

“ . . . And Guide Us When Perplexed . . . ” Understanding and Dealing with Conflict in the Christian Congregation

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WHEN THERE IS STRIFE

O Lord, it grieves me that anger, strife and bitterness have become a part of my life. Forgive my sins and renew my spirit so that I will pardon others, correct the mistakes I have made, and be more cheerful toward those around me. Remind me through your Word that your Son's peace provides the needed hope and reason for healing and change.

Christian Worship, p. 137

The Lord and head of the Church pour out wisdom from on high upon all the members of his body.

All pastors deal with conflict in the church of one kind or another. Conflict in the church is a Christendom-wide epidemic, afflicting liberal and conservative churches of every denomination, confession and tradition. From my experiences, from conversations with brothers in the ministry, and judging from the resignations on the bottom of the call reports and the grapevine stories that go with them, I know there is conflict in churches of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.¹

I began my study of the subject about a year ago. I typed the words “clergy abuse” into Google, and along with articles about pedophile priests, were articles on pastors who were abused by their congregations.² Those articles led me to a number of books. I will list some of the books I've read in the bibliography. Among these books, I have found *Antagonists in the Church* by Kenneth C. Haugk and *The Wounded Minister* by Guy Greenfield to be most helpful in understanding the causes and possible solutions. The books do have their weaknesses, too. If you read them in the wrong spirit, you could become paranoid, and if you follow their suggestions in the wrong spirit you may become the cause of more trouble yourself.

It's my goal in this paper to present a balanced, scriptural understanding of conflict in the Christian congregation. We will listen to Scripture and draw from our theological background first. We will also learn from some of the books that talk about the psychology of conflict in churches.

My title is “Understanding and Dealing with Conflict in the Christian Congregation.” We deal with human beings who struggle, sometimes unknowingly, with the Old Adam, and so we are dealing with situations that are unpredictable. However, I believe seeking to understand conflict and its causes and sources will be a first step. In dealing with conflict, just plowing forward as if everything is fine will leave many problems unresolved. By sharpening our knowledge of God's Word and learning the real cause of conflict is sin, we will begin to understand. At the same time, we will look in the mirror of God's law and perhaps see things in

¹See December 2006 *Forward in Christ*, p. 22. District President Vilas Glaeske was interviewed and asked, “What would you say is the most challenging thing [as District President]? A: Probably dealing with controversy within congregations. . . . Nobody likes to do that. I would rather take a whipping than go to one of those meetings, but it's got to be done.”

²Abuse of clergy and church conflict are treated by the same literature. The common pattern is a pastor is called/hired to preach the Word and serve the people. An influential person or influential persons try to do things in the church in self-serving or biblically / doctrinally questionable ways, and attempt to control the pastor through open or hidden psychological threats, bickering, destroying the pastor's reputation, a hire/fire mentality.

ourselves we never saw before. We will “flee for refuge to God’s infinite mercy,” and will grow in love, moved by our Savior’s love. There is also much we can learn from church conflict literature, psychology, and some secular leadership literature.

Solutions will come for some situations. Others will have to wait for the day when the chief Shepherd [pastor] “wipes away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Our blessed Teacher and Savior Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Luther, Augustine, or some other wise Doctor of the Church said that the three marks of the theologian were *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*.³ Meditation on the Word, prayer, and something Luther called *Anfechtung*—affliction, more specifically, proving the truths of the Word through suffering. I guess that makes many of us theologians.

A word about the footnotes. You may laugh at the abundance of them. Some contain references, others contain lengthy quotes. I put some information in the footnotes rather than in the body of the paper to save time in the oral presentation. Some people read the footnotes when the presenter is reading the paper. I suppose the footnotes could be a second paper all in themselves.

The Lord bless us as we seek understanding from his Word, and may he “guide us when perplexed.”

I. Understanding what the church is.

“The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord” (CW 538:1).

There is a great problem in the church when something else becomes the foundation. It doesn’t matter what that “something else” is— it can even be something that, ordinarily, is good and a blessing from God. History. Family heritage. A sense of personal service. Duty. Fellowship. Community. Certain people who are prominent in the congregation. It doesn’t matter. When anything other than Christ becomes the foundation of the church, the church becomes less than what Christ meant it to be. Many conflicts in the church come from a misunderstanding of what the church is.⁴

The Church is the body of believers and the body of Christ.

It is so easy to think that the church should be something other than the body of believers and body of Christ. It’s so easy for parishioners to think of their church as “*grandma’s church*” or “*our church*” or “*Pastor Jaegermeister’s church*.” It’s also easy for a pastor to think of the church he serves as “*my church*.” All these thoughts are really one and the same— looking at the church as personal property. It is true that if something belongs to you, you can do with it pretty much as you please. But the church does not belong to you or me. The church belongs to no one except Jesus Christ. “With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died” (CW

³Luther refers to this in his “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings” (LW 34:285). I first heard it from Prof. Deutschlandler in Frosh German at Northwestern. We learned a lot more than German in that class!

⁴Some of the conflicts come because of peoples’ unrealistic expectations of what they want the church to be. Because of concerns for pure doctrine and correct practice, we can’t do what everyone wants. Sometimes the reasons for conflict are *beyond* doctrine and practice. Sometimes it’s a matter of the same people wanting and not wanting the same things— struggling with change. Long ago and far away a predecessor of mine arrived at the church he was assigned to. The pastor who had been there just retired after 43 years there. On arriving, the new pastor was told, “You have to change everything.” He began to introduce the NIV, talked about the arrival of a new hymnal in a few years, and the same people screamed, “Oh, no! You can’t change that!”

538:1). *He* has entrusted us with *his* church. We are like the workers in Jesus' parables,⁵ given a field of labor to manage *for him*– to be wise and faithful in our management– to do it *his way*, for *his glory*, not ours.⁶

“What would Jesus do?”

The question has been overused in our time, but the church is one place where the question is appropriate. It is a far better question than “What do you think would be good?” or “What are they doing at Blinking Light Church?” or “How dare you do something that might offend that family who gave so much?” How does Jesus want us to manage his church? Guided by his Word. With love. Love for him and his truth first. Love for one another second. Forgiving love for the penitent. Tough and unyielding love for the impenitent.

“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love” (CW 494:1).

We are united by the love of God in Christ. That is the message of the font. “She is his new creation by water and the Word” (CW 538:1). This is the message of the Word– “*God so loved the world*” (John 3:16) “*I am the vine, you are the branches*” (John 15:5). “*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). This is the message of the Supper. “*My body... my blood... given for you*” (Matthew 26:26-28). Christ's love has drawn us first to him, and then it empowers us to love each other.

“We all are one in mission” (CW 566:1)

“*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last*” (John 15:16). As the church of Jesus Christ, he has not only called us out of darkness to light, he has also given us a mission. The mission is to carry out a ministry of Word and Sacrament for nurture of our own and outreach to others. Word and Sacrament are the marks of the church. Word and Sacrament are the tools the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain the church. Without them there can be no church. When we don't use them to lay the foundation that has already been laid, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11), then the result will be confusion, anger, anything but what Jesus would have us do. The church is all about *him*. The message must be *about him first*. Then, *about what he has made us*, and what his holy love *empowers us to do*. Any other message will lay a different foundation. Any other message will leave us without power. The message of positive thinking may make a group of positive thinkers, but alone, it will not get people thinking about Christ, or get people living empowered by Christ. Alone, any message other than the gospel of Jesus will not plant seeds of faith.

II. Understanding what human nature is.

“Confused and foolish oft I strayed” (CW 375:3).

