

One of the Most Important Conflict Management Lessons I've Ever Learned

by Chuck Lawless

I don't like conflict. And, I can so fret about conflict that I let it consume me and rob me of sleep. It's as if I simply can't let it go, even though I try my best to leave it with the Lord. I know better, but it's still hard. I know better because I can point back to conflict after conflict and talk about several truths that I've learned over the years.

First, the Lord truly is bigger than anything I've ever faced. All of us know that truth intellectually, but clinging to that truth in the midst of conflict isn't always easy. The immediate anguish of the moment overshadows any faith in our heart—until, that is, that we come through the pain and see that God was in control all along.

Second, the conflict often wasn't nearly as serious as I thought it was. Sometimes, others I worried about weren't thinking about the situation nearly as much as I was. In some cases, they had never viewed it as negatively as I had. In other cases, they had forgivingly moved on quickly while I dwelt in the quicksand of my own leadership regrets. The problem was that I often didn't realize these realities until after I had allowed the situation to eat at my soul.

Third, the source of the conflict was seldom more than a handful of people. It might have felt like a “church bus load” of people who were frustrated and increasingly problematic, but that seldom was the case. In almost 45 years of ministry, in fact, I can't recall any situation where the “opposing” group was numerous. There haven't ever been many of them; it's just that they've been loud. Really loud at times.

Since then, here's the lesson I have often run toward in times of disagreement and conflict: **“Don't worry so much about the level of the volume; instead, pay attention to the number of the voices.”**

I realize, of course, that even a single voice of opposition can be trouble, especially if that voice is a persuasive one. At the same time, though, it's been helpful for me to remember that loud voices in the congregation don't always equal influential voices.

Some church members regularly stir up folks to join their causes, but that support isn't always lasting. Sometimes, the loud voices sound louder simply because others are so tired of the troublemakers that they just silently ignore them; what the problematic members perceive as quiet support is really just apathy and fatigue toward them. And, frankly, I'm also convinced that sometimes Satan and his forces magnify the volume of the opposition in our own heads to stifle our leadership. We give our critics more power because we pay attention to their volume—and that's not always the best move.

Some years ago, Thom and I were co-leading a Doctor of Ministry seminar when a pastor/student expressed his heartache about ongoing conflict in his church. He had also told us about good things happening in his church, but he kept returning to the conflict issue. Thom stopped him almost midsentence and asked him, “How many people do you estimate are the troublemakers in your church?” The student's response was, “Probably about five out of about 200 regular attenders.”

Thom pressed back, and the student finally recognized what he had been doing: he was giving too much clout to his critics not because they were numerous, but because they were always in his ear. He had been listening to the few louder voices more than the

voices of the other 195 people who were in his court. He had allowed the few to rob him of his joy.

So, pastor, don't get too stressed about the volume if the critics are few. Listen instead to those who faithfully stand with you, even if they do so too quietly at times.

And, church member, be sure to tell your pastor today how much you appreciate him. One way to drown out the critics in your pastor's ears is to let him hear some positives once in a while.