
Acts 2 Journey Cohort
Pastor and Spouse Session
Dealing with Conflict



Use the QR code to visit Pastor and Spouse Session Resources page.

Here, you'll find video segments of the teaching for the pastor and spouse leadership sessions for all four Acts 2 Journey Retreats.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE STAKEHOLDER SYMMETRY.....2

FIVE RESPONSES TO THE GOSPEL.....5

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT CONFLICT.....7

COMMANDMENTS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION.....9

BUILDING A CULTURE OF HEALTHY CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.....11

CASE STUDIES.....12

Introduction

Nobody likes conflict—at least no one who’s healthy. But every journey is likely to experience moments of conflict, regardless of how amazing the intended destination might be. Remember that as the children of Israel journeyed across the wilderness, they were blessed with miraculous moments of deliverance and provision, clear direction from the skies above, one of history’s most remarkable leaders, and the perfect destination for a nation of former slaves—and *still there was conflict*.

As we attempt to lead our local churches toward the vision God has given us and the impact He wants us to make in our communities and beyond, we can anticipate moments of conflict. When those moments arise, our ability to navigate them effectively can become critically important. In fact, our Acts 2 Research has shown us that healthy conflict management is the second most important indicator of a healthy church. If we manage conflict well, we free ourselves to pursue God’s vision more completely.

Lyle Schaller says, “On any given day three-quarters of all churches’ ministry is significantly reduced because of nonproductive and destructive conflict. Conflict is so severe in one-quarter of those churches that the conflict has to be reduced before the church can even accomplish anything. The average pastor spends 20 percent of his time with church conflict.”

In this session, we will give attention to many elements of conflict management and resolution, but we want to give first priority to the conflicts that can arise amidst our efforts to bring change to our church. Managing other types of conflict such as those generated by personality differences or relationship struggles will have their moment in our discussion, but the Acts 2 Journey is just that—a journey—and we need to be prepared for the moments of conflict that can arise when we identify a vision or direction for our local church, choose the values that can move us in the right direction, and implement the strategies that will help us ultimately become the church we are meant to be.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that the right vision for our local church will be the “path of least resistance.” There will be moments of conflict ahead—moments you’ll want to manage effectively.

The following is an adaptation from *How to Break Growth Barriers*, chapter 8, “Should You Use More Than One Leadership Style?”

The Stakeholder Symmetry

1. Regardless of titles, stakeholders have _____.

Titles can open the door to the opportunity to build influence, but in any established organization, titles often don’t reveal where the greatest influence can be found. Former leaders, people who have impacted others, and even established family structures can shape the true influence structure of the local church and the wise leader will need to account for these stakeholders as he or she navigates the road ahead.

2. Stakeholders determine decisions based on resources they _____.

The local church marches forward largely on the people and financial resources that are provided by its members. People choose to give of their time and their wealth and can use this decision-making privilege to exert a measure of control on those who lead.

Simply put, the local church will ultimately do those things that the people believe in as those are the areas where they will invest their time and the offerings needed to fulfill them.

3. _____ and _____ influence their behavior.

As we begin to understand the influence and control of stakeholders, we often see the congregation's response to our leadership dividing itself into four primary groups according to both the individual's age and length of time in the congregation, particularly as these time elements relate to the current leader.

Age, Tenure, and Conflict

When considering potential for conflict, a pastor will find some common realities among those who are older and those who are younger, as well as, those who have been at the church longer or have come to the church since pastor stepped into leadership. Using these categories, we can divide the congregation into four groups, each of which must typically be managed in its own unique manner when change is the goal.

1. Younger Newcomers

- a. Younger than the _____
- b. Shorter _____ than the pastor
- c. See pastor as the _____.
- d. Follow pastoral leadership without _____.
- e. It is easiest to win people _____ to _____ years younger.

2. Older Newcomers

- a. Older than the pastor
- b. _____ tenure than the pastor
- c. Agree in some areas, but not in others
- d. Consider themselves more _____
- e. Lead with suggestions, not _____.
- f. Can't expect them to completely trust leadership without adequate _____.

3. Older Longtermers

- a. Most difficult to lead
- b. Longer _____ than the pastor
- c. _____ than the pastor
- d. Requires _____.
- e. Founding pastor may be an exception.