You can't get away from human nature.⁷ Luther said, “Pinch yourself. If it hurts, you still have the flesh.”⁸ St. Paul gave his anguished cry in Romans 7, “*I do not understand what I do . . . The good I want to do, I do not. The evil that I don't want to do, that I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am*” (Romans 7). A man who received many revelations directly from Jesus, and whom we call a “saint” said that. The rest of us will have great struggles, too. “*The sinful, fleshly mind is hostile to God*” (Romans 8:7). We can drown the Old Adam

⁵Matthew 24:45-51, The parable of the wise and faithful servant, Matthew 25:14-30, The parable of the talents. Luke 19:11-27, The parable of the minas.

⁶I will also mention in passing the parable of the tenants in Matthew 23:33-41 as the example of what happens when people manage God's vineyard for their own glory.

⁷By “human nature,” I mean the Old Adam, the flesh, ΦϛΔ. Jesus was the only one born without sin infecting his human nature.

⁸See *Luther's Catechism*, (WELS “Kuske” Blue Catechism,) Revised edition, “Christian Questions,” p. 322, #20.

daily, but the rascal swims.

Like a flock of sheep, people stray when they don't listen to the Shepherd. Disobedience is of many kinds and has many sides to it, but it is all disobedience— all straying from the Good Shepherd's path of righteousness.

Some disobey because of a lack of knowledge or misguided knowledge.

Either they weren't thoroughly instructed, or when they were instructed it went in one ear and out the other, or it bounced off of something very hard before it could go through, or the truths of God that they were taught have faded with time for lack of a refresher course. Sometimes people lack knowledge because they have something else in their minds that they think is knowledge, but is really quite the opposite of knowledge. It is the attitudes and trends of the world. It's the same mode of thinking as the classic logical fallacies: *ad populum* (appeal to popularity): "Everybody's doing it." *ad hominum* (attack on the person): "Pastor Schickelgruber is way too picky. He must be some kind of Nazi." *ad antiquam* (appeal to history): "We've always done it that way." *ad verecundiam* (appeal to authority): "Former Pastor Krauthammer always did it that way." *ad baculum* (appeal to force): "If you go through with that, you'll be sorry." *Hoc, ergo propter hoc* (Since this . . . therefore, because of this.): "That charity is popular in our community. Therefore, if we support that popular charity, we will become popular and bring in hordes of new members."⁹ These and many other funny Latin phrases are what move much of the world.¹⁰ St. John encourages us not to follow every spirit, but to test them (1 John 4:1). Only by hearing the Word of Christ will we gain the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16, Philipians 2:5, Colossians 2:8).

Some disobey because of willfulness and *obduracy*.

There's another funny Latin word we don't hear that much anymore. It means "hardening of the heart." And *that phrase* brings to mind images of Yul Brynner's (Pharaoh's) scowl, his accented syllables saying "I will not let your people go," and his finger pointing Charlton Heston (Moses) to the door.¹¹ Like the ancient Egyptian kings, many modern folk have deified themselves, and feel a sense of responsibility to no one but themselves. If change is needed, it is never on their part. They think the church must change to their liking. It is hardness of heart, plain and simple, and it manifests itself in challenges to clear Scriptural principles. The September 2006 *Forward in Christ* article¹² comes to mind, "Please **DON'T QUOTE BIBLICIAL** [*sic!*] **SCRIPTURE** that is from thousands of years ago! It will not make any reliable case. Save yourself some energy!" For that letter writer, I fear the battle has already been lost because the person doesn't want God's Word in the picture.

Hate the message? Kill the messenger!

Hardness of heart also manifests itself in challenges to God's representatives. In catechism class we speak about the three realms of authority, home, church and government, but I think people rarely think of their church or their pastors as authority. Pastors are the authorities God has established, too— established by virtue of the Divine Call that has come through the Christian Congregation. That call to service *is* divine. Pastors have the charge from God himself: "*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood*" (Acts 20:28). And the people are to "*Obey [their] leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must*

⁹See Greenfield's description of diversions and deceptions used by antagonists in *The Wounded Minister*, p. 36ff.

¹⁰Just look at politics.

¹¹Despite its biblical and historical inaccuracies, I love the movie *The Ten Commandments*. It vividly portrays the essential accounts of Exodus. It also portrays well Moses' struggles with leadership, and with the people he was leading. Especially vivid is Edward G. Robinson's portrayal of Dathan, who wants to lead the people back to Egypt.

¹²"Q & A at the foot of the cross," *Forward in Christ*, September 2006, p. 9, answered by Richard Gurgel.

give an account” (Hebrews 13:17). In the heat of battle, a pastor cries, “Why me?” “What did I do to deserve this?” The answer is this: You are God’s messenger, bearing God’s message. When you say “No” to someone’s request, whatever it may be, and give a thoughtful, biblically sound answer, it isn’t your “No,” but God’s. And their “What? You’re kidding. Oh, that is just so Middle Ages” is their response to God’s ambassador.

“Watch against yourself, my soul, lest with grace you trifle” (CW 472:3).

When thinking about human nature, the pastor must also think of his own human nature. We are not immune to anger, holding grudges, gossip, weakness of faith and occasional whining and complaining. Sometimes a pastor will wonder, “Is it me? Am I the cause of these problems?” Other times, he will confidently think, “It is them. They are the ones who are causing trouble.” The truth may be somewhere in the middle. No one is guiltless. Being God’s ambassador does not give you “Papal infallibility,” whatever that is. Everyone makes mistakes and so do you.¹³ However, being God’s ambassador means you have a responsibility to God for your doctrine and practice. You’re not your own man, but Christ’s. When you do right and it offends, don’t blame yourself. When you make a mistake and it offends, correct what wrongs you can, and then lay the guilt at the foot of the cross.¹⁴

At the same time, we pastors need to be aware of our mental health. Dealing with conflicts, sometimes, oftentimes alone, and dealing with our fellow poor miserable sinners bring unique stresses to pastoral life. Trying to be tough and deal with these stresses alone is too much to bear.

1. “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*” (1 Peter 5:7). Pray. A seminary professor told our class: “Always pray about decisions and conflicts. If you don’t, you’ll always wonder if things would have turned out differently if you had prayed about it.”
2. Talk with brothers in the ministry, especially senior members of your circuit and your circuit pastor¹⁵ who may know the history of your congregation. You will have the assurance that you are not alone. You will have a friend, in much the same situation as you are in, to bounce ideas off of. You will have a shoulder to cry on. You will have a partner in prayer.¹⁶ Remember that the circuit pastor is also *your* pastor.
3. At the same time, be careful who you share information with. Be careful of who you complain to. Some members of your own congregation may not keep things confidential. You may unknowingly be sharing sensitive information with someone who will use it against you.
4. There will be times when you need to “vent.” There will be a point where you have “vented,” and that it’s time to think and talk about problems in a more mature way.

¹³On the outward appearance, it sometimes becomes very unclear what is a mistake and what is not. Well-meaning people will point to a situation that didn’t turn out well, and say that you made a mistake. True, you could have done some things better. You can do things right— even with perfect holiness, and things can still turn out badly. Look at the lives and ministries of the prophets and apostles. Look at the life and ministry of Jesus. When thinking about mistakes, the psalm gives me enormous comfort: “Who can discern (understand) his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:17). Psalm 130 is also an enormous comfort going from “Out of the depths,” to “forgiveness,” and “O Israel, put your hope in the Lord.”

¹⁴It has been my experience that doing the right thing offends more often than doing the wrong thing does. When I’ve made genuine mistakes or blunders like forgetting an appointment, forgetting to announce an anniversary or getting behind in my shut-in visitation schedule, the fault was quickly overlooked.

¹⁵In “Practical Ways to Support our Brothers in the Ministry,” Galen Riediger says, “Maybe [the circuit pastor] won’t be able to wave the magic ‘circuit pastor wand’ and solve all your problems, but you will find an ear that will listen, and a heart that will be taking you and your people to the throne of grace” (p. 8).

