



Conflict as a Crucible

for Spiritual Transformation in Congregational Leaders

Project Summary

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This is a summary of the doctoral thesis entitled “Conflict as a Crucible for Spiritual Formation in Congregational Leaders” (the “Project”). As the title indicates, this Project’s investigation was at the intersection of leadership, conflict, and spiritual formation.

The focus of this research was to identify those factors that enabled congregational leaders not only to endure and survive conflict directed at them from within their congregations, but also to grow and develop through such conflict. A number of collateral issues were also examined including the frequency of such conflict, variables accompanying such conflict, and a comparison of the Canadian and American experiences of such conflict.

A. Problem experienced.

Among leaders of Christian congregations, Hoge and Wenger declare that “Unresolved conflict … is ministers’ most prevalent motivation for leaving local church ministry.”¹ Another author states: “Abuse of pastors by congregations … [is] increasing in epidemic proportions.”² In 2004, *Christianity Today International* conducted a survey of 506 senior and solo American pastors (the “CTI Report”)³ – 79% of respondents reported the experience of conflict directed at them personally from within their congregations.

The toxicity of such conflicts is frequently reflected in painful, deep, long-lasting wounds in congregational leaders, their families, ministries and churches, as well as negative impacts on the mission of the Church generally. However, there are instances in which a leader has grown through the experience of conflict. What makes the difference between one leader being crippled by conflict, and another growing through conflict?

B. Questions asked.

A large body of research has identified the high incidence of congregational leaders leaving congregations, or ministry altogether, because of conflict. The goal of this Project was to identify factors that enabled congregational leaders not only to endure and survive conflict, but also to experience spiritual formation through it.

This research was delimited to leaders within Canadian evangelical congregations that were English-speaking. In this way, a specific segment of Canadian Christian congregational life could be examined, and variables of diverse theological and cultural positions minimized.

As a result the primary research question was: “**Among leaders of Canadian Evangelical congregations who have experienced congregational conflict directed at them personally, what critical factors do they claim have contributed to their own spiritual formation?**”

Some collateral questions were also asked to provide context and direction for this research. These questions included:

- What were the incidence and nature of such conflicts in the delimited sample?
- What were some of the variables that indicated a higher or lower incidence of such conflicts?
- Were the American and Canadian experiences of such conflict similar?

C. Some definitions and hypotheses.

The following are some of the working definitions and hypotheses used in this Project.

A “**congregational leader**” was described as a person in a recognized governance position within a congregation. In most church cultures this is typically a “pastor,” however, it may also include elders, directors, team or ministry leaders, and others.

Among the numerous available definitions of “**spiritual formation**” James Wilhoit’s was adopted: “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ When reviewing literature that was not overtly Christian, concepts such as “personal development” or “personal growth” were considered. Although these latter terms are more general than spiritual formation, common or useful principles were discerned from them that enriched an understanding of the scope and nature of spiritual formation.

A preliminary definition of “**conflict**” is a “disagreement between interdependent people; it is the perception of incompatible or mutually exclusive needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals.”⁵ This definition is specific to social or interpersonal conflict. Other aspects of conflict examined included role conflict (a subset of social conflict), and intrapersonal conflict (i.e., conflict within an individual).

One hypothesis of this research was that the source of conflict is deeper than indicated by the preliminary definition of conflict. This hypothesis proposed that a person’s or group’s identity is at or near the root of conflict. Identity is how a person or group answers the question “Who am I?” or “Who are we?”

Similarly, spiritual formation may be viewed as a process in which a person’s identity is progressively conformed to the essential humanity of Jesus Christ.

Insights from social sciences were drawn upon to inform this Project. These sources included conflict theories, family systems theory, and resilience theory.

D. Research conducted.

In 2011, this Project conducted a national on-line survey that invited responses from leaders of English-speaking congregations across Canada (the “Survey”). The six evangelical denominations associated as ACTS Seminaries at Trinity Western University agreed to participate.⁶ A partnership agreement was entered into with Outreach Canada to facilitate the collection and analysis of the data.

Participation in the Survey was voluntary, and the responses were anonymous.

The Survey asked twenty-eight questions. Some of these questions paralleled those in the CTI Report. Question 10 (Q10) asked: “At any time while you have served in a congregation in some leadership position, have you experienced conflict directed at you personally from with a congregation?” Those who responded with “yes” continued with the remainder of the Survey.

