - no matter how much “the law is on our side”.
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ASKING PEOPLE TO LEAVE THE CHURCH.

It is always tempting to ask, expect or encourage trouble makers to leave – but this should be a very sad and serious last resort (after absolutely *everything* has been done to find alternative solutions – including the use of outside expertise.

Rather, people should be asked to “play by the rules” (booklet 14) and accept the outcomes of the **10 step process** (see booklet 14).

Asking people to leave is only appropriate in serious ongoing cases where trouble makers make life *totally* intolerable for others (by their ongoing abuse); and, where the church no longer has the resources to cope with the behavioural consequences.

Speed Leas writes *“in my experiences churches attempt to remove people too soon and for inadequate causes”*.

People may choose (and must be allowed) to leave the church – but normally encouraged not to. After high level conflict (see Booklet 14), if people choose to leave, they probably should not be encouraged to stay or be pursued.

UNDERSTANDING OTHER AREAS ALSO HELPS US MANAGE CONFLICT CREATIVELY.

We need to grow in our understanding of areas such as:

- the responses of differing personality types (e.g. Myers Briggs)
- the power of creative thinking (e.g. Edward de Bono)
- behavioural changes with levels of hurt
- the grief process (see Booklet No 4: 'People Helping Skills')
- issues to do with anger and its management
- the impact of drugs, medication and illness.

LEADERS – YOU ARE INVOLVED!

..... especially clergy, lay staff and lay leaders.

.....**AND church members there is a word here for you too.**

<p>The quality of our leadership is more likely to be determined by the way we handle things that go wrong, than the way we behave when things are going well.</p>
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Leaders are called to recognise conflict accept its reality and deal with it.

It is not a question of whether, as leaders, we will be involved in conflict - but a question of *we are automatically involved so how we will handle it.*

Recognising about to surface conflict is not always easy.

Sensitive **intuition** will often alert us to underlying tensions. We need to be alert to possible signs – such as rumours; increasing complaints; people worshipping less often; resignation from groups or leadership; reduced giving; avoiding relating to those in authority; the development of party factions; and the activity of “stirrers”. Changing attendance patterns are often one of the biggest indication of brewing conflict.

These things do not imply conflict – they can be quite normal aspects of life in a church – but they may be warning signs of unhappiness which could become conflict.

Leaders have responsibility for others

Speed Leas writes *“Leadership demands the attention of the leaders to the needs of the followers. When a leader does not respond to these needs, he or she will soon be alone.”*

Conflict in the church requires a response by the leaders, especially the vicar and other staff. We are called to act so people respond and work through conflict. We can enable, encourage and assist action towards a solution.

Leaders can reduce feelings of inadequacy and fear so that parties feel strong, safe and empowered to work through difficulties. Even when we as leaders feel weak we can build confidence in others, assisting them to behave in Christ like ways.

Leaders should create a positive climate where people can talk.

It is important to have a climate where disagreements and areas of conflict are allowed to be raised without recrimination, where people are allowed to confront leaders and leaders, when confronting others, do so gently with love.

If people have lines of communication – people with whom they can discuss what they disagree with – then conflicts are less likely to escalate.

By our example (and provision of opportunities and training) leaders can encourage people to listen to one another.

For discussion:

What avenues are there in our church for people to disagree, ask questions, seek clarification, express hurts ...?

Leaders set an example of how to handle conflict by the way they themselves handle conflict.

We inspire others to act appropriately by such things as our: calmness; openness to complaints; sensitivity; listening; accuracy with facts; self control; obvious care for and love for our people; creating a climate of trust; spending time with people; respect for people's differences; encouraging both sides.

Leaders can be an encouraging non anxious presence.

Leaders reach out to others – rather than wait for others to reach out to them.

Clergy can be the cause of conflict – often unintentionally.

As well clergy often become the focus of conflict – blame is dumped on them – for causing it (which may not be true); for not agreeing with our side (and so clergy cannot win); not resolving the conflict (when often there was no desire on the part of others for it to be solved); or not resolving it the way we wanted.

