

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE LIFE OF A
CONGREGATION AT A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Dedicated to:

My lovely wife Juliette Bannister and my children Christopher and Jessica for their
support and prayers.

To my entire Lay Advisory Committee for your commitment to the project.

Lee Abbott for her prayers, skillful and loving care in proofreading and editing
this project.

To my advisor Dr. David Lawrence: without his guidance, expertise and patience I
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ABSTRACT

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Conflict had marred congregations from the beginning of time and continues to be a concern in the Body of Christ today. Members of the congregation have a diversity of gifts and talents which become a catalyst for contention when individuals do not employ these gifts to honor and glorify God, but seek their self-interest and glory. Many congregants are concerned about the direction of the church and the methods used to resolve conflict.

The Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church was plagued with internal conflict. Conflict arose because there was not dynamic leadership, and culture played a significant role in perpetuating the conflict. Although attempts had been made to stem the tide of the internal strife, it was compounded by the lack of respect directed towards each other.

This project established a blend of biblical studies with the current understanding of conflict management. Highlighted are the biblical texts that speak directly to conflict,

and the approach and methodology used to resolve conflict. It also examined the difficult relationships in the Bible and how forgiveness factors into the restorative process for believers. Basic elements of forgiveness were suggested to encourage congregants to move toward healing and godlikeness.

The reshaping and understanding of theology as it relates to Matthew was studied. This was used as the biblical template for confronting and resolving conflict. Active listening was recognized as an important tool to resolving conflict. With an awareness and application of this tool, broken relationships were restored and positive results were seen at the end of the project.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION.....	1
ONE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION.....	5
TWO RESEARCH.....	15
THREE DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT.....	27
FOUR PROJECT EVALUATION.....	45
FIVE CONCLUSION.....	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	60

INTRODUCTION

Within the church, there are various members. These members in the congregation process different characteristics, abilities, and temperaments based on their experience and outlook on life. On a daily basis, parishioners can experience similar difficulties and challenges because they determine and assess what is occurring within the Body of Christ through different lenses.

This multiplicity of culture, giftedness and diverse backgrounds can be a catalyst for contention as to how congregants worship, praise and view theology in the Body of Christ. The stage of a person's spiritual growth is different from one person to another. Many individuals are concerned about the life of the congregation and the direction it will go if something is not done to manage each conflict that is causing stress.

Conflict is more than a mere disagreement - it is a situation in which people perceive a threat (physical, emotional, power, status) to their well-being. As such, it is a meaningful experience in people's lives, not to be shrugged off by a mere, "it will pass." Participants in conflicts tend to respond on the basis of their perceptions of the situation rather than an objective review of it. As such, people filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender, and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions.¹

The Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church is one congregation that currently embodies the aforementioned attributes. This congregation can gain a resilient spiritual aptitude by addressing and managing the conflict it is experiencing. There needs to be an understanding that there can be strength in diversity. Furthermore, intellectual

¹ *About Conflict*. n.d. <http://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/onlinetraining/resolution/aboutwhatisit.htm>. (accessed Nov 1, 2013).

differences may be welcome as they open the door for comprehending others and showing love. The church's mission statement is:

The Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church loves God and mankind. We find joy in serving our community. We are a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic group whose diversity empowers unity. Our goal is to reflect God's character through our lives. Our purpose is to understand and meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of our members and of the community. Our commitment is to spread the love of Jesus Christ.

I saw this as an opportunity to introduce to the congregation the concepts of conflict, how it may operate in the system, and strategies to manage it, thereby allowing the congregation to benefit from dealing with the issues at hand.

Due to the diversity in this congregation, conflict was demonstrated in the area of music. Especially noted was that some liked traditional music while others were leaning towards the contemporary style of music. Some became frantic with the introduction of singing from the screen (praise music) as opposed to singing the traditional way from the church hymnal. Likewise the theology of the church was brought into question.

While some congregants took the time to work through their personality and personal differences, there were those whose differences clashed profoundly. At times, what appeared to be a minor disagreement became a full-blown verbal confrontation as individuals fought for their personal identity and right. Confrontations caused anxiety in the congregation. "Anxiety is a generalized mood condition that can occur without an identifiable triggering stimulus...Anxiety is related to situations perceived as uncontrollable or unavoidable...Anxiety is a future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events."² Individuals rely

² *Anxiety and Worry*. n.d. <http://www.firstchoicementalhealth.com/anxiety-worry/> (accessed Nov 1, 2013).

on God for direction and guidance in difficult times when they cannot control their anxiety. “Anxiety is a powerful force in emotional relationships.”³ Many individuals suffer from anxiety in the church and the world. “Each church member, past or present, affects every other church member, whether there is direct contact between them or not.”⁴

It was difficult for the pastor to ask for help because so many were looking to him for understanding, wisdom and direction during these difficult times. Being a part of the congregation and a board certified chaplain, I was able to minister to the pastor, providing emotional and spiritual support to him and his wife since this conflict was disturbing and painful to them. I was invited to serve at the church as a guide and part-time interim (unpaid) when the pastor secured another pastorate outside of the Conference. I was aware of the conflict the church was experiencing.

My task was to encourage the membership. There were emotional ties to the departing pastor; hence some individuals were grieving. It became part of my duty to provide support to those members. I was elected as the First Elder of the congregation with the responsibility of preparing the preaching schedule, preaching, visiting those in the hospital, performing baptisms and funerals.

The hypothesis that I planned to test in my project is whether congregational life can be enhanced if congregants are successful at managing conflict while addressing issues they may disagree on. This project produced a blend of biblical studies with the current understanding of how to manage conflict by conducting one session per week over a six week period at the Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church. These

³ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

sessions were opened to the congregation. This project was successful as individuals were able to glean the nuances of comprehending that conflict may exist in every church, whether it is a large church or a small church. The task is never to eradicate the conflict because conflict will always exist. Rather, it is to help congregants resolve the conflict in a manner that honors God, thereby manifesting love in the congregation and protecting each other.

CHAPTER ONE

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

As one looks at conflict in the church, it may appear to be an insignificant matter. “Too often, church attendees—pastors and members alike—act as though being religious or spiritual has nothing to do with any other aspect of being human.”¹

One would expect that there is no animosity in the church, and there is unity as God commanded in His Word. In times of conflict among congregants in the church, the scriptures are implemented and employed for doctrinal understanding for a Christian to live on a daily basis. One’s theology helps to shape thoughts, feelings, and actions. Even in “healthy churches” conflicts exist, and Christians have a hard time getting along with each other. “We may never be able to rid ourselves of conflict altogether, but we can contain it and limit its power.”²

Jesus said to his disciples: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)³ There are times when believers of Jesus do love each other in an exemplary manner. However, at some points in the Christian experience, such love is flawed by existing stress, and “spiritual unkindness.”

This is a starting point to deal with conflict according to the theological guidelines of the scriptures, because in times of conflict emotions often dictate behavior. For

¹ Douglas J. Bixby, *Challenging the Church Monster: from Conflict to Community* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ All biblical texts within this thesis is taken from *The New King James Version*. Nashville, TN: Andrews University Press, 1982 unless indicated otherwise.

example, members of congregations may lash out at each other in anger. Additionally, perhaps because of fear of losing a cherished position, some may want to defend themselves. Others in the congregation may seek revenge. These actions make matters worse and complicated.

As I study the Bible, I have concluded that God's way of dealing with conflict is far different from the method implemented in the church. Human nature's intention is to win the battle, to be vindicated, and or to prevail over one's opponents during church conflict. The Apostle Paul gives us some injunctions in his epistle to the Philippians that present the compelling and challenging example of Jesus himself:

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.⁴

The highlighted and overarching theme bears its connectivity to the book of John. As one reads John 13, the theme focuses on Jesus as he washes the disciples' feet. This attribute of Jesus humbling Himself was a fitting example for the disciples because, at that given time, they had lost sight of the mission. Conflict had crept into the ranks of the disciples, and through this illustration Jesus taught them the true meaning of love. The Apostle Paul also captures this imagery of Christ to show forth how humankind should

⁴ Philippians 2:1-8.

treat each other: with dignity, humility, understanding, servanthood and most of all love. Without God, it is virtually impossible to resolve conflict in the church.

The church at Corinth had experienced extensive and destructive conflict within its congregation. Due to this “toxic spiritual environment” the Apostle Paul journeyed with the intent of focusing on the conflict within the church. Additionally, he wrote extensively and frequently to the congregation, counseling them and at times rebuking them for the way they were treating each other. This church had become one of the leading churches with conflict. In the biblical account, the Apostle Paul shares his understanding at the beginning of the chapter about the congregation:

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’”⁵

“Paul spoke plainly of the dissensions that had arisen in the Corinthian church, and exhorted the members to cease from strife.”⁶ The Apostle Paul also stated in the following passage: “You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling [*eris*]⁷ among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?” (1 Corinthian 3:3)⁸ As the Greek text is brought into focus, one comprehends that the word translated here as “quarrel” can also be interpreted as “argument.” The Apostle was suggesting that the church had moved from a state of godliness and godlikeness and had

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:11-12.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1991), 302.