The Survey posed four core qualitative questions allowing leaders to tell their “stories” of conflict in their own ways. These core inquiries were:

- Q12 “Briefly describe one significant conflict directed against you personally as a leader in a congregation.”
- Q24 “Please provide any additional information that may give a better insight into how you were affected by the conflict. This may include any impact upon you, your spouse and other family members, your friends (both within and outside the congregation), your health, ministry focus, and the like.”
- Q27 “Comment on those factors that you found helpful or beneficial to you personally in responding to the conflict, in processing the conflict and resolving the conflict in respect to yourself, your family and your ministry.”
- Q28 “In retrospect, what (if anything), would you have done differently?”

A wealth of data was provided by 496 congregational leaders. The margin of error for this data was plus or minus 4.08%, 19 times out of 20. By comparison the CTI Report had 506 participants, and a margin of error of plus or minus 4.36%, 19 times out of 20.

E. Data analyzed.

The following are some highlights of the data.

1. The incidence of conflict is high.

Of respondents in this Project, 405 or 81.7% reported at least one incident of such conflict, and over 21% reported that conflict was current. When the data was limited to senior and solo pastors with more than six years of service, this number rose to 87.4% – almost 9 out 10. This latter group is relatively similar to the sample used in the CTI Report that reported 79% of American respondents had experienced this kind of conflict.⁷

It must be noted that these respondents continued to serve in congregational leadership. There are others who have left ministry altogether. As such, the incidence of such conflict is probably far higher than reported.

2. Canadian leaders may deal with such conflict differently than their American counterparts.

The experience of congregational leaders is, to some extent, different in the context of Canadian evangelical congregations than for their American counterparts. These differences include: (1) a higher rate of conflict directed at Canadian congregational leaders; (2) “control issues” was a more likely source of conflict against leaders in Canada; and, (3) more Canadian leaders approached their antagonists; whereas more American leaders resorted to public process for conflict resolution.

Although this conclusion is cautious and invites further research and evaluation, other research confirms differences between American and Canadian expressions of Christian faith. In a 2004 study, Donald Posterski and Andrew Grenville concluded that “Canadians often look to America for models of effective ministry.... We think they have the answers. We forget the questions may be different. Given the clear differences between the faith experiences of the two countries, it is clear the challenge of encouraging Canadians to integrate Church and faith demands a ‘made in Canada’ solution. The challenges are here. So are the solutions.”⁸

3. Eight factors.

The data identified eight factors that leaders claimed enabled them to survive, and in some cases grow in, situations of conflict. These factors are reviewed next.

F. Factors identified.

A review of current literature, an examination of biblical and theological principles, and an analysis of data from the Survey, identified eight factors in the lives of congregational leaders that enabled them to survive conflict and, in some cases, to become more Christ-like. These factors are connected as a matrix centered in the leader's intimate relationship with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here are some brief comments on these eight factors.

1. Existing intimacy with God.

This is not “depersonalized ... information about God” but “the *living* of everything we know about God: life, life, and more life.”⁹ This God is revealed as Jesus Christ. Arguably, an existing intimacy with God incorporates, at least potentially, the other seven factors. In turn, an existing intimacy with God is expressed in, and is nurtured by, active engagement in the other factors.

Although a crisis may intensify or mature a person’s intimacy with God, responses to the Survey attest that such intimacy was already a present and continuing relational engagement at the time of the crisis. Therefore, if it is not already present, the priority must be established, or re-established, in the life of every congregational leader to have an existing and growing intimacy with God.

2. Functioning biblical theology.

James K. A. Smith has stated that “Theology is not some intellectual option that makes us ‘smart’ Christians; it is the graced understanding that makes us faithful disciples.”¹⁰ If a congregational leader has dysfunctional core beliefs or theology then it can be expected that such a leader will interpret and behave in ways that are dysfunctional. At least five crucial areas of theology related to conflict were specifically identified by this Project: God’s sovereignty, human depravity, spiritual warfare, suffering, and forgiveness.

In the context of a congregational leader experiencing conflict directed at him or her from within a congregation, a functioning biblical theology acts as a compass that can bring an understanding of God’s presence and purpose into an otherwise disorienting situation. These leaders need to give continuous attention to biblical theology – listening to, engaging with, and living out this biblical theology in all of life.

