A Strategy for Member-Driven Discovery of Leadership Problems at PC(USA) Churches in the Presbytery of San Diego

Neal Nybo

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin

Part of the Missions and World Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin/67
Please HONOR the copyright of these documents by not retransmitting or making any additional copies in any form (Except for private personal use). We appreciate your respectful cooperation.

Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN)  
P.O. Box 30183  
Portland, Oregon 97294  
USA  
Website: www.tren.com  
E-mail: rwjones@tren.com  
Phone# 1-800-334-8736
This ministry focus paper entitled

A STRATEGY FOR MEMBER-DRIVEN DISCOVERY OF LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS AT PC(USA) CHURCHES IN THE PRESBITERY OF SAN DIEGO

Written by

NEAL NYBO

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

[Signature]

Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: February 14, 2012
A STRATEGY FOR MEMBER-DRIVEN DISCOVERY OF LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS AT PC(USA) CHURCHES IN THE PRESBYTERY OF SAN DIEGO

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
NEAL NYBO
MARCH 2012
ABSTRACT

A Strategy for Member-Driven Discovery of Leadership Problems at PC(USA) Churches in the Presbytery of San Diego
Neal Nybo
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2012

To help Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) churches in San Diego Presbytery (SDP) to discern and be prepared to address problems within their leadership, which the leaders are not addressing, this paper will present a presbytery-based strategy that provides resources and training and a means for presbytery-church-member interaction and feedback. Since 2000, at least one-third of SDP has experienced public church conflict. Consequences include church splits, membership loss, and pastors removed or resigning. The strategy proposed here prepares members and churches to discover and begin to face challenges before they become public conflicts. This discussion will be presented in three sections.

Part One describes general, harmful, and self-preserving leadership problems and the consequences of these issues for the members who face them. A recent history of church conflict in the last ten years in San Diego Presbytery provides specific context for examples of the three leadership problems in three SDP churches. This includes my own Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church (RBCPC) and two others referred to as “Church Y” and “Church Z.”

Part Two will introduce three biblical concepts central to preparing members and church for discovery: the concept of “environment” from Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, the concept of “community” from the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, and the concept of true versus symptomatic problems from 1 Corinthians. Additionally, four theological principles based in the Presbyterian heritage will be set forth in order to guide the process of confronting leadership problems.

Part Three will provide a ministry strategy for preparing members to discover and address leadership problems, before they become public conflict in churches in San Diego Presbytery. Implementation and evaluation of the strategy will be accomplished in RBCPC and will be introduced to the other two congregations as well. The results will be presented and analyzed.

Content Reader: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD
Words: 300
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the church members who provided multiple interviews and feedback, members of the Committee on Ministry in San Diego Presbytery for their support and participation, Anne Nybo for her encouragement during the last stage in the process, and Lisa Marie Sandoval whose editorial assistance greatly improved the final manuscript.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART ONE: CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. THE CONTEXT OF SAN DIEGO PRESBYTERY AND THE LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS FACING ITS CONGREGATIONS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. RECENT HISTORY AND CONTEXT WITHIN SAN DIEGO PRESBYTERY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART TWO: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING CHURCH CONFLICT</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. PRACTICAL STUDIES IN INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DYNAMICS</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART THREE: AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS LEADERSHIP-INITIATED CONFLICTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. EXPLORING REAL-LIFE CHALLENGES</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6. ESTABLISHING A MODEL AND CURRICULUM FOR DISCOVERING PROBLEMS IN LEADERSHIP</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7. IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPANSION OF STRATEGY AND ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8. EVALUATION AND EXPANSION OF IMPLEMENTATION AND STRATEGY</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX</strong></td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

A group of people stand in their kitchen looking at a puddle of water on the floor in front of the sink. While the puddle is a visible and clear problem, they realize immediately that it is neither the only problem nor the most important issue. Cleaning it up will not resolve their situation. Once tidied, the puddle will form again. They know the real problem is inside the kitchen cabinet. Once the cabinet doors are open, they may find a small drip or a stagnant pool damaging the interior of the cabinet or a hidden mold that can hurt anyone who comes near it. The systemic challenge and root issue (a leaky pipe) are concealed, completely out of sight in the cabinet. Before they can discover and address their predicament, they have to risk opening the door. There may be an unsightly mess, a harmful mold, a lengthy process to track the problem to its source, or an unexpected or costly solution that causes inconvenience. Still, to fix the problem permanently, those in the kitchen must open the cabinet. In the same manner, the process in this paper helps churches to open their “cabinet” doors and be prepared for what they find.

Churches face “puddle” problems on a regular basis. These kinds of issues are visible and relatively understandable. The solutions are known, even if they are not easy. For instance, a pastor and a choir director have a conflict over the amount of time the worship service dedicates to sermons and to songs. It is a recognizable problem with an understandable solution: reallocate time. Unlike “puddle” problems, “cabinet” problems are not recognized easily. They may be intentionally hidden or ignored by both leadership
and members. Often “cabinet” problems are not addressed directly, and they lead to observable “puddle” problems.

For instance, in the “puddle” problem above, the “cabinet” issue may be that the pastor secretly feels insecure about his inability to manage his time and his staff. Inside he may privately experience continual guilt because those he needs to peacefully shepherd work in a continual state of chaos. He believes that his powerful preaching will keep members from noticing, which would lead to identifying, his lack of management skill. Those who are aware of it—like elders, the next level of leadership—turn a blind eye and ignore it, justifying their inaction with the explanation that the pastor’s call is not to manage but to preach. Meanwhile, the choir director remains unaware of the pastor’s fear and keeps feeling pressured to cut songs to make time for longer sermons. Members complain of services running long, and staff becomes ever more unresponsive to reasonable requests. Dealing with the “puddle” problem by reallocating time will not solve the hidden “cabinet” issue, because the “cabinet” dynamic will just surface again or sprout a leak elsewhere. In the end, the situation can deteriorate with staff, members, and even the pastor leaving or being fired. This scenario is very similar to an actual situation described at length later in this paper regarding a congregation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—or PC(USA), as it is commonly called.

The PC(USA) is a mainline protestant Christian denomination in the United States. Its structure includes national, middle-governing, and local structures for leading more than ten thousand churches.¹ In the PC(USA) today, tremendous challenges face the

---

denomination. Membership numbers have dropped 2.9 percent in both 2009 and 2010, accelerating a thirty-year trend. The denomination has been in a debate regarding the ordination of practicing homosexuals since the 1970s and in May 2011 approved changes to its constitution that many consider will allow local presbyteries and churches to permit gay ordination and reinterpret what that permission says about the authority of Scripture. These public and well-known challenges and problems have been the objects of constant attention and investment of resources for a very long time. Those fighting the battles feel they are the most important issues facing the Church. However, it may be these are “puddle” problems that draw attention away from more significant but hidden “cabinet” issues in the denomination. With membership declining and churches leaving the denomination, the PC(USA) may not remain a denomination long enough to “open the cabinet” and discover its most significant issues.

Within the PC(USA) is the San Diego Presbytery (SDP). SDP is a body that governs at the local level. PC(USA) pastors installed at churches in the presbytery are members of SDP along with elders selected by their churches. SDP, like the national

---


5 Ibid.

6 Fortson, “The Road to Gay Ordination.”
denomination, faces problems like declining membership as well as declining budgets at churches and at the presbytery..getCurrentVersion()

Currently, I serve as the executive pastor of Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church and am a member of SDP’s Human Resources Committee. I also have served as chair of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, chair of the Council for the Presbytery, and moderator of the presbytery at large. In both my roles as pastor and presbytery official, I often hear church members complaining about their “puddle” problems. In SDP, these familiar challenges with identifiable solutions come in the form of a shortage of parking spaces at their favorite worship service or complaints about contemporary music creeping into traditional worship.

However, I also have witnessed SDP experience a large share of churches that were distracted by such “puddle” problems and did not recognize or address “cabinet” issues, which exploded as catastrophic public conflicts. For example, one church experienced its married pastor having twelve-year affairs simultaneously with two staff members. Another church hid its pastor’s frustration with the denomination until 75 percent of the congregation left the local church and the PC(USA); and still another church had a presbytery administrative commission take full jurisdiction for the church

---


8 Don Lattin, “Minister Resigns as President of Marin Seminary Church Trial over Sex Abuse Under Way,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 3, 2000, http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2000/05/03/MN60938.DTL#ixzz1TRLb3fyF (accessed July 28, 2011), with additional details revealed at a congregational town hall meeting reporting the results of a denominational trial in May 2000 in San Diego, California, for which I was present.

9 I chaired the administrative commission during this particular conflict, which took place in 2005.
after eighteen months of presbytery intervention regarding irreconcilable conflict between the pastor and the session, resulting in a 66 percent drop in membership.

In the presbytery setting, these are problems not addressed easily by committee votes or application of the Presbyterian *Book of Order* (BOO). The *Book of Order* is part of the constitution of the denomination. It seeks to provide definitions, boundaries, rules, instructions, or guidelines for every kind of situation. The BOO is very good at codifying church details—like who must approve, perform, and record baptisms—and it admonishes leaders and members toward Christian life. However, while it mentions the committee responsible for addressing problematic issues, it does not provide specific direction for solving actual problems.

San Diego Presbytery of the PC(USA) is located in San Diego County, California. It was formed in 1968, when it separated from the much larger presbytery of Los Angeles. It began with thirty-one churches and twenty-five thousand members. In 1993, membership dropped to twenty thousand. Today, its website indicates it has thirty-three churches, various church plants and outreaches, and ministries with sixteen

---


14 Ibid.
thousand members.\textsuperscript{15} A more recent census places membership at fourteen thousand, almost half of what it began with forty-three years ago.\textsuperscript{16} While the desire of congregations and the presbytery is for growing churches and thriving ministries, tremendous energy has been invested in recovering from devastating disagreement which requires presbytery intervention. For the sake of this discussion, such devastating disagreement requiring presbytery intervention, and involving “cabinet issues,” will be referred to as “public conflict.”

The challenge in the presbytery is that hidden, “cabinet” problems remain unknown or unaddressed until they expand beyond the church’s ability to contain or address them. The presbytery is called in to help solve the problem. Once that occurs, even if significant resources are brought to bear on the problem, history demonstrates that the conflict erupts and the presbytery works towards recovery and repair rather than solution. In each of the seven churches examined in this paper, extensive efforts were made by presbytery members and committees, sometimes for years, without major improvement. Before public conflict occurred and before the presbytery was called to help solve their problems, there were members who felt concerned that “cabinet” issues existed but were unable to get leadership to address them. Those members were ill prepared to discover what the systemic challenges and root problems were and even less prepared to name and address them adequately. In some cases, they were hindered by leaders who did not want these “cabinet” problems uncovered.


\textsuperscript{16} Therien, \textit{Summary of the Presbytery}, 1.
For this reason, energy and resources need to be available at the presbytery level to come alongside members and leaders who want to look at their deeper, “cabinet” issues. Those resources need to be readily accessible in informal ways, without the imposition of committee rules and tools. The primary tool available to the presbytery is the administrative commission, a group of presbytery members elected by presbytery to take over some or all responsibilities of a church. This is like a government regulatory agency taking over a business. At that point, recovery, repair, and keeping the doors open take priority over reconciliation; and, conflict resolution is all but forgotten.

For this reason, this project will address a presbytery-level process to resource church members when they suspect there are undiscovered, “cabinet” issues in their church. A process will be developed to prepare members and leaders to identify and begin to address those challenges early in a way that is clarifying, healing, and reconciling. Over time, this process can lead toward a presbytery culture and environment of corporate and self-discovery so that addressing “cabinet” challenges early becomes the norm rather than the exception. Since “puddle” and “cabinet” problems tend to overflow, overlap, and muddy an already existing mire, it proves helpful to distinguish them. The main difference among them is as simple and significant as technical versus adaptive challenges.

“Puddle” problems tend to be more technical in nature. According to Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, technical problems are the kinds of issues that people face on a regular basis for which they have known solutions.\(^\text{17}\) For example, needing to lose five pounds put on over the holidays is a technical challenge with known solutions. To lose

weight, one eats less and exercises more to burn more calories than one consumes.

Technical problems arise in churches all the time. For instance, the Sunday school director does not have enough volunteers. The known solution is that an announcement for more volunteers needs to be made in worship services. In extreme cases, perhaps a sermon series on service is needed. When more ecumenical technical challenges arise—perhaps a pastor resigns or non-members wish to have their infant baptized—the BOO can be relied on to provide standard operating procedures to address such situations.

Adaptive problems are those that cannot be addressed by authoritative decisions, such as those provided by the BOO. Adaptive problems require those involved to internalize a change before the problem can be resolved. In the case of being overweight, it may be that depression leading to an inactive lifestyle has contributed to the condition. A technical change like walking up stairs at work instead of taking the elevator will not solve the adaptive problem. An adaptive solution would be for the individual to internalize the change from inactive to active. The solution would require recognizing the need for help, perhaps seeking therapy, and altering the primary response to the systemic challenge (the depression). In this way, facing adaptive challenges will “require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community.”\(^{18}\)

Adaptive challenges require new ways of processing information and making decisions. Addressing them requires experimentation, innovation, and changes in “attitudes, values and behaviors.”\(^{19}\) It is vital that these most important and difficult issues be addressed, but too often they are avoided. In *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
and Linsky suggest that this avoidance is unavoidable. This is because the church’s system of leadership, policies, theology, and polity may work against discovery or disclosure of such challenges.

Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez also address this point in *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*. When speaking of steps leading a church through significant transformation, they write: “This process is not about experts who tell us the truth and solve our problems—it is about leaders who shape an environment and provide resources so a plural leadership becomes normative.”

Although PC(USA)’s system of governance is based on checks and balances among pastors, lay leaders, and members, shaping an environment and moving toward plural leadership with respect to problem solving are not readily familiar to church leaders—especially if such approaches to conflict are not the norm in people’s families of origin. More often, when faced with the risks and unknowns of adaptive challenges, leaders and churches instead try additional technical solutions or opt for denial.

The need addressed here is not resolution but its precursors: identification of the problem and preparation of members and leaders to be willing and able to embrace the necessary change. SDP’s executive presbyter referred to this need in a public email to pastors and elders in the presbytery:

> Often we don’t get notified of difficulties in congregations until after there is significant or public conflict. Instead of being able to work on prevention and resolution, we have to work on damage control, restoration, and recovery. There

---

20 Ibid., 24. Rules, organizational culture, standard operating procedures, and economic incentives regularly discourage people from facing the hardest questions and making the most difficult choices.

is a need at the presbytery level for voluntary intervention and training that equips
congregation members and leaders to recognize and address underlying
challenges before becoming larger conflicts.\textsuperscript{22}

The magnitude of the problem of conflict in churches makes it important.
Unresolved or badly resolved conflict has been devastating to churches in SDP, to both
members and leaders. Damage can continue long after the visible conflict has been
addressed, if secrets from the conflict remain, and can result in patterns of decline or only
marginally maintaining the status quo.\textsuperscript{23} Pastors suffering from conflict often leave the
churches they were called to by God, sometimes in shame and frequently deeply hurt
with careers damaged or ruined. In such circumstances, spouses and children can be torn
from a beloved church home.

In San Diego Presbytery, systemic issues that have either been unknown or
unaddressed have led to increasing levels of conflict and problems, including significant
decline in membership. Over a ten-year period from 1999 to 2009, five churches that
faced public, disruptive conflict saw average membership declines of at least 48 percent
and 43 percent reduced attendance. In contrast, seven similar churches which did not
experience that kind of public conflict experienced average decreases of only 6 percent in
both membership and worship attendance during those same years.\textsuperscript{24} In addition to

\textsuperscript{22} Clark Cowden, email message to author, July 11, 2011.

\textsuperscript{23} Kibbie S. Ruth and Karen A. McClintock. \textit{Healthy Disclosure : Solving Communication
Quandaries in Congregations} (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 57.

\textsuperscript{24} These percentages were based on PC(USA) ten-year trend reports: General Assembly Mission
yeartrends/report/10594/ (accessed July 18, 2011); “Statistical Snapshot for Christ United Presbyterian Church”;
cusa.org/tenyearreports/report/GKCH8MP/ (accessed July 18, 2011); “Statistical Snapshot for First United
Presbyterian Church,” http://apps. pcusa.org/tenyearreports/report/503/all_statistics.jsp (accessed July 18, 2011);
financial and numeric losses, churches and their members can experience emotional and spiritual trauma. Churches may split or have large numbers of members migrate away. Those who stay may find that families and friends within a church are torn between sides vying for their loyalty.

While conflict can be devastating and generally is avoided, conflict is also inevitable in human beings. Consequently, a healthy process that can lead church members to address conflict before it becomes destructive is vital. Often, when members identify a concern, they seem unable to name it or address it early—when it would be easier to do so. According to Marc Dupont in *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse*, open and honest communication can become almost “dangerous,” with members developing an unwritten code of rules. These can include being blinded by personal perceptions of reality, remaining quiet regarding abuse in order to “protect” the pastor, and guarding a false facade at all cost. This type of behavior results in major crises, splits churches, devastates congregations, damages the souls and spirits of believers, and hampers and hurts the witness of Christ. Sometimes conflicts are numerous and addressed before growing and


26 Ibid., 40.
going public. However, those that do become public before the presbytery is able to intervene often are devastating. The cost of not changing is high.

I am motivated by this topic, because as an active member of SDP I have watched churches I care about be devastated by their conflicts. I have counseled well-meaning members who were stymied by lack of personal knowledge and ability and by church cultures that resisted discovery. Resolving conflict is a vital tool used by God to do the deep, transformative work in human beings. This profoundly work of the Holy Spirit is what initially drew me into ordained ministry. I have discovered that the life transformation in Christ that I seek is only available as Christians live and work through their lives together over time, even amidst the discomfort of conflict. Salvation and the kingdom of heaven are at hand, as Jesus said in Matthew 4:17. That kingdom calls for repentance and a re-evaluation of the way individuals and communities live their lives. This kingdom call is the only way that conflict in churches will be recognized and ultimately resolved.

To help members of PC(USA) churches in San Diego Presbytery discern and be prepared to address problems, secrets, or difficulties within their congregation’s leadership, which the leaders are not addressing, this paper will present a presbytery-based strategy. It provides resources and training involving communication, discernment, small group dialogue, and a means for presbytery-church-member interaction and feedback. This discussion will occur in three parts. Part One explores three leadership problems facing PC(USA) congregations in San Diego and the consequences of these problems for members who face them. Chapter 1 describes three core issues: general leadership

---

27 All Scripture is taken from Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), unless otherwise noted.
challenges, harmful leadership problems, and self-preserving leadership practices. Chapter 2 provides a recent history of church conflict in the last ten years in SDP and portrays the specific context of these leadership challenges in three SDP churches. These include my own church, Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, where I currently pastor and two others referred to as “Church Y” and “Church Z.”