⁷ Frederick W. Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸ *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

indulged in activities and conversations that were hurtful to each other. Hurt feelings occurred because of the quarrelling that was taking place in the church. They had become “worldly,” acting as if they did not know God.

The Corinthian church was being destroyed by the constant conflict. Conflict was not new to congregations in the Bible. As one moves to the Old Testament, conflict existed within the Israelites. There was murmuring and complaining. Systems were set up to govern the people because Moses and other leaders were overwhelmed by the existing conflict of the people. We should not be surprised when conflict arises. God’s blueprint for resolving conflict should be one’s tool in defeating the enemy in the Body of Christ.

Within the church, change brings transition to the order of activities. When individuals are able to embrace change to a higher degree, it causes transformation to the overall working of the Body of Christ. As people come into the church, they are asked to adapt to the order of the church. If this is not done, it brings tension to the system. If the system does not change, individuals finally leave the system for a congregation where they feel comfortable. This movement is classified as first-order change and second-order change.

First-order change is a change from one behavior to another within a given way of behaving as a response to a new environment or a new stimulus. First-order change has a high degree of continuity through the transition of change. Second-order change on the other hand, produces a new system and a new way of thinking within the same system...In second-order change there is less extrapolation out of the past and more of an attempt to restructure the present in terms of a perceived goal.⁹

⁹ Ray Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21-22.

Change is characterized in the area of first-order change and second-order change. Within the theological realm, there are concepts that fit these categorical development areas that are similar and different in nature. Relating to the Christian idea of change, in comparing the change, when great progress has been made in one's spiritual journey, God says it is good - there is kindness, goodness of God, love and mercy. He moves individuals to a state beyond their place of ease and invites them to a state of purification. That is what happened to the rich young ruler, who gleefully ran up to Jesus. The young man thought that he was faithfully obeying God according to what he was taught in the commandments (first order change). He was satisfied with his condition because he felt he had earned that right.

However, he was caught off guard when Jesus invited him to view his condition differently (second-order change). Jesus had read his thoughts, and there were some avenues in his life that needed to change. Leading him to acknowledge his condition without condemnation, Jesus lovingly showed him his shortcoming about the higher order of the law: The Law of Love. "Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.'"¹⁰

He resisted the change Jesus was requesting (second-order change). He was a hearer of the law but not a doer of the law. Jesus was showing the rich young ruler his lack of commitment towards God. Jesus was suggesting that he needed to dedicate his life to the Master in order to gain eternal life. The rich young ruler deeply believed that he did not need to change. From his youth, he kept the commandments to the best of his ability; so he thought his eternity was assured.

¹⁰ Mark 10:21.

According to the theology of that day, they were still looking for the Messiah to come, so selling all that he had to give to the poor was not a reasonable request. Rabbis around him had great possessions, and they showed committed faith. In the midst of this internal conflict, he did not realize that his riches had superseded his commitment, dependability and loyalty to God. Jesus was assuring him that through this sacrificial giving he could receive greater eternal benefits that would surpass the earthly, moving him to second-order change. Additionally, he could be a spiritual and ethical conduit by becoming “a change agent” not only in his life but also in the lives of others. He could not grasp the concept and according to the text, “he went away sorrowful.”¹¹

Focusing on second-order change, Nicodemus implemented this change when he went to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who approached Jesus and called Him “teacher.” Jews called their Rabbis “teacher,” hence it was odd for a Pharisee to employ this term. He inquired how he may be born again, moving to second-order change, because this was not natural for a Pharisee to request this of a Jew. Jesus gave him an answer that affected his outcome dramatically, changed his philosophy, and altered his relationship (second-order change).

Jesus never followed the status quo, but “pushed the envelop.” He asked the man to gather his belongings on the Sabbath after healing him and invited him to take up his bed and walk.¹² Likewise, He invited the owner of the sheep to retrieve his sheep if it fell into the pit on the Sabbath day.¹³ Jesus was always changing the system, asking people to move to a higher order of change. He said to the inquiring minds regarding the

¹¹ Mark 10:22.

¹² John 5:8.

¹³ Matthew 12:11.

greatest commandments that the first was loving God (first order) but the second was like the first, love you neighbor as yourself.¹⁴ (second order change).

Changing one's mindset is the first major step that will help congregants deal with conflict. Change is a component of life from the beginning of time. Change is seen in the heavenly bodies, in the flow of the tides, in seasons and days. It can manifest itself in circumstances of an individual's daily activities. At times, change can render one helpless and hopeless. People are open to change if it makes a positive impact in their lives.

The congregation at the Hackettstown Church was stuck in first-order change. The more they provided activities and programs, formed committees and changed leadership, the more things remained the same. They focused on the past as they remained in the present but could not move towards the future. Some individuals were concentrating on winning at the expense of the entire congregation.

In the Christian life, one should endeavor to move to a higher order of change. Conflict is a process, and it deals with change. It moves from chaos to resolution. Dealing with conflict in the congregation has a powerful impact on one's Christian belief.

Change in the Body of Christ inevitably leads to conflict. In the church where the project was conducted, change of music and worship style created such conflict that the congregation could not move forward into the future. They were very rigid and just did not want to change. Some members did not want the leadership to mandate change when they did not fully understand the issues or could not derive any benefit to themselves or to the church at large. Some members felt that the way leaders introduced change into the congregation was inappropriate and did not align with the overall vision and mission of the church.

¹⁴ Matthew 22:37-29.

“In actual practice, the extensive exploration of a person’s history and the discovery of a problem’s source generally are not prerequisites for effective and lasting change.”¹⁵ In dealing with conflict, the decisive objective includes reconciliation and integration. “When we value ourselves, we do not have to reach passively or in a reflective, ‘knee-jerk’ manner; we have the capacity to decide how we will respond to the circumstances and events in our lives.”¹⁶ Thus, conflict may become a dynamic force whereby an individual may develop.

The church should be an innovative, dedicated, and problem-solving congregation, gifted at the art of effectively using conflict as a vehicle to deal, not only with internal problems, but with the concerns of its communities and the world at large. If one understands that this type of view necessitates the theory that the attitude towards conflict can be overcome, this will move the church towards trusting each other and ultimately drawing them closer to God. Therefore, individuals can use conflict to further God’s work and develop their spirituality.

It is imperative that congregants take seriously the importance of the healthy management of conflict. As Jesus said, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”¹⁷ Upon reviewing this admonition closely, Jesus prayed that the church will be one. Larry Crabb wrote, “The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to

¹⁵ Howard W. Stone, *Strategies for Brief Pastoral Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:23-24.

handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community.”¹⁸ In other words, how conflict is handled determines one's spiritual aptitude. When conflict is handled in a “God-fearing manner,” relationships can be restored. Choosing the right path for conflict resolution can enhance or destroy believers.

Jesus gives us some very simple steps in relation to handling conflict. If these steps are followed, the church can save itself much anguish and pain and may become an effective witness to the world. If there is a confrontation between two members in the congregation, it is admonished that one should go to the other person first to resolve the matter. Many persons may go to a friend, their pastor or another church member instead of seeking out the person with whom there is a problem. When someone approaches you with a problem about another person, a simple question to ask is, was the concern addressed with the immediate person involved? This is the starting point in Jesus' admonition.

It was also recommended that both parties have someone who has everyone's best interest at heart and would like both parties involved to reach reconciliation and forgiveness. If one party is of the opinion that an observer is there to lend support to the other person, this can create more conflict and healing would not be achieved. If this step does not bring a measure of resolution, then the next step comes into focus.

Christians should not contend with one another, for they are brothers and sisters in Christ. The Apostle Paul is stating that if this principle is applied, it would prevent many

¹⁸ Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth: Where People connect and are Forever Changed* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1999), 40.

lawsuits, and end many conflicts. A Christian should possess a forgiving spirit. The Apostle Paul states,

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another.”¹⁹

The elders, the congregants, the attendees from the church should get involved in making a difference in the church. When we deal with conflict appropriately, there is positivity in the life of the church, as stated in Matt 18: 19 “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”²⁰ “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them”²¹ adds the context of God’s presence in resolving conflict.

Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness. If individuals want to resolve disagreement, anger or conflict, they must learn to forgive. The Word of God states, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”²² Forgiveness is the primary key to church conflict. Conflict will come, even in the church.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 6:1-8.

²⁰ Matthew 18:19.

²¹ Matthew 18:20.

²² Matthew 6:14-15.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH

I began my research with the reading of four books suggested by my professor as well as two outside readings. These were very instrumental in helping the candidate understand conflict. These books included: *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* by Ronald W. Richardson; *Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil* by David R. Sawyer; *Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration* by Norma Cook Everist and *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* by Edwin Friedman.