3. Training for wholesome and competent behaviour.

Congregational leaders should be encouraged and enabled to continue to learn and train in areas that widen and deepen their competence in living godly lives and leading God’s people. As an example, several respondents referred to the benefits of training in conflict resolution or conflict management, while others commented that such training would have better equipped them for situations

of conflict. This confirms the position of some of the authors surveyed who observed that congregational leaders have not been adequately trained or prepared for conflict. At the congregational or interpersonal level, this training ought to include an understanding of what conflict is; the ways in which a leader can or should respond to conflict; and, approaches to conflict resolution, conflict management and conflict transformation. This does not necessarily make congregational leaders experts in conflict theory, but it should equip them to be wholesome and competent in how they understand and respond to conflict, especially when it is directed at them.

4. Practising spiritual disciplines.

Donald Whitney describes spiritual disciplines as “those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth.”¹¹ Spiritual disciplines include inward disciplines (e.g., meditation, prayer, fasting, study), outward disciplines (e.g., simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and corporate disciplines (e.g., confession, worship, guidance, celebration).¹² On a proportionate basis, practising spiritual disciplines was reported well over twice as often by those expressing language of spiritual formation than those who did not. Those disciplines most often mentioned in this Project were careful reading of Scripture (i.e., *lectio divina*) and praying, as well as self-examination and confession, fasting and solitude.

5. Being oriented to, or in, one’s call.

A biblically-grounded sense of purpose is a significant component of a wholesome and realistic grid for interpreting and responding to experiences of life, including a crisis of conflict. In addition, a leader’s defined purpose, ministry and location may change due to any number of factors including experience and maturity, gifting, and life-circumstances such as conflict.

6. Attending to emotional and mental health.

One realistic piece of advice for leaders who have experienced conflict directed at them from within a congregation is to “expect uncomfortable emotions.”¹³ Often responses to conflict include anger, betrayal, bitterness, shock, defensiveness, being overwhelmed, apathy and depression. A leader’s awareness of, and attention to, his or her emotional and mental health is important. Frequently respondents commented on the relationship of emotional turmoil, discouragement and depression with declining physical health.

The counsel and intervention of people competent in dealing with mental health issues, good friends, active incorporation of the other factors, and the passage of time, all contribute to attending to one’s emotional and mental well-being.

7. Attending to physical health.

Proper care of our physical bodies in the context of surviving conflict is important. A leader experiencing conflict should avoid practices that abuse the body such as exhaustion, poor diet, drug and alcohol misuse, and being overweight or underweight. Stress (i.e., distress or unhealthy stress) is frequently inherent in leadership and situations of conflict. “When stress is overwhelming or constant, it can cause mental and emotional difficulties as well as heart disease, obesity, asthma, ulcers, and allergies.”¹⁴

Although often overlooked, a healthy physical regime of exercise, nutritious diet and sufficient rest should not be underestimated. Congregational leaders need to cultivate life-giving rhythms of rest and action in all areas of their lives.

8. Relating to others.

Consideration of a leader’s relationship with others during an incident of conflict was limited to three sub-categories: antagonists, supporters, and interveners.

An antagonist is the person or group that directs conflict at the congregational leader. Greenfield observes that “pathological antagonists precipitate conflict that is unhealthy and destructive. It is important to note that not all conflict is of this character.”¹⁵ The leader should not dismiss the possibility that an issue may be legitimate, calling for self-examination, and perhaps confession.