4. Younger Longtermers

- a. Usually children of Older Longtermers
- b. Tendency to be ambivalent

Leadership Observations

- **Pastors must lead each group differently.** While certainly each individual presents his or her own distinct needs and may vary somewhat from others in their group, these four groups will exhibit consistent patterns in how they approach their leader and in what it will require of that leader to effectively lead them.
- **Older Longtermers and Younger Newcomers usually the most distinct from each other in both identity and leadership needs.** This shouldn't surprise us as these two groups have the least in common—one has been around life and the church longer than the pastor while the other is newer in both ways.
- **Pastors tend to be more comfortable with Younger Newcomers.** We expect that establishing leadership influence would be easiest among those who most easily see us as their leader. Since we are the only pastor they have known in this local church setting, these Younger Newcomers will most easily see us in that leadership role without also remembering others who have sat in our current chair.
- **Pastors tend to resent the presumed lack of support from Older Longtermers.** These friends often form our greatest challenge, largely because of the additional “baggage” they may bring to our relationship—baggage that other leaders helped them pack. And these Older Longtermers must also adapt to a leader who is younger, an adjustment some find difficult to make.
- **Don't alienate Older Longtermers if possible. They may be the major financial support.** Every pastor understands this reality. While he or she may be anxious to bring the changes needed to reach those who are not a part of our local church, those efforts will typically be financed by those who currently are a part of our local church. Helping the existing church members prioritize the needs of others will never be automatic and is becoming more challenging as the culture's “consumer mindset” more fully infiltrates the local church.

- **The pastor must employ different leadership styles for each group.** Until we begin to see these different groups and understand their unique needs, we likely won't begin to find the best ways to lead them.

Five Responses to the Gospel

Of course, there are many ways to identify the differences among those within your congregation, and other ways can bring their own valuable input to our efforts to manage conflict. One such way is to consider the varying responses to the Gospel among the people of our local congregation.

As you know, we find our mission in both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The Great Commission calls us to “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations...” while the Great Commandment compels us to “Love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.” In *A Spirit-Empowered Church*, we list five classes of people in the church:

1. Unbelievers – these are individuals within our congregation who have yet to respond to either the message of the Gospel themselves or commit themselves to the Great commandment’s call to love. Yet these individuals are a part of our congregation and will impact our pursuit of the change we seek in our ministry efforts.
2. Believers – these are individuals within our congregation who may insist that they have responded to Christ’s promise of salvation, but they have yet to truly commit to the requirements of discipleship, such as the Great Commandment’s call to love. Of course, “believe” can be a tricky word in the local church as some will think that mere mental assent to truth is enough, while the biblical authors use the term to identify those who believe enough to live as though they do. Here, we use the word “believers” to describe the first group—those who acknowledge the Gospel and claim to have received it, but have yet to allow its implications to impact how they live. Frankly, this group can often pose the greatest challenges to the efforts of local church leaders.
3. Disciples – this is the group our ministry efforts seek to establish. They have responded to the message of the Great Commission and are seeking to grow in their relationship with Christ through daily obedience to His commands—including the Great Commandment. We might be tempted to think that everyone in a healthy church has made it to this level, but our efforts to make disciples will always find some at the first two levels among us.
4. Servant-leaders – this response identifies those among the group of Disciples who have found or are finding their place of ministry within the church and the community itself. These have moved past a primary focus on receiving from our ministry efforts and have joined us in prioritizing ministry to others.
5. Reproducers—disciples who make disciples. These friends are the truly missional disciples among us. They no longer serve because help is needed, but the heart of the Gospel and the mission Christ has given to us pound in their hearts and drip from their efforts. As the number of Reproducers in our congregation increases, so does the number of Unbelievers, Believers, and Disciples that we can manage and minister to effectively.

Since there can be a wide variance in the motivations of each of these groups, leading them toward change can be challenging at times. The first two groups continue to be motivated by what they believe will benefit themselves while Disciples are growing in their awareness of the needs of others—something the latter two groups are committed to more fully.

So, the potential for conflict here is driven not by age or tenure, but by _____.

Each group will require the pastor to be aware of their unique motivations as ideas for change are presented and implemented within the local church.

