



How to Eliminate Many Church Problems

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Many local churches mishandle disagreement and conflict. In a perfect world, disagreements and conflict would be resolved in a healthy manner that builds stronger relationships. But in the church (and in many families) they are often unresolved and lead to unhealthy behaviors that cause further problems.

One of the most common ways churches choose to address problems is to not address them. The assumption behind this seems to be that if a problem is ignored, it will go away. The problem with that logic is that all too often it simply isn't true. Problems ignored often are like placing a dead animal in the backyard. In time they just stink.

When churches do choose to address problems, they often do so in unhealthy ways that make matters worse. As pastors for many years and now as state pastors, we have noticed several forms of unhealthy behavior in churches that create discord and cripple relationships. These behaviors fuel a very unhealthy culture that in time will destroy a local congregation.

The behaviors below are like throwing gasoline on a fire. If churches will identify these behaviors as unhealthy and address them, many church problems could be resolved in a much more effective manner.

We've observed that most churches have been rendered impotent partly due to expending much of their energy fighting amongst themselves rather than in expanding the Kingdom. The enemy of the church is very successful in using conflict and disagreement to derail local congregations from their God-given mission of making more and better disciples. Our prayer is that God will use this article to help pastors, boards, and local congregations take steps to eliminate unhealthy, destructive behaviors and seek to resolve conflict in a way that keeps the church on mission.

Behaviors and Attitudes to Eliminate

1. **Anonymous letters/emails sent to the pastor or board.** We suggest a personal and church policy that states that anonymous communication in any form is unacceptable and will not be received. People who have a complaint need to be willing to own their complaint before they share it. Jesus gave us Matthew 18 for a reason: people have a tendency to complain about people to

everyone but the one they need to talk to. Jesus' words need to be enforced - if you have something against someone or if they have something against you, go and talk to that person.

2. **Using “in confidence” as an excuse for complaining, gossiping and/or being critical.** You've heard it before: *“I need to tell you something in confidence about...”* Messages sent in such a fashion cannot be addressed or satisfactorily resolved and should be considered taboo.
3. **Going to someone in the church to complain about the pastor, a staff person or someone else.** The excuse people often use is, *“But he/she (i.e. the pastor) won't listen.”* Often the person just assumes that. We suggest that every church needs a grievance policy for addressing concerns in a healthy and productive way and for those occasions when maybe the reality is that the pastor won't listen.
4. **Listening to someone complain about someone else.** Listening to unwholesome conversation makes a person just as guilty as telling it. If someone approaches you with a complaint about someone, call a time-out and ask, *“Have you spoken to this person about your complaint?”* If the answer is *“no,”* the response should be, *“I'm not going to be an accomplice. I will, however, tell the person to expect a call from you about this concern.”* While such a response may seem bold and even rude, imagine how much unhealthy talk would be eliminated. Always point the complainer back to the person against whom they have the complaint.
5. **Passing a petition and/or calling for a vote of confidence on the pastor.** Too often this is a bullying tactic to get rid of the pastor and, on occasion, even disguised as an attempt to give the pastor constructive criticism. There is very rarely anything constructive about a petition or a vote of confidence. No one – not the pastor or the church – wins in these situations.
6. **Any communication that includes the phrase “a lot of people in the church are unhappy about...”** If the person is asked who these people are, the response is often that the complainer must keep those names in confidence. (Refer back to items 1 & 2.) So let the person complaining know that as far as you are concerned, *“a lot of people in the church”* really means the person sharing the complaint. Emotionally healthy people speak for themselves. Too often using *“a lot of people in the church are unhappy about...”* is nothing more than a power tactic for a few to get their way. It just means the complainer isn't happy and is trying to sound like he or she represents others in order to give more credence to their complaint.
7. **Saying, “I'm not being heard” when the reality is that leadership does not agree with the opinion being stated.** *“I'm not being heard”* often really means, *“I'm not getting my way.”* People in leadership roles have the responsibility to lead. Not everyone will like all the decisions made by pastors or lay leaders. Once you've appropriately shared your opinion and the decision has been made, get on board with the decision as though it was your idea.

8. **Assuming the pastor has mishandled a situation when the person complaining doesn't have all the information and probably shouldn't have it.** On occasion pastors and leadership have to make decisions based on information that is not prudent to share with everyone in order to protect a person or persons. If someone doesn't like the decision made, it is easy to declare that the situation has been mishandled. While our carnal side is prone to jump to conclusions and make accusations, trust is a much healthier response.
9. **Assuming the pastor's job is easy and that you can do it just as well or better.** There is a phenomenon in some circles that we call "the preacher itch." This is an attitudinal disease some have who feel called to ministry but who have not pursued it. Or, if they have, they've not been 'successful' in ministry. The resulting attitude can tempt a person to think he/she can do the job better than the pastor. The resulting behavior is criticism of the pastor and acting in ways that undermine that pastor's ministry. It's easy to be an armchair quarterback and to second-guess every decision made when you don't have all of the information and when you aren't the one on the field. Leadership is hard work.
10. **The belief that the pastor is a hired hand whose job is to serve and to please the people who pay his salary.** Herein lies one of the greatest diseases in the American church, and it largely explains why most churches are either plateaued or in decline. In North America we have unwittingly made the church about ourselves. In most churches the programs and the ministries are for the membership. The expectation, even demand, is that the pastors expend all of their time and energies meeting the expectations and needs of the membership. Friends, the mission is to those who don't yet know Christ, and the pastor's primary job is to lead the church in accomplishing this mission.

We encourage pastors, church staffs, and boards to discuss unhealthy behaviors and agree on how to respond to them. You might even want to name some more that need to be eliminated. The beginning point to changing these unwholesome and counterproductive behaviors is identifying them and the leadership agreeing to confront them when they surface.