Part Two of this paper provides the theological and practical reflection upon which the strategy and its final process are predicated. Chapter 3 examines those foundational elements of theology which ground an understanding of God’s work among human beings, individually and in community, as well as the biblical foundations for this work itself. Chapter 4 establishes the foundational understanding for healthy individuals and groups. It describes normal leadership styles as well as dysfunctional aberrations. It goes on to offer the basic interpersonal tools that enhance the emotional safety of individuals in a group as well as strategies for group discovery of issues.

Part Three provides a ministry strategy for preparing members and leaders to discover and address challenges in their churches before they become conflicts. Chapter 5 explores the experiences of individual members in the three focus churches. Surveys, focus groups, and personal interviews seek to provide understanding of the problems they faced; analyze what additional support, knowledge, and resources they needed; and conclude how the presbytery could have provided it them. Chapter 6 takes the theology and practical studies of this project and develops a model for prevention training at the presbytery level as well as the steps a member, congregation, and presbytery can take from the time a concern is raised until a satisfactory outcome is achieved. Chapter 7 provides the model

28 Aliases denote the other two churches to maintain appropriate confidentiality.
and curriculum for helping to address issues in churches and describes the process taken to implement that model and curriculum at my church. While not a church in conflict, it does experience issues of general leadership challenges. As a church familiar and open to me as its executive pastor, it offers a rich environment for study. There is an evaluation of that implementation as well as a process for introducing this strategy into the culture at San Diego Presbytery so that members, leaders, pastors, and elders can equip themselves to address the “cabinet” issue facing their churches. Finally, the summary and conclusion will provide a synopsis of the outcomes and insights gained as well as next steps and plans for implementation throughout the presbytery.
PART ONE

CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY
CHAPTER 1

THE CONTEXT OF SAN DIEGO PRESBYTERY AND THE LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS FACING ITS CONGREGATIONS

This chapter examines the context of San Diego Presbytery as well as three significant kinds of leadership problems facing its churches today: general leadership challenges, harmful leadership problems, and self-preserving leadership practices. These are adaptive challenges which resist discovery. Church leaders often address problematic dilemmas and quandaries in their churches, but these particular issues lie with the leadership itself, thus making leaders consciously or unconsciously unaware or unwilling to address them. Members who begin to recognize these problems face resistance, ostracism, and a host of unexpected behaviors from their church leaders.

The Context of San Diego Presbytery

In the last twenty years SDP has moved from being an environment filled with significant conflict, distrust, and financial difficulty to growing confidence, joint projects, and financial stability tempered by the current challenging economy. In 1993 the presbytery was split over an involuntary dismissal of the executive presbyter, the chief officer of the presbytery, for financial reasons—which included a trial before the
denomination’s Permanent Judicial Commission. The split caused a great deal of distrust among members, mainly between liberal and conservative elements in the presbytery. That distrust remained high, and sometimes contentious, for many years. The role of executive presbyter was filled for several years by an interim executive, Mary Elva Smith.

In 2002, the Reverend Dr. Andy Smith was installed as the executive presbyter and brought with him a personal sense of being a pastor to pastors. Dr. Smith sought to “bind up the wounds” of the pastors and elders in the presbytery. While relations at the presbytery level improved, with financial losses being recovered and relationships between conservatives and liberals improving, several individual churches suffered their own misery of significant and public conflict.

For instance, the leader of a large congregation was removed from his church by a vote of the presbytery after two years of contentious battling at the church regarding the senior pastor, his leadership, and whether he should remain pastor—all occurring with common public demonstrations on Sunday mornings. The pastor left the denomination and formed a new church near the old one, taking a substantial number of members with him. Another church split due to the pastor and session’s joint frustration over doctrinal issues being debated in the denomination over the Lordship of Christ, authority of Scripture, and ordination of homosexuals. The pastor, session, and three-quarters of the congregation left to form a new church in a different denomination not far from the first church. In two more churches, tumultuous discord between members and their pastors over vision, leadership, and direction led congregations to stagnate and decline and with

---

1 Therien, *Summary of the Presbytery*, 2.

2 Ibid.
the pastors eventually leaving. These were difficult times for a leader like Dr. Smith. His ministry was taxing but effective; yet in 2006, just four years after his arrival, he resigned unexpectedly.

In 2007 the Reverend Clark Cowden became the executive presbyter, during a time of significant theological transition in the denomination. The mood of the presbytery changed. Previously, SDP had focused on internal conflicts among members, mirroring the wider denomination’s conflicts over conservative-versus-liberal issues regarding doctrine. Now it engaged in efforts to maintain its own sense of identity as an organization itself. The presbytery’s intent is to pursue its own goals and maintain its own identity while remaining within the changing national organization.

SDP currently faces adaptive challenges to change with its environment, if it is going to exist and grow. For example, the presbytery has worked intentionally to learn and develop a “missional” approach to ministry. In the last several years, the presbytery has been leading congregations through a missional church survey process. It provides resources, training, and connections in the areas of worship, evangelism, mission, education, and personnel situations. It helps churches connect with other congregations, ministries, and leaders. In 2008, SDP declared that it was no longer primarily a governing body but a relational community with the intention of becoming a mission agency.

Nevertheless, leadership difficulties persist. A conservative church sued the presbytery to acquire its property and buildings, because it sought to leave the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 1.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 2.}
denomination. Eventually, an acceptable arrangement was made that allowed church members to leave yet keep the congregational property. Another church in conflict with its pastor has lost so many members that it cannot hire a new pastor. Consequently, its future as a congregation is in doubt.⁶

In light of San Diego Presbytery’s current shift from governing institution to mission agency with a primary focus on congregations, congregational leaders, and the community,⁷ this project is timely and appropriate due to its desire to help congregations and their leaders address conflict. It addresses a specific need from a perspective of being a relational community. It puts the focus on equipping congregational leaders and churches to discover and respond to challenges that may lead to debilitating public conflict, if left unaddressed.

In the presbytery, both leadership and decision-making are democratic. All pastors are voting members as are elders, who are elected by their congregations and serve three-year terms. They elect a moderator and vice moderator who each serve one-year terms. Chairs and members of committees also are elected, for one- and three-year terms respectively. Most work is done, and most decisions are made, in committees. Permanent committees are responsible for organizing missions, establishing new churches and evangelism, supervising presbytery staff, addressing pastoral and congregational needs, training and qualifying potential pastoral candidates, and various additional tasks.

⁶ Ibid.

The organizational body responsible for helping churches in times of conflict is SDP’s Committee on Ministry (COM). COM consists of at least six, but usually eight to ten, members of presbytery. They include pastors and elders, who are elected to serve three-year terms on the committee. The executive presbyter is an ex-officio member and participates actively. The committee fills the role of pastor and counselor to pastors in the presbytery. It facilitates the administrative functions of the presbytery for employment relationships between pastors and churches. COM is also called on to “settle difficulties on behalf of presbytery when possible and expedient.”

The presbytery meets as a whole body five or six times a year. While pastors and elders are more or less interested in the work of the presbytery, they generally are kept busy and even are overwhelmed by the challenges they face in their own congregations. Therefore, they are usually content to provide more or less rubber-stamp approval to motions and decisions arising from committees. While many worthwhile proclamations and good intentions are ratified in this manner, often little ownership or follow through is observable by the presbytery membership.

The success of this project cannot be assured by SDP implementing it from the top down with insistence that churches participate. While the presbytery theoretically plays a supervisory role over its churches, its opening statement—that it seeks to be less regulatory and more relational and mission sending—recognizes that churches basically can choose to follow the presbytery’s direction or not. Consequently, this project will need grassroots support by elders and pastors who are interested in addressing conflict, see the need for guidance in their own situations, or have experienced it already and found it helpful.

Leadership Problems Facing Congregations in San Diego Presbytery

There are three kinds of leadership challenges that have devastating consequences in San Diego Presbytery churches: general, harmful, and self-preserving. Rather than attempt to provide any clear division among them, this discussion will explore these issues and distinguish them in terms of magnitude and intentionality. Even before one reaches the category of general challenges, there are entire categories of peccadilloes that human beings put up with in one another that fall outside the bounds of this project. For the purposes of this project, general challenges are defined as human flaws, character traits, and foibles which—when left unaddressed—create difficulties, hinder growth, and compromise the work and ministry of a church. Emotional, social, relational, physical, mental, and administrative weaknesses in a pastor are broad examples of such general challenges. Harmful leadership problems are those personality flaws and characteristics that can be described as compulsions and dysfunctions, which cause injury or damage to others.

Self-preserving leadership practices often result from both general and harmful leadership issues. These can be defined as secrets, patterns, and behaviors that often cause or are rooted in shame. Those involved in such practices specifically do not wish them to be discovered and actively work against anything or anyone trying to uncover them.

General Leadership Challenges

Well-meaning and effective leaders often have a general leadership challenge (GLC), creating difficulties in their church. Their role as spiritual leader and head of the

---

organization make it difficult for members to address such “cabinet” difficulties, which can exacerbate the church’s problems and keep a loving community from helping its leader. This combination of human flaws in the leader and intimidation felt by the members is what make GLCs a real problem.

GLCs are normal personal difficulties or weaknesses that human beings have and which have potential to become conflicts if unaddressed. These may be personality issues like being insensitive, critical, or egotistical. GLCs may be related to emotional issues like experiencing depression, anger, or burnout. They tend to manifest visually through a leader’s job performance as a lack of vision, putting in less effort than is needed, using old and tired methods without exploring current thinking on important subjects, or poor management skills. Sometimes GLCs are due to an inability to exercise tolerance. These can take shape as a personal bias—for instance, intense hate of traditional or contemporary worship—an overwhelming political bias, or personality dispositions that impede getting along with certain elders or staff. In essence, a GLC can be almost any kind of character trait that is ignored rather than humbly acknowledged by the leader. However, it is not always just the leader’s fault that they go unaddressed, for all believers—both leaders and spiritual flock—need the Body of Christ to grow (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

Members may feel intimidated about approaching leaders regarding a character challenge. Spiritual leaders often feel comfortable doing so, because they perceive they hold that role as a result of their own spiritual maturity, advanced training, and personal sense of call. Members who do not see themselves as spiritually or emotionally equal with leaders, have little or no training, or doubt their own maturity may not feel the same
sense of call. However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only when the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.” Members have the opportunity to care for their leaders by helping them address their issues and, in doing so, assist them from becoming harmful leadership problems.

When this “ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming” is not carried out, a pastor and the congregation together can create a general leadership challenge. For example, in one church in the presbytery there was a senior pastor who was deeply frustrated by his perception that the presbytery was not able to take a stand against a clear example of heresy by another pastor in the presbytery. This led him not to trust the presbytery staff. That, combined with his strong disagreement with decisions being made at the national denominational level regarding doctrinal issues, led him to engage in private deliberations with his session about leaving the denomination.

The congregation loved its charismatic leader. Leadership had challenged and bent the presbytery’s rules in order to make him their senior pastor. He was truly their spiritual authority. When he expressed strong concerns and distrust about the presbytery, the congregation did not question him. Leadership had a habit of not questioning his authority or decisions. Ultimately, he, fellow staff members, and all but one elder on session decided to lead the church from the presbytery but included no one in the conversation for over a year until the decision was made. Then they conducted informational meetings with

---


11 Senior pastor who left, intervention meeting with other pastors, San Diego, CA, 2005. I participated personally in this meeting.

12 Remaining elder who stayed with the church, interview by author during administrative commission meeting, San Diego, CA, 2005.
members of the congregation, causing deep divisions. Eventually, nearly all of the session and three-quarters of the congregation abandoned the church together with the senior pastor.

For the remaining one-quarter of the congregation that did not agree with this action, and therefore did not participate in leaving the presbytery, the potential task of seeking clarity and transparency may have felt to members as if they were questioning the pastor’s actions or motives. If members had believed it appropriate to question the pastor or disagree with his perceptions of the presbytery, perhaps more voices would have been heard and consequently yielded a different decision. This division left those remaining with feelings of confusion, fear, and uncertainty about the future. I chaired a presbytery administrative commission which had to take over the administration and leadership of the much smaller congregation. I met with members of the church who told me that they feared the presbytery and the administrative commission wanted to take over their church. Behind their anger and frustration seemed to be a deep concern that their church would not survive. It took several months and many meetings for the seeds of trust to be restored. It took years for the church to stabilize and regain some of its confidence in itself and the presbytery. Healthy congregations with transparent relationships do not go through events like this, because they have the tools to deal with dissatisfaction, conflict, and other general leadership challenges that surface.

When working well, the relationship between pastor and people can build the strongest churches. Reggie McNeal describes the phenomenon this way: “Spiritual leaders who are fairly intact in their self-esteem can build community. They breed health in their

---

13 These statements are taken from presbytery minutes when an administrative commission was formed, which I ultimately chaired. San Diego Presbytery Stated Clerk, *Presbytery of San Diego Called Meeting May 10, 2005* (San Diego, CA: San Diego Presbytery, 2005), 4626-4627.
relationships because they themselves possess psychological health. The opposite is also true; dysfunction breeds dysfunction.”

Members and leaders of churches, due to the nature of life in Christ, have the opportunity to live life together in a loving community, each there to care for, serve, and help develop the others. In this setting, passionate pastors are able to live transparently, knowing that other members will support them as well as encourage them in their areas of weakness. In this way, the entire congregation can fulfill and participate in what the Apostle Paul described when he wrote: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

When GLCs compromise a church community, everyone suffers. Members do not exercise their Spirit-led role of supporting their pastor and participating in spiritually leading their own church. Pastors and leaders continue in their unhelpful patterns and miss out on the transformative change God wants to do in them. Ultimately, the surrounding world loses some of the witness and ministry of Christ that might have been there had the church been able to live fully into the vision and path that God might have laid out for it.

Some GLCs only may require technical fixes, while others need adaptive change. However, only through identifying the “cabinet” problem can this happen. Churches today face the real possibility of having the choice Robert E. Quinn describes as “confronting the deep change or slow death dilemma.” Chillingly, he describes two senior leaders who, buffeted by demands were tired and facing personal burnout. Quinn

---


writes: “Both of these executives recognize that a deep change is needed in their organizations, both have opted to do nothing. They have chosen short-term personal survival over long-term collective responsibility.”\(^{16}\) With membership and attendance in decline, even in healthy churches, to do nothing and assume things will be fine appears not to be an option. Quinn goes on to say that many people eventually suffer from the executives’ unwillingness to address their organizational problems and consciously leave them to worsen.\(^{17}\) Likewise, for churches, worse situations present themselves if general leadership challenges go unaddressed and move toward becoming harmful ones.

Harmful Leadership Problems

A harmful leadership problem (HLP) is a personality trait in people in authority which causes damage to themselves and others. HLPs arise from what Gary McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima describe as “the dark side.” That dark side consists of the “inner urges, compulsions, and dysfunctions of our personality that often go unexamined or remain unknown to us until we experience an emotional explosion.”\(^{18}\) In contrast with GLCs where the pastor or leader may be aware of personal shortcomings, leaders with HLPs are often oblivious to them. Here is one case in point. A group of elders held a meeting with their pastor to confront his destructive behavior. They began the conversation telling the pastor they loved him but that they had certain concerns. Then, they carefully laid out their well-planned and rehearsed descriptions of issues, frustrations, concerns with, and specific behaviors they had experienced from the pastor. Even when confronted directly with his

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 28.
issues, this pastor could not readily see them. The report received by others from the pastor after the meeting was that, while he had been blind to his actions and resulting consequences, what he learned from the elders was this: “They love me.”

Rather than hear the concern and embrace the effort to change with the help of his elders, the pastor heard only what supported his own self-perception. Any opportunity for counseling, mentoring, or other informal support from the presbytery was missed.

McIntosh and Rima list issues that surface from the dark side as “insecurity, unhealthy codependence issues, feelings of personal shame, deeply sublimated anger or fear” and state that they “wreak havoc in our lives and leadership and eventually endanger ourselves and others.”

Common to people in all walks of life, these issues can be addressed, resolved, healed, and the individuals made stronger for it. What cannot be done is suppress, manage, or control them indefinitely. Eventually, they seep to the surface of life and wreak endangerment, which can be seen in society and in news headlines on a regular basis.

The damage from HLPs occurs when individuals do not process their issues in healthy ways. McIntosh and Rima cite one example from a church that demonstrates the point effectively. In 1995 a pastor of a very large and well-known church, with over five thousand in attendance and a $13 million building campaign, performed a lewd act on an

---

19 Members of La Jolla Presbyterian Church, interviews by author, Encinitas, CA, May 19, 2010.

20 McIntosh and Rima, Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership, 40.

21 Ibid., 173.

undercover police officer in a city park and was later convicted.\textsuperscript{23} The shocking fact regarding the event is that two consultants who had worked with the pastor throughout the rise of the ministry felt his behavior was not a total surprise. It seems others recognized some element of his “dark side,” even if he could not or would not acknowledge it.\textsuperscript{24} This particular problem, the unhealthy acting out of sexuality, while common in today’s society went on to become not only a harmful problem but criminalized behavior, because no one effectively confronted the issue earlier in the man’s leadership and character development.

Harmful leadership problems can become so severe and entrenched that they come to characterize the leaders themselves. When this happens, the problematic issues can show up in various areas of life. Some common labels used to describe leaders who knowingly have taken on the identity of their “cabinet” issues are compulsive leaders, narcissistic leaders, paranoid leaders, codependent leaders, and passive-aggressive leaders.

Compulsive leaders need to maintain total control. These leaders may look orderly in all areas of life; but on the inside, “they are an emotional powder keg.”\textsuperscript{25} They have strong emotions that threaten to be expressed explosively if set off somehow. In a church, these leaders need to micromanage every detail of their organization. For example, a pastor may insist on approving every song, prayer, or announcement that goes into a worship service and then want to decide what curriculum is being used in Sunday school classes.

