Praise for
Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict

“Conflict and tension go with growth, even in congregations; yet few congregational leaders get the help they need to engage inevitable conflict creatively. Every congregation needs a little conflict, according to George Bullard, but not all conflict is equal. Bullard helps church leaders differentiate various types of conflict and respond appropriately for the faithful and fruitful witness of the congregation.”

Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Lewis Center for Church Leadership and Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.

“Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict is a relevant and fresh resource to help congregational leaders maintain healthy and spiritually vital congregations. The significance and usefulness of George Bullard’s book lies in the many-sided perspectives on congregational conflict he shares—from the reasons why a little conflict is needed, to his categorization of the levels of conflict intensity, to foundational insights that bring understanding, to the illustrations and stories that broadens and deepens understanding, to strategies for keeping conflict at a healthy intensity level or dealing with it when it becomes unhealthy.”

Bill Moore, lay leader, Huguenot Road Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia

“Dr. George Bullard’s insights will greatly assist pastors, local church leaders, and district and denominational executives to assess the levels of conflict and know the appropriate responses for achieving the ongoing health and vitality of persons and congregations. His premise that conflict can be a ‘great thing for congregations’ is fully explored, and he effectively demonstrates how conflict can be a means of transformational empowerment toward missional purposes. He outlines so well the various levels of conflict, the processes and systems to use, and the necessary roles to employ for those called upon to mediate and manage conflict. Dr. Bullard provides pastors, coaches and consultants alike with the resources for turning conflict from impending disaster to ultimate blessing.”

Thomas E. Armiger, General Superintendent, The Wesleyan Church
“George Bullard helps us understand the important function that healthy conflict can play in the church and equips us to redeem what might otherwise be or become unhealthy, destructive conflict. I recommend this book to every lay and pastoral leader, especially in this era of colliding cultures, incredibly rapid change, and the high anxiety that every Christian brings with them to church! Church people (including ministers) want everything to be ‘nice’ in the congregation. Consequently, most of us tend to regard conflict as an enemy. So, most of us either avoid conflict like the plague or, in our anxiety and sense of powerlessness, soon go for the ‘nuclear option.’ Neither approach typically results in a good and healthy outcome. George shows us the way to better outcomes.”

Richard L. Hamm, Christian Churches Together in the USA

“Conflict is a reality for us all while we live on the ‘lumpy side of heaven!’ Without a doubt Canadian congregations who succeed are learning how to process conflict well and even learning how to invite it. George Bullard has a lengthy track record of successfully assisting Canadian congregations who strive for effectiveness. Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict, will be a vital effectiveness tool which I strongly recommend. This is more than simply a book...it is a living resource with interactive questions, stories, coaching insights, and practical advice. The church says, ‘Way to go, George!’”

Ken Driedger, Western Canadian District, The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada

“Bullard’s expertise is both technical and sage. He helps us embrace ‘healthy’ conflict as an agent for needed change. He also provides concise descriptions of different intensities of conflict so the leader, manager, and innocent bystander are equipped to diagnose the situation and respond appropriately. Rarely do you find a pastor, lay leader or denominational staffer who welcomes conflict—in fact, we tend to run from it or brace ourselves for a lot of personal pain. Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict will not only change your perspective and give you courage; it will help you identify your best strategies as conflict intensity fluctuates. You will see the conflict apart from yourself and precisely identify your role in the situation. You will be able to discern what is best for the church, its mission, and your own well-being.”

Z. Allen Abbott, American Baptist pastor and denominational leader currently serving through the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board and on the board of directors of Baptists Today
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EVERY CONGREGATION Needs a Little CONFLICT

GEORGE W. BULLARD JR.
Contents

Editor’s Foreword ix

Introduction 1

1 The Necessity of Conflict in Congregations 8

2 The First Intensity of Conflict: Typical Issues with Many Solutions 18

3 The Second Intensity of Conflict: Common Disagreements over Multiple Issues 28

4 The Third Intensity of Conflict: Competition That Develops Causes 39

5 The Fourth Intensity of Conflict: Now It’s time to Vote or Else 53

6 The Fifth Intensity of Conflict: Dividing the Medes from the Persians 68

7 The Sixth Intensity of Conflict: Discrediting Our Enemies 83

8 The Seventh Intensity of Conflict: Destroying the Infidels 97

9 Leadership Styles for Engaging Conflict 109

10 Processes for Engaging Conflict 122

11 How to Never Experience Unhealthy Conflict in Your Congregation Again 137

12 Implications for Denominational Service alongside Congregations 146

Afterword 158
Editor’s Foreword

Inspiration and Wisdom for Twenty-First–Century Christian Leaders

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Primarily serving congregations, denominations, educational institutions, leadership development programs, and parachurch organizations, the Partnership also seeks to connect with individuals, businesses, and other organizations seeking a Christ-centered spiritual focus.