¹⁶Riediger also writes about encouraging our brothers in the ministry: “First step: listen. That may be all you need to do! That may be all he wants. It’s amazing how two ears can solve so many problems. Listening, and then those few questions to make sure you understand what you are hearing, might just lead your brother to find comfort in God’s forgiveness, come up with a solution and leave with a plan— all because you listened. Next step, love. We are not in competition with each other. Other’s successes are not our failures, nor are their failures our success. Let that love that we have for each other in Christ be evident. Then your brother in the ministry will know that he’s not alone (“Practical Ways...”, p. 6,7).

5. Ask yourself, “What do I know for sure?” For the unknowns that bother you, ask yourself, “Who do I need to ask so I can know about the unknown for sure?” Don’t speculate on the unknowns that trouble you. The things that remain unknown, entrust to the One who knows all.
6. Keep a journal of the odd events, harsh words said to you and other unexplainable phenomena. Love keeps no record of wrongs, true. Yet, “*Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*” (Matthew 10:16). This journal is for your eyes only. Don’t sit and read it to stoke the fires of a grudge. That’s not the purpose of it. If accused of something later, (“You said this. You did that.”) you have something to look at to refresh your memory of what really did happen during a troubled time.
7. This may seem obvious, but I will say it anyway. Never apologize for things you haven’t done. Never apologize for the things you did right. In trying to be sensitive when dealing with someone who is angry with you, it may be very tempting to apologize for everything, especially if you feel depressed¹⁷ about the situation. Sometimes you may have to say, “I’m sorry you feel that way.”
8. Never, never, ever express anger in public, in a meeting, or especially in a sermon. 1 Timothy 3:3 says that an overseer must be “*not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome.*” Titus 1:7,8 says he must be “*not overbearing, not quick-tempered*” but “*self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*” “The pastor who loses his temper, loses.”¹⁸
9. Also, the reality of a certain squabble may be that few people know about it. A pastor’s public blow-up is something many people will know about.
10. A sensitive pastor is bound to ask himself the questions, “Is it me?” “Is the problem that I just don’t relate to people well?” In conflicts, a pastor may be told that *he* is the problem. The nature of the conflicts can clearly tell you that it isn’t you. Ask yourself these questions: “Am I sticking to biblical principles?” “Am I striving to follow clear principles, the church constitution, the law of the land?” “Am I speaking gently, out of love?” Or ask the obverse questions: “Am I ‘strong arming’ people to ‘get my way’?” “Am I going out of my way to be difficult? ... Delighting in evil or in someone else’s frustration?” “Am I acting as a ‘lone ranger’ in dealing with problems, people or issues, or do I try to involve others, council members, to work *with* me?” “Am I saying “no” or criticizing people on the basis of my emotion, like or dislike of persons, or on the basis of a principle?”¹⁹
11. “Walk humbly before the Lord.” A difficult time in the congregation may be a temptation to pride for the pastor. (“I’m the good guy. Mr. X is the troublemaker.”) The Lord casts down the proud, but lifts up the lowly. Be sure you are one of those who are lifted up. It may take time.
12. Be realistic. You cannot provide an instant solution for every problem.
13. Use common sense in dealing with the problem. Use tact in dealing with the people. Tact can be difficult– what is tactful in dealing with one person will not work with another. You can be so tactful that at a certain point, you’re not saying anything.

“Heed not when they flatter” (CW 472:3).

Human nature is a strange animal. It can be especially strange when a pastor starts his work in a new congregation. A proverb says “*If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse*” (Proverbs 27:14). Luther also: “No enemy is more harmful than a flatterer” (*What Luther Says*, #1593).

¹⁷Depression is a psychological and medical term. Depression is also a word we commonly use to describe our moods. Depression is a very real danger for those who are under attack and feel alone. See a further description of depression on page 15 and in footnote 34.

¹⁸Greenfield tells of several younger ministers who related the same story, that they were worn down by conflict until they either lost their tempers in public, or simply resigned in despair (*The Wounded Minister*, p. 105).

¹⁹Luther says: “Seek peace, and you will find it. If, after your enemy has done his worst and his temper has cooled, you are deaf and do not scold and rave in return, he must perforce check himself. For this is the way Christ on the cross overcame His enemies; He did not do it with the sword or by force. Therefore this proverb should be written with letters of gold: To strike back causes strife. And the other: He who strikes back is wrong. Thence must follow: Not to strike back creates peace. But how achieve this? It is not human! Ah, truly it is not human” (From a sermon on 1 Peter 2, *What Luther Says*, #1362).

Beware of those who praise you when you haven't done anything yet. In the same way, beware of those who criticize your predecessors severely. It's an Eighth Commandment / Matthew 18 issue. If they say bad things about your predecessor when he is gone, they will say the same things about you when you are gone. They may not wait until you are gone! Hasty compliments and unfair criticisms are twin sisters. Neither are honest. They can both be temptations to pride. "They hated Pastor Fleischfresser because he did this or that. How terrible! I guess they'll love me." Guess again. The same principle applies to your pastor neighbors. If a family comes to your congregation and on their first visit they say... "We would like to transfer our membership to this church from Weeping Savior Lutheran Church because of Pastor Muelhaeuser. He's incompetent in counseling. He's socially weird. His sermons aren't relevant.".... it may be a matter of time before the same people say the same things about you.²⁰

III. Understanding what Satan tries to do in a Christian Congregation

"Though there be those who hate her, and strive to see her fail. . . " (CW 538:3)

Satan himself is the chief hater of the church. He does all he can to disrupt Christ's work. *He* is the enemy. St. Paul wrote, "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand*" (Ephesians 6:12-13). Luther²¹ or perhaps Augustine spoke about the nature of temptations. The flesh and the world offer "low-level" temptations— often the path of least resistance taken by the children of the world and by the children of God struggling with their weaknesses. The devil himself puts out "high-level" temptations, chiefly, to doubt God, his Word, his promise, his goodness, his plan to work all for our good. To lead us to doubt, he puts difficulties in our way, and throws in some logical fallacies. "If things are going rough, this can't be the right path." "I heard they did things that way at Pastor Fenstermacher's church— he's a good guy, and so it can't be all bad." Remember also that if the devil can destroy our faith in part of God's Word, he can destroy our faith in all of it. The same apostle who writes clearly about headship and the roles of men and women in 1 Corinthians 11 also writes about the resurrection in most vivid terms in 1 Corinthians 15. If doubt is cast on one clear passage of Scripture, it is also cast upon the other. A "salad bar" Bible, in which some parts are to be believed and other parts are to be set aside, is well on the way to becoming a Swiss cheese bible, or a bible of public or personal opinion.²²

We dare not forget that these struggles are struggles to hold on to God's truth. The Christian faith *is* at stake. The Word is truth— the truth about Christ that will set us free (John 17:17, John 8:32).

"The foe, with hidden snares may seize me, unawares" (CW 431:1).

Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. . . . The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they*

²⁰I remember the recently sainted Pastor Kenneth Strack from Tecumseh, Michigan saying, "I always ask new members, 'What were the people at your old church like?' If they are WELS transfers or from ELCA or Methodist or whatever, I ask them the same question. No matter what they answer, 'good,' 'bad,' 'friendly,' 'grumpy,' I tell them, 'I think you'll find the people here are about the same.'" (Sometime between 1992 and 1995)

²¹See Luther in *Large Catechism*, Lord's Prayer, Paragraphs 99-104. Also, in a St. Michael's Day sermon in 1532, Luther spoke, somewhat speculatively, of lower ranked demons who tempt people with fornication, avarice and honor, and higher ranked demons who tempt people with unbelief, despair and heresy (*What Luther Says*, #1151).

²²Luther: "Is it not a thousand times better to keep the Word of God than to lose the Word and to keep peace, even though it were a heavenly peace, so to speak?" (Exposition on Psalm 120:7, 1531, *What Luther Says*, #3281).

may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:1, 10). Satan always steps over the fence. He never comes in the front door, clad in red and carrying a pitchfork saying, “Hi! I’m Satan and I’m here to make your life miserable and hinder the mission of the church.” The devil always steps over the fence in some back corner doing something that may be unnoticed at first, or enticing with something that looks good on the surface, or that looks good to the untrained. When something questionable comes up— usually a matter of practice rather than doctrine— take time to analyze before giving an answer or a decision. If possible, consult and educate your Council before acting.