As leaders we have feelings – some good, some not.

Understanding and respecting our feelings does not mean we must respond to them.

Our feelings may show us what is going on “inside”, our reactions, our hopes and pain.

Having feelings does not compel us to obey them!

Leaders seek the fruit of the Spirit – including self control, patience, love, kindness and gentleness. All these are important for handling conflict.

As leaders we may need to seek help because there will be times when we “don't get it right”.

Anger, frustration, verbal outbursts, impatience, can “break forth” from any of us. If they do we need to apologise, seek forgiveness and try to respond more appropriately.

If we are finding the conflict hard to handle or if we are out of our depth - then we will need to seek help.

So a word for all church members.

Leaders will struggle and like any Christian have times when they get it wrong. Then, like any fellow Christian, they will need your forgiveness; an extra dose of loving care; encouragement and support.

Leaders often face more tension, higher expectations and more pressure than anyone else in the church.

This does not excuse wrong behaviour but may explain those times when leaders are less than “saintly”. They are as “breakable” as any of us.

WHERE TO NOW?

Find a fellow Christian with whom you can **discuss** some of the issues raised in this booklet.

- Spend time on those issues you struggle or disagree with – don’t just dismiss them.
- Exploring these areas (especially those we disagree with) will stretch our learning and increase our usefulness in hurting and conflicting situations.

Booklet 14 “Managing Conflict in the Church” continues our studies in “relationships and conflict in the church”. Read it and discuss the issues with others – especially spend time on the “10 Steps For Managing Conflict”.

These two booklets will help your journey into “Managing Conflict” but **they do not cover** all the issues involved. Further reading and participating in **training events** will be important for those who find themselves called to deal with hurt and manage conflict in the church.

Have hope. God is in the business of healing hurts and bringing reconciliation between conflicting parties. He looks to create positive relationships in the church. No situation is beyond hope. Every person can have a fresh beginning.

Even the most difficult situations can find a way forward. We can play our part. God will certainly be at work.

Let’s together be positive about a great church – with wonderful relationships, and an exciting future!

APPENDIX ONE: Some Biblical Passages

Matthew 5: 23-24; 18:15-22

Mark 12:28-31

Romans 2:1-8, 14:19

1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-7, 16-17; 6:1-8; 11:17-19; 2:26; 13:4-7.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

Galatians 5:13-16, 22-26

Ephesians 4:14-15, 26-32

Philippians 2:4; 4: 23-24

2 Timothy 2:24-26, 3:16-17

James 3:10,17, 4:1-3

1 Peter 4:8, 3:8-9

1 John 1:5-10, 2:9-11

APPENDIX TWO: Some Helpful Resources

Resources more applicable to “Managing Conflict In The Church” are mentioned in that booklet - Number 14.

de Bono, Edward. “Conflicts – a Better Way to Resolve Them” Penguin

de Bono, Edward. “Six Thinking Hats” Penguin

Halverstadt, “Managing Church Conflict” (Westminster/John Knox)

Hathaway, Brian. “Living Below With the Saints We Know” N-Joy

Leas, Speed. “Moving Your Church Through Conflict” Alban

Leas, Speed. “Leadership and Conflict” Abingdon

TITLES IN THE SERIES:

Number 1 "Visitor Friendly Worship"

Number 2 "Worship - Who is it for?" – 2001 edition.

Number 3 "Leading Worship - The Prayers"

Number 4 "People Helping Skills"

Number 5 "Preaching and Teaching"

Number 6 "Stewardship - The Financial Area"

Number 8 "Healing - Prayer Ministry"

Number 9 "Informal Worship - Designing and Leading"

Number 10 "Incorporation - Helping Newcomers Into Membership"

Number 11 "Change - Introduce New Things Successfully"

Number 12 "Youth Ministry For the 21st Century"

Number 13 "Handling Hurts in the Church"

Number 14 "Managing Conflict in the Church"

Number 15 "Every Member Ministry – Making It Work"

Number 16 "Criticism – How Do We Respond?"

Please note that Number 7 on Planning is not available in the Electronic Series.