We welcome your comments on these books, and we welcome your suggestions for new subject areas and authors we ought to consider.

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Introduction

Welcome to a book on the number one growth industry for Christian congregations: conflict. The growth rate is exponential. The product life cycle is still in ascendancy and shows no signs of peaking. Those who deal in conflict resolution, mediation, and management are busy people.

Books about conflict are a necessary evil. This is another one. I wish it did not have to be written. But this is an extremely important book and will apply to many more congregations than we would like to imagine.

Here is the good news. Every congregation needs a little conflict. Conflict is actually a great thing for congregations if it comes in small doses. In large doses it can be devastating to Christian ministry, and to the people it impacts. Many things are good in small doses. Coffee, chocolate, and medicines of various kinds come to mind. In large doses medical science warns us they are all more harmful than good.

My History with Conflict

My personal history with conflict is checkered. Early in my ministry I was extremely confrontational, quick-tempered, and did not handle conflict well when I was one of the primary persons involved in the conflict. Some people who know me now may still wonder about my ability to handle what is known as two-party conflict. This is conflict in which I am personally involved as one of the participants in the conflict.

I was a social activist on various issues thirty to forty years ago. I would strongly proclaim my positions and not be open to negotiation with people who did not see things my way. For those who remember this name, Saul Alinsky was my social activism hero. In college I did an independent study on French syndicalism as a radical labor movement and its call for the general strike by all workers. I was also interested in dialectical materialism and its impact on the structure of communism. These were all part of my college rebellion years. In reality I was much more talk than action. I am a much more plain and boring guy now.
Then in my seminary pastorate I pursued my youth minister across town to a meeting he was attending. Why? Because I received a report of something foolish he had done—something quite different from what I had instructed him to do. This was the same congregation in which I had to stand between two deacons in the middle of our monthly meeting as they had their fists cocked to take punches at each other. Lucky for me neither threw a punch.

In my early years as a consultant on strategic issues with congregations, I badly handled conflict going on in the congregation in which I had grown up. I acted in a destructive rather than constructive way toward the pastor. I was impatient with what I interpreted as incompetence. I still am, and it gets me in trouble from time to time. Some measure of tolerance has come with age, but an edge is still there.

Unfortunately, many congregational and denominational situations have a measure of conflict in them. Often an intervention or change process will bring to the surface issues of conflict that congregations do not want to engage. Early in my years as a consultant I encountered a lot of situations in which congregations would not acknowledge that one of their key issues was conflict.

I asked one of my mentors what he did when he was consulting with congregations in which some issue of conflict arose for which he had no warning. He said he did two things. First, he confronted the pastor for lying to him. He always asks up front, “Is this a conflict situation?” because he never goes into a conflicted congregation. Second, he got an early flight home.

My Leadership in Conflict Ministry

More than twenty-five years ago, I was on the national missions staff for my denomination. Our area of work was considering the training needs of local denominational leaders. We determined that, in many areas where training was needed, no one inside or outside our denomination adequately understood both the training needed and the context of local denominational organizations.

We decided each of us would choose one of the top priority areas and seek training ourselves to become experts who could deliver training to our leaders with an understanding of the context. I chose conflict. I knew I had so much to learn in this area. I was hoping I could be a learner while helping others to learn.

It was a great choice. It was a great help to me in my ministry. It opened opportunities to provide training for many congregational and denominational leaders. In later years it has been very
useful to me in my consulting and coaching roles with numerous congregations and denominations in conflict.

For more than twenty-five years I have worked in the areas of research, writing, teaching, consulting, and coaching in the processes being written about in this book. The material behind this book has been used throughout North America among dozens of denominations.

From 1983 through 1993 I conducted weeklong training at national conference centers for three levels of conflict ministry and management training: awareness training, advanced skills training, and consultant training. More than 500 congregational and denominational leaders participated in one or more of these levels of training.