Satan has a whole legion of things that he tries to do in the minds of pastor and people. He knows what the church is, and what Christ wants us to do, and he will do everything to get us to stumble and eventually run in the opposite direction.

The devil plays upon our weak flesh to get us to look inward at self, rather than upward to God and outward to others. If the chief driving force in my life is “How do I feel?” I’m going to be driven this way and that. I will be easily moved and manipulated if I feel threatened (See Ephesians 4:14). If I’m building on a foundation of sand eventually my feeling-centered faith will come down with a great crash.

The devil knows that the members of the church are members of the body of Christ, so he will try to sever as many connections as he can so he can sever branches from the Vine.

In times of conflict, the devil tries to get us to polarize and demonize one another— making people and their actions seem worse than they really are.²³ “*Love keeps no record of wrongs.*” Hate does. It has its own record of wrongs, perceived wrongs, things that might have been wrong, and things that have never “sat right.” “*Love always trusts.*” Hate, on the other hand, has phony X-ray glasses with which it thinks it can see into hearts and read a person’s motivation. “*Love always hopes.*” Hate has a crystal ball that peers into a dark, cloudy future of where it thinks a person’s bad motivations and intentions will lead. With these, the devil intends to destroy mutual love and trust among Christians— always separating, always isolating. “*Love always hopes, always trusts, always perseveres*” (1 Corinthians 13). Parishioners and pastors need to throw out the unwritten book of revisionist history. Throw out the X-ray glasses. Throw out the crystal ball. “*Speak the truth in love, and in so doing build up the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:15).

In love we look at the members of our congregations as members of the body of Christ. *Satan* is the enemy. At times, any one of us might be his agent. Any one of our people might be misled. Someone may push his or her own agenda or an unsound, unbiblical idea. But that person is not the enemy. A victim of the enemy, yes. *The enemy*, no.

The devil tries to get us to see a situation as worse than it really is. He intimidates us with thoughts of the great unknown. A few disgruntled voices are exactly that— a few. Those who have very intense, troubled feelings often speak in the plural. “Everyone is upset with this.” “Everyone is upset with you.” “Everybody knows what you did.” “A lot of people will be upset if you go through with this.” They also tend to speak loudly. This kind of language is devilish, untrue, and designed to induce despair into the victim. Disarm it, and answer in the

²³Luther comments: “This vice of anger uses the trick of making itself look good; for this is how we reason: That fellow has done this and that to me; I would be doing wrong if I did not look sour and be angry about it. I would be encouraging in wrongdoing. I must let the rascal be softened a bit; otherwise he will not do any good as long as he lives. If the heart is inclined to anger to begin with and, besides, now gets the notion that it is doing right and well by being angry, then the devil has won his game, the grudge grows greater from day to day, and the hearts become increasingly bitter toward one another” (Sermon on Matthew 5:20-26, *What Luther Says*, #75).

second person singular. “Tell me, what troubles *you* about this?”²⁴ A seasoned pastor told me, “Don’t take things too personally.” It is hard when much is aimed at you personally.

“Though there be those that hate her, false sons within her pale” (TLH 473:3).

There may be a point where a troubled individual gets so entrenched in his or her position that he or she begins to cut himself/herself off from the life of the congregation when things aren’t going their way. Requests to sit down and talk about the issue are ignored or refused. The cement hardens. Sensitive people, sensitive pastors, may want to find a way to compromise or find some middle ground to try to win the person back. At this stage, it isn’t a time to be soft, because you aren’t dealing with a soft issue anymore. It is a time to be firm. Some church constitutions speak of “Termination of fellowship.” If frequent breaking of the Eighth Commandment and continued propaganda for bad doctrine and practice has become an issue, then something stronger than “Termination of fellowship” is called for.

In a congregation where discipline is weak or rarely practiced, or not clearly outlined in a constitution, then this is an opportunity to instruct. Because much will fall on him,²⁵ the pastor must let his council know what efforts he is making.²⁶ It may sound like a broken record. “I contacted the Jones family and asked for an appointment to meet with them. They said they would get back to me.” “I left another message on their machine asking them to call for an appointment.” In time it will become evident who wants to talk and who doesn’t. It will become evident who is being gracious and holding the door open, and who is refusing to enter. If they are already angry with you, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The whole process of dealing with the individual kindly may be “*heaping burning coals on their head*,”²⁷ and end in the individual’s request for removal or release. It merely acknowledges what the state of things really is. While these cases are distressing, we understand that this, too, is God’s plan for his church. “*My Father is the gardener, and he prunes every unfruitful branch*” (John 15:1-2).²⁸

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? ... You are worth more than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:31, Luke 12:7).

Jesus spoke those words to his disciples who were now going out as apostles, and would encounter situations that would make them feel worthless. The devil tries to get us to feel worthless, too. He tries to get us to focus us on our own weakness, rather than on God’s treasures and God’s strength—confronting us with what we

²⁴One book suggests asking, “Who are these people? I’d like to know who they are so I can answer their questions and talk with them about their concerns.” The answer is usually, “Oh, I dare not say. They spoke to me in the closest of confidence.” See also Greenfield, *The Wounded Minister*, p. 27.

²⁵If *too much* falls upon the pastor, he will have to proceed with extreme caution in some cases. In other cases, the passage of *time* will be a greater help. Haugk writes, “First, if you lack the support of others you handicap yourself considerably in dealing effectively with an antagonist. One pastor, who was in a situation where an antagonist was evident to him but to no one else, put it this way: “I could see the self-serving nature of this antagonist very early on, but no one else did. I was left alone, holding this idea while my wife and others consistently criticized me for *not caring*.” Second, sitting back and waiting is sometimes all you can do, and may even be the best possible action. Be patient. As the book of Proverbs points out: A fool flaunts his folly (13:16). A fool throws off restraint and is careless (14:16). A fool’s mouth is his ruin (18:7). By being patient you merely allow antagonists to publicly reveal themselves” (*Antagonists in the Church* p. 125).

²⁶And keep a confidential written record of all your contacts and attempts to contact.

²⁷Proverbs 25:22, Romans 12:20.

²⁸Sometimes I have thought, “With the things these people want, it seems they would be a lot happier in a church of another denomination.” But there are things they want here, at this church, and family or community concerns are what keep them here— not orthodox doctrine, not meaningful preaching that touches the heart and moves with the gospel. Family, community, the old building. As a young graduate I was completely unprepared when I faced peoples’ love of their home church for reasons other than love of the Word.

haven't done, what we haven't done well, or what hasn't turned out well for us. This can lead to anger turned inward, feelings of helplessness, a loss of hope in God, a loss of trust in others, a loss of confidence in the power of the living and active Word. We may even be tempted to see God's way as being an unreasonable way. You are not worthless, but you are clay jars with a treasure inside (2 Corinthians 4:7) – the treasure of Christ and his Word. You are worth more than many sparrows– you are worth the blood of God's own Son. When Satan is at his diabolical worst, as accuser, you know that Jesus' holiness covers your sin, and that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Let the brushes with darkness help you to appreciate the Light that much more. Remind yourself that you have a great privilege to bring the Light of Christ to others.

“Rise, my soul, to watch and pray. From your sleep awaken” (CW 472:1).

Even if you feel alone, you are never alone. Look at the ministries of John the Baptist, Elijah and the other prophets. Not counting the abiding presence and power of God, they were alone much more than you or I will ever be. The beloved psalm says, *“I will fear no evil for you are with me”* (Psalm 23:4). You are working to glorify Jesus. He gave the message. He gives the promise. He invites your prayers. He hears your prayers. *“Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you”* (Psalm 50:15).

