

Conflict is inevitable but manageable. Because in this life we are forgiven sinners, not yet former sinners (1John 1:8-9), there will be disagreements and misunderstandings, especially in times of transition, crisis or change. Conflict itself is neither bad nor good. What matters is how people handle it. If handled well, conflict can help a congregation learn and become healthier. Conflict becomes destructive only when people speak or act in destructive ways. Conflict is no fun, but you can help bring positive change out of conflicts in church if your words and actions are prayerful and guided by God's wisdom in Christian love. Here are some ways you can do this. (These principles also apply in family matters, friendships, business relationships, school, clubs, sports, politics, etc. Dealing with conflict well is one of the ways Christians can be "salt and light" in this broken world, Matthew 5:13-16.)

1. Keep the Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther says this means, "We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about others, but defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest way." *False witness* is anything said maliciously or with hurtful or selfish motives, not only lies. "A truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent" (William Blake). Talk about others the way you would like others to talk about you. Assume others mean well, even if they seem misguided to you. (Exodus 20:16, Leviticus 19:18, Proverbs 25:11, Luke 6:31, James 3:5-12, 4:11)

2. Talk to people, not just about them. Follow Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus says it's your responsibility first to talk privately to people you are upset or angry with. This allows them to explain themselves or to apologize and make amends, which opens the way to reconciliation. Bringing in a third party or making the matter public before trying to resolve it privately is adversarial; it raises the stakes, hardens hearts, builds resentment, and makes reconciliation harder. Groups should assertively decline to consider any accusation until private resolution has been tried. Unless you're calling law enforcement to report an actual crime, Matthew 18:15-17 is the rule.

3. Listen actively, patiently and respectfully to others' thoughts, feelings and ideas. Strive not so much to make your own case as to understand others' points of view and their reasons for thinking as they do. Ask questions for clarification. Think of disagreements as problems to be solved for the good of all, not battles to be won or lost. Think "win/win." Avoid partisanship, rivalry, side-taking, arrogance, dismissiveness, prejudice, defensiveness, "us/them" thinking, jumping to conclusions, diagnosing others' problems, and labeling people, all of which prevent good listening. Discuss issues and behaviors, not people. Be flexible for the sake of others. Keep an open mind to others' ideas. Take responsibility for your part and apologize when appropriate. (James 1:19-21, Philippians 2:1-11, 4:5, Romans 14:1-15:13, Proverbs 10:17, 12:1)

4. Forgive. Just as God forgives us for the sake of Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us, so we should gladly forgive others. Let go of resentments, grudges, vindictiveness, animosity, spite, enmity, rancor, hostility, judgmentalism, and self-righteousness. Be slow to take offense. Never seek revenge or retribution. Deal with others' sins the way you would like yours dealt with. (Matthew 7:1-5, 18:21-35, Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3-4, John 8:2-11, Romans 12:14-21, 1Corinthians 13:4-7, Galatians 5:26, Colossians 3:12-15)

5. Speak the truth in love: be assertive. Express yourself honestly and respectfully. Speak for yourself and let others do likewise. Take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings by using *I-statements*, such as "I think . . ." or "I feel . . ." or "I'd like you to . . ." rather than "You need to . . ." or "You made me feel . . ." or "Lots of people think. . . ." Tactfully say what you mean and mean what you say. Assertiveness honors the rights, dignity and personhood of others and yourself. (Ephesians 4:15-32, Matthew 5:21-24, Proverbs 25:12, 28:23)

a. Assertiveness is not aggressive. Aggression disregards the rights, dignity or personhood of others by failing to speak *in love*. Examples include insults, abuse, sarcasm, ridicule, cursing, labeling, name-calling, criticism, accusations, blaming, fault-

finding, shaming, innuendoes, libel, slander, threats, intimidation, demandingness, bullying, etc.

b. Assertiveness is not passive. Passivity disregards one's own rights, dignity or personhood by failing to speak *the truth*. Examples include avoidance, submissiveness, appeasement, placating, pandering, flattery, "kissing up," conformism, crowd-following, self-abasement, blame-taking, tolerating abuse, undue niceness, victim mentality, accepting labels, giving in to bullies, etc.

c. Assertiveness is not passive-aggressive. Passive aggression is aggression disguised as passivity, which speaks neither *the truth* nor *in love*. Examples include foot-dragging, pouting, whining, stubbornness, condescension, manipulation, false flattery, snooping, eaves-dropping, sabotage, trap-setting, loaded questions, shunning, gossip, back-biting, anonymous complaints, playing the martyr, "making nice" instead of reconciling, expecting others to read your mind, repeating hearsay instead of speaking for oneself, etc.