I have consulted with hundreds of congregations on issues of conflict, and used information, knowledge, and wisdom about conflict in consultation with congregations and denominational organizations. I have consulted with dozens of congregations and denominations in which the specific issue that brought me there was an unhealthy intensity of conflict.

Particularly for the period of 1989 through 1995 I was seen as the *hired gun* who went into some severely conflicted congregations up and down the East Coast in attempts to meaningfully engage their conflicts with a compelling style that would guarantee something significant would happen as a result of each encounter. Beginning in 1996 I focused my conflict management efforts on helping denominational organizations to deal with their conflict situations.

**The Focus of This Book**

The purpose of this book is to help congregational, denominational, and parachurch leadership empower congregations throughout various intensities of conflict, and to use conflict in a healthy manner to deal with the issues confronting congregations.

My primary focus is to suggest that every congregation needs a little conflict so it can learn how to deal with healthy conflict and use it as an empowerment vehicle. A congregation can also use the skills and habits it develops at lower intensities of conflict to see its way through unhealthy, high intensities of conflict.

People who read this book should understand the seven intensities of conflict, how to assess their congregations according to these intensities, how to educate their congregations through healthy processes of decision-making at lower intensities of conflict,
how and when to bring in outside assistance, and how to confront dysfunctional and destructive conflict.

I have written this book because (1) most of the approaches to congregation conflict I observe deal inadequately and indecisively with the issues of conflict compared to what it takes to appropriately engage conflict; (2) I desire to share my experience in conflict ministry, mediation, and management with congregations; (3) too many congregations and their leadership do not understand how to handle decision-making and cultural adjustments in their congregations, and thus their leadership often escalates conflict; (4) many denominational leaders indicate they spend an increasing amount of their time dealing with issues of conflict within and between congregations and seem burdened by the this without knowing how to get out of the situation; and (5) I believe my experience and the effectiveness of my conflict management consultations give me something new and effective to contribute to the conflict ministry, mediation, and management processes.

This book is not just another process for dealing with congregational conflict. It is new in that it (1) speaks to a model and approach that has been effective in many congregations; (2) speaks to a model that has been tested in congregations for almost twenty years and about which there has not been many books written, and (3) focuses on capacity building in congregations so that learning what works in the midst of conflict and how to hardwire new learnings into the congregation are strong components of the process recommended. The seven intensities of conflict used in this book are built on five levels of conflict developed more than twenty years ago by Speed Leas, of the Alban Institute in the Washington, D.C. area (www.Alban.org). I have built on his material for twenty-five years to the point that I have taken it to a different, but related, dimension of understanding and application. It may or may not be an improvement. You will need to judge.

Some years ago Speed and I spent an evening in dialogue about my seven intensities, and he agreed they were faithful to his five levels. I pray it honors his groundbreaking work that has influenced so many congregations and their leaders. One significant difference, though, in our work is that many of Speed’s consultations were in mainline denominations, and most of mine have been in evangelical denominations.

This book will help pastors, staff ministers, lay leaders, denomination servants, parachurch leaders, and consultants or coaches understand the type of conflict they might experience
in their congregation, how to use conflict as a positive force for transition and change, and how to handle unhealthy conflict that might arise. It can be used for personal learning; for training classes within congregations; for training classes by denominational organizations; in college, Bible institute, and seminary classes; and in seminars conducted by myself and my ministry colleagues with The Columbia Partnership at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org.

What Can You Learn from This Book?

Under the umbrella concept that every congregation needs a little conflict, you can learn at least seven things from this book.

1. You can learn about the intensities of conflict and how to assess at which intensity a given situation is being played out.
2. You can gain information that will help you educate participants in your congregation concerning conflict so they do not unnecessarily escalate conflict because they do not understand it and are afraid of it. Too many congregational leaders are conflict illiterate.
3. You can learn how to use conflict as an empowering force at lower intensities of conflict and to handle it appropriately before it becomes a destructive force at higher intensities of conflict.
4. Discovery of your personal conflict management styles will be a key learning.
5. Learning when you need to call in outside assistance with conflict can impact how well or how badly conflict situations in which you are involved are handled.
6. Stories and illustrations can give you a new appreciation for people and the issues that impact the conflict.
7. I hope you can learn earlier than I did in life how to handle appropriately conflict that seems to come at you from out of nowhere, and not to overreact to it, but to learn how to disagree with people without being disagreeable.