Growth and Conflict

While numeric growth is not the only indicator of church health, with few exceptions the infusion of new people by conversion or by transfer usually results in more people to care for and minister to.

At what size does it become difficult or impossible for a single person, the pastor, to care for the people?

“The word *pastor* means shepherd or sheepherder, and I do not object to or criticize that role. I am, however, laying the foundation for my conviction that the concept of *pastor* needs a broader, fuller definition than that of solo sheepherder if we are truly to multiply disciples, as Jesus commanded in His Great Commission. (Matt. 28:19-20)”

—Carl George and Warren Bird, *How to Break Growth Barriers*

The authors of *How to Break Growth Barriers* suggest that there is a time during the life and growth of a church when the pastor needs to shift from being a “doer” and become a “developer.” They even suggest that a pastor should become more of a rancher than just a shepherd. Although Jesus called Himself the “good shepherd,” and we should never abandon that metaphor, He modeled both individual care and a broader approach to caring for many sheep. His life demonstrates that He spent much of His time growing others to do ministry rather than doing all of the ministry Himself.

However, in smaller churches when a pastor begins to shift from being a “doer” to a “developer,” conflict can sometimes result. People may sometimes think, *We pay him/her to do the work of the ministry*. Of course, this isn’t the biblical idea for any size congregation, but in smaller, more family-oriented congregations, the primary caregiver is often the pastor.

When a church begins to grow, the pastor must navigate this shift. A key component to almost every growth barrier requires the leader to recruit, train, and empower others to do much of the ministry, including some of the areas he has been modeling for years.

As that transition occurs, how does a pastor survive the criticism, chaos, and conflict? How does Ephesians 4:12 become a reality? Clearly the healthiest approach is to develop people. Frankly, if a church would move beyond the 200 level, they’ll need to develop a way of leading and governing that goes beyond the energy and personal availability of its pastor.

Observations about Conflict

1. Conflict is _____

Any deepening relationship will experience conflict. As pastors, we have provided such counsel to the newly married, but this truth is valid for congregations too. We cannot be growing closer to one another or pursuing a path forward together without some conflict arising.

2. Confrontation is _____. Why is it difficult to confront?

- a. Fear of being _____

John Maxwell identifies the second level of his 5 Levels of Influence as the Relationship level and wise pastors know that building and deepening relationships with their people form an important part of the job description. Well, conflict seems to risk that, or even hinder those efforts, doesn't it?.

- b. Fear of being _____

Few things are more frustrating to us than being misunderstood, our motives misjudged, or our feelings misread. In conflict, people tend to make assumptions about the thoughts, attitudes, and motives of those on the other side of their conflict.

- c. Fear of _____

Given that our connection with people leans heavily on their voluntary willingness to be a part of our local church, rejection risks more than just the emotional toll it may bring for us. Pastors know that conflict often and sometimes easily ends one's relationship with a local church—sometimes even their own.

- d. Fear of making things _____

Some pastors, especially those who are highly relational in their leadership approach, choose to avoid conflict in hopes that it will either resolve itself or dissipate without causing any further issues. They'd like it to go away so they don't risk making matters worse by addressing it unsuccessfully.

- e. Fear of the _____

Of course, there could be deeper issues behind what seems like a small conflict. It's possible that the other individual has been piling up offenses or has a great deal of influence with others. Some pastors avoid conflict because they are afraid of how the situation might grow or reveal other problems or participants.

- f. Fear of sharing _____

Dealing with our own negative feelings is never easy. As leaders, pastors cannot be careless in their management of their own emotions and often feel they must hide their true feelings in difficult situations. Pastors are people too and sometimes find it difficult to express their feelings in healthy ways so avoiding that risk can seem preferred to addressing issues that need to be resolved.

- g. Lack of confrontation skills.

Sometimes we just don't know how to deal with conflict in an effective manner, having never learned the path of effective confrontation or seen it modeled by leaders in our own lives.

3. Causes of conflict

- a. Human nature. H.B. London: "Cain had a problem with God, but he took it out on his brother.

When facing difficult issues, people can draw from the negative emotions they feel toward other people, places, or situations. Of course, this can create or magnify the intensity current situation beyond what is reasonable.

- b. _____ people

In times of conflict, people often act out of their own experience or deal with issues in ways that they've experienced from others. So, if my parents didn't manage conflict well, I may have learned their ways.