How do you cope when you feel alone? How do you deal with doubts and fears? Sleepless nights? Return to the Word. Make it your *mantra*. Instead of “Ohmmm,” recite or chant Psalm 23, 46, or 130. *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny . . . you are worth more than many sparrows.”* Confide in your wife (but try not to give her a burden she can't bear), your circuit pastor, and other brothers in the ministry who know you and know the situation, and who can give you genuine support. No one will have a quick answer for an intractable problem. But a brother in the ministry can serve as a stand in for the merciful and faithful High Priest– to comfort, encourage, absolve, and to put the Word of God into your ears.²⁹

“There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

History seems to repeat itself, and our struggles seem to parallel those of the prophets and saints of the past.

King Ahab called Elijah *“the troubler of Israel”* (1 Kings 18:17). But who was it who introduced false gods and drove out and killed the prophets of the Most High? Elijah was preaching the true God, the path of righteousness, and true worship. He had done nothing wrong. His only “fault” was to confront the true “troublers of Israel.”

One of the strangest sections of the Bible is the time Elijah flees to Horeb. He just had a great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. He should have been on a spiritual and emotional high! Instead, his thoughts are on the prophets of the LORD slain by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and their threats to him. So he heads south, sits under the broom tree, and wishes he could die (1 Kings 19). Then, at Horeb, the Lord is about to pass by. He doesn't appear in the thunder, earthquake or wind, but in the still small voice. We aren't told what the voice whispered. I like to imagine the voice of God whispering that question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

“What am I doing here?” A time of conflict in the church is a time for evaluation of our work, mission, and our personal attitudes about the work God has given us. The voice of God is not in the screams or in the bluster. It's in the voice that calls you back to reality. It is the voice that renews your Divine Call. It's the voice that tells you what you can do, and where your strength really comes from.

²⁹There's a great example of this in the new *Luther* movie. Luther is shown having anxiety attacks– only to be comforted by Father Staupitz, who encourages him to read the Word of God and pray, “Lord Jesus, I am yours. Save me.”

What is the cost of conflict?

The devil's goal in raising up conflicts in the church is primarily to destroy faith, but also to waste time and resources. Perhaps this is a good place to pause and think about the cost of conflict in our congregations? The last issue of the Quarterly had an article on a recent Barna study about the death of the organized church. People are finding the organized church increasingly irrelevant. Could an additional reason for people leaving churches be the way Christians in churches treat one another and how they treat their pastors? New members are especially sensitive to what they see in their new church-home.³⁰ Studies show that conflict is damaging to outreach first, then damaging to financial contributions and attendance. It takes the joy and zeal out of worship and church life for both pastor and people.³¹

The cost to the pastor is great, too. Since he is often perceived as the cause of conflict, he will be blamed. I know of one pastor³² who would not confirm a child because the child wasn't ready. The next budget meeting, his salary was cut, and a new stained glass window project was begun (which cost about the same as the salary cut). Ouch!³³

It greatly taxes mental health.³⁴ Depression and anxiety are common in our society, and clergy are especially vulnerable. Here's an excerpt from *The Lutheran*, the ELCA's official newsmag:

Report reveals church leaders have above average stress, weight gain and depression. Many ELCA pastors find their work fulfilling, but lately they report feeling a little "sluggish," "burned out" and "down." They tend to say their weight gain doesn't help matters, but it's difficult to exercise or eat better when putting in 60- to 70-hour workweeks.

Many find it hard to take time for vacations or even personal devotions. And that's on top of worries at home, such as paying bills and spending enough time with family. Some feel cut off, alone with no one to talk to about stress, and they wonder how much longer they can continue.

These are some key findings revealed in an ELCA report on the health and wellness of clergy and lay leaders on ELCA ministry rosters. The majority are satisfied by their work, but they are more overweight, sedentary, and prone to stress and depression than the average U.S. citizen.³⁵

It greatly taxes health— not just mental health. Stress— cumulative stress takes its toll on the body as well as the mind. A predecessor of mine (long ago and far away) who retired after 43 years at the congregation and his wife

³⁰Haugk says: "Antagonists frequently lobby with small groups in the congregation to create doubt about one or more leaders. One vulnerable group on whom antagonists focus their attention is new members. This is one reason general education is so important" (*Antagonists in the Church*, p. 85).

³¹See Greenfield in *The Wounded Minister*, Chapter 8 (p. 115-123). Also Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church*, p. 20.

³²No, it wasn't me.

³³See K. D. "Casey" McKibbin, "Kidney Stone Conflict Management" http://www.clergyabuse.net/kidney_stone.html

³⁴Greenfield lists symptoms of depression on p. 106 of *The Wounded Minister*: Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood; Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism; Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness; Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed; Insomnia, early awakening or oversleeping; Appetite change or overeating; Decreased energy; Thoughts of death or suicide, attempts; Restlessness, irritability; Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions; Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, headaches, digestive disorders, chronic pain. If you identify with half or more of these symptoms, get help from a professional counselor.

³⁵*The Lutheran*, "How Healthy are Our Pastors," Cindy Novak, September 2002, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3942/is_200209/ai_n9113201

both died after about one year of his retirement (See footnote 4). I had heard that it wasn't a voluntary retirement. My successor at the same place resigned because of marital problems that were related to stresses in the congregation. Guy Greenfield writes about his heart and blood pressure condition that were aggravated by the stresses in his congregation.³⁶ These are some of the personal costs to the pastor and his family.

We talk about the cost of our worker training system. Conflict in congregations makes the cost even higher.³⁷ How many thousands of dollars, synod's, the individual's and his parents' dollars, are invested in prep, college and seminary education? What a waste when a seminarian graduates, comes into a new congregation, and then resigns after a year or two because of conflict! What a waste when a gifted pastor whose top-notch education is crowned with several years, perhaps many years of experience, resigns because of conflicts he had little or nothing to do with.³⁸ Along with personal costs to the pastor and his family, these are the costs to the church at large.

You can read between the lines of what is written above and find the costs to the local congregation. What consumes more time? Doing the Lord's work, or dealing with conflict, stepping gently around the bear traps, trying to appease? The mission of the church is undermined. Because of conflict, the called servants of the Word are wrongly discredited, scorned and weakened. Who wants to listen to a depressed preacher? Will people be edified when they listen to a sermon while they carry the baggage of their presuppositions and prejudices against the preacher because of some conflict? Letting destructive conflict continue is a disservice to the Word of God and to the people of God.

I repeat my title for this section: "Understanding what Satan tries to do in a Christian Congregation." How successful has he been? With God's help and the power of God's Word we can stop him. "One little word can fell him" (CW 200:3) We need to take up the "weapons of the Spirit" (LBW 228:4), and give these problems careful study to learn what is really happening in our churches, and to plan a course of action to change or even stop it.

IV. Understanding the psychology of conflict.

Why are people so hurtful? The answer is, they are hurting. Psychologists talk about "transference," in which anger about one thing in a person's life gets transferred to someone or something else. A man gets yelled at at work. He comes home and yells at his wife. The wife yells at the kids. The kids kick the dog. It does happen. It also happens this way: The farm is failing. God is in charge of the rain. The pastor works for God. It's the pastor's fault.

Sometimes these problems and conflicts have elements that are beyond our area of expertise. The troubled and troubling people we deal with may have issues of mental health. Here are some of the more serious disorders, some more common than others.

- Antisocial personality disorder ("sociopathic" and "psychopathic" are the most severe forms) – The

³⁶Op. cit. p. 102-103.

³⁷In 1985, Oliver Lindholm wrote a paper on resignation, and cited conflict in congregations as a reason for declining enrollment: "A recent editorial in our *Northwestern Lutheran* cited as one of the reasons for declining enrollment in our synodical schools the fact that any number of our pastors and their families are treated with disrespect, anger, impatience and dishonor by members of their own congregation. The writer implied that this can lead to increased stress, family problems, resignations and early retirements. And our young people who observe this kind of situation certainly aren't going to be encouraged to study for the ministry" ("Resignation From The Parish Ministry: Causes And Remedies," Minnesota District Pastoral Conference, St. James, Minnesota, April 16, 1985, Available from the Seminary Library's essay website. p. 6).

