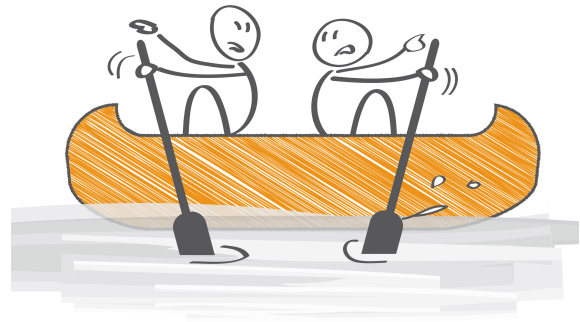# Pastoral Conflict Management Skills:
A "Game Changer" or a "Derailer?"

It is an unfortunate fact that conflict and pastoring seem to go hand-in-hand. Over 75% of congregations surveyed report some level of conflict in the past five years[1], while over 80% of pastors indicate they are experiencing conflict in their church[2] and 26% indicate that their predecessors left their position due to conflict.[3] The current social and political environment exacerbates these challenges, as the likelihood for congregational conflict – and conflict with the pastor – increases when there isn't a common understanding of truth and facts.

As clergy face these charged situations, they often bump into a fundamental skill gap: a lack of training or affinity for proactively managing conflict. Terry Linhart comments, "Most leaders enter ministry with very few skills in conflict management. Schooling doesn't develop those skills, and most organizations don't have it as a part of a training program."[4] To make matters worse, issues and conflict within the church often are projected back on the pastor. In their book *Pastors in Transition,* researchers Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger comment, "A … recurrent theme is an assumption that if there's a conflict in the church, the pastor must somehow be at fault."[5] They further found that conflict is one of the two main reasons that clergy decide to leave local parish ministry (the other being to pursue specialized ministry).[6] As Robert Gauger and Leo Christie appropriately summarize, "Conflict resolution skills may be among the most vital tools needed by a pastor from the first day of his or her tenure in a given church."[7]

While conflict was central to Jesus' ministry, most pastors have a negative view of conflict. A *Christianity Today* survey conducted in 2004 found that the top four responses pastors had to a recent conflict were negative feelings (defensive, angry, overwhelmed, shocked). This same survey highlighted the top negative consequences of congregational conflict (68% identified damaged relationships as a cost of conflict, while 58% indicated sadness and 32% reported a decline in attendance).[8] While conflict can have negative costs, a central tenet of successful conflict management is recognition that conflict is inevitable, a necessity at times, and can be **either harmful or helpful**. Research indicates that congregations that deal with conflict openly are healthier than congregations who don't.[9] Moreover, when pastors who had experienced congregational conflict were asked, "Will any good come from this conflict?", 94% answered "Yes".[10]

The distinction between healthy and unhealthy conflict is often in how we approach it. In her research on conflict management responses in pastors, Carol Kuzmochka highlights the differences between "healthy" and "unhealthy" disagreements. She characterizes "healthy" disagreements as being based on respectful and intentional choices, demonstrating a desire to listen actively to understand, showing clear empathy and compassion to the other side, and having a commitment to collaborate on solutions that make both the community and key relationships stronger. Kuzmochka contrasts this with "unhealthy" conflict that is dominated by negative reactions including anger, aggression, domination, fearful avoidance, a lack of empathy, and poor listening.[11] This comparison has significant implications for how we approach conflict. Linhart insightfully comments, "It's not THAT conflict happens but HOW

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we do conflict that matters… If leaders can't learn how to manage conflict, they will not last long in ministry."[12]

One of the most insightful conflict management models that has been developed is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI Model).[13] Created by Ken Thomas and Ralph Kilmann from the University of Pittsburgh, the model identifies five different modes or approaches for managing conflict, based on two factors: the level of assertiveness (trying to satisfy your own concerns) and the level of cooperativeness (trying to satisfy others' concerns). The *five conflict modes* in the TKI model are: *avoiding* (low assertiveness/low cooperativeness), *accommodating* (low assertiveness/higher cooperativeness), *compromising* (medium assertiveness/medium cooperativeness), *competing or confronting* (high assertiveness/low cooperativeness) and *collaborating* (high assertiveness/high cooperativeness). The TKI model emphasizes the importance of being able to flex between the five conflict modes based on the specific situation, as no conflict mode is inherently "better" or "worse" than others but is largely situational. Thomas and Kilmann note that each of these conflict approaches are appropriate in some circumstances and inappropriate in others. The key to successful conflict management, they note, is to identify when to use a particular conflict mode and to have the skills, experience, and confidence to successfully do so.