HLPs in this form may appear as a striving for excellence, but in reality it is a need to wield power. Harm to others comes from excessive criticism and critiquing as well as the

\textsuperscript{23} McIntosh and Rima, \textit{Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership}, 52.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

experience of being scrutinized and distrusted. In the example just provided, a worship leader might suffer frustration, self-doubt, anger, or bitterness under the pastor’s disapproval of song choice, while the Sunday school director might feel oppressed and undervalued if not trusted to choose appropriate materials for the department the church has entrusted to him or her. Members may feel uncomfortable challenging these leaders because, even in their compulsiveness, these same leaders seek to do their best for the Lord.  

Narcissistic leaders have the false sense that their importance to the organization is greater than it is. They want, and even need, constant attention and admiration from others. Harm is done by their “interpersonal exploitiveness, in which others are taken advantage of in order to indulge the leader’s own desires or for self-aggrandizement.” Healthy people do not like to be used for another person’s gain. This is painfully true when the abuser is a spiritual leader who seems to need to enhance personal importance at a member’s expense. Members can feel uncomfortable challenging these leaders, due to all the good the leaders appear to do for God in other areas of ministry.

Paranoid leaders “are desperately afraid of anything or anyone . . . they perceive to have even the remotest potential of undermining their leadership.” These leaders are insecure in their leadership and show it in their reactions to people who threaten that leadership, knowingly or unknowingly, whether the leader’s perception is real or

26 McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 107.
27 Ibid., 115.
28 Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, 159.
29 McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 117.
30 Ibid., 123.
imagined. Regardless with whom they deal—members, colleagues, friends, or even family members—their response can run the gamut from guarded to suspicious to hostile.\(^{31}\)

Once while serving as an elder at a church, I was called into the office of the pastor and asked why I was undermining her ministry. I had been supporting her as best as I could, even attending meetings at inconvenient times, so that she knew she had my support. However, I had no idea how I might be causing detriment to her ministry. Only after receiving my repeated assurance did she acknowledge she had misread my behavior. This example shows how paranoia can skew a pastor’s perception of an otherwise positive reality and push away the people most supportive.

Harm also can come when paranoid leaders respond jealously to congregational approval of associates and other fellow laborers. Paranoia can woo leaders to treat others with distrust, and such leaders often possess an unwillingness or inability to build close relationships with members.\(^{32}\) Members might not challenge these pastors for a long time, because the leader’s reaction to their questioning is met aggressively.

In a similar manner, codependent leaders have an internal set of “oppressive rules that prevent the open expression of feelings as well as the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems.”\(^{33}\) Codependency is “the forming or maintaining of relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive and/or abusive.”\(^{34}\) Spiritual leaders who are codependent often fail to address inappropriate behaviors in the church. They do not want to

\(^{31}\) Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, 372.

\(^{32}\) McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 124.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 133.

hurt someone’s feelings even when that other person’s behavior is obviously wrong.\(^{35}\) These leaders are hurtful when they refuse to protect their congregation from flagrant deviant actions in others, allowing them to continue their harmful behaviors. Members may not want to challenge these leaders, because the leaders try to be helpful and forgiving.

Passive-aggressive leaders tend to avoid or resist the performance of tasks.\(^{36}\) Instead, they can procrastinate or dawdle and become forgetful, stubborn, or intentionally inefficient.\(^{37}\) An example is that of a pastor who was given an assignment to develop a new ministry for a group in the church. She planned leadership meetings, invited members to share ideas and concerns, reported on the planning team’s progress, created goals, and organized strategies; yet, no single new program or meeting started. Nevertheless, she defended all the work she was putting into the new ministry with self-justifying comments, complaints about unfair expectations, and comments to co-workers that suggested a critical attitude toward her supervisor. In such situations, passive-aggressive pastors are “prone to short outbursts expressing intense emotions, such as sadness, anger, and frustration. Most of their aggression lies just within the bounds of what is legal and socially acceptable and yet is still provocative.”\(^{38}\) An example might be that of a leader who has outbursts towards others, and then says he is kidding, or uses inappropriate language occasionally but not enough for others to gather the courage to confront it.

\(^{35}\) McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 136.

\(^{36}\) Millon, *Disorders of Personality*, 246.


\(^{38}\) McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 141.
Passive-aggressive leaders find goal setting and plan implementation difficult, because such actions clarify exactly what they are supposed to do and leave no room for error or misunderstanding. They are often happy and satisfied but inconsistent in reactions. In their wake co-workers wonder which personality will show up at any given moment. Such leaders harm others when they derail conversations and plans, explode irrationally, and leave others on edge. Members timidly can worry when the next outburst will occur.

These five categories serve as examples of the kinds of problems that can lead leaders to harm the church they have been charged to shepherd, often while being unaware of their own behavior and certainly of their own underlying motivation. The point here is to recognize that such leadership challenges exist in churches and can be difficult to confront. Even though these examples aptly describe the problems, when members experience these “puddles” in their real-life setting, it is difficult to name the “cabinet” issue. Although members may hope that leaders “wake up” and discover they are the problem in church, the opposite seems to occur. They consciously or unconsciously may resist a discovery process that threatens their dark side, because it would reveal the weaknesses and problems they do not want identified or cannot see in themselves. If positive change is going to occur before challenges become destructive and cause public conflict, members need to be prepared to uncover even the deepest leadership issues and begin to address them.

Self-Preserving Leadership Practices

Self-preserving practices are the most egregious form of problematic leadership. When engaged in self-serving practices, leaders withhold important information from the

---

39 Ibid., 142.
congregation until their unhealthy and destructive habits are discovered. These leadership practices are the best kept secrets in the church. Leaders may create environments where questioning is not allowed. They can draw a protective group of staff and elders around them to insulate themselves from examination. They even might create a session-based system with the elders, where all decisions are made by the leader and a few trusted others giving forgone approval.

At a town hall meeting,\textsuperscript{40} I witnessed divorced women break down in tears as they realized that their revered senior pastor had been having an affair for ten years with two women, including his secretary and the beloved female associate pastor who led the divorce recovery program. The betrayal was devastating, as these women realized that their leader was the same kind of “other woman” that most of them had experienced in their own broken marriages. It was even worse, because no one had ever suspected a thing.

When denominational officials informed the congregation of these multiple affairs, they realized that self-preserving practices had been so locked in place that even those closest to the adulterers—the pastor’s wife, staff members, presbytery peers, and congregants at large—for many years thought all those concerned were above reproach. Details had come to light only after both pastors had left the church. Eventually, a denominational trial was held, and the senior pastor was defrocked temporarily. The female associate pastor was considered a victim. When the information was made public, she confessed her part of the affair to the session of her new church, though she never was named publicly. After the senior pastor left, the pastor who followed was tasked with bringing him to trial. That new pastor left after bringing the trial to conclusion. The

\textsuperscript{40} I was present for this May 2000 congregational town hall meeting and denominational trial results.
original church went through years of processing with interim leadership, and ten years later it still has not completely owned its need for change nor has it implemented all the policies and practices it committed to put into action as a result of this process.41

The behaviors of self-preserving leaders can go unnoticed for years; and even when they are discovered, they might not be obviously bad to everyone. This may seem surprising. Usually, issues like extramarital affairs, embezzlement, and sexual abuse are clear once they are seen; but, this is not always the case. The example of the above affairs demonstrates this. While the senior pastor was defrocked, and removed from pastoral ministry—at least temporarily—once it was proven that the affairs had occurred, the associate pastor never was charged and was considered a victim due to the power differential between the two—despite the fact that she remained “best friends” with the senior pastor’s wife during the affairs over a twelve-year period. Even more surprising was how easily members of the church dismissed the inappropriate behavior as normal.

In this way, behaviors of self-preserving leaders can lead to a leader’s dismissal, disgrace, and removal from service or even incarceration, legal action, and civil suits. It is for these reasons that such leaders do not willingly participate in discovery processes and go to great lengths to cover up “cabinet” issues. An example of dismissal and disgrace comes from the presbytery. A different pastor had a brief sexual encounter with a member of his church. It was a mistake. He knew it. He sought to apologize and make it “right” with the member while keeping it secret. Eventually, he lost his job, his standing in the

41 Members of church of adulterous pastor, interview by author, San Diego, CA, July 12, 2011.
presbytery, his source of income, and his public reputation. Later incarcerated for eight months, this leader is described as the “evangelical pastor who fondled a teenage boy while he slept and touched a young preacher while sharing a hotel bed.” In a similar vein, the Los Angeles Archdiocese suffered a $660 million financial settlement for priests engaging in self-preserving practices worthy of civil punishment.

Sadder and perhaps more surprising are behaviors that do not lead to a leader’s dismissal, even though they are experienced and witnessed openly. Such behaviors include an example of abuse of power and manipulation by a pastor who was removed for management problems, while another surfaces with a pastor who engaged in multiple affairs. He performed spiritual abuse amidst a decade of sermons on grace and forgiveness but never mentioned or modeled repentance and purity. These can be considered as egregious demonstrations of ungodly behavior as the inappropriate acts that were ultimately the focus of legal and church action. These behaviors are deeply hurtful to members and congregations, because they are antithetical to the call of Christ for pastors and leaders (cf. John 13:34; 2 Corinthians 13:11). These behaviors flow from and demonstrate the power of human over human, in rebellious conflict with the power of God in God’s people for wholeness, love, and mutual respect.


44 Wooden and Hidalgo, “L.A. Archdiocese Reaches Agreement with More Than 500 Abuse Claimants.”

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.
Self-preserving leaders use these behaviors to defend themselves from discovery by others. In the example of the pastoral affairs, the pastor was so powerful and controlling that no one dared to confront or contradict him. For example, if a child made a noise in a worship service, the pastor’s quick and angry glare made it clear to everyone in the small sanctuary that such outbursts were unacceptable. If an associate pastor brushed a fly away while speaking to the congregation, he feared a tongue lashing from the pastor after the service.47 For more than a decade, members will say that while they did not know about the affairs, they had experienced abuse of power and had seen perfectionism from that pastor in worship services.48 Nevertheless, this pastor was held in high esteem and led unquestioned by members, staff, elders, or presbytery officials.

Even after the hidden behaviors of self-preserving leaders are revealed, many members still defend and excuse their leaders.49 One wonders why a leader with such behavior would be revered and beloved and at the same time feared. The words of James help to describe the existence of such a paradox: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” (James 3:9-11).

Discovering and addressing challenges like any of those described earlier can seem overwhelming or even impossible. When concerns are raised directly with leaders, those leaders may ignore, resist, or undermine efforts to address them. Many who have

47 Members of church of adulterous pastor, interview by author.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
lived with or worked with a person with any of these characteristics can attest to the reality that identifying a leader’s problem does not necessarily make it possible to address it. Examples from individuals from churches with leaders like these demonstrate the need for preparation and a communal effort from the Body of Christ. They also demonstrate the ineffectiveness of a strategy based on education or knowledge alone.

Consequences of Leadership Problems for Members Who Face Them

In the presbytery, the consequences of churches whose unresolved challenges have escalated into public conflict have been devastating on many levels. These consequences include membership loss, damaged relationships, and fallout that lingers long after conflicts have been resolved. Public conflict has led to losses in membership and attendance of 40 to 50 percent.\(^{50}\) Hundreds of relationships have been broken with little chance of ever being repaired. Unhealthy patterns established during the conflict caused by general leadership problems, harmful leadership problems, and self-preserving practices can continue long after any directly involved participants have left. Beyond these, churches can suffer residual roots of bitterness (cf. Hebrews 12:15) and unforgiveness (cf. Matthew 6:15), to remain with unknown impact in the spiritual realm (cf. Matthew 16:19).

\(^{50}\) These percentages were based on PC(USA) ten-year trend reports: General Assembly Mission Council, “Statistical Snapshot for Christ Rancho La Costa Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Chula Vista Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for First Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for First United Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Grace Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Graham Memorial Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for La Jolla Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Mt. Soledad Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Southeast Community Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Village Presbyterian Church,” “Statistical Snapshot for Westminster Presbyterian Church.”
Negative consequences in membership and attendance levels are a fact, at least for five SDP churches which have experienced public conflict since 2000. The denomination maintains ten-year records for all churches. For these five churches, the records reflect average decreases in membership of 48 percent and in attendance of 43 percent. Those decreases are almost ten times as much compared to seven similar churches in the presbytery without public conflict whose average membership and attendance both decreased by only 6 percent. These statistics show how conflict results in a devastating impact on membership. Those numbers represent people who left their fellowship; friends; and possibly, in some cases, their faith. These statistics suggest that resolving issues before they become public conflicts might be one of the best uses of a church’s or presbytery’s resources. Few events in the life of a church lead to almost 50 percent decreases.

Shattered relationships remain broken long after apparent conflict has disappeared. For example, in the church that had its pastor removed by the presbytery due to abusive leadership and management issues, hundreds of members continued to support him. There was no attempt at reconciling the people on the two sides of that battle. Several hundred members left to form a new church with that pastor in another denomination, only a few miles from the original church. Those former members continue to live in the same


neighborhoods with members of the original church. Perhaps some have made personal attempts at reconnecting, but no records exist of large or organized efforts.

The consequences of leadership problems can actually lead members into unnecessary long-term suffering and even sin. Real and perceived hurt, betrayal, and damage are caused and felt by many people in a public conflict. Pastors, staff, elders, and members not involved in any of the conflict directly can hurt others as they try to help in the recovery or just by having an opinion. For example, members of the church whose pastor had multiple affairs supported that pastor long after he was gone and held grudges against the new leaders who followed him and sought to resolve the lingering issues. Ten years after the events, I have watched those loyal members refuse to speak to those new leaders, despite leaders’ frequent attempts to engage them. Had that problem—even with a harmful, self-preserving leader—been addressed early, these relationships and many like them might not have been broken. There would have been no need for such long-term animosity between people who were not even involved in the problem. A lack of intervention multiplies brokenness in the Body of Christ by hundreds or possibly thousands. The ongoing hurt caused by public conflict should be motivation enough to do whatever is possible to avoid it.

Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to know the true cost of public conflict in churches in that its depth and breadth can be difficult to measure. Stories tell the heartbreaking price some have paid. Financial figures and layoff notices show the cost in reduced budgets. Empty chairs in sanctuaries reflect the decrease in membership and attendance. The spiritual cost is not so easily quantified, because it requires judging what levels of love and Christian maturity could exist if conflict had not occurred.
CHAPTER 2

RECENT HISTORY AND CONTEXT WITHIN SAN DIEGO PRESBYTERY

This chapter will describe the background and ministry of San Diego Presbytery since the turn of the millennium. It will survey public church conflict within SDP over the past decade. Additionally, it will profile the challenges faced by Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church (RBCPC), my current church and first congregation where this project will be implemented. In addition, this chapter will look at two other churches, their challenges, and the efforts of San Diego Presbytery to help those churches.

A Survey of Public Church Conflict in the Last Ten Years in San Diego Presbytery

This section looks at five public church conflicts in SDP from 2000 to 2009 to demonstrate both the efforts the presbytery was willing to make and the limits of its present conflict intervention resources. When public conflict occurs and a congregation cannot resolve its problems, the presbytery is requested to help in some official capacity. Official help can take the form of assigning representatives to the church, appointing administrative commissions, and offering long-term interventions. The presbytery can
hold church courts with binding decisions. There can be formal presentations at presbytery meetings with votes on everything, from recommendations which need not be followed to the immediate removal of pastors and the dissolution of sessions. Experience in SDP shows that once church challenges become public conflicts, resolving them becomes much harder and the consequences are far higher.

Before the presbytery officially became involved, members and leaders of the five churches studied in this section appear to have focused on “puddle” problems, as discontent and disagreement in the congregation grew to unmanageable levels. It is not clear that the congregations addressed or even knew what their deepest “cabinet” challenges were. What is evident in these examples is the damage done to each church, once the “cabinet” issues became public conflicts. As a result, these five churches faced an average decrease in both membership and weekly attendance eight times greater than that of comparable churches in the presbytery without public conflict.¹

A brief look at these five churches that faced public conflict in the presbytery illustrates the cost of unhealthy conflict and the limited helpfulness the presbytery’s intervention can provide. The five are examples of the executive presbytery’s observation that “instead of being able to work on prevention and resolution, we have to work on damage control, restoration, and recovery.”² Over the near decade from 2000 to 2009, these churches suffered decreases in membership and attendance that was as much as 40

---

¹ See the Introduction to this discussion for more details.

to 50 percent\(^3\) and, in one case, 75 percent.\(^4\) All have lost substantial numbers of people, financial support, and ministry opportunities. All have sacrificed tremendous amounts of time and energy to conflict, both their own and that of members of the presbytery.

The five churches are divided into two groups. The first two, Southeast Community Church and Mt. Soledad Presbyterian Church have more in-depth discussion. In both cases, I had more personal knowledge than in the other three. In the case of Southeast, extended debate occurred in multiple presbytery meetings where a great deal of information and opinion was shared by members of the church. In the case of Mt. Soledad, I chaired the administrative commission that was assigned by the presbytery and which served for almost a year. Consequently, I am aware of far more information than is normally available through standard SDP meeting minutes. Since I had no such personal knowledge of the second group of three churches, their information is limited to only what can be read in meeting minutes. These describe the actions that were taken but not the debate and discussion preceding the action. Therefore, description and analysis of these three stay necessarily on the surface.

Members of the presbytery, particularly members of its Committee on Ministry, have personal experience working with all of these churches. Since COM is the presbytery body tasked with facilitating relationships between churches and pastors, it helps resolve conflicts when they rise.\(^5\) In interviews with six longtime members of San Diego Presbytery’s


\(^4\) General Assembly Mission Council, “Statistical Snapshot Mt. Soledad Presbyterian Church.”

Committee on Ministry, it was estimated that those six members personally had been called to settle difficulties in at least twenty-five significant church conflicts in San Diego in the past fifteen years and another twenty-five in churches outside the presbytery.\(^6\) Some of the conflicts were in the same churches multiple times but with different pastors. In most cases, SDP was called in only after conflict had grown too difficult for the congregation to address.

When the presbytery is asked or is forced to get involved with official actions, COM becomes involved before challenges become public conflict. This is the current conflict intervention resources referred to earlier. The consensus of the members of COM interviewed was that the presbytery more often participated in “cleaning up” the aftermath of conflict rather than in helping congregations recognize and resolve challenges before they got out of hand.\(^7\) COM members assumed there were churches in the presbytery which had resolved potentially devastating conflicts before they got out of hand, but none of them had personal knowledge of even one example that could be examined for this project. SDP’s current approach has not increased churches’ ability to deal with their issues, even in the face of multiple and recurring conflicts. In most cases, SDP’s participation came late in the process, often to clean up serious problems in the aftermath of public disclosure.