The notable point of these books is that it does not matter if we are dealing with the Body of Christ or any other entity; there is no easy resolution or quick process when dealing with conflict. According to Friedman,

The desire for a quick fix throughout the Greater American Family evidences a search for certainty, a penchant for easy answers, an avoidance of the struggles that go into growth, and an unwillingness to accept the short-term acute pain that one must experience in order to reduce chronic anxiety.”¹

The authors painted the picture of the inner workings of the congregation, how its leaders responded to conflict in a manner that directly or indirectly impacted the congregation. This was dependent on their theological background, organization skills or worldview. Knowledge was gleaned on how to exercise responsibility in managing

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Maryland: Church Publishing, Incorporated, 1999), 119.

conflict. Richardson, asserts “we make assumptions about what motivates others and guides their functioning, about how they create problems for themselves, and about the resources they have for dealing with difficult situations.”²

Within his work, Richardson spoke about the structures of the church. All the notable activities that carry the most effective influence and control over the congregation are within the “emotional system.” “It is the most difficult to detect and understand, let alone try to change.”³ Expanding further on the concept of the emotional system, Richardson captured my attention when he voiced,

Emotional systems are like delicately balanced mobiles. Any movement by any one part of the mobile toward or away from the center of gravity affects the balance of the whole mobile. This is most true of the parts closest to the top of the mobile (the leadership), and only somewhat less true of the parts closer to the bottom. As soon as a mobile gets out of balance and hangs askew, it needs to be rebalanced to hang properly.⁴

The way one thinks and functions when the emotions are stimulated in the midst of conflict determines the level of control the emotional system has on a person. It does not matter about comprehending the system or status, when one’s emotions are involved; it determines the outcome and alters the nature of the worshipers.

Conversely, those who persistently hang on to biblical instructions, will find the power to act rightly even when their feelings tend to lead them in the wrong track. On occasions when parishioners found themselves trying to get even with people who had wronged them, God’s Word enabled them to avoid confrontation in the midst of conflict.

² Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 24.

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Ibid., 29–30.

A tool that was extremely helpful was assessing the congregation's emotional system. There were anxieties in the congregation. Richardson shared his assessment of a church that is in conflict:

(1) A church is lifeless. It has no energy, no zest, no passion for enacting its understanding of what it means to be the church. (2) A church is always in turmoil and experiences an accumulation of unresolved conflict. (3) Related to this is the church's lack of a clear direction or goals. (4) A church is disconnected from or regularly at odds with its denomination in a bitter, angry way. (5) A church experiences little sense of connection or community between its members or members are unable to be open or real about who they are in the congregation.⁵

Operating within a church can be hectic. Very often elders and pastors become disconcerted because of the blame, disrespect and inconsideration that is directed at them. These accusations and indifferences have caused many leaders to internalize these spiritual assaults. These outbreaks within the congregation are taken to heart thus causing the leaders to take them personally. "If they think this way, however they respond, whatever they actually do or say, more problems will result and church life will become more chaotic."⁶

A very powerful and eye-opening chapter by Richardson, "*Being One Among Many*," reflects on congregational life in general as it relates to conflict. He fosters the admonition of Christ as portrayed in John 17: 22-23, "...that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one."⁷ The church is instructed to work in unity through prayer, study, teaching and loving each other, but often there are difficulties that ruin the church, blocking unity and growth. There can be unity in diversity. Conflict should not plague a congregation because there is a diverse

⁵ Ibid., 159-160.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ John 17:22-23.

culture or ethnicity, or as a result of some members holding a viewpoint of certain tenets of the faith such as: living the vegetarian lifestyle or the wearing of jewelry (some believe that they should only wear a wedding ring). In any congregation, there is that diversity that is a part of life and respect and brotherly/sisterly love should still prevail.

Richardson expounded on the difference between “togetherness” and “individuality.” He defines “togetherness” as “the biologically rooted life force that drives us to want to be connected to and affiliated with others.”⁸ Upon further examination of the chapter Richardson writes:

It orients us to the group, or at least to those who are emotionally important to us. It is about our inevitable dependence on others and our need to be connected. It shows in our concern for others, our sensitivity to them, our ability to listen to them, to love them and to both seek and give nurturing...It inspires us to seek “unity,” in the church or in any other group we are a part of.⁹

This shared knowledge allows the candidate to better understand how individuals think and function in togetherness. There is shared love, respect, open friendships, and a sense of connectivity even in the midst of multiplicity or intellectual differences.

On the other hand, “individuality” is defined as “the biologically rooted life force that impels us to become our own persons, to become emotionally independent, distinct entities who think, feel, and act on the basis of what makes sense to us individually...”¹⁰ This individuality allows persons to explore new ideas that may be very beneficial to the church. Thinking “outside the box” has caused many great programs to be implemented because of the “free thinking” of individuals. This can be a good attribute for an individual within the congregation if placed in the proper perspective. However, if not

⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁹ Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

used to the glory of God, one can become very self-centered and try to amass fame and popularity. It can be expected that others should be in agreement with their thoughts and ideas. These individuals pursue their own path without regard for others, and this leads to conflict within the congregation. I have observed and experienced conflict when individuals undermined the whole Body of Christ and implanted their “theology” or some ideal that is contrary to the congregation.

The Apostle Paul explores the idea of individuality within the context of togetherness with the metaphor of “the body” in 1 Corinthians 12:

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all... for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit...But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ...If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased...Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers ... But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.¹¹

Richardson points out that “more mature individuals, who have a stronger sense of their own self or their individuality, experience mature togetherness as attraction to, interest in, and curiosity about others, especially about getting to know others’ differences. In this form of unity, there is greater comfort with diversity, variety, and uniqueness.”¹² There was much cultural diversity in the congregation. It played out in the way individuals interacted in the conflict. Some individuals tried their best to bridge that

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:4-29.

¹² Richardson, 63.

conflict, but others did not try to understand or respect the culture of others.

Overemphasis on cultural differences, particularly of the dominant culture in the church, became patronizing and controlling to the congregants. Suggestions or programs were ignored or not supported. The candidate noticed that some people appeared relaxed, even-tempered and accepting of different positions until they could not handle the stress conflict anymore. They eventually became “caught up” in the conflict, becoming confrontational and angry at others and the process that was taking place in the congregation. This unresolved conflict became toxic, leading and destroying the closeness of the church and undermining its ministry.

Ronald Richardson in the thirteenth chapter, “*Becoming A Better Leader*” addresses being a less anxious presence. Church leaders should be mindful of difficulties in conflict and pay close attention when trying to resolve them. He states, “The leader’s main job, through his or her way of being in the congregation, is to create an emotional atmosphere in which greater calmness exists—to be a less-anxious presence.”¹³ Individuals become impatient and nervous when officers or leaders in the church cannot demonstrate a measure of peace or tranquility. Confidence is lost, and as a result the group shows mental fatigue.

Richardson maintains that leaders have a greater influence over the group and can cause a better resolve and lower stress if they are able to control their emotions. This cannot be possible if the reverse is done, for “if the leader becomes as anxious as the group, it is less likely that the group will deal as well with a crisis.”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 173.

¹⁴ Ibid., 174.

One should be selective as to the time frame they choose to initiate a discussion during conflict. When the congregation at the church was in conflict, a leader led out in singing, or the church was asked to divide into groups of twos or threes for prayer. Avoidance of confrontation was encouraged by the leaders. This brought wholeness and a measure of calmness to the life of the congregation. By showing oneself as a non-anxious presence and communicating through prayer made a profound impact on the believers.

As a leader, you need an awareness of your own level of reactivity and the part that self plays in the emotional process in the church. This means having the ability to step back from a situation and observe how you are affected emotionally, how others react to your behavior, and so forth.¹⁵

This research has drawn the candidate's attention to the five different leadership styles that are defined by Thomas and Kilmann: 1 Competitive (Forcing) 2 Collaborative. 3 Compromising. 4 Accommodating and 5 Avoiding.¹⁶ Three of the five leadership styles I will forgo in my thesis since the model I am presenting in my hypothesis suggest that there is not aggression, or winners and losers, but if the principles of loving your neighbor and/or not taking the law into your own hands are applied, resolution can be achieved.

In the Collaborative Leadership Style

Try to meet the needs of all people involved, including themselves. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution, when there have been previous conflicts in the group or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁶ Michael Warden, "5 Leadership Conflict Styles." <http://michaelwarden.com/5>. May 29, 2012. (accessed Nov 1, 2013).

¹⁷ Ibid.

In the Compromising Leadership Style

People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, including the compromiser themselves. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal-strength opponents are at a standoff or when there is a deadline looming.¹⁸

The writer believes when congregants show calmness and love for each other it does not negate the fact that conflict may still exist. One's ideas and concepts are governed by culture and society making an impact on the way they view conflict. Religious upbringing and theological views influence the perspective on conflict in the congregation. Norma Everist suggested that the formation of conflict comes "partly through our own personality; partly through our family of origin, including birth order; and certainly by our experiences with conflict and the roles we play in conflict at various stages of our lives."¹⁹

The author maintained that comprehending the complexity of conflict allows individuals to decipher what is happening when dynamics occur. I was very eager to learn and understand what Everist had to say in Chapter Three regarding "*Patterns of Conflict*." This was very eye-opening for the candidate as an individual in ministry. What resonated were the characteristics of destructive and productive conflict. I gleaned a better understanding of "strangulation" within a congregation. "What may seem destructive for a while, in the end may actually be productive. Likewise, as conflict drags

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 3.

on, draining the group's energies, what might have been productive at first ends up destroying the group's passion for mission."²⁰

David Sawyer expresses "a congregation can be wonderful and terrible, exciting and discouraging, nurturing and demanding, healing and hurting."²¹ If individuals are willing to alter their mindset and unmask the great truths in the complexity of conflict, they can regain that connectivity with God and their fellowman. It also renews faith and trust in God.