Research relative to pastors and the TKI model reveals several interesting tendencies with regards to the five conflict modes. First, clergy tend to score higher than average for conflict *avoidance*, indicating that many may tend to overuse this conflict strategy.[14] While this may have the benefit of side-stepping the immediate issue, research has shown that overuse of the avoiding conflict mode correlates to higher burnout levels.[15] A different survey on pastors and conflict indicated a common regret of pastors wishing they had responded more quickly to specific conflict situations they faced.[16] Pastor and author Peter Scazzero comments on the impact of his own tendency to avoid conflict: "I discovered that I couldn't build God's kingdom with lies and pretense. I found out the things I ignored eventually erupted into much bigger problems later." He challenges pastors to avoid being "false peacemakers" by avoiding conflict and appeasing others too frequently.[17]

A second tendency for many clergy is to overuse the *accommodating* mode, as research indicates clergy tend to score higher than average for this approach, as well.[18] This mode has the objective of maintaining harmonious situations by prioritizing others' concerns over your own. Similar to conflict avoidance, overuse of the accommodating mode has been shown to correlate to higher burnout levels.[19] Consistently overaccommodating can also reduce your influence or impact over time, as others become comfortable not focusing appropriate attention or focus on your concerns or viewpoints.

Relative to the *compromising* mode, research indicates clergy tend to score average to below average.[20] Compromising often has the objective of fairness and typically is a pragmatic, flexible approach of "give and take" that helps to expedite less critical decisions. Compromising looks to find a relatively quick middle-ground solution that partially satisfies both parties, ideally giving each party something they prioritize or that is important to them. Some issues with compromising are that neither party is likely fully satisfied. In addition, because the focus is often on finding a quick mutually-acceptable position, the level of dialogue and understanding can often remain at a surface level, creating the potential for misunderstandings in the future.

Research indicates that many pastors tend to score lower, on average, in using the **competing or confronting** mode to resolve conflict.[21] At first blush this is not particularly surprising given the unique nature of the pastoral role and the fact that it is healthy to have a general bias to use this mode rather sparingly given the potential for relational friction. Nevertheless, there are clear situations where pastors should feel comfortable being more assertive and considering using this conflict mode – including when unpopular decisions need to be taken, or when quick, decisive action is required. This is also a mode that can move things forward when consensus decisions are simply not possible, and also be a mode of self-protection when others take advantage of your tendency to avoid confrontation. While it is critical to carefully monitor and assuage relationships any time you use the competing or confronting mode, this may be an approach to consider if you are finding yourself feeling that you are powerless or without influence or if you are uncomfortable taking a firm position despite recognizing that one is needed.

The final conflict mode, **collaborating**, tends to be one where many pastors score average to slightly above average relative to the full TKI database.[22] This conflict mode seeks to find solutions that meet your interests as well as the interests of others, seeking to find win/win solutions or approaches that increase both understanding and the strength of relationships. While this mode can take a good deal of time and energy to work through, this strategy can be a strong natural fit for clergy working with lay leadership relative to direction and vision of the church and its ministries. An important consideration is to ensure that the conditions are right to collaborate, including having sufficient time for the necessary dialogue and reflection, satisfactory interpersonal skills among all stakeholders, a willingness to find solutions that integrate multiple viewpoints and considerations, openness to alternative ideas, and a strong level of trust between all parties.

Our choice of conflict mode can be heavily influenced by our personal and family histories, as well as our past experiences and relationships. We have all had the experience of responding to a situation either internally or externally in an amped up manner (e.g., at a "7" or an "8" on a 10-point scale) when, in retrospect the situation called for a more tempered response (e.g., maybe a "3" or a "4"). Knowing how our history and our shadows can influence our views of and reaction to conflict can be a critical self-awareness element for any leader or pastor. Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima note, "The great majority of conflicts in leadership are the result of the leader's own sensibilities being offended, his ideas being rejected, his being outperformed by a staff member or not receiving the attention and respect he feels he deserves, and various other petty issues. These often become areas of conflict because they touch some raw nerve within the leader's dark side."[23]

Knowing your natural conflict mode tendencies is a critical element of self-awareness as a pastor and as a leader. Moreover, being able to utilize each of the five modes depending on the situation you are facing can make the difference between conflict being a positive force or a derailer for your ministry. If you are interested in exploring your personal conflict management modes, an abbreviated conflict mode assessment based on the TKI model is attached to the end of this article (or via weblink). You can also consider taking the more comprehensive TKI assessment, which provides additional diagnostics and understanding as to when to use a particular conflict management mode, by contacting Chris Clark at chrisclark@northernelmmentoringgroup.com. Chris has been certified in the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict

Mode Instrument and has used it to provide valuable insights in numerous pastoral mentoring engagements.

Reflection Questions:

- What relational, leadership or societal issues are creating a level of tension or conflict in your ministry?
- How have you traditionally thought about conflict? As a negative? A positive? As something to be avoided? As an opportunity?
- What specific situations can you identify where you may be underusing or overusing a particular conflict management mode?

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as "The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health" through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

Notes

[1]Dudley, C. S., Zingery, T., & Breeden, D. (n.d.). *Insights Into Congregational Conflict*. Faith Communities Today. 8.

[2]Lifeway Research 2015, cited by Hall, H. (2016, March). Hard Job, High Calling. *Christianity Today Pastors*.
https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=132964.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Linhart, T. (2017). *The Self-Aware Leader: Discovering Your Blind Spots to Reach Your Ministry Potential*. InterVarsity Press. 127.

