

# Leading a Church in Conflict

By Colin Patterson

Look at the box on the right. There you see some typical scenarios in the Bridge Builders case-book. As an organisation we are often asked to give help with church conflicts, and although every case is different there are some recurring themes: ministers not matching up to expectations, friction between people with different personalities or working styles, polarisation when people disagree over touchy issues.

*And, sadly, sometimes a battle-field with a wounded scapegoat lying on it.*

There's a lot that could be said about how help from an outsider can make a difference. But I want to focus on what you can do if you're a *leader in the congregation*.

- A former Church Secretary appears to be leading a personal campaign against the minister.
- The senior and assistant youth workers are gifted individuals but don't seem to be able to work together without regular explosions.
- A much-loved minister is succeeded by a much-resented one, and after a couple of years of tension the Church Meeting calls for resignation.
- Thirty people keen for renewal are threatening to leave and form a new church.
- Repercussions are still rumbling on, twenty years after a particular pastor left under a cloud.
- The new leadership structure just doesn't seem to be working and there are struggles for power bubbling below the surface much of the time.

As far as I can see, it's very rare to be involved in Christian leadership without hitting serious turbulence at some stage. In my case, it came in a big wave just after I was ordained. At the time, I couldn't remember having heard any warnings that there could *be* debilitating conflict in a local church. My gut reaction was, "This shouldn't be happening." I backed off and wished it would all just go away. Looking back, I think I had the wrong starting point. My base-line nowadays is to **see conflict as normal**. It's going to happen. The critical thing is how I, as a Christian leader, choose to respond. Here are a few things I've learned along the way – and have to keep re-learning ...

## *Fight or flight?*

What should one do when people complain? I find the example in Acts 6: 1-7 helpful. The early church was experiencing explosive growth in numbers and in loving concern. Yet a major complaint was being voiced in the fellowship: "We're being overlooked". As a leader in those circumstances, I might have been inclined to dismiss the deputation as trouble-makers. But the apostles called the community of believers together to grasp the nettle. "Choose some wise and godly people to sort this out," they said. And the result was further growth: a bigger pool of leaders, a fairer way of handling the church's affairs, and new people putting their faith in Jesus.

This suggests that conflict **can sometimes act as a wake-up call from God**. A number of ministers have said to me, in one way or another, "We've been tested as a church but we've emerged stronger." What I notice is that they are all ministers who were prepared to face into the storm.

## *I hear you hear me?*

I find it's important to **work at careful communication**. The practical wisdom of James is a good starting point: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19). I need to hear that because I worry that I'll lose ground if I'm not the first to speak. For me, listening requires an act of will. I warm more naturally to the idea of speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), but I find it a very difficult balance to get right. As it happens, I have an aptitude for speaking plainly so it's the love that I need to work on. Others, I think, have the opposite problem: they need to find ways of facing matters more directly. But all of us, whatever our temperament, need to accept that we're likely to communicate below our best under stress. Some conversations are going to be very difficult and it pays to think carefully about how to handle them. There are some tips on the right.

### **Tips for handling difficult conversations**

- Be ready to listen deeply to the other person before you have your say.
- When the situation gets emotionally charged, or you need to say something hard, speak face-to-face. Don't say it on the phone or in writing – and especially not by e-mail.
- If you're feeling attacked, pause (e.g. count to ten) before you respond. Express your puzzlement and ask for help to understand, rather than reacting or retaliating.
- Check that you're clear about the other person's point of view, by summing it up in your own words and inviting correction, before you say how you see things.
- Frame what you say so as to send out the message, "I'm open to sorting this out in a way that works for both /all of us."
- Affirm some things about the other person before you raise problems.
- Focus on specific examples of behaviour that you find problematic, rather than making general comments on the other person's character.

## *Roots deep enough?*

OK, then. My goal is to listen and speak skilfully, trying to ensure that no one is needlessly hurt. But I have to accept that there's no such thing as a pain-free zone when things are getting heated. Yes, conflict can be managed to some extent. But – inevitably - surprises spring up, and I find that I need God's peace to avoid panic, and grace from beyond myself to persevere. I can't pretend that I'm not personally affected. Particularly as a leader, pain comes with the territory.

Consider those whom you most respect as leaders. I think you'll find that what they *are* is more important than what they can *do*. In other words, **the most important resource for facing conflict is character**. We live in a quick-fix world but maturity in Christian leadership can't be bought off the supermarket shelf or picked up in a training workshop. Character grows by:

- patient, prayerful reflection on our own conduct
- being willing to receive honest feedback from others
- wanting to learn from the mistakes we've made.

For Christian leaders, humility and self-knowledge are essential. I think the most frightening people in times of conflict are those who are simply not aware that they're acting in the grip of strong emotions, and are blind to the hurt they may be causing others. I know I can easily become one of them.

God has drawn me back several times to Paul's words, written to a young Christian leader: "God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, of love and of self-

discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7) When I feel powerless in a tense situation, when I suspect that hardly anybody loves me, when I’m desperate to get a grip, I have to remind myself that lots of others are probably feeling like that too. We’re all wishing somebody else would do something to sort things out – but I have a responsibility as a Christian leader to break the cycle of cowardice, and to model walking by the Spirit. I don’t have to have all the answers. I just have to be willing to:

- face into the storm
- let God’s power be at work in my weakness
- concentrate on *offering* rather than *demanding* love
- focus on managing *myself* rather than managing *others*.

Power, love and self-discipline are the marks of Jesus’ character. In the end, my call as a leader is to **be like Jesus, making conscious choices for good** even if everyone around me seems to be simply reacting. I may even find when I calm down that many of them are trying to do the same!

*Colin Patterson is Assistant Director of Bridge Builders ([www.menno.org.uk/bridgebuilders](http://www.menno.org.uk/bridgebuilders)). This article is a revised version of one first published by the Church Pastoral Aid Society in the magazine “Church Leader.”*