To this end David Sawyer shares some ground rules for addressing conflict in the chapter "*Looking, Listening and Learning*" from one of his books, "*Work of the Church: Getting the Job Done in Boards and Committee*," to help the wise leader sort through and identify deeper realities on conflict:

(1) Listen to each other and "say it back." Before parties can rebut an opponent's statements, they must first repeat the statement in their own words. (2) Stick to the issues and stay away from personalities. (3) Stick to the present; do not bring up the past conflicts. (4) The best offense is a good defense. State clearly your own position rather than attack an opposing position. (5) If your position prevails, thank God. If your position is defeated, accept the majority decision and be patient. (6) Remember that it is Christ's church, not yours or mine. We are seeking God's will first.²²

The church is a pattern of subsystems. These subsystems are "component organizational units that are established by rules, by roles, and by rituals. Roles, rules and rituals may be formal or informal, explicit or tacit."²³ Conflict in the congregation can be

²⁰ Ibid., 27.

²¹ David R. Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 7.

²² Ibid., 33.

²³ Ibid., 44.

reduced (not eliminated) when anxiety is brought under control. These keys aid the candidate in remembering that the congregation is an interrelated whole.

One of the ways of communicating to the congregation is by the means of telling stories. These stories can reflect the pulse of the congregants. “The words or stories a congregation tells about itself are clues to its deeper realities and ultimately to the degree to which they are in harmony with the mind or will of God.”²⁴ As the congregant mingles, they can paint a picture of themselves. It can be one stroke in the painting of the congregation. A colleague had shared with me the name he called his newly formed church based on the text “to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light”²⁵ He wanted everyone to identify with his church based on the name that was given.

In each church, there are leading persons who drive the story. As these “stars” begin to interact with other members of the congregation, they can change the dynamics positively or negatively. There is thankfulness for the description within story when conflict is recognized and dealt with according to the principles of God as outlined in Matthew 18.

A fundamental skill in conflict is listening. “You can hear a lot just by listening.”²⁶ Much can be gained when there are no distractions and attention is paid to the speaker. If the deeper meanings and intents of the discussion are followed closely, there can be different outcomes. At times, one may interpret or ask for clarification if they are paying close attention in the discourse.

²⁴ Ibid., 58.

²⁵ Acts 26:18.

²⁶ Sawyer, 59.

As one listens closely to the discussion, it would be realized that it is not always necessary to win an argument. Sometimes individuals are not listening but thinking of the next response in order to win an intellectual difference. This “short-circuits” the conversation because instead of listening, one wants to “say” the last word. Listening allows one to be empowered when they feel that their voice is heard. “Non-anxious waiting and listen communicate caring and respect.”²⁷

The most important commonality suggested is that church leaders address conflict early and proactively before it “becomes highly argumentative or divisive.”²⁸ Conflict will always exist, but the deciding factor is how one handles conflict. “Understanding people is more important than trying to do something to people to “fix” them in some way.”²⁹ There are no quick fixes in conflict.

The Word of God has instructions in dealing with conflict lovingly and respectfully. Sweeping conflict under the rug does not eradicate existing problems. In the Bible, fitting examples of David, John Mark, Paul, and Moses, even Jesus, were used to show how conflict was handled and what they learned through success and failure in conflict.

It is tempting for people to be negative towards each other. We are called to take Matthew 18 seriously when dealing with conflict. One of the qualities of a good leader is the ability to allow others to share in the conversation at the table. “Good leaders are people who know how to create a safe enough atmosphere in which people feel safe

²⁷ Richardson, 78.

²⁸ Ibid., 87.

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

emotionally.”³⁰ When individuals are disrespected or ignored, their reaction to conflict is different. Handling internal conflict with understanding, grace, wisdom and love is a witness to the members, especially new believers in the faith. “A congregation that is always dealing with conflict will wear its members out.”³¹

Change is unavoidable. “Any action that is focused on trying to change others or make them different will automatically fail and only lead to greater reactivity in the system.”³² Richardson further emphasizes that a working knowledge of “triangles” is needed. “You need to be able to identify the triangles in the congregation that you are involved in and change your participation in them.”³³

Every book offered a different perspective on conflict, and the supportive readings had an incredible impact on the candidate's understanding of the types of conflicts that exist within the congregation. The types of leadership styles draw insight into ways leaders can influence conflict positively or negatively.

³⁰ Ibid., 107.

³¹ Norma Cook Everist, 78.

³² Richardson 165.

³³ Ibid., 115.

CHAPTER THREE

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally operated as an inclusive congregation that prided itself as being “a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic group whose diversity empowers unity.” Its mission statement reads, “To be a church that reflects God’s character through their lives, with the purpose of spreading His love as they meet the emotional needs of its members.”

Conflict had marred the tenets of faith in this church, causing conflict in the congregation and the community. It became disconcerting to me that these dynamics in the church were either overlooked or passively addressed. As an ordained minister and board certified chaplain, many individuals came to me seeking counsel, emotional support or resolution concerning their dilemmas. I tried to speak to the leadership of the church regarding legitimate concerns that some members of the congregation had expressed, but it appeared to fall on deaf ears. Conflict was not new to this church, as there was a “split” in the congregation before I attended. During my first two years, I helped restore a sense of unity within the church, and the membership increased.

Knowing that the church’s conflict was upsetting too many individuals, I shared my concern with my professor and cohort. It was suggested that someone share guiding principles on conflict as it relates to the Bible. Based on their comments, I discussed with the pastor the requirement for my Doctor of Ministry program to conduct a project at a

site. I asked his permission to conduct biblical seminars focusing on conflict at the church.

Since the church is part of the New Jersey Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, the pastor recommended that I notify the President of the Conference regarding my intent to conduct these biblical lessons on conflict. I contacted the President of the Conference to ask for his approval. I received word that this proposed project would be very important, not only for the individual church, but may be used throughout the Conference. There were no existing seminars to discuss the conflict within the congregation. Finally, I presented a proposal to the church board. With the board's approval, I promoted it in the congregation for approximately four weeks.

Conflict is a broad topic, and it was recommended that I established a specific methodology for rolling out the seminar. It was decided that I develop a set of bible studies, introducing the concepts of conflict to the congregation, how it may operate in the system, strategies to manage it and thereby allow the congregation to benefit from dealing with the issues at hand. My personal belief is that individuals should be part of the solution instead of the problem. This blend of biblical teachings with strategies to manage conflict offered tools for the congregants to resolve conflict.

For my Lay Advisory Committee, I chose three colleagues from our hospital who knew of my goals and were willing to help me achieve those objectives. These individuals were selected for their familiarity with conflict, experience in researching information relating to the subject, and their steadfastness in wanting to see me accomplish my goal of completing the project.

The first member was an Administrative Assistant, who worked for six years at Hackettstown Regional Medical Center. She has good organizational skills, writing and

editing skills. She brings excellent judgment when called upon from her various superiors. Keen planning and decision-making skills also make her an advantageous candidate for the lay committee.

The second member has been employed at Hackettstown Regional Medical for approximately 15 years. She is well read on the subject matter in the field of anxiety. She is the wife of a minister and has a practical knowledge of conflict within the church.

The third member is an Administrative Assistant at Hackettstown Regional Medical Center. As a Seventh-day Adventist, she can speak to the issues of conflict that exist among the parishioners from a lay person's perspective.

With guidance from these three individuals, the goals were set: encourage individuals to have a closer walk with God as they communicate with each other, and help participants understand the principles of conflict as they implement the best tools available.

Three more individuals were added to the Lay Advisory Committee. The fourth member is on the Elders Board of the Hackettstown SDA Church, and understands the working of organizational structure and policies and is influential with the leadership team.

The fifth member has been employed at the hospital for 38 years as a staff nurse, OR nurse, ER nurse, supervisor, manager and nurse executive. In her role on the committee, she acted as a sounding board, provided support during challenges of the project and assisted in navigating the unfamiliar waters of dealing with conflict.

The final member is a financial analyst. She is also a member of the church executive team, a Bible worker and spiritual guide who understands the conflict within the conference.

It was difficult at times for the entire committee to convene, but they supported the Candidate in the selection of the topics to be presented to the participants. They assisted with the design of the promotional materials, encouraged the members of the congregation to participate in the sessions, and evaluated the candidate's presentations and the overall leadership of the project. I asked for their critical input and candid observations on what was written and discussed at the sessions. Finally, they participated in the site visit for my concluding evaluation with my advisor, Dr. Lawrence.