- c. _____ people

Conflict can also indicate that attention is needed to other matters. "Hurting people hurt people." It seems there is almost always another story behind the one we're currently engaging.

- d. People with other _____

Sometimes people create conflict as a means to another end. They can desire attention, even if it's an unhealthy kind, or they may be seeking to increase their own influence through less than honorable means. In these cases, we can discover that the conflict was never really about the conflict itself.

- e. Poor _____

If we do not teach others how to engage conflict in a healthy manner, we destine ourselves to live with the unhealthy approaches they have discovered on their own. Jesus taught often concerning healthy approaches to conflict and used times of conflict among His disciples as "teachable moments." As their leader, He recognized both His responsibility to help them manage such areas of life and His opportunity to improve the quality of the lives ahead of them by teaching them to manage conflict effectively and wisely.

4. Which conflicts should I engage?

Of course, if a pastor tries to address every conflict that occurs within the local church, he or she won't get much else done and they certainly won't enjoy the work they've taken on. So, which conflicts must be addressed?

- a. Conflicts between me and others

Certainly pastors must engage any conflict where they are a primary participant. We cannot afford to ignore any moment where people may have an issue with us.

b. Conflicts among my leaders

For our leadership team to be healthy, we must manage moments of conflict well. A pastor may need to assist such efforts by bringing conflicting parties together and helping the resolution forward; however, pastors shouldn't solve these conflicts themselves as the participants need to learn how to address their own matters effectively.

c. Conflicts between my leaders and others in the church

Here's an area that often contributes to an unhealthy church culture. Conflicts between a church leader and someone else in the congregation must be resolved. Many churches have a "stench" of unresolved conflict that the congregation has grown accustomed to, and they don't realize that newer congregants can smell that unresolved conflict fully.

Again, pastor should not solve these conflicts, but must make certain that healthy efforts are made and even assist by guiding those efforts where necessary.

d. Conflicts between people

These are the conflicts that pastors cannot become embroiled in. While the pastor may need to assist on occasion, trying to engage every conflict within the congregation is not possible nor wise. When leaders model a healthy approach to managing conflict, and healthy teaching on this matter is regularly provided, people have the tools they need to deal with their conflicts with others. And they should be expected to do so.

Pastors may, at times, need to intervene when conflicts between people have begun to spread to others in the congregation. As modeled by Jesus with His disciples, such situations can provide "teachable moments" but they require willing learners if they are to be successful.

Commandments of Conflict Resolution

1. Matthew 18

Given that Christians rightly prioritize biblical direction in their decision-making, one can find it puzzling that so few adhere to the Bible's clear direction concerning moments of conflict.

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.'" Matthew 18:15-17

Healthy conflict management is one of the most critical traits of a healthy local church. To be such a congregation, this biblical directive to deal directly with those involved proves absolutely essential. Too often, local church conflicts either spread too quickly to be resolved fully or in a healthy manner or the conflicts simply go unresolved because leaders were unwilling to address them. In truth, local church leaders have proven to be just as likely to neglect this biblical prescription as are those that they lead.

2. Understand the Goals of Confrontation

- a. _____ understanding

If you're going to address conflict or confront individuals in order to bring correction, your deepest motives must be acknowledged. Approach every situation with a mind that is open to learn the real story behind the behavior. Simply put—Be a learner! Engage others with a desire to understand rather than predetermining what you suppose is happening or has occurred. Often, better understanding will provide a clearer path to dealing effectively with a situation.

b. Positive _____

Being right is never as important as being better. Conflict can offer valuable opportunities to take positive steps, whether by achieving greater understanding, improving our efforts, growing relationships or even deepening trust. Often the problem itself proves to be a path toward even greater opportunities to solve such problems together.

c. Growing _____

While conflict isn't fun, addressing it does open the door to improving relationships. Often conflict can help us understand one another better and appreciate the efforts to heal the issues that have risen between us.

3. Look at Yourself

Self-awareness is often lacking in the midst of conflict. People tend to become so heavily focused on the behaviors of others that they fail to observe what is evident in their own. To effectively resolve conflict, one must look closely at his or her own attitude and actions and be certain that motivations and behaviors are brought into line. Leaders who cannot govern their own conduct will never be able to effectively resolve conflicts with others.