Southeast Community Church

A look at Southeast’s experience shows the frustrations members felt while trying to solve their “puddle” problems. It details the unfortunate results of the presbytery’s efforts to help and the inability of anyone to identify or resolve their “cabinet” issues.

\(^6\) Committee on Ministry, interview by author, San Diego, CA, 2010.

\(^7\) Ibid.
Denominational statistics report that in 2009 Southeast’s average membership was half the national average of two hundred members. Those figures were down 59 percent from 160 members ten years earlier. Worship attendance over the same ten years dropped by a staggering 70 percent, from 135 to 40. The drop in membership and attendance coincided with the years of conflict and attempted resolution at Southeast Community Church.

Southeast’s public conflict was addressed by the presbytery for years while members fought over “puddle” problems and did not appear to address deeper “cabinet” issues. Members were divided between two groups. Older people, self-described as longtime members, did not like the new direction of the church. That direction included changes to worship style in an effort to reach younger people. These members also complained about the pastor’s non-Presbyterian style of leadership, including non-orthodox roles for elders and a lack of understanding of church polity. The other side was made up of younger people newer to the church. They were attracted to the pastor’s non-traditional style and viewed his ministry efforts in a favorable light. Overall, the two groups disagreed over worship and preaching styles as well as the pastor’s personal manner.

Clarifying at least one of Southeast’s “puddle” problems helps provide a context for this project within SDP. The church’s first “puddle” was the conflict between longtime members and younger members over the introduction of contemporary elements and preaching styles to their worship service. New instruments were introduced into worship services, including guitars and drums, as well as praise songs that were very different from the traditional hymns in the hymnals. The pastor’s preaching style was different from what

---

8 General Assembly Mission Council, “Statistical Snapshot Southeast Community Presbyterian Church.”
the longtime members considered traditional but which seemed to appeal to the younger members. Conflict over the changes is symptomatic of less visible “cabinet” issues.

It seems clear that passionate members on both sides allowed themselves to remain focused on “puddle” disagreements and were unable or unwilling to “open their cabinet” to explore the difficult issues of change, growth, loss of what is, and uncertainty about the future. The pastor’s lack of effort in addressing longtime members concerns points to a possible “cabinet” issue. It may be that a general, harmful, or self-preserving leadership problem with the pastor is a “cabinet” issue. The pastor displayed an inability to articulate his role in the current crisis, which contributed to organizational disarray and lack of church records as well as his lack of understanding of Presbyterian polity and governance. Southeast might have avoided its public conflict had it identified this “cabinet” issues rather than focus on its “puddle” problems. By not addressing leadership problems in a pastor, Southeast found itself fighting over “puddle” issues while the hidden problems corroded the church’s foundation to the point of possible closure.

Mt. Soledad Presbyterian Church

Mt. Soledad’s leadership had a challenge of conscience and moved towards leading the church out of the denomination. It did this without involving church members until the decision already had been made. Once announced, the decision to leave shocked and dismayed many members. The secretive process by leadership led to public conflict and a church split.

The church’s conservative pastor had strong disagreements with the theological positions of the denomination and the presbytery, which he felt were becoming too
liberal. For a year or more, he and session elders prayed, discerned, and ultimately planned to take the church out of the denomination while not discussing this important issue with any others in the church and presbytery. At the request of members, the presbytery stepped in, disbanded the session, and took over the church. The pastor, the entire staff but one, the session, and three quarters of the congregation left the church. The remaining members have struggled to rebuild. Membership dropped from a high of 320 in 2003 to 90 in 2008. Worship attendance dropped from 360 to 75.

Mt. Soledad faced several layers of issues. The most notable were its leader’s disagreement with decisions and direction in the denomination. The “puddle” issue of disconnection with SDP stands out in the events at Mt. Soledad. This is the lack of member participation and experience in the presbytery. Few elders ever participated in presbytery meetings or on presbytery committees. Any information about the presbytery came through the pastor. Lack of participation resulted in a lack of familiarity with any presbytery staff or pastors and elders from other churches. Mt. Soledad members were isolated from the larger community of the presbytery. When presbytery representatives began doing the work tasked to them by the presbytery and the Book of Order, members of Mt. Soledad perceived their actions as hostile and untrustworthy.

The public conflict never did address a potential hidden “cabinet” issue that may have contributed to the puddles and eventually a second church split in ten years. While the presbytery did not pursue the question, it could be asked if there was ever a history of

---

9 Personal notes from Mt. Soledad administrative commission, by author, Encinitas, CA, April-October, 2008.

10 General Assembly, “Statistical Snapshot Mt. Soledad Presbyterian Church.”

or tendency towards abuse of power within the leadership at Mt. Soledad. It might be that the congregation’s respect for a pastor or leaders may have been so great as to not be helpful for the congregation. Had members and leaders at Mt. Soledad identified its “cabinet” issues and addressed its “puddle” problems, it might have avoided its public conflict and experienced a different outcome.

Fallbrook Presbyterian Church

Over the last ten years, Fallbrook’s leadership has wrestled with the same denominational decisions that frustrated the pastor at Mt. Soledad. Ultimately, the church voted to disassociate with the PC(USA). Disassociation is a complicated matter. In general, this makes talk of leaving or actual plans for leaving difficult and contentious. Before negotiations could take place with Fallbrook, its session filed a law suit in the California civil courts against the Presbytery of San Diego.12 Litigation took several years and its cost was substantial to the presbytery and the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii. The suit was over ownership of the church property, which the court awarded to the PC(USA). Despite the ruling, the presbytery felt compelled to be supportive of the members, and eventually the presbytery and the church agreed to a purchase price for the property.13

The “puddle” the church faced involved a desire to remain faithful to its understanding of Scripture while feeling disconnected to a denomination it felt had abandoned that understanding. Leaving the denomination seemed the only option. The leadership made decisions without the knowledge or consultation of presbytery and

13 Ibid.
implemented a lawsuit which led to its ultimate outcome. Their solution led to deep hurt and loss as longtime members who wished to stay in the denomination lost the property they supported and the church friends and leaders in whom they had invested.

Such loss may have been mitigated had Fallbrook’s leadership faced its “cabinet” issue. The “cabinet” issue was a distrust of SDP and the process that might allow church members to keep the property while leaving the denomination. Instead, they sued SDP. This left many members wondering if a lawsuit, with all the expense and harshness associated with such action, was really necessary. Dialogue was stopped and only the “puddle” issue of property ownership was ever addressed. The actions that leadership took a result of their distrust caused more loss then might have occurred naturally as longtime friends had to choose between leaving their denomination and leaving their church. Fallbrook exemplifies a church that solves its “puddle” problem without every addressing its “cabinet” issues, leaving those hidden issues to create more problems in the future.

Pacific Beach Presbyterian Church

Most churches have groups of people who disagree with some direction or decision made by church leadership. Sometimes disagreements are resolved. In other cases, people agree to disagree and carry on. At Pacific Beach Presbyterian Church, a specific small group of members continued to disagree with current church leadership over a period of years and came to believe they should be the decision-makers. While there must have been specific issues of contention, public conflict erupted over the issue of which group would lead the church, the pastor and session or this group of dissenters.
For eight months, an informal team of people from the presbytery worked with both groups to try to reconcile their differences. After almost a year, it became clear that reconciliation was not possible. The group of dissenters was unwilling to support elected leadership and became a repository for complaints about the pastor and elected church leaders.\textsuperscript{14} The ongoing conflict’s significant negative impact on the church can be seen in its 52 percent drop in membership, from 428 to 206, and 39 percent drop in attendance, from 296 to 183—all between 2000 and 2009.\textsuperscript{15}

Pacific Beach’s “puddle” is disagreement over who is in charge of the church. The official leaders were in irresolvable conflict with a group of people who disagreed with their leadership. When two groups disagree in principle, then almost any action one takes will be challenged by the other. Each leadership decision is an opportunity for vocal disagreement. The cycle of focusing on the disagreements continues. Resolving one disagreement has no ability to stop the next from occurring, since there is an underlying “cabinet” issue still unaddressed.

There are “cabinet” issues at Pacific Beach that need to be discovered. A group within the church is the focal point of complaints. The hidden concern is whatever gives them power to be a repository for the complaints of others and makes them need or want to force change from the currently installed leaders. Something motivates this group to be willing to let, or force, the church to possibly close its doors. Until the “cabinet” issue is uncovered and resolved, symptomatic “puddle” problems will continue to be created. The “puddles” resist clean-up and the “cabinet” remains firmly closed.

\textsuperscript{14} SDP Stated Clerk, \textit{Presbytery of San Diego Stated Meeting: November 16, 2004}, 4509.

\textsuperscript{15} General Assembly, “Statistical Snapshot Pacific Beach Presbyterian.”
For five years, leadership at Christ United Presbyterian faced significant internal problems and ultimately, public conflict. In 2001, the church’s influential senior pastor of forty-four years retired. An interim pastor led the church and then a new pastor was installed after a couple years. Conflict seemed to begin almost immediately among the pastor, staff, and elders. By 2006, COM members had been working quietly with the pastor and elders for eighteen months. During the work of the Synod in 2007 and 2008, membership dropped by more than half, from 275 to 125, while worship remained near seventy-five. This was part of the ten-year drop in membership of 66 percent, from 350 to 119. Worship attendance during that time plunged by 44 percent, from 150 to 85. The pastor ultimately resigned. In 2011, a new pastor was approved by the presbytery. He has yet to be installed, yet it appears there are issues with this pastor and elders of Christ United even before he begins work. While no public conflict occurs currently, it may be that issues similar to those that led to conflict in the last few years may still be present.

“Puddle” problems seem to stubbornly refuse to be cleaned up at Christ United. There is a visible problem surrounding the pastor and his apparent inability to “fit” with the church. More than half of the session had this concern and voted on it. That means that the rest of the session felt he did “fit.” There is no indication in the reports as to what

---


“fit” meant. It was important enough to cause conflict among the pastor, elders, and members though it did not lead to action by any of the parties. It seems likely that there are people on both sides with strong opinions and personalities.

A second “puddle” is the lack of official processes and rules of order. For years no one had been keeping track of membership roles or other administrative tasks. Basic rules designed to keep power from staying in the hands of a few were circumvented. Elders voted and made decisions, but the congregation did not follow through with them. There was the appearance of organization, but there did not seem to be actual agreement on who had the authority or how it could be established.

While presbytery records do not report any specific concerns, the existing “puddles” suggest at least one “cabinet” issue that could be explored. It may be that there are power groups in the church left over from an earlier time, still in conflict with each other. Some of the people who were in authority during a former pastor’s time may have expected to continue having influence when the new pastor arrived. Other groups who did not have a strong voice in leadership may have hoped they would when the new pastor arrived. There was little time for transition to new leadership or for any significant exploration of these issues. Had work been done to explore possible issues related to these power groups, the symptomatic issues related to the new pastor may have been avoided or mitigated.

Much like Southeast Community, Mt. Soledad, Fallbrook, and Pacific Beach, Christ United has demonstrated an unfortunate pattern of continued decline and conflict in its congregation once the conflict rises to the level of official presbytery or “public” involvement. This in no way questions the efforts of the presbytery or any of its many
members who have served faithfully in difficult situations, who are all volunteers other than a handful of presbytery staff. Instead, it raises the question of effectiveness and the need for an alternative option. Through the pilot of this strategy, a possible alternative has been discussed or tried in three churches in the presbytery. They are the subject of this project and are profiled more intimately in the next section.

A Profile of Three Specific Congregations Who Have Survived or Avoided Conflict

There are three congregations that provide examples of the three kinds of leadership problems described in Chapter 1: general, harmful, and self-preserving. RBCPC was chosen for this project because it was not in public conflict but did have members who thought there could be something wrong with leadership but which leadership did not seem to address. The other two churches have been through public conflict with significant impact on their congregations and have moved beyond it. Since members and leaders at these two churches currently were not embroiled in conflict, they were able to comfortably discuss their experiences and lessons from past issues. As they look back on their challenges before they became public conflicts, members and leaders had unique insight into what could have been helpful in their situations.

Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church

RBCPC understands itself to be a thriving\(^{18}\) congregation wanting to reach its community for Christ, and it is willing to engage in self-examination to reach that goal.

---

With this self-perception, the church has reached out towards its surrounding neighborhoods and has increased its ministries to its own members. For many members, it seems momentum is strong. Others see setbacks in those same outreach plans, little communication between staff and elders, and a lack of clarity about future vision. Some members wonder if complacency stops leaders from looking at growing concerns. These differing views became part of the focus of an extended season of self-reflection for RBCPC.

**RBCPC: Context, History, and Profile**

The church is set in the San Diego suburb of Rancho Bernardo. Like RBCPC, the population of Rancho Bernardo is primarily white and comprised mostly of married couples. The median age of the community is forty-two. This is a neighborhood in transition from a destination for people in retirement to a community filled with white-collar workers who commute to San Diego with their families. The church draws from similarly surrounding areas and has strong ministries and programs for families, mature adults, students, men and women. As the area has grown, so has the church. RBCPC is the largest church in the SDP. Attendance and budget grew through the early 2000s then peaked in 2005.

More members led to more resources and staff and a greater desire among both preachers and parishioners to reach out to the community. Professional staff created better children and youth programming. New, contemporary worship services were added with paid musicians. A commercial kitchen run by multiple staff invited volunteers to serve

---

only, keeping management, cooking, and planning for staff. A shift was occurring from members and elders leading to professional staff leading with members and elders helping.

While staff became busier, elders had less to do. Decisions about programs and ministry were being made by staff. The senior pastor felt strongly that such a large church is necessarily led and run by staff with elders only required to address crisis situations. Elders had little input on short- or long-term planning. This was left to staff members. Rather than leading departments or ministries, elders heard monthly reports from one staff director so that, over a year, they developed a sense of what was going on around campus.

The senior pastor told elders that the polity of the denomination was created for small churches and does not work in large churches. He suggested that elders should be happy they are not asked to lead Sunday school or produce bulletins. Instead, they can consider their time on session to be about their own spiritual growth and discipleship. New elders coming on to session each year were assigned “busy work” by pastors. The pastors met together and determined which tasks were unimportant or which they were not interested in and assigned them to elders.

The leadership structure became a flat organization with the senior pastor at the top and an executive pastor reporting to the senior. All staff reported to the executive. Ministry directors met weekly. Much of the agenda since 2007 has been trying to determine why they meet: whether for coordination, decision making, discussing theology, or setting direction. There is no consensus and no clear direction from the senior and executive pastors. Ministry directors have been told that they lead and run the

---

20 Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church Head of Staff, *What Is the Role of an Elder in a Large Multi-Staff Church?* (San Diego, CA: Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, January 13, 2010). Team leaders (staff) account for 95 percent of decision-making while session (elders), only 5 percent.
church. Session is below staff with non-essential roles and little or no interaction with staff. This seemed an effective structure for a congregation of two thousand.

Since its peak in 2005, the church has been in decline. Ten-year statistics from PC(USA) records indicate that in 2009 the congregation had 1,856 members, almost four hundred fewer than ten years earlier. Worship attendance dropped from 1,700 to 1,350 over the same period. The largest change was in 2008 to 2009 when membership dropped from 2,200 to 1,800 and worship attendance declined from 1,700 to 1,400. This decrease was reflected in the budget for that same time period. There were reductions of 9 percent, about $350,000. Decreases in attendance continued so that in 2010 while membership was reported as being a little over two thousand members, attendance averaged eleven hundred in attendance at five primary services each weekend.

While attendance continues to decline in main worship, the senior pastor’s passion for diversity and outreach to younger people has led him to question attendance figures limited to those services. He wants attendance figures to include middle school and high school classes, which include times of worship; volunteers in Sunday school, who do not make it to church but are serving; and a Sunday morning Arabic-speaking service.

Within this leadership context there occurred an unexpected shutdown of a multimillion-dollar, progressive community outreach program. The program, called “The Porch,” began in 2004 with a capital campaign. Property was purchased to build a family recreation center. The city council held meetings on the proposal and was inundated with

---


22 Communications Director, Annual Report (San Diego, CA: Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, 2010).
complaints from neighbors who did not want a church or a church recreation center near them. In 2007, the city council delayed the building process and told the church leadership that the facility never would be approved. Some leaders believed the church could “win this battle” with the city. The senior pastor said the church could not win the neighbors for Christ by beating them in court. In 2007 RBCPC leadership cancelled the project and made preparations to sell the property. Following the cancellation, the church entered a season of discernment. Discouragement began to set in among members who did not feel that leadership was forthcoming either with new direction for an outreach ministry or appropriate redistribution of more than a million dollars in donated funds. Elders grew anxious because pastors and staff seemed either not to make decisions or not to communicate them.

Throughout these ongoing times of change, challenge, and anxiety, the senior pastor is respected by the congregation, elders, and staff. Leadership seems satisfied with membership, attendance, and budget in spite of decline. The senior pastor believes attendance simply has shifted to other venues that are not counted in worship totals. He attributes decreases in finances to the 2008 economic downturn. There is no public conflict. However, there are frustration, anxiety, and expressed concerns—essentially, “puddle” issues, which can be identified and “cabinet” concerns yet to be clearly recognized.

**RBCPC as a “Pre-public Conflict” Church**

Much might be deduced or inferred from this aforementioned profile of RBCPC’s leadership, vision, direction, and member participation. The inclusion of this church in this

---

23 Bruce Humphrey, general announcement made at a congregational town hall meeting at Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, CA, March 2010.

24 Bruce Humphrey, senior pastor of Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, interview by author, San Diego, CA, June 2009.
project arose because it seems to be a possible “pre-public conflict” church. That is, there have been clear and visible issues and challenges in the church. From these issues, some members or elders in the church have begun to feel that something more significant might be wrong, either with church leadership or of which church leadership has been unaware. Significant energy has been devoted to addressing some of these recognizable difficulties. These issues are RBCPC’s “puddles,” which are symptomatic of more significant “cabinet” challenges still unrecognized but which could cause more “puddles.”

The church’s state of “pre-public conflict” means that no one has called in presbytery to deal with or address any concerns. In fact, many do not recognize that there are concerns beyond the “puddles” themselves. The process at the core of this project is designed to get at those deeper issues, to open the “cabinets” so that church leadership can identify the underlying issues and move towards addressing them in ways that lead into resolution and avoiding devastating public conflict.