The Lay Advisory Committee worked with the Candidate to develop the topics for presentation over a six week period. Topics included: 1. Handling Anxiety in the Midst of Life. 2. The Power of Forgiveness. 3. Loving Your Enemies. 4. Spiritual Renewal. 5. Resolving Conflict through Christian Reconciliation. 6. Building Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities.

In preparation for the project, I met with one of the Lay Advisory Committee members. She mentioned that this topic and the potential goals needed to be guided by the Holy Spirit. We prayed that the biblical seminars would not be a mere formality to fulfill the requirement but that they would touch the lives of those attending the program and change would take place in the life of the congregation. I felt touched and confident that the focus of the project was "blessed" and my concerns regarding the magnitude of conflict would be addressed as I articulated the various topics.

The first step was communicating the sessions to the congregation. A flyer was distributed to those attending the church services. Promotions were placed in the church bulletins; announcements were made from the pulpit, and a Power Point presentation was shown. Members were reminded of the sessions during the fellowship luncheon.

This project was well received by the congregation. A target group of twelve attendees was initially set, but an average of forty persons attended. The increase in attendance was partially due to people from “sister churches” who found out about the seminars and wanted to attend.

At the beginning of each session, participants were given a disclosure form indicating that their identity would be protected in the writing of my thesis paper. A pre-evaluation form was used to evaluate whether they understood the concepts presented and to identify any changes in their perceptions during the sessions.

Being mindful of the challenges in the congregation and the goals of the project, some members of the Advisory Committee gathered before the first session for a season of prayer. This forty-five minute session saw us pouring our hearts to God asking the Creator to be present with the Candidate in his opening remarks on “why people fight” and that the first session’s focus on the thought provoking subject: Handling Anxiety in the Midst of Life, would go according to plan.

SESSION 1: Handling Anxiety in the Midst of Life

People in congregations fight about everything one can imagine:

Whether young people should sleep coeducationally in tents on a church retreat; whether women should be ordained to the priesthood; when people may speak in tongues in the 11:00 A.M worship service;...whether to change the prayer book;...and which biblical scholars should be taken seriously with regard to scriptural inerrancy.¹

It is unfortunate that Christians hurt each other in the house of God. It causes leaders to expense their vitality in resolving issues rather than teaching members the

¹ David B. Lott, *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2001), 22-23.

principles of right living. “Rather than trying to solve problems and fix the causes of complaints, leaders in many congregations today are more appropriately trying to manage differences and make decisions based on the congregation’s defined purpose or goals.”²

After the introduction of why people fight, questions were asked to generate discussion. One question asked of the group by the Candidate was, “What are some of the areas or events that bring about anxiety or stress?” It was noted by one of the attendees that when there is a loss of control of emotions due to a change in lifestyle or death of a family member this brings pain and stress. She gave the example of the burial of her husband and the financial stress that occurred during that period. Some concurred that this was a stressor that brought stress.

College students in the congregation spoke of major exams (midterms and finals) that led to stress. Some of them told about drinking stimulants (coffee) in an effort to be successful in college (trying to stay awake at night). Others said that forgoing a social life and even being “a loner” in order to be successful brought a measure of anxiety.

Others in the congregation said that the family dynamics brought on tension and conflict. It was mentioned that abuse (verbal and physical) in the church is seldom addressed. Members are afraid to discuss this matter in fear that their partner, who is seen in the eyes of the church as an honest Christian, may be viewed as an “abuser.” I had stated that I have seen this abuse resulted in the separation or divorce in families.

One young member remarked that hurricanes caused anxiety. Although this caused laughter because of his age, discussion centered around the disasters in California and the Mid-West where lives were disrupted, homes lost and families displaced.

² Ibid., 86.

Relating to the questions on stress, some of the church members stated that when programs were not implemented because of budgetary constraints, it caused stress, frustration and conflict. Also the cancellation of the youth trip caused stress and disappointment since the youth was looking forward to the trip. Likewise, the change in leadership caused tension. Finally, the uncertainty of a new pastor increased anxiety in the congregation. This interactive questioning session moved the congregation to focus on the stressors that occurred in the life of the congregation.

The next question that was asked, “Is there any difference between fear and anxiety? If so, how does it affect one’s Christianity?” Most individuals were of the opinion they are the same. One participant uttered, “Fear produces anxiety and anxiety produces fear.” Some believed that anxiety exists when there is tension or when someone worries, while fear is something bigger like bombings, terrorism or rioting. As pointed out by the candidate, apprehension and fear disturb the emotions, and any disruption of emotions is felt in a person’s Christian life.

During this time, we further explored the trials and tribulations of the Christian. It was declared that everyone suffers. This started from the inception of the fall of Adam and Eve. Although some individuals may suffer more, the pain may be the same, but the outcome can be different depending on how one handles their trials. I shared an example of a person whose trial was being afraid of her death. I was called to her room by her nurse. I sensed her agony, and I sat quietly, held her hand, spoke words of comfort and prayed with and for her.

In the main discourse, it was expressed that there is a connection between fear, concern and depressions. According to Dr. Archibald Hart, “you seldom see depression without some anxiety, or anxiety without some depression. They are two sides of the

same coin. It just depends which side lands face up.”³ One participant asked what makes the difference between those who suffer from anxiety and fear and those who live in faith and courage. One person suggested that the difference was Jesus. I explored this idea with the participants as I believe that Jesus is in the life of those who struggle and because of His presence it gets them through the day.

This stimulated the question, how do you develop a relationship with God, and how does it help reduce stress? The biblical character David was used as an example as he expressed vivid thoughts of depression and anxiety “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?”⁴ We discussed how at times one may believe that the Creator of this vast universe, who controls everything, is not giving the attention that is needed to his creation and has forgotten them, but He never does. He is always waiting with open hands to support, strengthen, and love us. I showed the poem “Foot Prints” on the screen. This was powerful as some individuals cried during its reading.

“There is a lot of external pressure in this type of society and little emotional support. Perhaps that is why anxiety disorders are the fastest growing psychiatric conditions for which people seek help today.”⁵ A deeper discussion ensued with simple but profound principles that may help when someone is overtaxed. Archibald Hart wrote, “One way is to get yourself a little notebook to record your beliefs whenever you catch

³ Archibald Hart, *The Anxiety Cure: You Can Find Emotional Tranquility and Wholeness* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 1.

⁴ Psalm 22:1.

⁵ Rex Briggs, *Transforming Anxiety, Transcending Shame* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communication, Inc, 1999), 39.

them.”⁶ Many of the participants spoke of journaling as a means of recording their successes and failures. One person had their journal and showed an example of journaling by reading the “blessing” from God in the midst of her trial.

During difficult times humor is used as a means of lightening and alleviating stress. “When all is said and done, the best guarantee of a long and healthy life may be the connections you have with other people.”⁷ Within the biblical text humor is described as good medicine, “A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.”⁸ One participant remarked, “Laughter makes me feel better. It heals my broken heart and brings an optimistic outlook through difficult situations and disappointments.”

Reviewing stress, tension and anxiety led to the pathway of conflict. One notable example that leads to conflict is the loss of a loved one when family members cannot unanimously make final decisions. When the benefits do not outweigh the burdens, some may still want to hold on to their belief that God would provide a miracle. When this does not occur, anxiety ensues. In closing this very interactive session, we refocused on the idea of developing a relationship with God. Elements examined for a healthy relationship with God included: 1. Prayer – Jesus encouraged us to pray by giving us a model in the Lord’s Prayer. 2. Meditation – “No amount of meditating can magically erase the stress of losing a job or a loved one. But it can help people cope.”⁹ 3. Seeking God’s

⁶ Archibald Hart, *The Anxiety Cure: You Can Find Emotional Tranquility and Wholeness* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 113.

⁷ Nancy Shute, “Prescription: Don’t Be Lonely,” U.S. News and World Report, Nov. 12, 2008.

⁸ Proverbs 17:22.

⁹ Michelle Andrews, “How to Beat Stress and Anger Through Meditations,” U.S. News and World Report, Dec. 29, 2008.

Kingdom– Jesus knows that we will worry, so he said to His disciples “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will put on.”¹⁰

People have needs that they want to fulfill by joining the church. People join because there is a fulfillment through the messages that are preached, thereby meeting an intellectual need. Also, some have theological questions that are unanswered and are seeking a fuller understanding of the Word of God. And finally, there is a longing to be a part of a congregation that ministers to others in the community.

SESSION 2: The Power of Forgiveness

The second session examined the difficult relationships in the Bible and how forgiveness factors into the relationship of the Body of Christ. The congregation required forgiveness to move towards healing, and knowing that some members struggled with forgiveness, it was decided that the season of prayer be conducted on Friday night.

Attendance increased as many individuals had invited others from “sister churches.” Individuals were curious about the content and what discourse would encourage the church that was shaken by conflict. To set the tone for the discussion, we sang and read a devotion that was applicable to the topic.

It was decided that the definition of forgiveness would be relevant to the discussion. This definition was taken from Webster. He states “Forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge.”¹¹ With this foundation, the question was asked, “What is forgiveness?” The general response was, “God’s pardon of sins.”

¹⁰ Matthew 6:5.

