

Conflict ... in the church...over money matters. Thus it was, is, and forever shall be, world without end. Amen. I do not mean that as a sarcastic lament. Honestly. I could not always say that. I was born into a family of conflict avoiders and nurtured to be one, too. Asked to fill in the blank with a verb, “_____ conflict” (with a verb, not an adjective), my reaction would have been: avoid, prevent, limit, resolve (as quickly as possible), contain, minimize. After training in family systems, my fill-in graduated to: manage...manage conflict. Why? Because, as the promo for this talk says, conflict is natural and unavoidable. Where 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus’ name, there will be conflict. There’s good news in that. Conflict means people care enough to fight ... or at least differ vigorously. They may care for what we deem to be the wrong reasons, but caring is a better starting point to work with than “meh.”

So I learned to focus on managing conflict constructively, but truth is by “managing” I probably still hoped to limit, resolve (as quickly as possible), contain, or minimize conflict if not avoid or prevent it. But what if...what if sharing Jesus’ kingdom work in the realm of finances involves increasing or intensifying conflict, broadening or spreading conflict? When we manage assets, we don’t aim to minimize them, but grow them. What if conflict can be a strange asset of the church, *sometimes* meant to be grown? After all, Jesus told us he did not come to bring peace but a sword, to set people against one another. Apparently, God’s kingdom does not come to earth without conflict. So I want to suggest two possibilities with for-instances, less to transmit a body of knowledge, more to provoke you to imagine how *some* conflict may be an asset.

Possibility #1.

What if ... what if being an effective leader regarding money matters in the church requires me to plunge headlong into my internal conflicts over church and money? When one person is gathered in Jesus name, there will Jesus be, with his sword, setting me against myself. Most of us are conflicted beings. Few of us are of one mind, of undivided loyalties, pure in heart. So, as a church financial leader, maybe:

- My best thinking tips me toward decision A, but the people in the church I’m closest to, for a long time, are a decision B crowd. OR
- I can’t support calling or visiting people about their stewardship because I don’t feel confident about my own financial contributions to the church. OR
- I get stuck wondering, “What would Dad say if heard me think like this?”
OR

- Three churches ago my contribution was mismanaged and I'm still not over it. OR
- You know; I don't.

At a stewardship conference like this, I heard about a young man who increased his pledge \$2,045 per year. That odd number made the stewardship chair curious, so he asked the young man how he arrived at it. "Well," came the answer, "I get a venti latte on my way to work and my way home every workday. That's \$4.26 twice a day 48 work weeks a year: \$2,045. I figure that money has a lot more value in the church. I want to get my actual spending more in line with my professed values and priorities. So I'm giving up my lattes and pledging the money to the church."

I *loved* that story and wanted to use it in a stewardship sermon, but ... I knew first I had to answer the question, "What are my lattes?" The list was embarrassingly long, but I settled on clothes as most significant. I planned to preach that I would not buy clothes for a year (other than socks and underwear) and pledge the savings to the church. I was also embarrassed to learn, in a painful review of charge receipts, how much money that was, and still more embarrassed to name the amount in the sermon. I experienced tremendous conflict with myself. Wondered if I could or would really do this. Had about 4 alternative sermons I almost preached to escape dealing with my conflict. I also experienced conflict with my wife. She doubted I would actually forgo clothes purchases for a whole year, so other spending she cared about would take a hit. And if (miraculously) I did keep my resolve, she wondered why some of the savings shouldn't go to debt reduction (we had recently finished sending 3 kids to college, 2 of them to private schools). Not outlandish reservations, but she sighed OK.

I invited the congregants, if they saw me in a clothing store, to check my bag. I was serious. Before Christmas, a congregant bumped into me at Kohl's. Very hesitantly, jokingly, she wondered aloud what was in my bag. I showed her. Aghast, it was men's clothes. AWKWARD. I told her to check the size. Medium slim fit – not *my* size. They were Christmas gifts. That week she sent the church a check for \$1,000. My point here is not that my sermon brought in more money. Healthy management of conflict is not a quick-fix strategy, but a lifetime approach. My point is that I was free to invite people to their own latte or clothes or whatever

value exercise only after I confronted, deepened, and intensified my internal conflict and risked open conflict with family.

What if ... what if each of you went home and plunged into your own conflicts about church money matters, intensifying your experience of internal conflict? How much freer and more creative might your leadership become? I am absolutely persuaded that all the wisdom about creatively managing conflict in the church over money matters is pointless until we lay and clergy leaders do this work with ourselves. What might that look like for you? Imagine.

Quick corollary. Nominating Committee Chairs: Do not just recruit big givers and finance professionals to Finance and Stewardship Teams, but also people who are emotionally ready to do this work with their own conflicts.

Possibility #2.

What if a healthy way of dealing with conflict over money in the church spreads the conflict, not contains it...involves more people in the conflict, not fewer? One unhealthy family dynamic results when one person in the family takes on most of the pain that results from everyone's decisions. Examples:

- The martyr spouse of an unrecovering alcoholic – making excuses, carrying all the family responsibility.
- The abused spouse or child who suffers silently.
- The child of a mentally ill parent, who's taught to vigilantly guard every word and move, lest "Mom can't cope with it."

Someone or ones in the family are unreflectively considered to be unable to bear the pain of reality. Others take on the pain to protect the so-deemed "weak" one – whose weakness actually exerts great power over the family.

At one church I served, in a Finance Committee meeting one night, it occurred to me that the same 4 or 5 people for the third year in a row were bearing all the pain of developing an almost-balanced budget because of the scarce resources that resulted from everyone's contribution decisions. "Maybe that's the problem," I thought, "that it's only the same 4 or 5 who agonize. Maybe we need more folks in agony." So, I pushed the Committee to NOT present an almost-balanced budget to the Church Council, but to present at least 3 such budgets with clearly different spending priorities and clearly different ministry sacrifices. Let the whole Church

Council wrestle with these painful decisions, not just rubber-stamp the Finance Committees excruciating work.

I had to push and push. Almost all the committee members saw my alternative as an admission of failure. So now there was conflict between me and the committee that hadn't existed before, but they reluctantly agreed. The first Church Council meeting dealing with the budgets did not go well, though they were well informed in advance, the budgets were out two weeks before the meeting, with plenty of time to ask questions. We failed to approve a budget. Now I had conflict with the Church Council ("What were you thinking, Bill?"), and Church Council members had conflict with each other. Word spread quickly beyond the Church Council. Other church members chastised my hair-brained idea. *But* ... a bunch of people were examining and talking about tough financial decisions. The next Church Council meeting was intense, with more than few guests, a budget was adopted, and everyone went out for a drink together afterward. The next year, the Finance Chair recommended repeating the plan of developing several almost-balanced budgets to propose. There was some resistance. The reason? The Finance Committee loses control of the budget in that process, which takes us back to leaders dealing with their own conflicts about church and money.

To be clear, proposing multiple budgets is not a fool-proof strategy for constructively managing conflict over money matters in the church. My point is that church leaders risked spreading the conflict, not containing it, and the resulting budget was owned by more members than in a long time. What if each of you went home and imagined ways to spread the pain and conflict over money matters in your church? What experiment could you live with, no matter how it turned out? What if the right conflict is a leadership asset, not liability? Just asking?