Perhaps the most important learnings will be those discoveries you have when the material informs you, and God inspires you to new insights surrounding conflict.

Reading This Book

Each chapter of this book has an organizational logic or outline that begins with a short Executive Summary of what is the
Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict

key content of each chapter. This is followed by the main text. Somewhere near the middle of the main text, we will take a Coaching Break, where a series of questions and issues will be proposed to you as your gaze out the window and think about what has been shared to that point.

Near the end of the text for each chapter is a section called Coaching Insights that focuses on the various learnings from that chapter, and offers questions for the reader to ponder as he or she considers applications for the information and knowledge shared in the chapter. Each chapter closes with an opportunity for Personal Reflections on the material presented in the chapter; dialogue around actions you need to take about your life, ministry, and/or congregation on material presented in the chapter; and the challenge to be held accountable for these actions.

People Who Helped Make This Book Possible

I want to express my appreciation to Speed Leas for being a tremendous, positive influence in my life in the area of conflict ministry and management. He has been a wonderful teacher and mentor over the years. My most concentrated years with him were between 1981 and 1985, but every several years since then we still have had the opportunity to connect.

I also appreciate the team of Larry McSwain and Bill Treadwell for their book Conflict Ministry in the Church (Broadman Press, 1981) that they wrote a couple of decades ago, for their personal mentoring of me in the area of conflict and so many other areas, for their assistance with training events I organized beginning more than twenty years ago, and for the collegial relationship I enjoyed with them in the midst of my consultations with congregations in severe conflict. I really miss Bill’s counsel, as he is now experiencing the joys of eternity and probably advising heavenly hosts on relationships among various saints and sinners.

COACHING INSIGHTS

As you weave your way through this book, it is important to understand your beginning point. Consider these issues.

■ What is your history and pattern of involvement in conflict situations? Are you a helpful presence or a hurtful presence?

Do you tend to be one of the persons often involved in conflict
situations, one who avoids conflict, or one who comes alongside those in conflict as a support person to them or a mediator of the conflict?

■ What do you know about conflict? Have you sought to study its positive contribution to the spiritual strategic journey of a congregation? What are you doing to learn how to handle conflict at lower intensities so you will be better prepared to handle conflict at higher intensities?

■ What do you know about your personal response to conflict? How do you handle and express your emotions at various intensities of conflict? When is the point when you move from focusing on principles to focusing on people, from focusing on everyone winning to focusing on you winning?

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Your Reflections: What are your reflections on the material presented in this introduction?

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

Your Actions: What actions do you need to take about your life, ministry, and/or congregation based on the material presented in this introduction?

_________________________________________________________
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_________________________________________________________

Your Accountability: How and by whom do you want to be held accountable for taking these actions?

_________________________________________________________
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1

The Necessity of Conflict in Congregations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the processes for helping a congregation define and understand the presence of conflict. One focus will be on the necessity of conflict in the Christian experience, and its necessity in the community of believers known as a congregation. The seven intensities of conflict will be introduced.

Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict
Every congregation needs a little conflict. Why? Because congregations without conflict are dead or dying. Conflict is a typical, common component of life. A byproduct of conflict is energy and passion. Conflict forces decisions and action. Every congregation needs a little conflict, or a healthy intensity of conflict for at least the following seven reasons.

1. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict do not have passion around their mission, purpose, and vision. They are directionless. They have little or no ownership of their spiritual strategic journey. Congregations with a healthy intensity of conflict must address their mission, purpose, and
vision. They must clarify their identity and direction or be forced into an unhealthy conflict situation.

2. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict do not have clear beliefs and core values. They refuse to clearly define their beliefs and values, perhaps because they are afraid of conflict. When congregations experience healthy conflict, one way they interact with it is to seek to bring clarity to beliefs and values.

3. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict function in an avoidance lifestyle. They are afraid to address issues because they are concerned about experiencing conflict. As a result, they are captivated by an immature emotional culture in which the tough decisions of life cannot be addressed except through simple answers, indoctrination, and blind loyalty.

4. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict make shallow decisions that come from a group-think mentality. The need exists to agree, particularly with leaders. Harmony and homogeneity are promoted rather than diversity and innovation. I know, I know. You are thinking, “Harmony is a bad thing?” Yes, especially when it is achieved at the expense of in-depth spiritual and strategic thinking and action.

5. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict do not have the opportunity to learn how to handle decision-making around complex issues and thus how to handle transitional and unhealthy conflict when it is experienced. These congregations end up being emotionally immature in decision-making and so inexperienced in complex decision-making that they do not know how to handle tough challenges that come their way.

6. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict do not learn how to keep conflict from escalating to an unhealthy intensity. Because they do not know how—or refuse—to deal with healthy intensities of conflict, significant conflict situations get out of hand too quickly.

7. Congregations without a healthy intensity of conflict do not take many risks because they are afraid taking risks will create conflict they cannot handle. They are unable to reach their full Kingdom potential. They focus too much on conflict avoidance. They ultimately plateau, decline, and perhaps die.

Is it ever possible for congregations to benefit from an unhealthy intensity of conflict? Yes, but it depends. I would never want to
suggest that an unhealthy intensity of conflict is a good thing for congregations. But from my experience, I would go so far as to say God can bring forth good things from an unhealthy intensity of conflict. But I would not say God causes conflict to bring forth good things.

In all except the most extreme situations of life, I would never want to be party to generating an unhealthy intensity of conflict just so something good might happen on the other end. The risks are far too great, and the pain that occurs during an unhealthy intensity of conflict is far too unloving.

COACHING BREAK
✔ Gaze out the window for a minute. Ponder the situation of your congregation. What images come to mind?
✔ What are some of the ways in which you experience conflict in your congregation as good and helpful? What would be the result if good and helpful conflict were not present in your congregation?
✔ What is your congregation doing to learn how to proactively deal with the conflict that is typical and natural for any congregation? What are the consequences of not learning how to deal with typical and natural conflict?

Congregational Conflict Is Necessary and Healthy

Simply defined, conflict is the struggle of two objects seeking to occupy the same space at the same time. Purposes, objectives, or goals can be in conflict among individuals, groups, or organizations. Conflict is not an objective fact; it is a subjective experience. In another sense, conflict begins as a neutral value. People interpret conflict as positive or negative, healthy or unhealthy. The value assigned to conflict will help determine whether the conflict can be resolved or must be managed.

Conflict can occur at the intrapersonal level, the interpersonal level, the inter-group or sub-system level, and at the organism, organization, or system-wide level.

Conflict can be expressed in attitudes, emotions, through communication, or in substantive issues. Much conflict lacks significant substantive issues. Antagonists who promote unhealthy conflict as righteousness should be confronted and dealt with
before they destroy churches. Churches that have been severely wounded need to be loved and taught a pattern of interpersonal relationship that prevents them from returning to unhealthy patterns of conflict.

Conflict is all around us. Think about the simple act of clapping your hands. If done as an act of praise it is a healthy action. If done to assume authority by clapping hard to get the attention of people around you, it moves into the grey area. If done to indicate you intend to slap or hit someone, it is an unhealthy action. However, the action of bringing your hands together is the same in each incident. The force and intent are different.

Conflict can be healthy. Consider a violin. This instrument is capable of producing beautiful music as a result of appropriate tension on the strings, and artful drawing of the bow across the strings. Conflict also can be unhealthy. Too much tension on the violin strings will break them, or untalented drawing of the bow across the strings will produce painful noise rather than beautiful music.

Just as it takes people with special skills to tune and play a violin, it takes individuals with special skills to deal with different types of conflict. Let’s face it. Chances are you don’t want an automobile mechanic tuning your violin. Different conflict ministry styles are needed in various conflict situations. Factors such as the congregation’s size and age, issues, personalities involved, and intensity of the conflict can affect the style needed.

A spaceship breaking gravity to achieve orbit is tension and conflict that leads to a great outcome. Reentering earth’s atmosphere is also an action of resistance and conflict that has been an even larger challenge to the NASA space program. Great risk is involved. However, a positive outcome is generally worth the risk. The alternative is to remain in space forever and avoid the reentry conflict.

Numerous congregations avoid their challenges, unwilling to address them for fear of harmful conflict. These congregations need a little conflict along their journey through which they can become conflict literate.