From 2007 to 2009, three examples of “puddle” issues arose from the events and situations described earlier. The first “puddle” was the resignation of six of the twenty-seven current elders in 2010. Of the six elders who resigned from session, three did so with a sense of frustration and an indication that their time and energy could be used better elsewhere. One moved to France for a year, a fifth moved away, and a sixth stopped attending with no explanation. The response of the senior pastor and of elders to these departures was to pray for the elder leaving for France. No mention was made of the others. The ones who moved did not appear to be missed for several meetings. No indication was given to session verbally that the ones who resigned in frustration were gone. There was a motion to accept
their resignations in a report by the clerk of session, but there was no discussion. If elders had questions or concerns, they were not expressed at session. No discussion occurred. One might conclude that it did not matter if elders attended and that the individuals were not important to the group, as their departure seemed to make no difference.

The senior pastor made no initial contact with any of the six to determine if something was wrong or if care was needed. As the executive pastor, I recommended that he call the three who resigned due to frustration and set up appointments for dialogue and exit interviews. The senior pastor opted to send three emails offering to talk if those elders felt it necessary. I remained in contact with the elder in France. The elder who moved away was removed from the session’s roll. The elder who stopped attending was contacted by me the following year when job assignments were being made, to see if she planned to return.

Several key concerns stand out upon analysis of this “puddle” example. The first is a lack of connection among these six elders and the rest of session, including the senior pastor. These were members of the church who cared enough to serve as elders; yet, the absence of almost 25 percent of the board did not appear to be noticed. No one seemed to wonder about their life situations, opinions, or concerns. There was no unease about the departures or what significance they might have. In addition to this general lack of connection, another concern was the senior pastor’s apparent ambivalence to elder participation on session.

The senior pastor was consistent and honest about his belief that RBCPC was a staff-run and staff-led church and that the Presbyterian requirements for elders on session was an anachronism from days when churches averaged fewer than one hundred people.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Bruce Humphrey, senior pastor of Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, interview by author, San Diego, CA, April 2010.
This belief appeared to leave him unconcerned whether or not elders stayed or left. Some might say he was uncaring about the elders themselves. While the senior pastor’s response could be questioned, there is concern that none of the other three pastors or any elders pursued conversations with the elders who left or raised questions at session itself.

Finally, there is the concern for the actual reasons why three elders might resign. This is not done lightly. One elder had been on the human resources committee and another on facilities and finance. The third had been involved in multiple taskforces leading toward the implementation of this project’s process at the church. When asked, each told me the reason for resigning was that they felt unheard, could be more effective elsewhere, or did not want to cause trouble. Every one of these reasons points to larger issues, none of which were explored.

In addition to elders resigning, enough new elders could not be recruited to fill all nine spots for the next class of elders while filling the spaces made by those who left. To solve the problem of too few elders, session (along with the senior pastor) determined that a reduction in the size of session was appropriate given the nature of its responsibilities. The size of session was reduced from twenty-seven to twenty-one. In this way, a smaller number of incoming and remaining elders was acceptable. Reducing the size of session cleaned up the “puddle” of elders leaving but did not resolve the underlying reasons of why they left, in order to avoid a repetition of the problem. The “cabinet” issue was left hidden.

The second “puddle” example is particularly significant in light of the elder “puddle.” Since 2007 RBCPC’s ministry directors—or “team leaders,” as they are

---

26 Resigned elders, interviews with author, Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, CA, September 2010.
called—have not had clarity regarding their position as leaders and decision-makers of a staff-run, staff-led church nor do they understand what their purpose is in meeting together regularly. Other work has been accomplished, like the coordination of schedules and cooperation around special events. Also, they have made efforts to build trust in one another and safety within the group. However, each individual primarily is tasked with running a ministry and department. It is also the case that none really has needed any collaboration with any other team leader to be successful in personal ministry. The exception is when schedules and the use of resources, like rooms, conflict.

Several team leaders have voiced a desire to have “leadership” (though who “leadership” is remains unclear) state clear direction and goals so that ministry directors have a way of knowing if their plans or ideas are in alignment with those goals. The question, “What are team leaders doing?” is consistently answered with amazing descriptions of successful activities and effective programs. The question, “Why are team leaders doing what they are doing?” is far more difficult for them to answer even to their own satisfaction. This is the team that the senior pastor refers to when he tells session that this is a staff-led church, but the team leaders do not appear to understand that they are leading. They each have a clear understanding of what they personally are doing in their own area; but, as a group, they do not have a sense of agreed direction toward which they collectively work. At the beginning of this project’s process, team leaders said they needed clarity about their roles as well as the role of elders. Overall, this fog of purpose has created an underlying frustration.
Through the self-reflection process carried out at RBCPC, role clarity was developing and session approved goals and direction for the future of the church. In 2010, in response to those decisions, I led the team leaders through a several-month process seeking to arrive at a clear goal based on session’s direction. At the end of the process, the senior pastor told team leaders that there was no one goal but that individual team leaders might unite their silos at times for specific tasks. As late as October 2011, the question of the purpose of the team leader groups continued to be unanswered. Most recently, the senior pastor suggested that the team leaders group is “simply an unofficial group for coordination of relationships and building of trust.”27 This understanding resonates with his personal desire and passion for theological discussions as avenues for relationship building. While this kind of relationship building is appreciated by many, there is a continuing lack of clarity about why the group meets. A consultant involved in planning responded to the senior pastor’s comment by saying, “Without a clear understanding of the direction/purpose of the team [other than] ‘unofficial group for coordination of relationships’ then I wonder if what you need is a therapist not leadership coaches?”28

Analysis of this “puddle” yields a lack of clarity among team leaders, similar to the symptomatic problem faced by elders. Team leaders lack clarity about their role as leaders and the purpose for their meetings. Ministry directors have clear personal direction within their own ministries but little clarity in overall direction and their part in contributing to it. If individuals quit being team leaders due to frustration and sense they

27 Bruce Humphrey, senior pastor of Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, email to author, October 12, 2011.

28 Leadership consultant, email to author, October 15, 2011.
could be more effective elsewhere in their ministry, the church might see the same results as with session: members resigning. In fact, one pastor consistently misses most team leader meetings, though he has been requested to make it a priority by both the senior and executive pastors. His reasoning is that he always has more significant issues coming up that take priority. He feels that very little is ever accomplished in team leader meetings. Effectively, he has resigned almost silently from the group. Others value the senior pastor’s desire for relationship and express concern anytime it is suggested that the group stop meeting. They do not want to give up the connectional value of the meeting.

Again, this value of team leaders for the connectional nature of their meeting is similar to that felt by elders on session. Where the senior pastor has said that session is for elder’s personal growth and discipleship, he feels that team leaders is for relational connection. In both groups, while this value is appreciated, there remains a lack of direction and clear definition of roles. It could be said of both groups that they do not know where they are going and, while they enjoy being with one another, they long to know their destination and their personal contribution to reaching it.

The third “puddle” is general decline in RBCPC, as seen in dropping attendance and reduction in finances. Since 1999, attendance has dropped by 35 percent, from seventeen hundred to eleven hundred in 2010. Giving declined precipitously, by 9 percent, in 2008. Since then it has stayed relatively stable. However, prior to that decrease, over several years in the mid 2000s, the church’s budget overspent its income by almost $750,000. In 2007, significant estate gifts eliminated the budget deficit. The

senior pastor firmly believes that such gifts should be taken into planning decisions and that balanced budgets should be determined across multi-year time frames rather than annually. This philosophy helped the church avoid painful staff and ministry reductions during those years, and the eventual gifts balanced out the shortfalls. Having a balanced budget in 2007, neither the finance committee nor session was willing to return to deficit spending in 2008 when giving declined. Layoffs and budget decreases occurred that year, and the budget has been able to stay balanced since 2008. Estate gifts have continued to be received which have helped annual budgets remain balanced. While balanced, the budget is flat with reduced program funding and very limited salary increases. In the case of pastors, no raises have been given for several years.

This general decline is a “puddle” issue, because it is easily recognized and much energy and time have been put into addressing it. In terms of addressing the financial decline, significant budget decreases have been made. Two of the highest level positions, business administrator and facilities manager, were eliminated along with several other positions. Program budgets were cut. Several departments must subsidize their budgets significantly from designated gifts which are given outside the general budget process. Regarding declining attendance, most effort seems to have been made in explaining why the decreases in primary worship venues do not correlate with actual decline.

The senior pastor often points to the death of the mainline denominations and the PC(USA) in particular. Such decline is to be expected as the Church becomes something different in the twenty-first century. Otherwise, little overt effort has been made to be attractional to people outside the church. This lack of attractional effort coincides with a
significant push to lead the members of the congregation out into the community in ways that can transform people and change their neighborhoods. The senior pastor wrote the church’s current motto/vision statement: “We believe Jesus transforms us so that we can help change the world.” The pastoral staff, team leaders, and elders agree that they need to reach the community; and the term “missional” has become popular, so there is a genuine effort to become a “church without walls.”

An analysis of this “puddle” suggests that the senior pastor and other leaders are seeking to move beyond technical solutions to “puddle” challenges, like decreases in attendance and finances. The senior pastor seeks to instill adaptive changes to the culture of the church. He focuses on leading personal transformation with the expectation that God then will lead the transformed people to change the world. He wants members of the finance committee to think beyond common financial practices to be transformed to trust that God provides over time rather than according to a calendar. He seems inclined to “count hearts instead of heads.” In other words, instead of counting people in seats in primary worship services, the senior pastor wants to demonstrate that discipleship and following Christ are more than those services for Anglos middle-aged and up. Instead, the church should embrace the worship of students and Arabic-speaking members as well as seeing service in Sunday school as discipleship.

While these are important and visionary approaches to ministry, there is a similarity in this “puddle” to the previous two. There is no clear measurement of success or intentional direction for people to follow. Being and growing are assumed to be enough. No other goals are necessary. In fact, other goals are discouraged. Whether
someone serves on session or as team leaders or in worship services, simply being is enough. Growing in faith, service, and relationship are all the priority that is needed. There is no clear indication of what discipleship or transformation looks like beyond serving in the community. It does not appear to include maintaining or increasing attendance or finances. While the senior pastor is consistent in encouraging personal transformation, he does not offer or encourage direction or intentionality towards it. Perhaps he assumes a high level of ability to change on the part of members, staff, and elders. Perhaps declines in attendance and finances indicate frustration on their part for being told to change but not told how or for being told to meet but not told why.

“Cabinet” issues are those which are not obvious but which lead to “puddle” issues. The organization often works to keep the “cabinets” closed and leaves the issues unaddressed. Such may be the case at RBCPC. Therefore, it is not possible to know exactly what the issues are by simply mopping up the “puddles.” A strategic exploration must happen for adaptive change to occur.

Church Y

Seldom does a church session request to be taken over by a presbytery administrative commission; however, such was the case of “Church Y” in 2004. This request came after years of difficult interactions between staff and elders with the senior pastor. Then, committees were formed to try to address issues of leadership problems with the senior pastor. Ultimately, the session sought his resignation. When he refused, the session sought help from the presbytery in the form of an administrative
commission.\textsuperscript{30} The presbytery voted to approve the administrative commission with authority to take original jurisdiction for some of the administrative responsibilities of the church.\textsuperscript{31} The official summary included that there was significant conflict among the pastor and the administrative staff, clerk of session, and session.

Significant conflict occurred for months among members, including large email exchanges and members picketing on church grounds on Sunday mornings wearing buttons for or against the pastor.\textsuperscript{32} The commission worked with the church and pastor to seek to bring understanding and resolution. Ultimately, a specially called meeting of the presbytery occurred in February 2005 with a motion to remove the pastor from the church. I attended this meeting and remember seeing long lines of members, elders, and staff forming two camps, one speaking in favor of the motion and the other against. Those against removing the pastor spoke of his strong evangelical stance, powerful preaching, personal discipleship of members, and pastoral care over the years. Those in favor of his removal generally did not disagree with the first group’s assessment but added their own, which came from working with the pastor. It described examples of lying, abuse of power, and manipulation. Longtime friendships among the pastor, members of Church Y, and members of SDP were strained or broken. In a very painful decision, the presbytery voted eighty-seven to fifteen to remove the pastor from the church.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} SDP Stated Clerk, \textit{Presbytery of San Diego Called Meeting: October 19, 2004}, 4480.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Members of Church Y, interviews by author, San Diego, CA, 2010-2011.

\textsuperscript{33} SDP Stated Clerk, \textit{Presbytery of San Diego Called Meeting: February 22, 2005}, 4604.
When the pastor left, the church experienced significant numerical decline. The largest statistical change was in 2005, when membership dropped by 40 percent—from 2,012 to 1,207. Worship attendance decreased from nine hundred to seven hundred.\(^{34}\) When the pastor was removed, he left the denomination and subsequently started a new church within ten miles of Church Y with former members who had been loyal to him.\(^{35}\)

By providing this information and analysis, there is no intention to judge anyone at Church Y, including current or former leaders and pastors. Rather, the intention of this project is to provide a practical process that will help churches like Church Y to address even their most difficult and hidden issues before they become public conflict. Members of Church Y interviewed for this project were circumspect in their observations. They had served on committees with the pastor and others on staff. Some had been session members or other church officers during the conflict. While members did not want to judge or disrespect the pastor, it was clear they believed that he had harmed staff, elders, and members of this congregation.\(^{36}\) They also said he was unaware of his own issues. According to McIntosh and Rima, it may be from the dark side of leadership that the pastor’s leadership problems arose, from the dysfunctions of his personality that went unexamined or remained unknown to him, even for years.\(^{37}\)

Years before the challenges become public conflict, one person interviewed said she had seen the pastor exhibit the same negative behavior for which he was ultimately

---


\(^{35}\) Members of Church Y, interviews by author.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 28.
removed. This person saw the behavior before the man was installed as the church’s new pastor but shared it with no one until after the conflict erupted. She said she did not know what to do and so did nothing.\textsuperscript{38} Others may have wondered if there were deeper concerns, or “cabinet” issues, that were not being addressed. Some of what can be learned from Church Y’s participation in this project is what can be done for a pastor or leader early on to explore dysfunctions, while safety and support are still possible.

Since the pastor was dismissed the church has made efforts to move on, although for its difficulties no effort has been made to reflect on essential issues that led to his dismissal. The church leaders have not explored or evaluated the events that led up to the pastor’s dismissal, the terrible conflicts that resulted, or the ways leadership and members contributed. The church has called and installed a new senior pastor and seems to be working smoothly with effective leadership. The new senior pastor encouraged elders to participate in the interviews for this project, and the participants were hopeful that others could learn from their situation.

A more effective and healing effort could be made if the church would participate in a process that acknowledged its “puddle” problems and worked to open its “cabinet” to explore root its issues (absent those brought by the former pastor). In the interviews, participants began to see that practices and actions taken before the pastor arrived pointed to ways the church may have been at fault. Such issues left unknown and unaddressed will lead to new “puddles” with the new leadership, unless headway can be made by exploring real-life challenges and establishing a model for discovering and addressing problems in leadership.

\textsuperscript{38} Member of Church Y, interviews by author.
Church Z

“Church Z” is a less painful example of a congregation with a self-preserving leadership problem. While Church Z’s conflict became public and caused damage, its resolution occurred primarily in church courts rather than church pews. Personal hurt and severed relationships were small in number, so members are in a stronger position to examine what might have been helpful without having to revisit deeply wounded places. Still, Church Z had a pastor who possessed a secret that he intended to keep.

The pastor did not want it known that he had participated in behavior with a member of the congregation. While the behavior has not been designated in official reports, it can be described as inappropriate; public knowledge of it could exert negative impact on the pastor’s relationship with the church. Like other organizations, churches have requirements holding leaders to codes of conduct. Moral standards, like fidelity in marriage, integrity in finances, and honesty in dealings with others are important. Compromising those standards can lead to dismissal from a church and even loss of ordination in the denomination. Additionally, something like abuse of power is a concept from the secular world that has significance in the church\(^{39}\) and has been the cause of church leaders being removed from their official roles.\(^{40}\) Since consequences can be significant, when a leader crosses a line like abuse of power, there can be a strong desire to keep that act secret.

There are consequences when a pastor keeps a secret about an act or behavior with a person in the congregation. The pastor is keeping a secret from elders, members, staff,


and family. They also need the other person involved to keep the secret. Further abuse of power, manipulation, and more secrets can result. The emotional weight of secret keeping can cause a pastor to withdraw from all those who could be affected by the secret knowledge, like family and church members or those who might respond to it officially like elders and presbytery officials. The impact of the secret also has significant effect on the other person, family, friends, and faith. Shame, guilt, and spiritual abuse can occur in other parties when their spiritual authority requires secrecy from them. There can be consequences for the church as well, which develops a culture that includes secret keeping. Pastors can create systems, habits, and practices that help protect the secret and which can remain active in the church long after the pastor has left. While an act or behavior is harmful, the secret keeping after the act can be as or more damaging for years.

While that secret was hidden, Church Z wrestled with a “puddle” problem of complainers. The church seemed to foster groups of “complainers” and had done so for many years. In interviews, elders and leaders in the church described an enclave of complainers as current and former members who held negative opinions of the church’s leaders and policies. This group had influence in the church and among leaders. It seemed to be an organized group that could be gathered for a conversation. No one in the interview knew how the group had gotten started but they knew that different but similar groups had existed before the current pastor. Previous groups had been instrumental in trying to change

---

or remove several senior pastors.\textsuperscript{42} Even after the secret-keeping pastor left abruptly after his inappropriate behavior was discovered,\textsuperscript{43} this “puddle” problem of complainers was at the top of the list of concerns for the members interviewed.\textsuperscript{44} They had reason to be concerned. Based on ten-year statistics,\textsuperscript{45} the ongoing conflicts have been devastating. Membership has dropped by almost 50 percent, from 1,500 to 700, with worship attendance decreasing from 550 to 450.\textsuperscript{46} The largest change was in the two years between 2007 and 2009, when conflicts over the pastor’s secrets were coming to light.

The members who met with me to discuss their church’s challenges and what might have helped spent more time talking about the complainers than about the pastor’s inappropriate behavior and subsequent departure. Even though current elders and the clerk of session were present in the interview, none could clearly articulate what the pastor’s inappropriate behavior was that got him removed from the church. It seemed that they continued to focus on the surface problem of complainers, their “puddle,” rather than expressing a willingness to open their “cabinet” to see what issues lingered from the pastor’s indiscretion or even why their church had a propensity for complainers.