³⁸WELS: [Callrept] Pastors - 08/28/06

individual (most often male) is concerned only about himself. He will put up a good front to get what he wants. He uses people the way people use Kleenex. He is without conscience. People with antisocial personality disorder break the law because, as they see it, it doesn't apply to them in the same way. Antisocial people are into controlling others for their own perceived benefit. Individuals can have this disorder to lesser or greater degrees.

- Borderline personality disorder – this individual (usually female, sometimes male) has a broken heart and a broken mind. She wants closeness, but pulls away out of fear of being hurt. Often thinks in extremes, black or white, love or hate, nothing in between. Sometimes she has grandiose thoughts. Other times she wants to hide in a cave. She wants your attention and will talk to you for hours if you let her. If her needs are not met, she will lash out and try to make you feel as hurt as she does. People around borderline people feel like they are walking on eggshells all the time. What will set the person off next?
- Narcissistic personality disorder– this person is the sun in his own universe. Everything must revolve around him. Sometimes they live in a fantasy world, imagining all kinds of future success for themselves. Envious and arrogant, narcissistic people are kind of like cats. They live around you. They pay little attention to you. It's all about them. (See www.wikipedia.org for information and quotations from the DSM-IV diagnostic manual.)

These people need help– professional help– but studies show that they are unlikely to seek it. People around antisocial, borderline, or narcissistic individuals often do all they can to appease in order to avoid problems. This creates more problems. These disorders are diseases in the same way alcoholism is a disease. They involve sin and are connected to sin, or as St. Paul says, they are “caught in a sin,” and need to be restored gently.³⁹

There are other lesser psychological afflictions that affect peoples' behavior, and their behavior will affect you:

- Depression is an epidemic, called by some “the common cold of mental disorders.” Depression is of various kinds. Some is episodic– a reaction to a loss or to a difficult time. Some is chronic, and has less to do with outside forces. In computer terms, it's a hardware problem, not a software problem. The chemistry of the brain constantly draws the person down, and medication is necessary to restore a balance. Counseling can help fix the “software,” the patterns of thinking. Depression has been called “anger turned inward.” Sometimes it turns outward in the direction of the pastor or other parishioners. It is characterized by sadness, fear, poor self-esteem.
- Anxiety is related to depression, only instead of turning down the energy level and the activity of the mind, energy and mental activity are turned up. Anxiety combines fear with fantasy– a faulty “crystal ball” that always sees trouble in the future and worries about lack of control. When someone gets “worked up,” they may be suffering from anxiety rather than depression. Anxiety can shift into depression and back. (For more detailed information and quotations from the DSM-IV, see the article in www.wikipedia.org.)

“From every error keep us free; Let none but Christ our Master be” (CW 176:2).

Appeasement is the way many try to “get along,” but it makes you into a slave.⁴⁰ The Proverb says “*The leech has two daughters. ‘Give, give,’ they cry*” (30:15). Dissatisfaction begets dissatisfaction. Give people exactly

³⁹In Galatians 6:1-2, St. Paul's word for “gently” is $\text{B}\Delta\forall\text{u}909\cong\text{H}$, which can mean “gently,” but has more of the flavor of friendliness, as a friend. Not roughly or violently, but as treating someone you love. This can also be firm.

⁴⁰Greenfield writes about “A Philosophy of Appeasement” on p. 56ff of *The Wounded Minister*. “The antagonists soon realized that they would not be opposed by the silent majority. No one was going to stand up to them and rebuke their evil behavior. The passiveness of the majority who supported the minister actually encouraged these persons to step up the attack. I was reminded of the prime minister of England, Neville Chamberlain, who in 1938 signed the Munich Pact with the Axis powers. This policy of appeasement with Hitler actually encouraged Hitler to step up his aggression and begin World War II. ... Aggression always seeks to run over perceived weakness.” Greenfield also titles chapter 4 of his book (p. 59ff) “The Minister's Greatest Enemy: Passive Lay Leaders.”

what they say they want, and it will never be good enough. If a person feels wronged, no apology from you will ever be adequate enough. It's a combination of the desires of the flesh, pride, and unrealistic expectations people have of their pastors. Slavery to the whim of the unbalanced will take us away from the will of Christ. A church concerned with teaching God's truth and doing things in a fitting and orderly way needs the freedom of Christ to function and to be faithful to his Word.

Passivity enables meanness.⁴¹ Not standing up to antagonistic people enables them to continue their behavior. I know of a situation where a pastor firmly corrected an individual who said something in anger, and the person responded, "What's gotten into you?" No one had stood up to this person before. Firmness combined with love is the way to deal with these people. The results are not predictable. The immediate result may be bad. Sometimes it may take years to see loving firmness produce its fruit— but I think I have seen it. The troublesome people you deal with firmly today may be the people who weep the most years later when you announce you have taken a Divine Call to serve somewhere else.⁴²

1. Beware of emotions, yours and others'. Dealing with an emotional issue with emotional people is about as safe, effective and productive as negotiating with terrorists. Making a decision when you feel frustrated will only lead to more frustration.
2. Focus on the issue, not on the people bringing it. Emotionalism always makes things personal. "You won't allow this because you don't like me. I know you never have."
3. When you are talking with an individual who frequently has extreme concerns, try never to talk with him/her alone. Have someone else there, if possible. A church council member is preferred.
4. Matthew 18 is our standard and guide for dealing "with a brother who sins against you." However, going to a troubled individual alone can be a great risk. A private conversation can easily be turned against you. ("You wouldn't believe what the pastor said to me!") Sometimes you may have to stretch out step one with patience on your part. Sometimes you may have to skip to step two, "Take one or two with you."

After study of the literature, discussion with others, and some reflection, it dawned on me that much of "understanding the psychology of conflict" can be summarized this way:

People try to govern their lives and their churches in one of two ways. Either they govern . . .

1. With principle. Bible. Church constitution. Love for God. Love and service to neighbor. Affairs of the church done decently and in order. Promises made. Promises kept.
... or ...
2. By emotion. What do I want? How do I feel? How does it sit? What am I used to? What do I fear? What angers me?

Those who abide by the first will have a hard time getting along with those who abide by the second. Those who abide by the second will have a hard time getting along with anyone. Principle-governed folks will often be mystified by the behavior of the emotion-governed folks. Nothing will seem to make sense. No— *You* are not going insane. You're trying to be flexible. You're trying to figure out what is the issue and what is not. You're trying to be understanding. You can have the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes and the logic of Mr. Spock, and you will still be unable to understand why certain people want what they want, do what they do, say what

⁴¹Greenfield, *The Wounded Minister*, p. 66

⁴²At my last Call, when I had been there a year, a man I dealt with firmly responded by saying that I was acting "in the spirit of the Antichrist." Three years later, when I was deliberating a Call, the same man called me and begged me to stay.

they say.

On the other hand, the emotion-governed people will also be frustrated. They will see the principle-governed people as hard nosed, stiff necked, unloving, unsocial, old-fashioned, not-with-the-program. For the pastor who wants to “be all things to all people so that by all means he might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22), it will be maddening and heartbreaking. We abide by principle, always. We should try to understand the emotional reasons, but not yield to them.