¹¹ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate, *Collegiate Dictionary* 11th Edition.

Some spoke of God's forgiveness to humankind at the beginning of creation when Adam and Eve sinned. One person pronounced that forgiveness does not come easily for the Christian. This opened an avenue for discussion, as some of the congregants were on the fence. Some believed that if the love of Christ was in the believer's heart, then one should have God's forgiving spirit. Some felt that God had given His creation the power of choice in forgiveness. Forgiveness is driven and inspired by God's admonition to forgive.

One of the members who had experience conflict asked, "How can someone know in his or her heart when he or she has honestly forgiven those who wronged him or her?" This question received little response from the group. It was a critical crossroad in the life of the congregation. The Candidate declared that when there is no forgiveness, individuals find it hard to forget. When forgiveness is found in the heart, pain subsides, allowing one to focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Forgiveness doesn't mean that persons should not take accountability for the wrong they had done, and it does not excuse the wrong.

The Bible offers tips and skills to deal with difficulties echoed in the stories. We investigated stories in the Bible that showed failure and success in conflict: Cain and Abel, Saul and David, Paul and Peter at Antioch, and Christ and Satan. As I articulated, every conflict stems from Satan's rebellion in Heaven. It is a fight against good and evil. Conflict came because Satan disagreed with the Godhead in heaven, and his actions caused the Godhead to abandon him to this earth. Satan has impacted the human race through his rebellion. The scripture states, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."¹² We focused on the

¹² Ephesians 6:12.

biblical application of forgiveness: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”¹³

Jon Negroni pinpoints that there are seven basic elements in forgiveness. Some of these elements spoke profoundly to others in the congregation. The participants were encouraged to engage in the activities outlined by Negroni:

Acknowledge—acknowledge the pain, 2. Consider—how the hurt and pain have affected you. The word “consider” is key here because it involves thinking before making a decision. 3. Accept—accept that you cannot change the past. No matter how much you want this pain could be reversed, it’s time to admit to yourself that your anger toward the person would not redeem what they have done. 4. Determine—determine whether or not you will forgive. This is when the forgiveness process will either begin or end. 5. Repair—Repair the relationship with the person who wronged you. Before the act of forgiveness or reconciliation, rebuild the connection you used to have with this person. 6. Learn—learn what forgiveness means to you. Once the relationship is on the path to restoration, and you’ve given yourself time to accept the reality of the past, it’s clear that forgiveness is a way for you to find closure. 7. Forgive—forgive the person who wronged you.¹⁴

Relationships can be restored through genuine forgiveness. Through this session, the participants learned that forgiveness enhances one’s self-esteem. In the end, the individuals were invited to pray as they were led by the Holy Spirit.

¹³ Texts in this section came from passages of scripture in this order: Matthew 6:12; Luke 6:37; Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁴ Jon Negroni, “7 Steps to True Forgiveness, *ThriveWorks*,” December 10, 2013 www.Thriveworks.com/blog/7-steps-to-true-forgiveness/ (accessed Feb 4, 2014).

SESSION 3: Love Your Enemies

In this session, focus on the different ways conflict plays out in the congregation was reviewed. Our church has a high level of conflict, especially between some board members (who were on the board for a number of years) and the pastor. Most of the members and a former pastor had a good relationship, but there were still challenges and the programs were weakly supported. The Lay Advisory Committee discussed the various ways this conflict impacted the church and how it may affect the member during the week.

The objective of this lesson was to help people understand that being accusatory, laying blame and pointing fingers at each other only create enemies. As conflict and disagreements intensified in the congregation, people avoid each other. Some of them even stop coming to church. People were encouraged to move in a Godly manner from unwholesome behavior to healthy behavior. The saying, “when you point one finger at someone, three fingers are pointing back at you,” was the focal remark for this session.

We discussed Norma Everist’s focus on negative and positive avoidance: “as a means not to value certain people; as a way not to admit when you are wrong; as a way to maintain our belief that nothing can, or should, change; the church should by a place of peace and tranquility. Why do we have to fight?”¹⁵ Many of the participants expressed appreciation for these tools. Discussion centered on church members as troublemakers. It was felt that troublemakers should not be in the house of God because troublemaking is an intentional act. One person declared, “The things we used to do, we should do them no more.” Some believed that the church is a hospital for the sick, and by the grace of God troublemakers are transformed.

¹⁵ Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 74.

The biblical concept of loving one's enemies focused on this question: how do you react to people who make life difficult for you? There were generic answers all relating to God's love and treating your brother as you would like to be treated until someone said, "You put your foot down and speak up. There must be a line drawn in the sand when it comes to inappropriate behavior." We reviewed what the Bible said about enemies: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

"But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also... but love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High."

"When the wicked came against me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and foes, they stumbled and fell. Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident."¹⁶

Instruction about the healthy use of avoidance response as highlighted in the book *Church Conflict* by Norma Everist was highlighted. This was a great resource on restoring relationships that were damaged by conflict and offered authentic conversations that may avoid conflict. Individuals were very attentive and took notes on the avoidance responses:

1. I'm too emotionally tired to have this conversation right now, but I do want to deal with it because I value our relationship." 2. "I would rather we talk about this at another time. Are you free tomorrow morning (evening)?" 3. "It appears that some of us may have undue influence in this difficult decision. We need to provide everyone with all the facts." 4. (Depending on your image of conflict)

¹⁶ Texts in this section came from passages of scripture in this order: Romans 12:19-21; Luke 6: 27-36; Psalms 27:2-3.

“Let’s sleep on it.” “Let’s mull it over.” “Let the dust settle on this one.” “You bring up a good point. We need to bring others into this discussion.”¹⁷

Participants wanted printed notes on this section of the series, and it was promised to them. We closed this session with prayer. Some individuals stayed to converse with me on the topic.

SESSION 4: Spiritual Renewal

By this stage, momentum was building, and attendance increased. Some people who did not attend the other sessions (those strongly caught up in conflict) were at this session. My goal for this stage was to create an avenue for restoration and healing.

In James 4:1-3 we learned that the sinful words and actions common to conflict are merely symptoms of deeper problems. As James warns, it is not good enough to identify and repent of sinful words and actions, you must also deal with the attitudes, desires, and motives that prompt you to do what you do.¹⁸

I asked participants to share examples of persons who need regeneration and renewal. There were notable replies: 1. Single parenting. 2. One who is heavily involved in their work. 3. The church member who has many offices and is expected to do a good job. This session’s lecture highlighted the many opportunities for conflict: the use of alcohol and drugs; pleasure seeking; stop going to church; some are involved with the internet. I followed the lecture format teasing out biblical references to renewal and restoration.

¹⁷ Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 75.

¹⁸ Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker: Abiblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 101.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”¹⁹ He said that he learned to be content despite his conditions. He mastered the secret of poverty, adversity, ready to face anything through Christ, who lived in him.

David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul...”²⁰ David used this expression because he knew how God treated him. When we fail as Christians and feel helpless, the Good Shepherd is very patient with us, restoring us to our standing with Him when we call upon His Name.

SESSION 5: Resolving Conflict through Christian Reconciliation

At times Christians cannot resolve conflict. This is suggested in Matthew 18:15-20 as a biblical principle in resolving conflict:

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more that ‘by the mouth of two, or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”²¹

This was an eye-opening passage for the attendees as they reviewed the context of the passage about conflict. The entire chapter is about interpersonal relationships and

¹⁹ Philippians 4:13.

²⁰ Psalms 23:1-3.

²¹ Matthew 18:15-20.

offenses, not the church. The conclusion is that God is in the midst of conflict even when there are two or three persons.

I received unfortunate news that my children's god-father had died. This was a difficult moment for me because he was not only my good friend but also a great mentor. I mentioned to those present that I would be going to Dr. Allen Williams' funeral in Alabama, delaying the last week. Many persons had encouraging words to say about the sessions. They were looking forward to the last topic. The final session would review basic conflict resolution skills and build skills to turn conflict into opportunities for growth

SESSION 6: Final Application and Review-Basic Conflict Resolution Skills

We reviewed the basic conflict resolution skills and made them applicable to everyday living. There was an understanding that when there is a different of opinion on theological matters or any matter that is out of the norm, conflict may occur. How we handle conflict in the body of Christ makes a difference.

Members were encouraged to follow and apply these rules suggested by Jeanne Segal, and Melinda Smith, *Conflict Resolution Skills: Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities*: "Manage stress quickly while remaining alert and calm; control your emotions and behavior; pay attention to the feelings being expressed; and be aware and respectful of differences."²²

Members of the Lay Advisory Committee who attended the conclusion session felt that there was improved understanding about handling conflict within the

²² Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Melinda Smith, M.A. *Conflict Resolution Skills: Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities*. n.d. http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq8_conflict_resolution.htm (accessed Jan 2014).

congregation. Many of the participants appreciated the blend of biblical studies with the best strategies employed to conflict manage.