The new pastor was in attendance at the interview, and the general desire in the room was to move forward in the church while recognizing the need to look at their complainer “problem” in new ways. There is something that encourages complainers to form groups

\textsuperscript{42} Members of Church Z, interviews by author, Oceanside and Encinitas, CA, 2010-2011.
\textsuperscript{43} SDP Stated Clerk, \textit{Presbytery of San Diego Stated Meeting: November 18, 2008}, 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Members of Church Z, interviews by author.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
and gives them something to complain about. In the past, the church has applied technical solutions to this problem, including isolating the groups from leadership and ignoring them.

Through Church Z’s participation in this project, there is an opportunity to recognize the groups as symptoms of an unknown “cabinet issue” that requires an adaptive response. Such a response would be less about solving the complaints or silencing the complainers and more about understanding why such groups have formed historically, in order to be able to take steps to keep them from forming in the future.

Since different groups have formed during distinct pastoral tenures at the church, it is not necessarily the pastor but the church that holds primary responsibility for the issue. There is considerable interest in this project’s potential to help address the adaptive challenges still in the church.
PART TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS
CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING CHURCH CONFLICT

This chapter will explore three biblical concepts and four theological foundations that can aid in helping churches and members discern and prepare to address problems within their leadership. The three biblical concepts are environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems. The four theological foundations are depravity of humanity, community of Christ, grace, and sacrifice. These seven elements from Scripture and theology firmly ground the work of this project in PC(USA) history and culture.

Biblical Concepts

The core goal of this project is to foster a spirit of openness and trust within churches in the SDP so that they are able to work on their problems freely. The concepts of environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems serve as a biblical guide to the Church for how to arrive to this ideal place of openness and understanding. The theme of environment appears in Mark 4 through the Parable of the Sower, where Jesus gives an illustration of how environment in the Christian life plays a vital role in the Holy
Spirit’s ability to grow that life. Synergy appears in the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 and demonstrates God’s amazing strategy to require faith from each person in a relationship. Through that faith, he does a mighty work in each person and thus shows that transformation is for all and not just one.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 1 through 15 underscores the concept of true versus symptomatic problems through Paul’s address to a local church dealing with both “puddle” and “cabinet” issues. Due to his relationship with the church at Corinth, Paul was able to write a letter to them responding to their visible problems while honestly holding them accountable for those problems that were symptomatic of a more fundamental one. The path he provides for church members to discover their true problem in a way rejuvenates the community and fosters openness and honesty. These concepts are crucial to this project, because it takes an environment in which the Holy Spirit can move in each person’s life and, through them, in the lives of others. Only when individuals and churches can identify the real issues they face, not just the symptoms, can they address the core issues that threaten to tear churches and even lives apart.

**Environment**

Jesus’ parable in Mark 4:1-20 about a farmer who scatters seeds in a variety of soils can be instrumental in helping members influence their own ability to accomplish the goal of discovery. Jesus explains that the seed is the Word and the soils are people in different situations. Essentially, he describes an effectiveness made possible due to the environment of the soil. The Parable of the Sower may be one of the most familiar of Jesus’ parables; therefore, attaching the idea of “environment” to it might surprise those who have not heard
such an interpretation or who have focused instead on different kinds of soils.¹ In fact, Jesus details his description of the environments around what is essentially one kind of soil. He briefly explains the meaning of seed (Mark 4:14) but extensively elaborates on the meaning of the different kinds of environments (Mark 4:4-8). These environments are what make the difference of harvest potential in each seed.

This parable, with its farmer throwing seeds seemingly everywhere, is very visual. One can imagine those listening being very familiar with an agrarian lifestyle and their picture of that farmer in their mind’s eye. He walks down a row in a ploughed field tossing his seed, not sparingly but generously. Along the edge of the field often was a row of rocks cleared from the field. Next to the rocks might be weeds, since that area is not maintained by the farmer, and then comes the path or road and perhaps another field on the other side. It is not hard to imagine that those hearing the story recognized that the soil in the field is the same as among the rocks, the weeds, and even the path. It is the same soil but different environments for those soils.

The difference in the environments makes the difference in the harvest yield. Jesus describes soil that is actually the path (Mark 4:4) that allowed birds to eat the seed. Then there were rocky places that had little soil (Mark 4:5), which kept the seed from digging its roots down deep enough to protect the plant from the hot sun. A third environment into which the seed fell was soil that already had thorns in it, which stunted the plants (Mark 4:7). Finally, there was the environment that Jesus called “good soil” (Mark 4:8). Practically speaking, it is the same kind of soil as in each of the other situations; but he describes it as “good,” because the environment is conducive to letting

the life of the seed flourish. Rocks had been cleared away, thorns had been pulled, and hard ground had been tilled. Water would be brought through irrigation. The environment was right for growing crops, and it yielded successful crops with a significant harvest.

The nature of the environment has significant impact on the seed’s potential for growth and effectiveness. The result of planting in productive soil was crops of thirty, sixty, and one hundred times (Mark 4:8). It seems that Jesus wanted to imply significant growth without crossing into hyperbole. The indicated increases range from normal to bountiful but not beyond credibility.\(^2\) About thirty-five kernels on an ear of grain were expected. Sixty was not uncommon. A hundred kernels was an uncommonly large result but was not unknown. Good soil will produce results, but it is the environment around the soil that has an impact on how large the harvest will be.

The importance of the seed is not diminished by focusing on the environments. The seed is simply described by Jesus to be the Word (Mark 4:13). The term, “the Word,” had specific meaning in the early Church and referred to Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God.\(^3\) It is referenced in later books—for instance, “the word of life” (Philippians 2:16), “the true word of the gospel,” (Colossians 1:5), and, “the Lord’s word,” (1 Thessalonians 4:15). The idea of “the word” is used throughout the gospels (Matthew 15:6; Mark 13:31; Luke 4:32) and perhaps most powerfully in John 6:68 when Peter said to Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life.” By naming the seed so specifically, Jesus refers to his entire teaching. This is the seed, the gospel that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, Jew and Gentiles (Romans 1:16).

\(^2\) Ibid., 195.
\(^3\) Ibid., 221.
Jesus is the farmer lavishly spreading the seed. Later, he would commission his followers to take his message to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20); but for now, it was Jesus who had the “seeds” of eternal life and who tossed them everywhere, into soils with varying environments. Ultimately, the nature of the environment has significant impact on the seed’s potential for growth and effectiveness. The environment is the only component in the story that people can influence, and their influence can make their environment more available to the life-giving Spirit of God.

The environment of individuals or groups can be important to their ability to reflect on and respond to important information. People or groups whose environment allows them to be open and honest without being anxious and defensive may be more effective than when their context engenders worry, defensiveness, and antagonism. These attitudes and perspectives arise from the person or group’s environment which is more than just the surroundings. Similarly, a group that seeks God’s wisdom and direction, while being intentional about listening and responding to God’s Spirit, likely will be able to discover its hidden problems more easily than a group that does not make an effort to invite God’s active role in the process. Intentionally affecting the environment of a group so that it invites the Holy Spirit to bring life to group efforts is an application of what Jesus is teaching his disciples in the parable’s farmer sowing seed.

The concept of environment as an important component of harvest production did not originate with Jesus. In Deuteronomy 11:14, God tells the Israelites, “Then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil.” It was clear that the people of God depended on
God for environmental components—in this case, rain—to make their harvest successful. Scripture supports the idea that an environment is a crucial element in life-giving growth.

The environment is the only component in the story that people can influence. Humans cannot change the “farmer” and dare not change the seed. Humankind shares a common soil, the individual heart. No one but God can control the harvest or predict the growth the farmer’s seeds will reap. People cannot move nutrients from soil to seed or cause roots to emerge. People only can remove rocks, add water, pull weeds—that is, impact the environment. This removal of something to impact the environment is a practice seen instituted by Moses and the feast of unleavened bread still practiced by Jews today.  

In Exodus 12:14-17, Moses gives instructions for cleansing homes of all leaven (Exodus 12:15), creating a leaven-free environment—necessary to participate in remembering God’s deliverance (Exodus 12:14). In both passages, it is the environment that people are invited and even instructed to influence.

Along with scriptural precedence for environment, recent teaching on what is referred to as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 also suggests an environmental element. Dallas Willard—a professor in the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California and instructor of a “Spirituality and Ministry” course as part of the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary—has written that when Jesus taught his followers to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he was describing a process of “immersing the apprentices at all levels of

---

growth in the Trinitarian presence.”

This Trinitarian immersion conveys an environment where one is aware of and saturated by the existence and attendance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Likewise, according to John Calvin, with the seed of the Word planted in the soil of human hearts, it is the essential work of the Holy Spirit to provide nutrients and power to grow through inspiration and direction. The Holy Spirit is able to nurture the living Word (1 Peter 1:23) in the life and heart of the believer as the environment is made good through cultivation and elimination of thorns and rocks. Willard goes on to say that this is the single major component of the prospering of the local congregation. Gregory M. Finch agrees. Seeking a way to implement Jesus’ instructions for discipleship in Matthew 28, he has come to the conclusion that the power in his suggested plan “is the Holy Spirit working through disciples in an environment where God is allowed to transform an individual for His purpose.”

Here again is Calvin’s understanding that human faith is apprehended by encounters with “the living Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit’s guidance and influence are necessary in seed and soil for growth to occur.

As with Yahweh bringing rain in Deuteronomy and recent teaching on discipleship, Jesus’ parable teaches how people become fruitful and effective within an environment conducive to growth. The Holy Spirit takes the power and life from the living Word and plants it deeply in the ready heart of the believer—essentially, an

---


8 Ibid., 269.
environment open to that planting and freed from harmful influences represented by rocks, thorns, and birds. By studying the Word, one learns what Jesus thinks is important when it comes to effectiveness and abundant growth in God’s kingdom (Mark 4:11, 20).

People can influence their environment to make it more available to the life-giving Spirit of God. The only way for humans to influence this otherwise intimately Spirit-driven process of spiritual growth is to implement environmental change. In the parable, the good soil is that which lacks rocks, weeds, and shallowness (Mark 4:8). By removing hindrances, all soil can become good soil.

Applying the lessons of the parable, Christ followers need to impact their own personal, inner environment as well as their community so that the seed of God’s kingdom grows in them and produces substantial results. The idea that the Spirit of God grows the Word in the hearts of believers was Calvin’s assertion in his commentary on *The Acts of the Apostles*. Commenting on the conversion of Lydia from Acts 16:14, 15, Calvin wrote that the teaching of the gospel cannot be understood without the illumination of the Spirit.\(^9\) He goes on to say that the Word unites the ministry of men with the secret inspiration of the Spirit.\(^10\) The inspiration of the Spirit giving life to the Word unites with the hearts and ministry of human beings, which are the very conditions sought by those in a discovery process. It is the very situation articulated by Jesus in the Parable of the Sower.

An environment, as suggested here, allows participants into a discovery process to acknowledge that they do not have the wisdom, power, authority, or tools to accomplish all


\(^10\) Ibid.
that needs to happen for a church’s difficulties to be resolved without becoming public conflict. Each participant only can impact the environment of his or her own heart and those hearts within the shared community. Church members need the kind of effectiveness that Jesus describes as they seek to discover and address problems in their church’s leadership.

**Synergy**

In an environment where the Holy Spirit is at work helping Christ followers and their communities discern and be prepared to address problems within their leadership, people can anticipate and experience God-inspired synergism. Synergy occurs when God works in people’s lives in ways that produce outcomes greater than otherwise could be accomplished through the individual efforts of those involved. The Greek word for synergy, *syn-ergos*, means “working together.”\(^1\) The most familiar definition of synergy is attributed to Aristotle: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”\(^2\) R. Buckminster Fuller defines synergy as behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately.\(^3\) While Aristotle’s formulation provides a good working definition, Fuller’s definition comes closer to describing what Scripture reveals. It is nearly impossible to predict what the whole system ultimately will do based only on the behavior of those in the system, especially when God’s Spirit is one of the persons in the system. With God’s

---


Spirit present, according to the Apostle Paul, far greater things are possible than anyone can imagine: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). God chooses to do some of his most powerful work through Spirit-inspired synergy.

According to Scripture, God is active in the world and especially in the lives of individual people. God intervened in Noah’s life in Genesis 6:13, sharing God’s plans for the world and inviting Noah to take an active part in the rescue of animals and his own family. Similarly, God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 17:1-8, challenging him to a life of faithfulness and promising an incredible future for himself and his descendants. God’s activity with humans can be seen with David in 1 Samuel 16, and Naaman in 2 Kings 5. The New Testament demonstrates this as well in the lives of the twelve disciples throughout the four gospels and in Paul’s conversion in Acts 9. God involves himself in individual lives, impacting them and the world.

The evidence suggests that God is active in the world through people, accomplishing more than the people can do by themselves. In Exodus 7 through 9, Moses could negotiate the release of a nation of slaves with Pharaoh; but he needed Aaron to express the message, God to send the plagues, and Pharaoh ultimately to follow through with releasing the Israelites. In 1 Kings 18:30-39, Elijah could set up an altar and sacrifice a bull, but he needed God to send down fire to consume the sacrifice. God seeks to be involved in the world, with people, doing things they cannot do alone.

One form of God’s involvement with people occurs when he requires more than one person to accomplish what neither person could have done otherwise. In the Book of
Esther, Mordecai and Esther faced a threat to the nation of Israel. Neither of them alone could do much to stop it. When they came together in faith (Esther 4:12-16), their prayers were heard and their actions accomplished more than either could have imagined (Esther 8:9-14). In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faithful to worship only God and when they went together into a furnace, God was able to use their faith to impact Jews in all the lands ruled by Babylon (Daniel 3:28-29). God is active in the world through people and is able to do more through two or more people than they could have done on their own together. This kind of synergism is important to any process that seeks to discover and address leadership challenges in churches.

God’s synergy is particularly at work in Acts 10 in the story of Peter and Cornelius. God is involved in each man’s individual, personal experience in a way that neither could understand until they became involved with each other. In Acts 10:1-7, God responds to Cornelius’ prayers and gifts with a message from an angel to send for Peter. In Acts 10:9-19, God gives Peter a vision that challenges his understanding of what is impure and what is clean and is left to think about his vision in Acts 10:9. According to his own words later in the chapter (Acts 10:34), Peter did not understand the meaning of his vision until he was in the presence of Cornelius. God gave each man a message or vision that required the presence of the other to be understood and which neither seemed able to guess individually. God’s synergetic outcome was greater through community than could be predicted by the experience of either man alone.

God’s synergetic outcome required faith acted out by both men. For Cornelius, it necessitated an act of trust that God would work through a citizen of the territory his army
was occupying. Cornelius was a Roman centurion in the Italian regiment (Act 10:1). As a centurion, Cornelius was a commanding officer overseeing a platoon of one hundred men called a “century.” According to William Barclay, this “was one of six centuries making up the six-hundred-man cohort. His [Cornelius’] position most closely resembles a modern company sergeant-major. He would have been a man known for his courage and loyalty.”\(^{14}\) However, this position of authority in the Roman world did not translate into respect or relationship in the Jewish world. Cornelius is described as a devout, god-fearing, and generous man of prayer (Act 10: 2) but could not expect to be welcomed into their community or even to have contact with strict Jews. Such a Jew “would never have a guest nor ever be the guest of a man who did not observe the law.”\(^{15}\)

It is worth emphasizing that Peter’s reluctance to meet with Cornelius is due to the latter’s Gentile, non-Jewish nature and not his position in the Roman military. No suggestion is made that his reluctance is due to possible animosity towards the military. Historians point out that there was no Roman military presence in Galilee before AD 44.\(^{16}\) Therefore, the centurion whose servant is healed by Jesus as recorded in Matthew (Matthew 8:5-13) and Luke (Luke 7:1-10) was likely one of Herod Antipas’ troops. The detail that Cornelius is from the Italian regiment may be an explanation of how he comes to be at Caesarea, that he was away from that legion discharging special duties in Palestine.\(^{17}\)


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 82.


Regardless of how he came to be there, according to Barclay, Jews would be reluctant to engage Gentiles on any level.\textsuperscript{18}

In Peter’s case, God’s synergetic outcome required that he overcome his reluctance and engage a Gentile, Roman soldier. According to his own testimony (Acts 10:14), he followed strict food laws (Leviticus 11). His vision of God telling him to eat unclean food is the precursor to him understanding how God will incorporate Gentiles into salvation in Christ and the broader Christian community. Kenneth E. Bailey explains how jarring and significant this lesson is to Peter. The word translated “thinking” or “pondering” in Acts 10:19 has a Greek root, \textit{thymos}, which specifies that Peter “was angry because the vision overthrew his long-held opinions.”\textsuperscript{19} His opinions regarding purity and Gentiles are what make him reluctant to engage with Cornelius.

From his perspective, no positive outcome could be anticipated from an interaction between the two men. Almost any outcome other than conflict would be unpredicted by the behavior of these two men and would have to be synergetic. Although Peter and Cornelius may not have been in personal conflict with each other, their cultures, social groups, and prejudices clashed. Nevertheless, God was working in both men in ways that required trust in the Holy Spirit and surrender to his will in order for that work to be accomplished. Moving forward in their individual understanding of God’s work required faith. In his respective messages to both men, God did not indicate there would be a unique or significant exchange nor was there any hint as to what kind of interaction they might expect.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., s.v. “Gentile.”

\textsuperscript{19} Kenneth E. Bailey, \textit{Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 45.
There was no lightning or thunder but simple whispers from the Spirit and the Godly stirring in two men’s hearts who both sought God’s leading. God risks the future of the plan of salvation to the faithfulness of these two believers with nothing in common but their faith in God. That was enough for him to work synergistically to produce a result neither could have anticipated. In times of challenge and conflict, members and leaders in churches may have no more than faith in God with little expectation for success in discovering or addressing their “cabinet” issues but God is able to create a synergy from their faithful obedience.

The faith of both men is tested in Acts 10:27-33. Peter arrived with the men who had brought him, went into the house, and found a large group of Gentiles. Both men faced risks in the situation, and neither was sure what the meeting entailed. Nevertheless, both men moved beyond cultural norms and social comforts to explain openly and honestly that they had trusted God and now were waiting for more direction. They had acted in faith and expected to learn more as the Spirit led them. Peter at least had the stories of David and Jonathan and their surprising friendship to suggest that God could speak through such disparate men (cf. 1 Samuel 18:1-5).