More “hidden snares” (CW 431:1)

When requests, actions or reactions don’t make sense, remember that there may be a hidden agenda. The problem you face may not be the *real problem*. Something may be driving the person’s actions other than what you see on the surface. What the person is asking for may not be what they really want, but might lead to what they want. As they see it, asking for it directly wouldn’t work. How do you find the hidden agenda? One government website suggested:

“Keep checking for hidden agendas by watching for counterproductive actions, unexplained inactions, or conflicts and reversals in policy, actions, or statements. . . . [Ask] concise, direct questions. Then examine past and current actions to see if results diverge from the professed agenda. . . . If you still feel that someone is refusing to provide a rational explanation and continuing to hide an agenda, you may need to speculate on what that agenda might be and work around it.”⁴³

This writer’s experience has been that a hidden agenda is likely when a person makes an exaggerated case for what they want or against what they don’t want. The presented issue may be “There is false doctrine in the new hymnal. It has a bad creed. It has Baptist hymns. It has Catholic psalms. It doesn’t have a cross on the cover. It doesn’t use reverent ‘thees’ and ‘thous.’ It uses feminizing language.” The real issue may be “I don’t want to learn new songs.” In this case, the bulk of the iceberg is above the water. The pretense is big. The issue itself is small. Anything that defies explanation could be a sign of a hidden agenda. The issue may simply be *control*, manifested by a multitude of superfluous challenges. We should also remember that sometimes the people with hidden agendas *are not aware* they have hidden agendas. They may suspect *you* have a hidden agenda. Ask questions and seek to understand the request or position. *You* strive for biblical doctrine and practice. *You* be above board in all you do. You can’t control others’ emotions, actions or reactions. Be in control of your own.

V. Understanding *your* strategy.

“He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat” (LBW 332:2).

I have no “sure-fire, successful strategies for dealing with hard cases.” The conflicts in your church will be different than those in another church. But according to the literature, there are common patterns. What can you do as you serve your church in its conflicts?

1. Read the Proverbs. Tap into the God-given wisdom of King Solomon! It’s amazing all the insights that are in that book– practical applications about dealing with people.
2. Read a book on church conflict. *Antagonists in the Church* by Haugk is excellent and very practical. *The Wounded Minister* by Greenfield has a very pastoral tone. But read with caution so you don’t become

⁴³U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, “Decision Process Guidebook”
<http://www.usbr.gov/pmts/guide/hidden.html>

paranoid! Greenfield was a Baptist minister who was burned very badly in his last congregation. Sometimes his writing has an edge.

3. Read a book on dealing with different kinds of people. To me the book *Dealing with People You Can't Stand* seems the most practical for our situation.
4. Remember the concept of principle centered decision making vs. emotional centered decision making. Most arguments will be emotional. Don't get caught in the trap of emotions, yours or someone else's.
5. A slower decision on a subject or request is better than a quick one. "I'll get back to you on that one" is better than an off-the-cuff response. Involving elders or church council on a decision is essential— far better than a pastor acting alone.
6. Review your church constitution. Follow its policies and procedures to the letter. Have no tolerance for sloppiness in procedure or in record keeping. You never know how important this may be, especially in cases of discipline, releases, removals, in the approval of large projects, and in establishing, defending, and carrying out policies. If necessary and if possible, you may have to pursue changes in your church constitution to tighten up a loose practice or close loopholes.

“Grant us the will your work to do And in your service to abide; Let trials turn us not aside” (CW 176:3).

A point one of the church conflict books makes is that church conflict is a matter of prophetic urgency, and that it must be handled with the authority and zeal of Elijah and John the Baptist.

It is tempting to watch Call Lists for the Calls and pastors who come to the top (those who have held the Divine Calls longest), and to wonder, “When will my phone ring?” “Maybe I'll be on the list for that one!” Save your mental energy for a thought like this: a time of conflict in your congregation is a time for you to understand the meaning of your Divine Call— the specific one you hold now. You were called to be here, now. Regardless of what you or others think, you are the right one for this place and time. The present crisis may be an “Esther” moment. You were put here “*for such a time as this.*”⁴⁴

An exit from your situation is tempting. It will not change the situation in the congregation. Patterns of conflict usually have durations that span multiple pastorates.⁴⁵ *Shepherd Under Christ* speaks about resignation, but the following is applicable to thoughts of any kind of exit:

“Resignation must not be a yielding to those ‘who will not put up with sound doctrine’ so that they may find the kind of teachers that will satisfy their ‘itching ears’ (2 Tm 4:2-5). . . . Resignation should not be an attempt on the part of the pastor to escape the cross such opposition lays upon him” (p. 43).

Oliver Lindholm, former Circuit Pastor of the Winona Circuit, wrote an excellent paper on resignation, from which I quote:

Although we as pastors might realize that we have the option to resign from the ministry, we should also realize that resignation is a last resort. It can be a “cop-out” of responsibility and a concession to the flesh. And thoughts of resignation can be a temptation to unfaithfulness, temptations which the Devil

⁴⁴Esther 4:14. Take note of the phrase in its context: “*If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?*” It’s a descriptive passage, true. But could this also be applied as an example for us as a call to action on conflicts in the church?

⁴⁵See Greenfield’s comments under the heading “Repeated Abuse” in *The Wounded Minister*, p. 57-58. Also Haugk, “When a church leader relinquishes his or her position, the solution is often temporary. One a replacement arrives, the problem begins again. Although the antagonist may skip over the next leader to let things cool down, he or she will later resume the offensive” (*Antagonists in the Church*, p. 174).

sends our way. The real reason that there are resignations from the ministry is that Satan is attacking the Church in these last days by pressuring and tempting God's workers.⁴⁶

He later writes about resignation for a loss of confidence:

This loss of confidence may be evoked by [the pastor] causing offense At the same time there may be situations where a congregation stubbornly sets themselves against the pastor for reasons that are not valid. Perhaps they refuse to accept some of the doctrines and practices which he is faithfully promoting. He may need the aid of district officials to deal with this matter.⁴⁷ Or perhaps his differences with the congregation he serves are simply a "personality clash." Certain men aren't cut out for certain places. If that proves to be the case a call to a different parish may be the answer.⁴⁸

It very well may be an answer. A faster turnover in some congregations might be a solution. Depending on the congregation, several short-term pastors (three or four years duration) may be able to change attitudes and patterns of conflict more easily than one long-term pastor.^{49, 50, 51} However, it shouldn't be the first answer. Consider also that you might be the one who ends or helps to end a pattern of conflict in a congregation. St. Paul writes, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

And another Spirit moved writer said: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11). Those bent on evil (greater evils, lesser evils, and those who are unknowingly in league with evil) do not have the same mission or goal as you do. Yours is God-given. Be steadfast until they give up. It will take a sevenfold measure of patience and persistence.⁵²

⁴⁶Lindolm, Oliver, "Resignation From The Parish Ministry...", p. 3.

⁴⁷Haugk comments on contacting denominational officials about conflict. "Notify early, but request help late. One frequent complaint of denominational officials is that too often they are the last to know there is trouble in a congregation. Judicatory officials should always be kept appropriately informed of potentially explosive situations. ... Judicatory officials want to know when a storm is beginning to brew, not when all they can do is help a congregation clean up the wreckage. ... Antagonists may make threats such as "I'm going to call the bishop." You can experience peace of mind knowing the appropriate authority already knows about the situation. In reply to such a statement you could unperturbedly say, "The bishop is already aware of this situation." Offer no further explanation" (*Antagonists in the Church*, p. 169).

⁴⁸Lindholm, "Resignation From The Parish Ministry...", p. 5.

⁴⁹Schuetz and Habeck note: "The Lord may use a vacancy and declined calls in a congregation for salutary training and instruction" (*The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 35). And "...It may be that the pastor is convinced that a change would be good for him and for his congregation, not because of any trouble, but because his congregation will benefit by the different gifts of another and he himself will grow by his experience in a new field" (p. 36).

⁵⁰Also, Erwin Scharf in *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. III, "The Call to the Public Use of the Keys," comments on the considerations while holding a Divine Call: "We think of matters like the relationship between climate and health, an honestly diagnosed lack of talents either for the challenge in the new field or an intense though regretted personality clash limelighted by some problem in the present field. A new worker might solve such a problem very easily simply because of his being another person with another approach" (p. 512).