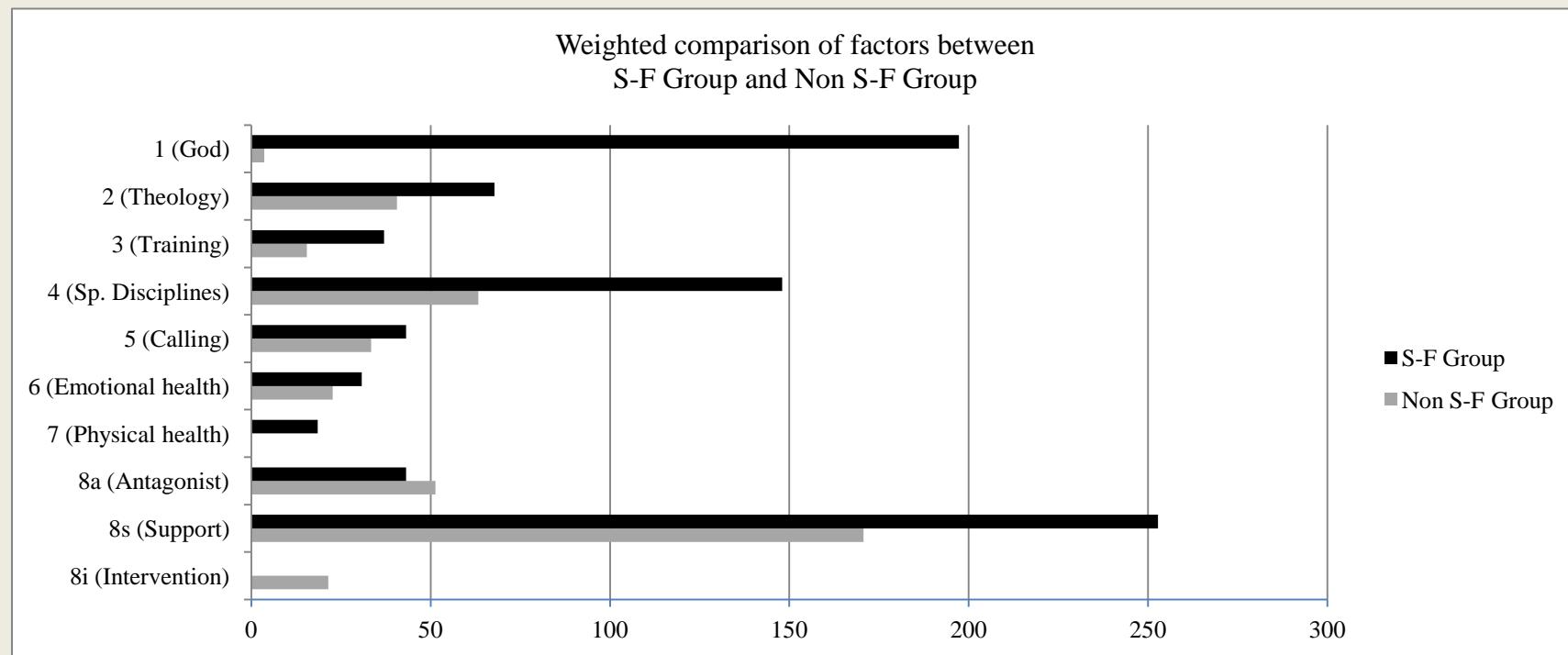
Leaders manifest something of their relationship with God and the value of the other person by the manner in which they treat their antagonists. In turn, a leader’s stance in conflict will be discerned by, and have an effect upon, others. Acquiring the discernment to distinguish the type of antagonist and to deal with the conflict wholesomely are important skills.

A second sub-group of people are those who are supportive of the leader. One author observes that “Entirely too many wounded ministers are attempting to handle their pain alone.”¹⁶ Supportive people are “there” for the leader, providing counsel, protection, orientation and encouragement. Such a person may be a spouse, good friend, counselor, mentor or confessor-confidant. Ken Haugk describes a confessor-confidant as “someone with whom you can share feelings, thoughts, and strategies for coping with an antagonistic situation. You can risk trusting a confessor-confidant, revealing to him or her your true feelings. He or she will respect confidences, display a measure of objectivity, listen intently, and offer responsible, timely advice.”¹⁷

In some cases a third sub-group intervened in situations of conflict. Intervention was usually from outside the congregation and took the form of a district superintendent or an independent third-party mediating or arbitrating the conflict.

G. Conflict and spiritual formation.

The final step in the analysis of the data was to identify what factors leaders experiencing conflict claimed had contributed to their own spiritual formation. A careful review of the data recognized fifty-five respondents who used language expressing an experience of spiritual formation. The eight factors were again present in this group, but in different proportions than the other respondents. A weighted comparison between those expressing spiritual formation (i.e., the “S-F Group”) and the others (i.e., the “Non S-F Group”) is set out in the following figure.



Those expressing spiritual formation through an incident of conflict exhibited a greater presence of all factors except for the two sub-categories of relationships with antagonists and with interveners. No interpretation is offered here regarding these two exceptions.

It is the first factor (an existing intimacy with God) that stands out in the responses of the S-F Group in contrast to the Non S-F Group. This does not mean that those in the Non S-F Group do not have a relationship with God, even an intimate relationship with God. However, an omission in mentioning intimacy with God may reveal deficient views of conflict, leadership and spiritual formation. What is clear is the correlation between respondents' expressions of an existing intimacy with God and their expressions of spiritual formation in situations of conflict.