This God-inspired synergy between Peter and Cornelius needed to occur if the expansive and inclusive truth of the gospel was to spread beyond the nation of Israel. By depicting God’s will for the extension of salvation, Acts 10 describes the most radical evolutionary step the new Church had yet to take. After thousands of years of the history of God’s covenant and promise specified for the nation of Israel, in an amazing and unprecedented expression of the grace of God, the good news of the gospel was extended
directly to Gentiles, the world beyond the nation of Israel.\textsuperscript{20} God’s plan for the redemption of fallen human beings was about to take an enormous, essential leap forward. To demonstrate the power of this connection and prepare the environment for synergy to occur, God splits the message into two parts and gives the two halves to two strangers from two cultures who disrespect each other so much that it is even unlawful (Acts 10:28) for Peter to associate with Cornelius. That such a strategic part of God’s plan would be executed in this way suggests people can anticipate and experience the same kind of God-inspired synergism as they seek to follow him, discern his will, and even prepare to address problems.

God invited both men to a situation where they would grow and edify the other. Summarizing the text, Peter tells Cornelius, “I can get into a lot of trouble if I’m seen with you but God told me to come, so here I am, now, what do you want with me?” (Acts 10:28). Cornelius replies, “A man in shining cloths appeared to me and told me to send for you. I did, so now, what have you come to say?” (Acts 10:30). Cornelius may have felt nervous when Peter did not have an explanation for why God sent him. Cornelius had brought his team members and congregation together due to a mysterious vision he had experienced. These Gentiles may have understood the challenging dynamics between Jews and Greeks, but they trusted their leader. He had taken a risk and had to wait and trust God. Peter was the next to take a risk, walking into the building, beyond the point where it was appropriate for a Jew to go. Only after he committed himself by faith and trusted God did he understand what God’s vision to him had been. In Acts 10:34-35,

\textsuperscript{20} Although the Abrahamic covenant acknowledges that the world will be blessed, the covenant was specified first to Abraham’s direct descendants and the blessings for the surrounding nations as a result of God’s overflow of blessings to the Israelites (Genesis 22:17-18)
Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Both men thought the other had called the meeting. As they stepped forward into the unknown, they were being faithful and so were in the place God had prepared for them to learn discover their “cabinet” issue—Peter, in particular. They both recognized the “puddle” problem of Jews and Gentiles not associating, even when both were believers. Peter did not recognize his deeper, hidden issue, that his commitment to written traditions and to purity laws might hide a belief of God’s favoritism for his own culture. Peter opened his “cabinet” through his willingness to do that which was uncomfortable: going to Cornelius in faith and engaging him. Only then did he recognize his problem, his assumption that God favors and would not accept people from other nations (Acts 10:34). He did not go with that problem in mind; but as he stepped forward, he discovered it.

In essence, God put the future of the salvation of humanity into the hands of two strangers, neither of whom had the ability to understand their unique part of the solution to either of their problems on their own. The two parts of God’s lesson were synergistically enabled when they came together, but not before, uniting the two halves of their message. If God took this risk with two men with such an important situation two thousand years ago, churches today should not expect to have one person or group unilaterally discover and solve their problems. Like Peter and Cornelius, when members today trust the Holy Spirit and surrender to God’s will, God will work synergistically to accomplish far greater things than could be anticipated from the behaviors of those involved if they simply acted on their own. In times of challenge and conflict, members and leaders in churches may have no more
than faith in God with little expectation for success in discovering or addressing their “cabinet” issues, but God is able to create a synergy from their faithful obedience.

**True Problems versus Symptomatic Problems: 1 Corinthians 1-15**

A key step in helping churches and members with their problems may be to help them understand the differences in the “puddle” and “cabinet” problems they face. “Puddle” and “cabinet” problems are significantly distinct in their nature and in how to solve them. “Puddle” problems are symptomatic of hidden “cabinet” issues. “Cabinet” problems are the true difficulties that can cause the “puddles.” To effectively address their problems, churches and members must distinguish between their true “cabinet” problems and their symptomatic “puddle” ones and tackle them accordingly.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul responds to concerns and questions voiced by and about the members of the church in Corinth. To the extent that those concerns reflect “puddle” and “cabinet” problems in the church at Corinth, how Paul addresses them informs how Christ followers can address their respective “puddle” and “cabinet” issues today. Learning how Paul worked with the church at Corinth lays the groundwork for effective ways for churches today to engage in a biblical process that moves them beyond symptomatic “puddles” to discovering and addressing their true “cabinet” issues.

Acts 18:1-11 depicts how the Apostle Paul established the church at Corinth. Paul’s first letter addresses three quarrels in the church which come to his attention (1 Corinthians 1:11). He first attends to divisions which have arisen in the church manifested by members declaring allegiance to Paul or Apollos and even Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12). Paul presents an argument in 1 Corinthians 1:13 through 4:21 to correct this practice and resolve this problem.
He begins his teaching with the cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:1) and goes on to compare human wisdom and foolishness with that of God (1 Corinthians 1:20-25) and his own humility (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Paul summarizes his essential argument: “So then, no more boasting about men! . . . you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). The Corinthians’ problem is familiar and understandable. They have focused on, and aligned with, the wrong leader. The problem has a known solution: realign focus on the right leader, Christ. The issue of division is a visible problem. In that regard, it is like a “puddle” problem. To be a real “puddle,” it also must be symptomatic of a more significant and as yet unknown true “cabinet” challenge.

Next, Paul takes up the visible problem of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 5:1 through 6:20. Paul begins with the issue of sexual immorality in the church (1 Corinthians 5:1), then expands it to include other forms of immorality—like greed and dishonesty (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)—and finally deals with those who continue to participate in these practices (1 Corinthians 5:11-13). Once again, Paul summarizes his arguments: “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?” (1 Corinthians 6:13-15). Like divisions in the church, immorality among members is a visible problem; and, like a “puddle” problem, cleaning up immorality can require a great deal of time, energy, and attention. If the Corinthians’ immorality is really a “puddle” issue, then it is symptomatic of a “cabinet” issue that Paul has not raised yet.
In 1 Corinthians 7 through 11, Paul responds to additional “puddle” concerns: sex, food, and idolatry. The Corinthians have asked questions about marriage and singleness (1 Corinthians 7:1-16), so Paul gives advice to the married and unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:25-40). He addresses a current and specific issue of their day, whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Evidently, thoughtful people in the church line up on both sides of the argument. Paul states the theological foundation for finding a solution: “There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6). Then he states a principle of community that should inform any action by any member of the Corinthian church: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9). This debate over what and what not to eat is a clear issue in the life of the church at Corinth, but it may very well be a symptom of a less visible problem. In similar ways, Paul teaches the Corinthians regarding idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:1-22) and appropriate standards for worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40). Like food, immorality, and divisions, these are visible issues and may be symptomatic of something greater: the church’s true problem.

Having addressed the presenting “puddle” issues either told to him by individuals or written to him in a letter, Paul raises what Bart D. Ehrman describes as the core issue that none of them has recognized yet. Bart D. Ehrman, The New Testament Course Guidebook (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2000), 95. Paul targets the “cabinet” issue which causes their various other “puddle” problems. Essentially, this is their lack of understanding of the nature, purpose, and results of Christ’s resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-58). To address this, Paul gives scriptural and historical evidence for the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). He
describes the Corinthians’ rejection of Christ’s resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12-19), the reality that Jesus indeed rose, and that believers’ bodies will be raised as well (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Finally, he explains that the Corinthians’ very faith and hope are useless if Christ has not been raised (1 Corinthians 15:29-34).

Paul makes his key point in 1 Corinthians 15:50-57 and says that the human body will be transformed, from perishable to immortal. His application is in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

Paul describes a perspective that can change the behaviors and attitudes in the Corinthian Christians. The perspective is that of people who know that they live in imperishable bodies and an existence that will continue forever, because Jesus rose from the dead in a transformed body and they themselves will be transformed physically as well.

This perspective is about the importance of the body and has an impact on all the “puddle” issues Paul addressed earlier in the book. Issues of division, immorality, food, idolatry, and worship are physical issues impacted by knowledge of the physical resurrection, both that of Christ and their own. Adjusting their paradigm will lead Corinthian church members to focus on their work for the Lord, confident that their efforts and their lives will be effective and successful. This is the true change in attitude and way of life which the Corinthians need to make in order to put a stop to all the symptomatic problems they have been facing. It is Paul’s “cabinet” solution to the “cabinet” problem, in order to cease all the “puddle” issues that continually seem to surface in the
environment of the Corinthian church. According to Ehrman, Paul’s argument is that the Corinthians’ core problem is that they do not understand Christ’s resurrection.²²

Gordon D. Fee supports this assertion while acknowledging 1 Corinthians 15’s abrupt change in subject matter from 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. Fee asserts this new subject, the nature of Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of the dead, significantly relates to “the many other matters in the letter as a whole.”²³ These “many other matters” are the symptomatic “puddles,” stemming from the true problem of their incorrect understanding of their bodies. From this true “cabinet” issue flow all their other symptomatic “puddle” problems.

The symptomatic issues of 1 Corinthians 1 through 11 are manifestations of the primary “cabinet” problem addressed in 1 Corinthians 15. The Corinthians’ immorality results from misunderstanding the role of their bodies in faith. Due to the lack of understanding regarding Christ’s resurrection, they are unable to fully engage in worship and communion physically, emotionally, and spiritually both individually and as a community. As a result, they easily cause others to stumble because they do not consider their spiritual existence above the common issues of what goes in their physical bodies. Even their following after various celebrity leaders, like Paul and Apollos, has its roots in this misunderstanding. Ehrman agrees that the presenting problems in the Corinthian church—its divisions, immorality, and confused organization—all relate to the real problem: a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of salvation.²⁴

²² Ibid., 96.


²⁴ Ibid., 97.
For Fee, the conflict is over what it means to be spiritual. To address these “puddle” issues that the Corinthians are allowing to contaminate their environment, Paul provides a “cabinet” solution: recognize the transformational nature of the resurrection for their own physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Since they will be changed and ultimately imperishable and immortal (1 Corinthians 15:54), their efforts on the Lord’s behalf are effective (1 Corinthians 15:58). Christ followers are not disembodied spirits or souls for the moment, held captive in bodies which do not matter and from which they will be freed to be pure spirit. Until the Corinthians discovered their “cabinet” issue, they believed they had “already entered the true ‘spirituality’ . . . a form of angelic experience,” as evidenced by speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30). Since they were “spiritual,” what they did with their inferior physical bodies seemed unimportant to them. All their symptomatic problems stemmed from the true, and less visible, one.

This concept of true versus symptomatic problems fills the pages of Scripture. For example, in the Book of Genesis Jacob spent decades cheating and being cheated, forced to deal with one symptomatic problem after another (with his brother and father in Genesis 25 through 27, and with his father-in-law in Genesis 29 through 30) until, while wrestling with God, he addressed his core “cabinet” issue of needing to trust God’s blessing rather than his own ability (Genesis 32:22-30). Likewise, Moses led his people through symptomatic “puddle” challenges (the people grumbled about lack of water in Exodus 15:24, and about lack of bread in Exodus 16:2-4), only to have them finally face their core “cabinet” issue of faithlessness (Numbers 14:1-4) at the edge of the river Jordan.

---


26 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 715.
The ultimate example is with Jesus and his disciples. Throughout the gospels, the twelve were afraid (fear of drowning, Matthew 8:25), fought (arguing over which of them was the greatest in God’s kingdom, Luke 9:46), fell away (fled when Jesus was arrested, Matthew 26:56) and even betrayed Jesus (Judas’ kiss, Matthew 26:49) as a result of their “cabinet” issue: they did not understand who or what Jesus was. It was not until the upper room at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them that they seemed to set aside their doubt and differences, having come to understand their core issue of needing God’s power to accomplish his purposes (Acts 2:1-12). Throughout Scripture, and particularly in 1 Corinthians, addressing true “cabinet” problems is crucial to resolving the symptomatic “puddle” problems that otherwise plague God’s people. Similarly, God’s people today will wrestle with many symptomatic “puddle” problems in their churches until they discover and address the true “cabinet” issues that cause them. By creating environments that invite the Holy Spirit to work in synergistic ways, members and churches can discover and begin to address their true leadership challenges.

**Theological Foundations**

Along with scriptural teaching, SDP is steeped in theological principles that support a discovery process. Four key foundational principles undergird the dynamics of the practice of individual faith and communal life within a church. These core reformed beliefs include the depravity of humanity and the denomination, the community of Christ and the congregation, grace and the individual, and sacrifice and the leader. These concepts are central to a Presbyterian understanding of life together as believers. Theologically, only together are members and churches able to uncover their true
challenges and move forward together as the Body of Christ. For this reason, these four theological foundations form the basis upon which individuals and leaders, churches, and even the denomination can work to discover and address their true leadership problems.

The Denomination: Depravity of Humanity

Starting from an understanding of depravity, that human beings are fundamentally broken and rebellious towards God, can have significant impact on how members and churches go about uncovering their hidden problems. The doctrine of the depravity of humanity asserts that people are by nature inclined to serve themselves and to recognize their own authority as opposed to that of God. Brokenness, corruption, and bondage are theological descriptions of human depravity, and fleshing them out philosophically leads to a deep awareness of their pervasive influence over human beings. While other religions or philosophies may assume something more positive about the basic nature of human beings, this doctrine of the depravity of humanity is a cornerstone of reformed, Presbyterian faith. It is the starting point of any work to be done in SDP. Presupposing depravity in each person involved in a church and a discovery process impacts the way that process will be carried out. Since the depravity of humanity is assumed to be an accurate understanding of the human condition, acknowledging and working with it is not something to fear and can lead members toward successfully addressing their real issues.

---


28 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Confessions, sect. 7.018 – 7.019. Essentially, this includes Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 18-19.
The nature of human depravity as recognized by SDP was established by the presbytery’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry, which I chair. The document that the committee developed, *What We Believe*, is SDP’s clearest explanation of God’s response to the human condition. The effort to quantify the presbytery’s essential tenets was controversial and a challenge to write, which included a fight to have it adopted as a community. The document, the committee, the presbytery, and I have been both embraced and excoriated within the denomination for this work. Its core premise states the following:

God created human beings good and in God’s own image. Humans were created to know, love, and obey God, and to be righteous stewards of creation. However instead of acknowledging, worshipping and obeying God, we rebel and bring sin and death upon ourselves and all creation. No human remedy can repair the radical brokenness and corruption sin has wrought upon humanity. Human beings are in bondage to sin and subject to God’s holy judgment. Without God’s intervening grace and salvation, we are lost and condemned. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23).  

These words describe the design for relationship between God and humans, the extent and consequence of the loss of that relationship, and the potential for its renewal. Human beings were shaped to be in relationship with God. By turning away from God, humanity twists this shape. God is able and willing to reshape humans so that the relationship can be re-established (cf. Romans 3:23-24).

Beginning to recognize depravity at all levels of human thinking and interacting can stop people from continuing to seek their own human solutions. Brokenness, corruption, and bondage are theological descriptions of human depravity. Fleshing them out philosophically leads to a deep awareness of their pervasive influence over human beings.

---

It helps create an environment of dependence on God and hopeful anticipation for God’s involvement in all of life, including dealing with challenges in church.

The brokenness inherent within human interactions leads to painful and destructive objectification. In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber explains that any attempt to study, categorize, or manage another person requires their objectification. In Buber’s language, the “Thou” (other person) becomes “an object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one.”\(^{30}\) Likewise, Alan J. Roxburgh picks up this theme in a radical dismissal of one of the most used and trusted tools of modern churches, strategic planning.\(^ {31}\) While acknowledging the benefits of strategic planning for objects like building airplanes and bridges, Roxburgh argues that it cannot be used to manage and control human beings without making them objects. He says, “Strategic Planning uses objectification to achieve ends.”\(^ {32}\)

This understanding echoes a statement from C. S. Lewis: “You can’t really study men, you can only get to know them.”\(^ {33}\) His point was that the work of study reduced men to less than who they are and therefore would not result in real knowledge. Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, authors of *The Sacred Romance*, quote this statement and go on to explain the power and importance of sharing one’s story and knowing others’ stories. They suggest that in evangelical circles, people try to apply formulas to each


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 76.

other with total disregard for where they are in their own story.\textsuperscript{34} Roxburgh best states the devastating realization that such objectification contradicts the basic ways that God’s kingdom “is at hand.” Its nearness is, in part, about releasing people from objectifying one another.\textsuperscript{35} The brokenness of human beings has led people even in the church to seek to control and manage others and the outcomes of those people’s efforts.

This depravity is reflected in the first human efforts to manage and control their situation in Genesis 3:6-7. Having broken God’s commands, they experienced themselves as naked and made efforts to cover themselves physically and perhaps spiritually. Like those first human beings, people continue to hide their mistakes and inadequacies. Some of those mistakes and inadequacies end up in church “cabinets” stubbornly closed against discovery. Brokenness and the control it seeks to exert lead to conflict.

The conflict that flows from human depravity may have a positive aspect for human beings. This depravity, what David W. Augsburger calls “radical brokenness,” makes disagreement and discord inevitable. Simply knowing that brokenness is inevitable due to the human condition, and understanding its positive use, can pave the way for “radical” growth and even healing—ushering in an improved state over and above the original individual and/or human dynamic.\textsuperscript{36} Augsburger describes four basic propositions which lay the foundation for healthy conflict resolution. Augsburger’s first proposition argues that traditional forms of conflict resolution must be superseded.

\textsuperscript{34} Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, \textit{The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God} (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 114.

\textsuperscript{35} Roxburgh, \textit{Missional Map-Making}, 77.

Resolving disputes by means of either-or solutions, argument, competition, or win-lose forms of logic blocks those involved from moving into the necessary exploratory style of searching for alternative resolutions.\(^{37}\) This is because the goal of these strategies can be solely the winning of the dispute rather than the resolution of the relationship. His second proposition recognizes that those most involved in the conflict are least capable of settling it and asserts that two opposing parties rarely can design a constructive or creative solution.\(^{38}\) The parties involved are too close to the problem, too invested in their own outcomes, and often too emotionally charged to be constructive or creative.

Augsburger’s third proposition says that people are profoundly ignorant of conflict solutions. This is because even the most skilled experience confusion regarding their own part in it and the roles played by others when conflict breaks out.\(^{39}\) Finally, Augsburger states that it is far more preferable to draw on the wisdom of multiple cultures rather than trying to create a universal science that incorporates them all.\(^{40}\) Each culture has contributions to make that are strong in their unique ways. That unique strength can be lost when contributions meld into an amalgam of general principles and practices.