This last session included a very moving ceremony. Some of the participants shared how the seminars helped them to understand the existing church conflict. After the testimonies, the congregation formed a circle, held hands and sang, “Side By Side We Stand.” Three of the elders and the pastor prayed.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT EVALUATION

The Lay Advisory Committee invested their time, shared ideas and supported the Candidate by attending the seminars at the Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their invaluable service made the seminars insightful, contextual and meaningful to the participants. As stated before, this congregation was “suffering” from broken relationships because of conflict. It was vitally important that the Candidate mastered the subject matter to bring focus and healing to the congregation. The Candidate, Lay Advisory Committee, Conference, Church Board, Pastor and congregants were excited and enthusiastic about developing and sharing the concepts of biblical teachings blended with the best methodologies on managing conflict.

As the Lay Advisory Committee members were selected, it was the intention of the Candidate to work with them as a unified body. I shared with them the prospectus and discussed their role in the development and implementation of the project. Unfortunately, the concept of working as a group did not materialize because of the working schedule of some of the members. Although the benefits of a cohesive discussion from the committee were lacking, the Candidate worked at times with the members on a “one-on-one” basis. Due to this process, there was redundancy of ideas and suggestions. A disadvantage of meeting with individual committee members is that it felt like the candidate was working harder at times as opposed to working smarter, utilizing the gifts and talents of the committee.

Although this methodology did not lend itself to utilizing the committee to its maximum, solid inputs, directions, and reflections were still derived from the committee. This in the end worked for the Candidate as everyone pulled his or her weight to make the project successful; for example, a member made the power point presentation, another wrote-up the bulletin announcements, revisions were made by another of the lectures. The Candidate provided strong, consistent leadership to the project with contributions from the Lay Advisory Committee.

Lay Advisory Team Evaluation

The Candidate developed a seminar of six interactive series that spoke to the issues of conflict that existed in the congregation. The stated objectives under the caption of the topic “Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Renewal,” were covered. One member from the Lay Advisory committee remarked that one of the hallmarks of the seminar was the Candidate’s ability to respond to questions throughout his presentations. The seminars were very enlightening and spoke to his preparation on the various subjects.

Members of the congregation who attended the series were hopeful that the topics covered would address their needs and specifically the needs of the Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist Church. One participant stated that the sessions helped her resolve the issues long-held on forgiveness since childhood. She felt that the sessions were appropriate as others thought they were well received, especially the use and interpretation of Matthew 18. Many individuals expressed an interest in similar programs in the future.

Another response from a Lay Advisory member in her discussion with me remarked that the topics were positive, powerful and soul searching. She felt that the

materials presented demonstrated that this Candidate is a naturally gifted speaker and intellectually talented in conflict management. I concurred with her as the seminars helped to give closure to those who were carrying burdens from family disagreements, hurts, and feelings of victimization. She enunciated that it was edifying to the believers, who discovered solid biblical truth of forgiveness and spiritual renewal.

Conflict reconciliation was a much needed message for the entire congregation. It was timely; a divine message for a congregation that was hurting from division and misunderstanding. A small number of congregants were still “fanning the flames” of conflict and disunity. An elder (a member of the committee) welcomed the series and declared he felt better equipped to handle and resolve conflicts. He observed that the few who seemed to be the most controversial were not interested in the project. We reflected on the fact that the Candidate was unable to arouse the skeptics’ curiosity regarding the seminars. It was difficult for me as I thought that some different direction in laying out the topics could have interested some of those individuals. I was elated when one of the persons who was deeply involved in conflict attended one of the meetings and made valid contributions to the discussion.

A seasoned member of the committee who advised the Candidate felt that the seminars brought to the forefront issues of conflict resolution and forgiveness which were not usually considered. The member articulated that one instance of forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal of friendship was observed as a direct result of the sessions. Additionally it was highlighted that the influence of the seminars spread beyond the membership of the Hackettstown Seventh-day Adventist as other members from various churches also attended on a consistent basis.

Very often individuals saw the Candidate in a preaching style (delivering the Word from the pulpit). The method of communication never lent itself to dialoguing and interacting with members of the congregation. Some of the committee members and those who attended mentioned that Church members and visitors who attended the seminars said that they were blessed by the Candidate's presentation style. His way of presenting the materials allowed others to share their ideas, and gave the Candidate an opportunity to "flesh out" the details of his comments. One committee member noted that the active discussion was refreshing and fun. An in-depth conversation with a senior member of the committee reflected on the effect this project had on the Candidate. After the discussion, it was voiced by this member that they felt the Candidate's integrity and desire to resolve conflicts within his church was paramount to the success of the project. They believed also that the project facilitated the understanding of the Candidate in dealing with future conflicts since his knowledge was opened to the principles of those concepts.

Finally, one Lay Advisory member felt that the Candidate gained more respect from members of his congregation as he conducted his presentations. It also suggested by this member that although conflict still existed in the congregation, after the presentation, there was less fighting among members. She believed it made a profound impact on the church.

The members of the committee agreed that the seminars exceeded their expectations. However, some were of the opinion that the use of power point illustrations interjected in the presentation would have solidified the concepts and ideas for the children and others in the meetings. Although this idea was factual, the Candidate felt that the overuse of power point presentations takes the place of the main speaker. I felt

that it worked for me since I wanted to deal with a sensitive subject that required a deep understanding of how to manage conflict utilizing biblical concepts.

Another observation for improvement of the sessions was the distribution of handouts relating to the presentations. It was believed that persons reviewed as well as reflected on the shared knowledge of the presenter. This was evident as some members asked for clarification of a previous session, or inquired about an instruction or quote that was emphasized on the power point presentation. I felt that if this suggestion was heeded, there would have been a greater influence on the congregation.

The final section that the Lay Advisory committee felt could have allowed the presentations to run smoothly was a “better use of time management.” They surmised that the sessions were too short for the materials presented. Most of the sessions ran over thirty minutes. At times, the Candidate felt under pressure to finish the materials. Much to the accepting nature of the attendees and the high interest in the topics, they stayed beyond the time. Some persons gathered after the close of the sessions to dialogue with the Candidate. One committee member suggested that I share this knowledge with other congregations and even different faith traditions.

The Committee assisted in the structure of the seminar and provided constructive ideas concerning the flow of the topics. They willingly went beyond the call of duty in encouraging participants to attend the sessions. I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the Lay Advisory Committee.

Candidate Self-Evaluation

As I started to develop the overall project, I experienced some anxiety. The overarching concern for me was how individuals would accept the material as presented

in the seminars. I knew of existing conflicts and wondered if the project would be effective in changing the existing dynamics.

I understood that I needed the presence of the Holy Spirit to stimulate my thoughts and lead me in the direction that would be most beneficial to the congregation. Members of the Lay Advisory Committee and I prayed for the sessions. I realized that the spiritual life can be strengthened through conflict. According to Ellen G. White, “Through conflict the spiritual life is strengthened. Trials well borne will develop steadfastness of character and precious spiritual graces. The perfect fruit of faith, meekness, and love often matures best amid storm clouds and darkness.”¹

This life that we live whether Christian or non-Christian, is a conflict. “We have a foe who never sleeps, who watches constantly for opportunities to destroy our minds and lure us away from our precious Savior, who has given His life for us.”² Hence, conflict will reside in the church.

The majority of participants involved in conflict consisted of individuals who had difficulty in refocusing their theological thoughts and their approach to handling conflict. I was concerned about their adaptability to the concepts, but I felt satisfied with the results of the turnout of and the acceptance of the materials.

I personally felt enriched by the study of the topics. It was a learning curve for me as I discovered biblical principles on conflict. This reshaped my ideas, understanding and methodology of implementing change, not only to congregants but also to those I counsel on a daily basis.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2003), 61.

² Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1915), 291.

Although I did not use many of the notable system philosophers and stuck mainly to the biblical principles, it still met the approval of many of the attendees. My presentations utilized Ronald Richardson's ideas on creating a healthier church along with a blend of biblical studies. Many congregants appreciated and endorsed the perspectives of these conflict resolutions. Their eyes were opened to the balance that may be accomplished in understanding other writers of this subject. My presentations provided a powerful impact on the congregation since they strongly believe in scripture as the primary book for instruction.

Based on this foundation, I focused on pertinent texts that could be positive sources in resolving conflict. Jesus says, "Abide in Me." These words convey the idea of rest, stability, confidence. Again He invites, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The psalmist said: "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him." And Isaiah gives the assurance, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." "Take My yoke upon you: . . . and ye shall find rest."³

Upon presenting the first lecture and hearing the response from the congregation, I felt encouraged to forge ahead with the other topics. However, the announced time did not do justice for the volume of work that I had prepared. It was frustrating at first. I tried to adjust the presentations. It did not work because of the question and answer format by the participants and Candidate. In retrospect, I am of the opinion that conducting the topics on a weekend (Friday, Saturday afternoon and Sunday) would have benefited the congregation and reduced the "rush" on the topics.

³ Texts in this section came from passages of scripture in this order: John 15:4; Matthew 11:28; Psalms 37:7; Isaiah 30:15; Matthew 11:29.