Often the best method for preventing unhealthy conflict is to educate congregations concerning the various types or intensities of conflict. Specifically, congregations need to learn how not to escalate conflict unnecessarily, but rather deal with issues of conflict when and where they occur. Those who are conflict illiterate need to become conflict literate.
At times congregations have antagonists present who promote unhealthy conflict. These antagonists may need to be confronted before they destroy the congregation. Congregations that have been hurt by antagonistic conflict need to be loved and taught a pattern of interpersonal relationship that will prevent them from returning to unhealthy patterns of conflict. As laborers for Christ, we all need to cultivate our talents and develop our skills in this area of congregational and denominational life. Unfortunately, local congregational tensions are currently increasing in many places.

*Conflict is necessary.* We could not live in a world without it. A church staff member in a congregation in which no conflict exists is probably in a congregation without strong Kingdom commitments. The book of Acts details how conflict was a necessary ingredient in the spread of the gospel.

Conflict is a necessary part of the Christian experience, as the old self comes in conflict with the new self. Daily we are in conflict to become more Christlike.

Therefore, we should not be afraid of healthy conflict. Rather, we should welcome it as an opportunity to bring forth positive spiritual and social change. We should meet unhealthy conflict as a challenge to the love of Christ, and the fellowship of the congregation.

The Christian who has made peace with God is not exempt from struggle and conflict, and history can testify that it is often the noblest saints who feel their unworthiness most.

The apostle Paul talks about personal conflict between his two natures in Romans 7:14–25. Verse 19 clearly expresses his dilemma. “For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” As Christians we all face this struggle in our daily walk with the Lord.

Christians—such as Paul—who have made their peace with God are not exempt from struggle and conflict, and history can testify that often the noblest saints are the ones who feel their unworthiness most. As I write these words, yet another great international evangelical Christian leader has been forced to show his humanity—the conflict between these two natures. Intrapersonal conflict is a constant struggle for all of us.

The Acts of the Apostles is a book of the Bible full of empowering conflict situations. It begins with the initial spread of the gospel that was propelled forward by the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

The early church sought to huddle in Jerusalem. The persecution by those who did not embrace Jesus led to the Church
being scattered. Chapters 8—11 of the Acts of the Apostles recount various incidents of people in internal conflict and people taking external action to spread the gospel beyond Jerusalem, beyond the core Jewish culture, and to the Gentiles. In chapter 11, at Antioch these followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

The Council at Jerusalem recorded in chapter 15 speaks loudly to an early conflict in the Church as to who could be a Christian and under what circumstances. The result empowered the gospel to spread throughout the world with the blessings of the founding apostles. The council’s conflict was ultimately a healthy one, although it probably did not seem like it to those experiencing it.

**Conflict Is about Power and Control**

One of the central manifestations of sin in the twenty-first century is our neurotic need for control. For all the control we attempt, we can never seem to control what matters most—our relationship to God. The more we clamor to be in control or in charge, the more we squeeze life out of everything that is precious to us.

Control changes people, and even the best-intentioned are perverted by it. Control seeks to deny progress to others. Control is non-risking and avoids the call of God.

Power, at its best, has a creative nature to it. The apostles were told in the first chapter of Acts about the power they would receive when the Holy Spirit came upon them. God’s power transforms people.

Let’s visit a couple of simple, yet profound, theological views on power and control. God seeks to empower us. Satan seeks to control us. God seeks to help us to be all that we can be in the kingdom of God. Satan seeks to keep us from being what Satan does not want us to be.

God adds to. Satan takes away from. God pulls us forward. Satan drags us back. God calls us to unconditional love. Satan calls us to place so many conditions on our love that it is no longer love.

God urges us to positively act on the principles of the gospel. Satan urges us to negatively act on the positions represented by winning and self-reward.

Healthy conflict has hope as a characteristic. Unhealthy conflict has despair as a characteristic. Those with hope in eternal life aren’t shaken by conflict.

Your theology profoundly shapes the way you approach conflict. If you believe there is hope for the next world, if you
Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict

believe that death is not ultimate, if you believe that out of failure can come new life, new opportunity, new growth and hope, then conflict can be a positive motivating force.

The Seven Intensities of Conflict

Conflict can be healthy, transitional, or unhealthy. Getting a clear view on what dimension or intensity of conflict you may be experiencing in any given situation can be difficult. I am grateful to Speed Leas for his pioneering work in assessing conflict situations. More than twenty years ago he developed an understanding of the stages or levels of conflict.