[5]Hoge, D., & Wenger, J. (2005). *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Ministry*. Wm Eerdmans Publishing. 95.

[6]Ibid. 78.

[7]Gauger, R., & Christie, L. (2013). *Clergy Stress and Depression*. https://www.pdresources.org/course/index/6/1132/Clergy-Stress-and-Depression. 41.

[8]Reed, E. (2004, Fall). Leadership Surveys Church Conflict. *Christianity Today Pastors*.
https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2004/fall/6.25.html.

[9]Dudley, C. S., Zingery, T., & Breeden, D. (n.d.). *Insights Into Congregational Conflict.* Faith Communities Today. 4.

[10]Reed, E. (2004, Fall). Leadership Surveys Church Conflict. *Christianity Today Pastors*.
https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2004/fall/6.25.html.

[11]Kuzmochka, C. (2019). *Towards Healthy Conflict Responses for Pastoral Ministers: Drawing on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Response Theory and Survey*. Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry.
https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/597/573. 127.

[12]Linhart, T. (2017). *The Self-Aware Leader: Discovering Your Blind Spots to Reach Your Ministry Potential*. InterVarsity Press. 128.

[13]Thomas, K. W. (2002). *Introduction to Conflict Management: Improving Performance Using the TKI*. CPP.

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[14]Gortner, D., Mouzon, A., & Burruss, A. (2012). *2012 Transition into Ministry Impact Study: Looking at Who We Are*. Virginia Theological Seminary.

[15]Beebe, R. (2007). Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *15*(2), 257.

[16]Reed, E. (2004, Fall). Leadership Surveys Church Conflict. *Christianity Today Pastors*. https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2004/fall/6.25.html.

[17]Scazzero, P. (2006). *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*. Thomas Nelson. 41-42, 176-177.

[18]Gortner, D., Mouzon, A., & Burruss, A. (2012). *2012 Transition into Ministry Impact Study: Looking at Who We Are*. Virginia Theological Seminary.

[19]Beebe, R. (2007). Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *15*(2), 257.

[20]Gortner, D., Mouzon, A., & Burruss, A. (2012). *2012 Transition into Ministry Impact Study: Looking at Who We Are*. Virginia Theological Seminary.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]McIntosh, G. L., & Rima, S. D. (2007). Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How to Become an Effective Leader by Confronting Potential Failures. Baker Books. 152.

Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about conflict management, I recommend the following resources:

- *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Books) by Ken Sande.
- *The Self-Aware Leader: Discovering Your Blind Spots to Reach Your Ministry Potential* (InterVarsity Press) by Terry Linhart.
- *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How to Become An Effective Leader by Confronting Potential Failures* (Baker Books) by Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including conflict management. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in possibly joining a pastoral self-care cohort or if you are interested in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your ability to manage conflict or other leadership and management skills, please contact Chris Clark of Northern Elm Mentoring Group (email to ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

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Conflict Resolution Styles Survey

Based on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Model

Sources:

Kuzmochka, C. (2019). *Towards Healthy Conflict Responses for Pastoral Ministers: Drawing on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Response Theory and Survey.* Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry. https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/597/573.

Levi, D. (2016). *Group Dynamics for Teams.* Sage Publications.

Instructions:

Use the following scale to indicate the level of your agreement with each of the following statements about how you deal with conflict. (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

1.	I try to avoid stating my opinion in order to not create disagreements.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	When there is a disagreement, I try to satisfy the needs of the other people involved.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I use my influence to get my position accepted by others.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I try to find the middle course to resolve differences.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I try to discuss an issue with others to find a solution acceptable to all of us.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I keep my opinions to myself if they disagree with others' opinions.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I usually go along with the desires of others in a conflict situation.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I am usually firm about advocating my side of an issue.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	When I negotiate, I usually win some and lose some.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I like to work with others to find solutions to a problem that satisfy everyone.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I try to avoid disagreements with others.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I often go along with the recommendations of others in a conflict.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I stick to my position during a conflict.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I negotiate openly with others so that a compromise can be reached.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	To resolve a conflict, I try to blend the ideas of all of the people involved.	1	2	3	4	5

TABULATION:

Instructions: Add up the total scores (1-5) for each group of questions, as noted below. Categories with higher scores indicate conflict modes that you tend to use more frequently or are more comfortable using. Categories with lower scores indicate conflict modes that you use less frequently or maybe are less comfortable using. Conflict modes with particularly high scores may be approaches that you are overutilizing, while conflict modes with particularly low scores may be strategies that you are underutilizing.

Avoidance	(questions 1, 6, 11)	Total Score	_____
Accommodation	(questions 2, 7, 12)	Total Score	_____
Competition/Confrontation	(questions 3, 8, 13)	Total Score	_____
Compromise	(questions 4, 9, 14)	Total Score	_____
Collaboration	(questions 5, 10, 15)	Total Score	_____