⁵¹On the other hand, church-growth and church-sociology writer Lyle Schaller favors long-term pastorates to foster stability and continuity, especially in small congregations. *The Small Church is Different*, p. 91.

⁵²Luther: "'In quietness and confidence shall be your strength' (Isaiah 30:15). ... Look to faith, which assures you that no one can harm you without the will of God. If, then, you are harmed, it has happened because of the kind, gracious will of God, so that your enemy harms himself a thousand times more than he harms you. This consideration makes love spring up within me— love which says: Then I will do good to him for the evil he has done to me; I will gather coals of fire upon his head. *These* are the weapons by which enemies are defeated who seem as mighty mountains which cannot be overthrown or won by iron or steel. Love teaches patient suffering" (Miscellaneous quotes from late 1537, *What Luther Says*, #3252).

The Ministry of the Gospel is not a popularity contest. It seems that when Billy Graham any other famous preacher is spoken of favorably in the media, it's because he said something biblically *wrong*. When Jerry Falwell is unpopular, it's usually because he has said something biblically *right* (although I wouldn't always agree with his methods or rhetoric).⁵³

Pastors are concerned about others. That's why we got into this business. We try to be "nice guys" who are trusting of those who have called us to serve. Haugk notes that committed Christians often possess the personality trait of altruism or selfless giving, which can lead to over-commitment or even messianic attitudes. "I have to fix this!" (p. 23). We give up more than we should. We know our Savior's command to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. We work with some people who may have forgotten "the worker is worth his hire," "respect your leaders who spoke the word of God to you." Part of our strategy must be self-defense, a defense involving a network of stable individuals we can trust and talk to. As mentioned before, we need to take care of ourselves. Nurture your own faith. Keep in shape in body, mind and spirit.

United Homiletics, Catechists and Liturgists, Local 130

A friend said, "We should form a union." They have actually tried this in Canada. The United Church of Canada has worked closely with Canadian Auto Workers, but has not been as successful in defending the rights of clergy as they hoped.⁵⁴ From watching the news, it seems that unions don't end conflict. Sometimes they are the source of conflict.

One thing that is certain is that better education in this area of pastoral theology is needed for seminarians and for pastors already in the field. I feel I've only scratched the surface. I hope I've shined some light on the subject and pointed you to a few resources you may not have been aware of. I also pray that those who struggle know that they are not alone, and that they should not be ashamed.

This is an area where the "church needs change." This is an "issue in WELS." Conflict in the church is an issue that needs to be talked about, addressed in seminars and conferences, and boldly faced in the field.⁵⁵ I believe it is more of an issue than "determining your ability to risk excellence,"⁵⁶ "becoming a missional leader,"⁵⁷ and even "stewardship challenges" and "fellowship challenges"⁵⁸ Acute conflict in churches affects, encompasses and hinders all of these in one way or another.

There is much more to be said on the subject— a whole library of books that could be written in addition to the one that is already written. Pastors, speak to one another. Encourage one another. Pray for one another. As soon as you get home, go to www.amazon.com and order the books by Greenfield, Haugk, and the book *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*."

One closing thought:

⁵³Luther notes: Do not, therefore, worry about where you may find affliction; there is no need to be concerned. Only be a pious Christian, preacher, minister, townsman, peasant, nobleman, and lord; diligently and faithfully perform the duties of your office. Let the devil worry about where he may find wood from which to make a cross for you; let the world worry about where to find a stick from which to make a scourge for your skin (*What Luther Says*, #1057).

⁵⁴See the articles on <http://www.clergyabuse.net>

⁵⁵"He [Christ] holds the field forever" (CW 200:2).

⁵⁶Name of the last seminar publicized on the "Church and Change" website. <http://www.churchandchange.org>

⁵⁷A goal for the Doctor of Ministry Program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul MN (ELCA).
http://www.luthersem.edu/dmin/dmin_FCong_FMiss_FLdrshp/

⁵⁸Topics from the more recent "Issues in WELS" meetings. <http://www.issuesinwels.org>

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other” (Mark 9:50).

And a closing prayer:

Come, holy Fire, Comfort true;
Grant us the will your work to do
And in your service to abide;
Let trials turn us not aside.
Lord, by your power prepare each heart,
And to our weakness strength impart,
That bravely here we may contend,
Through life and death to you, our Lord, ascend.
Alleluia! Alleluia! (CW 176:3)

Appendix I

A few months ago on WELSWinkel, the WELS pastors' e-mail group, a pastor wrote about a member who was requesting membership lists so he could send out his own information to everyone, and requested bulletins in advance so he could preview the service and see if it was worth going to church. Another pastor responded about his experiences:

I too have had individuals who have caused similar kinds of trouble. A few thoughts:

1. Do you know what the man's agenda is. Usually this kind of trouble making is a symptom of an underlying problem - (bitterness, loss of control, etc)
2. Does he have any psychological problems (emotional problems) that could be affecting his judgment?
3. Don't try to deal with him by yourself. I got very frustrated hearing my elders and council tell me the problems were just "personality clashes" or "communication problems." When I told them "you deal with it then", they learned very quickly it was far more than that.
4. I would tell your secretary (as I have had to tell mine) to ignore the emails, phone calls, etc. Politely hang up without giving him an ear. Usually that kind of person will either hush up or explode to the point that others will see the problem. Make sure you spend time supporting your secretary. She's going through a lot for a newbie.
5. As far as railing on you or others during meetings, that violates Scripture (Mt 18) and your congregation's constitution. When he starts he must be stopped. If he refuses then church discipline must be begun. "Warn a divisive person once, warn him twice, after that have nothing more to do with him."
6. Anyone defending his actions needs also to be dealt with. Blood is thicker than church membership unfortunately. It may cause others to be hurt, but more hurt is being done by allowing it to continue.
7. Don't worry about the lawsuit if he files one. We have been threatened and it hasn't happened. Keep a written record of each meeting with the man by each person(s) attending. Include a debriefing report on how it went. Most courts will throw the lawsuit out.
8. Don't worry about the "blackened name" in the community. Jesus said that would happen as the end comes. Besides, a person like that usually doesn't have many people willing to listen to them even in the community. We just had two ladies leave who give an ear full to whoever they meet. Sadly, they are the laughing stock, not us.
9. Remember your fellow partners in the ministry are praying for you. Live at peace with others as much as it depends on you. Defend the truth. And speak with gentleness and respect. Psalm 37 esp vv. 1-2, 5-6, 12ff has calmed my troubled heart many times.

Appendix II

The Ten Least Wanted from *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*.

TANKS

People who attack and bully you, or try to run right over you.

MAYBE PEOPLE

People who keep waffling and putting off decisions until it is too late

SNIPERS

People who make sarcastic comments or sabotage you behind your back.

GRENADES

The irrational temper tantrum.

KNOW IT ALLS

They know 99% of anything, just ask them! But they'll never listen to your clearly inferior ideas.

THINK THEY KNOW IT ALLS

They can't fool all the people all of the time, but these legends in their own minds can pull you off track.

WHINERS

Ooohh nooooo, nothing is right, everything is wrong! There's a plan for their life but they're not in it!

NO PEOPLE

Doleful and discouraging, their motto is: "Every silver cloud has a dark lining."

YES PEOPLE

Quick to agree, slow to deliver, they leave a trail of broken promises.

NOTHING PEOPLE

No verbal feedback. No nonverbal feedback. They simply say "."

The book *Dealing with People You Can't Stand* has useful strategies for dealing with each of these 'types.' You can see sample material and take some interactive training at <http://www.dealingwithpeople.com>

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<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wels-winkel/>
- www.wikipedia.org an online, internet encyclopedia. Thousands of articles on many topics. Professional quality. Always current.
- All Scripture is quoted from the New International Version.
- Hymns are quoted from *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, and *Lutheran Book of Worship*.
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