His work is also very helpful in acting as a beginning point for figuring what positive, proactive actions to take at what stage or level of conflict. Over the past two decades I have modulated his work into seven intensities of conflict that mirror his five stages or levels. (See the chart at the end of this chapter.)

The first three intensities represent healthy typical conflict experienced in congregations and many other arenas of life. When I claim that every congregation needs a little conflict, I am referencing these first three intensities. The theme for addressing these healthy intensities is “Getting to Yes!” This means that the focus of efforts at these intensities are coming to an agreement or attaining a resolution to the presenting situation.

The fourth intensity is a transitional intensity between conflict that is healthy and conflict that is unhealthy. The theme for addressing this intensity is “Getting Past No!” This involves the desire to avoid a negative outcome and impact by focusing on signs of hope. The goal of leaders is to mediate the situation to achieve a reasonably positive outcome and impact.

Intensities five, six, and seven represent unhealthy dimensions of conflict, which the vast majority of congregations are ill-prepared to address. The theme for addressing these intensities of unhealthy conflict is “Getting to Neutral!” Damage to the congregation has occurred that cannot be ignored and will be difficult to repair. How do we get to a neutral place to create a new beginning?

These unhealthy intensities of conflict require conflict literacy, emotional maturity, and spiritual maturity not seen in the typical congregation. They also require outside, third-party assistance to address them.

The next seven chapters will each take one of these intensities of conflict and seek to further develop it. I urge you to read all seven chapters, and not just view the chart at the end of this chapter and
focus only on the intensity you believe is currently present in your congregation.

Do this for two reasons. First, you may be wrong about which intensity is currently present in your congregation and take incorrect actions that will not provide the most loving ministry possible at that intensity. Second, you need to learn why every congregation needs a little conflict, and you can best discover this by becoming conflict literate about intensities one through three.

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**COACHING INSIGHTS**

- Before reading this chapter, how did you view conflict? In what ways did you see it as unnecessary and unhealthy? In what ways did you see it as necessary and healthy?
- What has been your typical response to conflict? Do you avoid it, accommodate more forceful people, attack those who are in conflict with you, dialogue with people regarding conflict, stay focused on the issues, or focus on the people?
- What are some of your new learnings from this chapter that have changed your viewpoint? What positive actions that will be helpful to your congregation do you plan to take as a result of your new learnings?
- What is your theology of conflict? Where is God in conflict? Where are you as a creation of God in conflict? Where are the people with whom you find yourself in conflict in your theology of conflict?
- What are some of the applications to this way of looking at conflict to other parts of your life? What are some actions you need to commit to taking in those arenas?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

*Your Reflections:* What are your reflections on the material presented in this chapter?

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________
Your Actions: What actions do you need to take about your life, ministry, and/or congregation based on the material presented in this chapter?

_________________________________________________________

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_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________

Your Accountability: How and by whom do you want to be held accountable for taking these actions?

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________
# The Necessity of Conflict in Congregations

## Intensities of Congregational Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTENSITY ONE</th>
<th>INTENSITY TWO</th>
<th>INTENSITY THREE</th>
<th>INTENSITY FOUR</th>
<th>INTENSITY FIVE</th>
<th>INTENSITY SIX</th>
<th>INTENSITY SEVEN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
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<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>Unhealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting to Yes!</td>
<td>Getting to Yes!</td>
<td>Getting to Yes!</td>
<td>Getting Past No!</td>
<td>Getting to Neutral!</td>
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<td><strong>Identifiable Task-Oriented Issues with Many Solutions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relationship-Oriented Disagreements over Multiple Issues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Competition within a Group or between Groups</strong></td>
<td><strong>Congregational-Wide Competition with Voting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Congregational-Wide Combat with Organizational Casualties</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pursuit of People beyond the Congregation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focused on Their Integrity</strong></td>
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<td>Lose-Leave</td>
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<td><strong>Conflict Resolution</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conflict Mediation</strong></td>
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<td>[Chaplain or Personal Coach]</td>
<td>[Team Coach or Mediator]</td>
<td>[Organizational Coach, Mediator, or Consultant]</td>
<td>[Consultant or Arbitrator]</td>
<td>[Arbitrator or Attorney]</td>
<td>[Law Enforcement]</td>
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