One area that persons felt comfortable in sharing was their personal stories. At times, these stories related to the existing conflict causing an uncomfortableness in the congregation. At times understanding the story and reflecting on the nuances within the story was not appropriate. This was a tremendous learning experience for me, as I endeavored to resolve delicate and personal matters in an open forum. At times, I second-guessed myself on the way I handled their questions. What worked best for me was addressing the matter after the sessions.

As a chaplain, I endeavor to listen to people's problems carefully, but this study has widened my understanding of the true intent of listening. I observed that on different occasions participants just wanted to be heard. Jesus mentioned listening as a component of resolving conflict. Listening is a crucial element. It tells me that attentive listening can lead to an acceptable resolution.

Matthew 18 has become my guiding light in the midst of conflict. I have a better understanding and appreciation for this Scripture. I personally experienced the "flames" of conflict, and it was humbling to implement the principles of this text. By the end of the seminars, a burden was lifted, as I spoke not only to the congregation but also to myself. It was a life altering experience for me.

Participants' Comments

Before this project was implemented, some members were very frazzled and had lost hope and trust in the leadership. A few persons targeted new believers and swayed them in their theology. The seminars were announced with the intent that God can use these sessions as a means of lifting the conflict that existed in the congregation. Although some members were concerned about the use of outside sources (authors who wrote

about conflict), many desired transformation in their lives and the life of the congregation so they were opened to the idea of reviewing the authors' suggestions.

Questions were posed to the participant as a means of evaluating their understanding of the sessions. One question to the participants regarded their attitude of the congregation before the seminars and after the presentations to the congregation. One person said before the seminars that some individuals were despondent, some members were "cold" towards each other and fiction plagued the congregation. After the seminars, bridges were being built. Similarly, other individuals expressed appreciation for the session on forgiveness, as it had the greatest impact on their ministry and social interaction. I sensed and witnessed that congregants were starting to practice forgiveness.

Another question that drew a response from the participants dealt with how the seminars made a difference in the life of the congregation. One member stated that she had harbored so much bitterness toward a member that it was difficult to attend church and worship with that individual. After the seminars, she was able to "swallow her pride," speak with the individual, and heal old wounds. Her relationship with God is more meaningful as a result of the seminars. Dr. Karl Haffner said "Until we are intimately connected to God and to His community we will feel lonely, isolated, and discontented. Only in fellowship with God and His followers will our souls find quiet."⁴

Another member remarked, "Something needed to be change and change quickly." It was echoed that some individuals may have "won the battle, but lost the war." After the seminar, the church adopted Isaiah 40:28-31:

Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,

⁴ Karl Haffner, *Soul Matters: Most things are optional. Some things are essential* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2006), 77-78.

The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.⁵

These seminars made a positive difference in the life of the congregation, evident in their increased identification with the church and commitment to God and each other. Some members began attending the fellowship meals and slowly mingled with members and visitors. God's leading on the minds and hearts of the hearers made a miraculous difference in the outcome of the sessions. Changing lives and embracing conflict were the greatest lessons for the church and the Candidate, that God can take any situation and transform it. With God "all things are possible."⁶

I greatly appreciated the counsel of my advisor Dr. David Lawrence. From the very beginning, he guided my thoughts on narrowing the topic to meet the needs of the participants. He gave invaluable feedback that led to a successful outcome. Even when circumstances prevented the Candidate from continuing, Dr. Lawrence shared words of wisdom. When writing was reinstated, he aided and supported the Candidate with guidelines. The Candidate was able to dig deep to fulfill his project.

⁵ Isaiah 40:28-31.

⁶ Mark 10:27.

Personal Testimony

Regardless to our station in life, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, CEO or worker, pastor or person in the pew, all of us go through difficulties in life. I was personally affected by the conflict in the church, and I wanted to do something about it. I was at the verge of giving up on the congregation, but felt an obligation to continue since in previous years, it had “turned around.” This project provided an opportunity to depend on God for answers and direction. Two passages of scripture gave me comfort and strength: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight,”⁷ and “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”⁸

This project gave me a better understanding about church conflict and how I may relate to those involved in conflict. Richard O’Ffill remarks in his book *“Lord, Save My Church: Tackling the tough issue”*:

The church is not a rest home for saints; it is a hospital for sinners. Now I understand the point of the saying: a person who is sick goes to the hospital because hospitals are there to help make sick people well and then send them back out into life.⁹

The church was “a hospital” for the spiritually sick as they experienced conflict, but in the end there was a measure of wholeness, revival and renewal.

⁷ Proverbs 3:5-6.

⁸ Jeremiah 33:3.

⁹ Richard W. O’Ffill, *Lord, Save My Church: Tackling the tough issues* (Nampa.ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007), 87.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The process and implementation of the project surpassed my expectations. I was called upon to demonstrate my aptitude to lead the church in examining an intricate topic: managing conflict in the life of a congregation. I felt overwhelming responsibility. I recall being challenged, disappointed and upset at the existing turmoil, but was refreshed by the support of participants in the discussions.

I am a different person than when I first started this journey. I survived the backlash of conflict that existed in the congregation. I am wiser and understand better the irrational and illogical behavior of members of the Body of Christ.

This project had a positive effect on my view of ministry. I have a deeper appreciation for the pastorate. It was difficult to satisfy everyone as I ministered to a diverse congregation. I had to be “strong like iron but still gentle as velvet” as I dealt with strong and varied personalities. At times, it tested my faith and made me rely upon my Christian belief and upbringing. This project demonstrated that one must remain a non-anxious presence, assured of oneself, and not willing to compromise values or principles. To endure in this ministry, I must endure the pressure between doing what is popular against doing what is right in the eyes of the Creator.

Another lesson that I learned is that it is lonely at the top. It has pressed me to reach out to my colleagues in ministry and chaplaincy because I felt that the congregation did not understand the path they were traveling and lives were being impacted by existing conflict. Now I am better empowered to handle conflict and give myself permission to

deal with disagreements in a professional manner. In the past, I was more defensive in my approach to conflict. I have learned to apply those principles with great results.

Another teachable moment from this project showed that commitment, hard work and especially prayer can make a difference in the life of a congregation. As long as they are open to change and willing to move forward despite their difficulties, they are a force to be reckoned with as they inspire hope in God and spread the gospel.

In my position as pastor and chaplain, very often church members or persons at work reveal their conflict to me, and at times it may appear hopeless. I share with them the story of Joseph, how God helped him in and through his conflict. His brothers sold him into slavery. He was a slave in Egypt for approximately thirteen years. God delivered him out of slavery and placed him in a position of authority next to the king. His brothers came to Egypt because of a famine in their land. Joseph's response could have been bitter, angry and unforgiving. Instead he chose to be like God and forgave them.

Today I am a transformed individual. This journey made me sensitive to the needs of others involved in conflict. My study of conflict in Matthew 18 offers an aid in resolving conflict. It suggests that when we have the right attitude everyone wins. In conflict there are no quick fixes. There will be a variety of subsystems within the church. The congregation's emotions and anxiety play out in all relationships.

There is a better way to deal with conflict: do not allow conversations, discussions or debates to become quarrels and arguments. I gleaned a wealth of knowledge in this project. I grew spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. I have observed the growth in the congregation as it now tries to manage its conflict.

This thesis is built upon Scripture's teachings about conflict resolution and the best models for managing conflict. It is the goal to produce a comprehensive training

model on conflict resolution for church leadership. I plan to develop presentation materials of a practical conflict model for others to use. This would be shared with leaders in my faith tradition and also made available to any other faith tradition that may find it helpful. I hope to share my experience via articles for publication: Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries publishes quarterly journals and other literature, pamphlets and training materials. The Association of Professional Chaplains provides resources to equip and motivate chaplains and spiritual caregivers, APC eNews and the Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy.

There are always opportunities to present seminars at various denominational meetings, conference sessions, and APC conferences. I intend to develop presentations on conflict appropriate for these events.

Relationships between leaders and members can be strained. This project gives hope that relationships can be rebuilt and spiritual lives can be renewed. The model outlined in this thesis can be effectively used to strengthen congregations. Some related topics which future researchers may pursue to advance this work are: 1. Support and comfort to the hurting. Many individuals are hurt through conflict. This would be a topic that may shed light on assisting congregants who have been wounded by conflict and have become discouraged and or emotionally distraught. 2. Positive and negative conflict in the church. 3. Active listening. Many conflicts occur because individuals do not take the time to actively listen during discourse. This topic would bring into focus the importance of active listening, response, and techniques that defuse conflict.

These topics offer a wider perspective on handling church conflicts. David Sawyer stated, “change not only brings with it loss and grief; it also requires individuals

as well as churches to be new creatures and to try new ways...We can find hope in conflict because God is in charge and is pulling the world toward the new and the good.”¹

Through my research, the input from the Lay Advisory Committee, and the participants’ questions and responses, I see this topic in a different light, the light of change. By God’s grace, my intent is to share this body of knowledge to congregations and individuals who are stressed out, discouraged, and despondent. I want them to know that resolution is possible. When it is taken to God, the assurance comes that we “can do all things through Christ...,”² even resolve conflict.

¹ David R. Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 160.

² Philippians 4:13.

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