H. Some recommendations.

Some observations and recommendations from this Project are:

1. Prepare for conflict.

The reports of conflict directed at Canadian evangelical congregational leaders are significant. For senior and solo pastors with more than six years of service, 87.4% reported at least one incident of such conflict. The probability is not "if" conflict will be experienced by a congregational leader, but "when."

As the experience of conflict is almost assured in any long-term service of congregational leadership, it is recommended that current and aspiring leaders be equipped to identify, respond to, and deal with conflict in a wholesome and competent manner.

2. Develop Canadian resources.

The general presumption that the American and Canadian experiences of conflict are the same or similar, is questionable. No doubt there are many similarities, but this Project has recognized some potentially significant dissimilarities. The data suggests Canadian congregational leaders experience a higher incidence of conflict directed at them personally; different reasons for the conflict; and, different responses to such conflict. This issue invites further research.

Extending the conclusion of Posterski and Grenville¹⁸ to the arena of conflict, American resources may not be adequate to deal with Canadian situations. As such, Canadian resources need to be developed.

3. Incorporate the eight factors into your life.

The presence of the eight factors was higher in those leaders who expressed spiritual formation in and through conflict. An obvious recommendation is to incorporate all of these factors into the lives of congregational leaders.

At the core of the life of every congregational leader there is the need to maintain, establish, or re-establish, an existing and growing intimacy with the one true God. From this intimacy should flow the other seven factors, which in turn nourish this intimacy. Of course, this should be the experience for every follower of Jesus – but leaders ought to manifest the power of Christ in all of life.

If these factors are present in a leader's life, the hope (if not the promise) is that when conflict occurs it will be a crucible for spiritual formation.

Endnotes:

¹ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 76 and 98.

² G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1.

³ Eric Reed, "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict," *Leadership* 25/4 (2004): 25-26. The report upon which this article is based was prepared by *Christianity Today International* and is entitled "Managing Church Conflict: The Source, Pastors Reactions and Its Effects,"

<http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/downloads/churchresearch/cr12.html> (accessed June 22, 2010). In this summary, this report is referred to as the "CTI Report."

⁴ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

⁵ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler, ed., *Making Peace with Conflict* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1999), 23. The definition supplied by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler is "a disagreement between interdependent people; it is the perception of incompatible or mutually exclusive needs or goals. Put more simply, conflict equals differences plus tension."

⁶ These denominations are (in alphabetical order) the Baptist General Conference of Canada (BGCC), the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC), the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada (CMAC), the Evangelical Free Church of Canada (EFCC), the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada (FEBCC), and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). In or about May 2010, CMAC amicably withdrew from ACTS in order to fulfil its obligations at Ambrose University College (Calgary, Alberta). Despite having withdrawn from ACTS at the time the Survey was conducted, CMAC readily agreed to participate in this research.

⁷ Participants in the CTI Report were composed of older leaders, 97% of whom described themselves as senior or solo pastors. The remaining 3% were described simply as "other." The data from this Project used for comparison with the CTI Report was limited to senior and solo pastors with lengths of service over six years. Although these two groups may not be identical, it is argued that the similarities of the two groups are sufficient to support the conclusion.

⁸ Donald Posterski and Andrew Grenville, "Like Thy Neighbour?" <http://www.christianity.ca/netcommunity/page.aspx?pid=2770> (accessed September 21, 2011).

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith as quoted by Darren C. Marks, "The Mind Under Grace: Why a Heady Dose of Doctrine is Crucial to Spiritual Formation," http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=87055 (accessed December 3, 2010).

¹¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 15.

¹² This list of spiritual disciplines was taken from Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹³ Rodney Crowell, "Spiritual Survival for a Forced Exit," *Leadership* 10/1 (1989): 28.

¹⁴ Vidula Bal, Michael Campbell, and Sharon McDowell-Larsen, "In Focus/Managing Stress: Surviving the Pressure Cooker," *Leadership in Action* 28/2 (2008): 20.

¹⁵ Guy Greenfield, *The Wounded Minister: Healing from and Preventing Personal Attacks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 40.

¹⁶ Greenfield, *Wounded Minister*, 220.

¹⁷ Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 114.

¹⁸ Posterski and Grenville, "Like Thy Neighbour?"