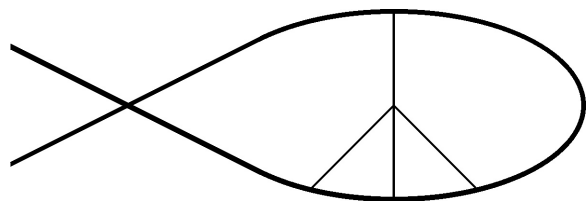
6. Keep confidences, not secrets. *Confidentiality* is for the protection of people who disclose personal information while seeking help for their own or their minor children's problems. *Secrecy* is a manipulative tactic for avoiding accountability or deceiving adversaries and is a form of false witness. Keeping confidences builds trust. Keeping secrets erodes trust by creating divisions between those in the know and those left out. Confidentiality is *not* for people who violate Matthew 18:15 by complaining anonymously. One should normally be accountable for what one says about others. Secret meetings, hidden agendas, conspiracies, espionage, and other forms of sneakiness breed mistrust and suspicion. Open, direct communication promotes healthy relationships. Ideally Christians should have nothing to hide. (John 3:19-21, 2Corinthians 4:2, Luke 12:2-3, Ephesians 5:11-14, Proverbs 6:12-15, 10:10, 16:30)

7. Squelch rumors; discourage gossip. Unhelpful ways people deal with conflict are often symptoms of *anxiety*, a contagious spiritual virus that impairs clear thinking, leads to "knee jerk" reactions, and

inhibits thoughtful problem-solving. Rumors, even if true, spread anxiety like sneezes spread colds. People who stop rumors help the group maintain emotional health by acting as its immune system.

a. Never trust hearsay. Assertively decline to act on or repeat anonymous information or complaints. The rumor mill is rife with misinterpretations, distortions, exaggerations, and even lies. When someone says, “I heard . . .” or “People are saying . . .” or “I’m not the only one,” ask who those others are, so that they can be asked about the matter and the information verified. If the speaker won’t say who, disregard the rumor and remind the speaker to speak only for oneself. Even if the speaker is entirely truthful, the unnamed source might be mistaken or misinformed. When you hear a negative rumor or conspiracy theory, the safest course is to assume it’s either not true or not as bad as the rumor implies. (Proverbs 26:20, Mark 13:7)

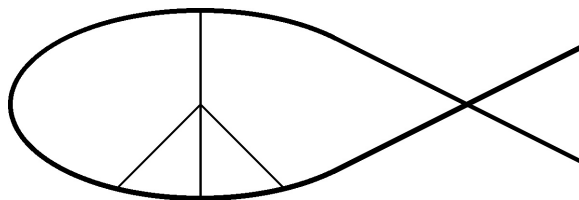
b. Disregard anonymous complaints. When someone complains about a person who is not present, assertively urge the complainer to talk to the complainees directly, if that has not already been done. Say something like, “Have you talked to him/her about this?” You’ll be helping both of them by steering them toward peace and reconciliation (Matthew 5:9). If you are willing and it seems appropriate you may offer to be present at such a conversation (Matthew 18:16). But if the complainer refuses to communicate directly, let go of the matter. Taking responsibility for others’ problems when they choose not to is anxious, meddling behavior, unhealthy for both you and them. You can help such people best, and avoid getting drawn into others’ conflicts, by encouraging them to deal with their own issues more constructively. (Luke 12:13-14, Proverbs 26:17, Galatians 6:1-5)



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This is a work in perpetual progress. I welcome any and all feedback, suggestions, questions and critiques you may have to offer.

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To read more:

Ruth N. Koch & Kenneth C. Haugk, *Speaking the Truth in Love: How to Be an Assertive Christian* (Stephen Ministries)

Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Alban Institute).

Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works and Healthy Congregations* (Alban Institute)

PASTOR STEVE’S PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FOR CHURCH MEMBERS

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