Remember, if Bill and Sue have a problem, and Bill and Bob have a problem, and Bill and Jane have a problem, the problem is probably _____. Don't be Bill.

4. Don't Delay Efforts to Resolve.

Given that even Christians fail to act in a healthy manner in times of conflict, a delay in addressing the matter in a biblical and healthy way can allow opportunity for greater problems to develop. If the conflict must be dealt with (according to the types previously discussed), then it should be dealt with in a timely manner. While acting too quickly (when emotions are high or facts are lacking) may not be wise, postponing action can allow the matter to spread to others.

When conflict arises, we are tempted to . . .

- a. _____ it.
- b. Procrastinate.
- c. Ask someone else to _____ it.
- d. Rationalize it.
- e. Don't let _____ feelings toward someone build up.
- f. Be firm but _____ and focus on facts and solutions.
- g. Remember "_____ with all; _____ to a few; unresolved conflict with _____."

Building a Culture of Healthy Conflict Management

1. Regularly teach and preach concerning biblical conflict management and provide clear instruction on how we manage conflict in our congregation.
2. Follow the _____ principle. Find the 1% you can agree on and give it your 100% effort. Start with what you share in common to build a foundation on which you can address your differences.
3. Love people more than _____. If someone loves their opinions more than people, they will defend their opinions and hurt people.
4. Give others _____ room. Let them save face. When people acknowledge their error or wrong behavior, shift your focus to recovery and rebuilding.
5. Learn to be flexible. Thomas Jefferson: *“In matters of principle, stand like a rock. In matters of taste, swim with the current.”* Some level of compromise may be possible and may help you preserve a friendship.
6. Check your own _____. Remember that the focus must be to resolve an issue, not defeat, reject, or punish a person.
7. Don't overreact to conflicts. Maintain your own emotional level so you can be at your best in finding the path forward. Don't engage or seek to address conflict when your own emotions are running high.
8. Take the high _____. Learn this principle: *“It may not be my fault, but it is my responsibility.”* As a leader, you must deal with issues of conflict wisely and carefully...but you must deal with them!

“If possible, so far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men.”
Romans 12:18 (NASB)

CASE STUDIES

1. Pastor Dave has been looking forward to today's opportunity to have coffee with two couples from the church—the Wilsons and the Martins. When Pastor Dave arrives, he discovers that these friends want to discuss their frustrations with Sam and Heather, their small group leaders. It doesn't take long for him to discover that they've accumulated quite a list of complaints, though Pastor Dave isn't convinced that any of these matters justify the level of emotion being expressed. How should Pastor Dave handle this situation?
2. After last Sunday's message, Pastor Kevin noted that Steve—a long-time and occasionally critical Sunday school teacher—walked past him abruptly and didn't acknowledge Pastor Kevin's effort to greet him. When he saw Steve across the gymnasium at their kids' school concert on Tuesday night, Pastor Kevin seemed convinced that Steve refused to make eye contact and was likely upset about something. What should Pastor Kevin do?
3. Billy, a deacon in Pastor Sarah's congregation, called today to unload concerning a troubling conflict with Katie, his long-time assistant and fellow church member. After a heated discussion where unkind things were said by both parties, Katie quit her job abruptly, leaving Billy (who tends to be a volatile person) extremely angry. Now Billy wants Pastor Sarah to bring Katie under church discipline given the things she said to him today. He also suggests that he won't be a part of a church that allows its members to treat leaders such as himself in such a manner. What should Pastor Sarah do?
4. At the conclusion of tonight's deacon meeting, Pastor Jim's question "Is there anything else" prompted Bob to present a problem. According to Bob, "A lot of people are upset with things that happened at last weekend's outreach." The others in the room seem unaware of this, but Bob is insistent, even suggesting that some people may leave the church over this matter. What should Pastor Jim do?
5. In the midst of the church's annual business meeting, Nancy questioned elements of the financial report and responded sarcastically to the answers provided by the church treasurer. The treasurer was clearly offended and responded abruptly to Nancy, causing some murmuring throughout the room. Pastor Dale could sense that this conflict would likely escalate if something wasn't done quickly. What should Pastor Dale do?