Augsburger’s propositions are the foundation for this project’s approach to conflict resolution: that in order to heal and move forward, the resolution process must be grounded by an understanding of human depravity and weakness. It is very important at the outset to understand that conflict cannot and should not be avoided. Conflict is a

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
natural part of human interaction that can have a positive impact. Often, in order to reach that impact, people outside the conflict must be brought in as a strategy towards getting a solution. Two people in a conflict in some cases can resolve their differences—hence, the admonition in Scripture to seek that resolution first (Matthew 18:15). However, in many cases people outside the conflict are better able to help settle the dispute—hence, the second step in Jesus’ reconciliation process (Matthew 18:16). It is not helpful to assume that the parties involved in the conflict can “get together and hash this out;” instead, good, well-meaning outsiders need to be involved. Those who face significant hurdles in discovering and addressing “cabinet” issues in their church can take hope from the knowledge that conflict is essential and that “the source, cause and process of conflict can be turned from life-destroying to life-building ends.”

The Congregation: Community of Christ

A gathering of Christians in a congregation may not automatically act like the kind of people God intends them to be. Studying the theology of the community of Christ is important to developing an understanding of what a Christian congregation is intended by God to be and what its potential really is. Understanding their identity can help members move towards the true experience of who they are created to be as a gathered group of believers in Christ. The “Barmen Declaration,” one of the creeds in the Book of Confessions of the PC(USA), states: “As the church of pardoned sinners, it (the Christian church) has to testify in the midst of a sinful world . . . that it is solely his property, and

41 Ibid., 5.
that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction.” Christians are to live for and from Christ. Christ, his Word and his work, is the one thing that his followers are to be about. God expects his followers to be at work, accomplishing what they set out to do. Simply living their lives is not enough. God’s call is for human beings to participate in his work, and a congregation that does so is in the process of becoming the kind of people God intends the Christian community to be.

To be successful at participating in God’s work requires unity among believers. That unity is one of body and spirit (Ephesians 4:2-3). Christian unity reflects the reality that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, all stemming from one God (Ephesians 4:5-6). In John 15:21, Jesus prayed that that all believers would be unified in a way similar to how he and his Father are one. Jesus wanted this because it would help the world believe the truth about who he was. To the first-century Church, Paul describes how this unity works itself out in a community of faith. In Philippians 2:2, he advises believers to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” Roy Bergen Guild provides a practical working out of these Scriptures. He says that unity “is a reality whenever and wherever two or more disciples of Christ work with hands and with hearts to make this world more nearly the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.” Guild describes what Paul’s admonition looks like in reality: disciples working “with hands and hearts,” with Jesus’

---

42 “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Confessions, sect. 8.17.
44 Karl Barth et al., Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1983), 473. “The command of God does genuinely demand the active life, namely, that man should set his mind of something and accomplish it. It does not allow him to understand and treat his existence as an end in itself.”
purpose in mind, and conforming the environment of this world into the kingdom of God wherever they carry influence.

This is important for the modern church facing disunity and conflict, because the world’s impression of such churches easily can be that their members are no different than any other quarreling group of people, with no benefit coming from their faith in Jesus. God’s “work” accomplished without unity is no work at all. Believers must be unified, not simply to be successful at doing God’s work but to participate in it at all (1 Corinthians 12:12). God’s people are to be about the work of God and being in unity as they do that work (John 17:23).

Being about the work of God in a unified way can lead congregants to recognize their most significant challenges in ways that bring resolution and reconciliation. This is part of the work of God, bringing a community of reconciled people into existence (1 Peter 2:9) where differences are not as important as being a new creation (Galatians 6:15) and in the presence of their savior.\(^{46}\) Even discovering and addressing true problems is not the most important work of the church; doing so in a way that brings reconciliation and unity is.

A congregation unified in doing the work of God even may be able to bring healing to those involved in their most significant challenges. Spiritual union with God and one another is the created and good nature of human beings (Genesis 1:27, 31). Separation from God and the resulting personal struggle are their broken experience (Genesis 3:16-19, 23). Henri J. M. Nouwen describes this loneliness as wounds and

writes that those wounds can be a source of healing.\textsuperscript{47} It is only in healthy community that human beings are able to explore their hidden problems honestly.

In communities that acknowledge a “well of human loneliness,”\textsuperscript{48} leaders can allow themselves and their issues to be discovered. Otherwise people, including leaders, tend to hide their issues and can use others to avoid that human loneliness. A community working with this understanding does not try to fix the loneliness or to take it away but invites others to recognize their loneliness on a level where it can be shared. This kind of ministry prepares people to open doors, admit failure, and allow discovery. By entering into a discovery process as a community living for and from Christ, focused on being a new creation rather than simply solving differences, members and leaders are able to risk opening their “cabinet” and venture to let their issues be discovered.

Without this kind of intentional approach of healing and community, leaders easily can seek safety in unhelpful ways that resist any discovery process. According to Nouwen, “As soon as our intentions take over, the question no longer is, ‘Who is he?’ but, ‘What can I get from him?’—and then we no longer listen to what he is saying but to what we can do with what he is saying.”\textsuperscript{49} Putting yet other words to the objectification that Roxburgh describes, Nouwen unmasks a common experience of manipulation and control so familiar as to be unnoticed in many conversations. Members of the community must recognize their own tendency for this kind of manipulation and control to combat isolation. This can allow

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{48} Henri J. M. Nouwen, \textit{The Wounded Healer; Ministry in Contemporary Society} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 83.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 90.
the group to move in ways that seek clarity and transparency while offering healing so that leaders need not seek the safety of resistance and obfuscation.

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer describes five elements of the work of believers towards one another that may provide the clear and healing environment necessary for discovery to take place. The first ministry is that of listening to others with patience, love, and openness to confession of sins. This reflects the scriptural caution in James 1:19 to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. For members seeking clarity about issues in their church, listening this way is crucial. According to Bonhoeffer, second is the ministry of helpfulness towards one another with an emphasis on simple, daily tasks without worrying about distracting from other “more important things.” This resonates with Paul in Romans 12:3: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.” People doing simple, day-to-day chores or mutual service leads them to be humble and think of others and not themselves or the importance of what they are doing. This is a vital element for a community in a discovery process. It needs its members and leaders not to be so concerned with their own importance but with the importance of others.

Bonhoeffer’s third ministry, bearing one another’s burdens, also is represented in Scripture by Paul: “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). Bonhoeffer says this includes bearing up with a brother’s personality quirks and adds that without bearing burdens others may just be people to manipulate. Engaging in this

---

51 Ibid., 99.
52 Ibid., 100.
important ministry mentioned in *Life Together* can help members and leaders focus on learning about and seeking to know a person and not concentrate on how to use them.

Fourth is the ministry of proclaiming God’s truth,\(^53\) which looks like genuine expression of Godly kindness and honesty in personal conversations, which differs greatly from impersonal preaching or teaching. Practically speaking, it is an element of work that comes after one has listened, helped, and born another’s burdens. Hearing the Word this way invites the Spirit of God to testify with the believers’ spirits that all involved are God’s children and made in his image (Roman’s 8:16).

Finally, the fifth is the ministry of authority,\(^54\) which comes from service and not from high competence or effectiveness. It is derived from humility. Bonhoeffer writes: “Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only when the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.”\(^55\) If a congregation is a Christian community, it can use these biblical five practices to help create an environment for healing where people can risk revealing themselves and, in so doing, resolve issues in love without public conflict—thereby witnessing to the world what it means to live for and from Jesus Christ.

The Individual Member: Grace

The concept of unearned value and worth is called grace (Romans 3:24). Grace is central to the Presbyterian/reformed understanding of salvation. It is found throughout Scripture (Zechariah 12:10; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Ephesians 1:6). Grace is the antidote for shame and the foundation for discovery, as it removes the need to hide. Grace becomes

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 103.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
the security members and leaders need to engage in a discovery process that may reveal their own shortcomings as they move beyond “puddles” to open “cabinets” and reveal true problems. When people know that they are valued and have worth without the need to earn or prove it, hidden “cabinet” issues are revealed more easily.

Grace is at the beginning of relationship with God. In Historical Theology, Gregg R. Allison describes Calvin’s view that human will is not free so that conversion to Christ and salvation are ascribed entirely to God’s grace. By this definition, salvation is solely an unearned gift of God. Grace is the free and undeserved help that God gives people to respond to his call. With grace as a beginning point, believers are invited to enjoy fruitful and productive lives knowing they are loved not because they deserve it but due to grace from the God who is love.

Without an environment where grace exists, there can be strong motivation to keep difficult issues hidden. Hiding goes back to the first man and woman documented in the Bible. In Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve hid after they had done what they were not to do. The shame and guilt associated with sin, failure, inadequacy, and brokenness alienated them from God and forced them to exacerbate their separation by hiding. Scripturally, shame leads to separation and results in hiding. This is important because unless shame is addressed, seeking to discover what is hidden engenders more fear and hiding. Simply finding out what is wrong is not enough. Providing an environment in which grace overflows shame, guilt, and fear is vital to healthy and redemptive discovery (Colossians 1:20-22). Learning to address shame is an important step to developing that kind of environment of grace (Psalm 31:1, Romans 5:5).

According to Lewis B. Smedes, a late professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, shame is the sense that one does not measure up. This can be seen in Scripture, after Adam and Eve did what God had told them not to do; when they heard God coming towards them, they hid from him (Genesis 3:8). When God found them, Adam said that he was afraid so he concealed himself (Genesis 3:10). It may be that Adam continued to cover his behavior by saying he hid because he was naked rather than because he had done what God had told him not to do (Genesis 3:10). However, God recognized the hiding for what it was and immediately asked if Adam had done what God had forbidden (Genesis 3:11). Adam demonstrates shame as he hides in multiple ways—hiding his body by clothing himself with leaves, physically hiding from God, and hiding his guilt by blaming the woman (Genesis 3:7, 10, 12)—rather than admitting he had done what he should not have done. From Smedes’ perspective, Adam felt that he did not measure up. For this reason, he could not stand naked and visible before God.

However, by Smedes’ definition, shame is not necessarily a bad thing to feel, since sometimes one truly does not measure up. In essence, there is healthy and unhealthy shame. Healthy shame points out the shortcomings of an individual or a church, highlighting the needs to improve, and recognizes the need for Christ to fulfill the standard God has set. For example, in the case of Southeast Community Church, healthy shame could have helped longtime members recognize their lack of awareness of the need for change and could have led to more helpful interactions in their efforts to impact their pastor and church.

---


58 Ibid., 31 and 37.
On the contrary, unhealthy shame is unwarranted and greater than is appropriate for a given situation. Unhealthy shame has a negative impact on individuals and congregations. It stops creativity and saps joy unnecessarily. An example of this is when the pastor and three quarters of the membership left Mt. Soledad. Members who decided to stay, though they were sure of their decision, wondered if they had done the wrong thing by staying. Some felt they had betrayed their pastor, leaders, and maybe even the leading of God. They experienced unhealthy shame, unwarranted by their situation. Both healthy and unhealthy shame is prevalent in life; most people experience both on a daily basis. Some is deserved, and some is not. Either way, it is a heavy feeling of being an unacceptable person. If leaders suspect that challenges in their church have something to do with their own inadequacy, their own shame may lead them to want to keep the challenges hidden or to find other reasons for them.

The shame of leaders and members contributes to the reason why the focus on “puddle” problems can keep the “cabinet” doors closed. Introducing grace can lead to the opening of the “cabinet.” The experience of being accepted is the beginning of healing for the feeling of being unaccepted. “Grace moves us to participate in the life of God. Grace not only assists us in living the Christian life through purification of our hearts, it literally changes our souls by infusing divine life to heal the wounds of sin.” This sums up two elements of grace that impact a person’s need to hide or, inversely, the ability to discover. First is the change God makes in the human heart through forgiveness. Second

---

59 Ibid., 37.

60 Ibid., 107.

is healing the wounds left by personal brokenness. In Psalm 32:1-7, the psalmist speaks to this collective experience. He describes the contrast between keeping silent about his sin and feeling as though his very bones were wasting away and contrasts this with confidence, safety. He names God as his hiding place, which infers there is no need to hide elsewhere (as Adam proclaimed in Genesis 3), once he confesses his sin and experiences God’s forgiveness. Ultimately, the psalmist describes his experience of grief and physical suffering associated with unforgiveness and shame and offers the reader hopeful results from the risk of revealing sin to God: grace is received through forgiveness, resulting in no longer needing to hide.

Perhaps the most famous example of the need to hide resulting from shameful behavior is that of Peter’s betrayal of Jesus (Mark 14:66-72). When Peter realized what he had done, and that Jesus knew he would do it, he wept (Mark 14:72). Later, he goes far away back to Galilee, seventy miles away, and returns to his way of life before encountering Jesus, back to fishing. This choice of physical distancing is itself a form of hiding from his community in Jerusalem. Galilee is where the resurrected Jesus finds Peter and offers him grace, thus removing his shame and his need to hide (John 21:1-19).

A community filled with the grace experienced by Peter and the psalmist can provide an environment that allows people to disclose what they previously have feared to reveal. Leaders who have general, harmful, and even self-preserving leadership problems may find the confidence and courage to acknowledge their hidden issues. Grace, from God and from others in a congregation, becomes the security Christ followers need to find healing and open doors bolted shut by fear. Grace is the element each individual in a
discovery process needs to remain engaged and to invite others to do the same. Grace frees participants from harmful shame, as they trust in reconciliation and the goodness of God for each person, regardless of whatever steps are needed to address the issues that are discovered. In a member or church’s effort to uncover hidden challenges, it is vital that there be an environment of grace so that those who are hiding in shame or fear can be brought into that environment as the psalmist and Peter were. In this way, God actively creates synergistic relationships and heals hearts even as true problems are recognized so that symptomatic problems no longer distract from the real work that needs to be done.

The Pastor: Sacrifice

Pastors, by the nature of their position in the church and in the lives of their members, have power over congregants both practically and spiritually. The position of pastor in the PC(USA) is filled by ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament (also known as Teaching Elders). Great responsibility and authority, both practical and spiritual, is granted to the pastor by the Book of Order. It establishes that the pastor will teach and preach in such a way as to shape people by the pattern of the gospel. Pastors are expected to be spiritual interpreters of the mysteries of God demonstrated in the sacraments of communion and baptism. They are to help people recognize the significance and impact of the work of God for their future, and they are to help people engage their faith throughout the day-to-day challenges they face.

---

63 Ibid., sect. G-2.0501.
Practically speaking this means that pastors have final authority over the understanding of Scripture and the proper use and implementation of both the most spiritual and practical elements of their churches. Presbyterian pastors also share the cultural and social positions afforded clergy for centuries as shepherds, parish pastors, and counselors. Even the term “clergy” is held for them alone. This all awards pastors power, whether they recognize it or not. The fact that such pastoral power cannot be avoided might suggest that the basic understanding of the role of pastor/shepherd as understood in the PCUSA might be critiqued and changed. Until such critique and change can be made, pastors cannot give up their power. In order not to wield it against the people they have committed to shepherd, they must identify and suffer with those people. Pastoral sacrifice in the form of suffering with the people is crucial to allowing for healthy efforts to address issues in their congregations.

Pastors serve as shepherd of the flock they have been given. Shepherd is what the word “pastor” means. Scripture makes it clear that the relationship is one of protection and personal care. Shepherds care for their sheep (Ezekiel 34:2), know them by name, are trusted by them (John 10: 3-4), and seek the safety of each one (Matthew 18:10-14). This understanding of the relationship of pastors to their congregation is reflected in the way they counsel, lead, and disciple members.

---

The relationship of sacrificial suffering as identification with a community is described beautifully by Nouwen, who makes the case that the wielding of power is a substitute for intimacy.\textsuperscript{67} Power and control are used by pastors who are not able to relate to their people with appropriate intimacy and personal connection. He writes that “many Christian empire builders have been people unable to give and receive love.”\textsuperscript{68} Therefore, it is necessary for pastors to resist every temptation toward power and control. This is the same temptation Jesus faced and overcame when Satan invited him to avoid sacrifice and suffering by embracing power and control (Matthew 4:9). In his own effort to be released from the need for power, Nouwen discovered the nature and power of solidarity with human suffering.\textsuperscript{69} It caused a humility in him that required him to “let go of every distance, every little pedestal, every ivory tower, and just to connect my own vulnerability with the vulnerability of those I live with. And what joy it is, the joy of belonging, of being part of, of not being different.”\textsuperscript{70}

Pastors can be an important part of a church’s vulnerable process of self-discovery. Their willingness to be vulnerable brings them both the joy of not being separate or different from their members and the suffering or sacrifice that pastors embrace in order to serve. A practical example for Nouwen comes in the service of communion. Communion is the central demonstration of belonging “as each member lifts the cup with its joys and

\textsuperscript{67} Henri J. M. Nouwen, \textit{Can You Drink the Cup}? (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996), 60.

\textsuperscript{68} Henri J. M. Nouwen, \textit{In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership} (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 60.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
sorrows, their own, Christ’s and their brother’s and sister’s in a fearless gesture.”

As a necessary component of community, communion, and the suffering intrinsic to it, this demonstrates the support members have for one another in their lives together—thereby creating the community. This is the vulnerability that leads to and allows for joyful, even if painful, self-discovery and group discovery of challenging issues.

For the sacraments to be experienced on this level of vulnerability, pastors need to embrace at least the suffering of this humble reality and learn to sacrifice the need to serve in powerful ways. Otherwise, the skills and training they so carefully cultivate will ensure a professionalism and distance from the very people they serve. As long as pastors serve through solid preparation, their members will remain people they serve and not their beloved. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet in John 13 and is said to have emptied himself of his specialness in Philippians 2:7.

Being a community of belonging is the desire of SDP churches, although they may not yet be willing or able to pay the price of suffering for one another in order to achieve it. Ministers of Word and Sacrament have a pivotal role to play. They can wield tremendous influence and power as advocates for discovery and resolution of challenges and conflict to address issues and empower members. When they are at the center or are the cause of challenges and conflict, they can obscure issues and disenfranchise members. Sacrifice and suffering are necessary for leaders because Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, is their model. Therefore, any effort to discover, understand, and ultimately resolve challenges or conflicts must take seriously the theology of sacrifice and the suffering servant.

---

71 Ibid., 57.

72 Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 38.
CHAPTER 4

PRACTICAL STUDIES IN INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Three disciplines directly connect with efforts to address one’s own hidden issues and those of a group or church. These are awareness of personality traits, relational tools, and skills in conflict management. While all three can contribute significant insight into the challenges, each is a complicated study in and of itself. For this reason, this chapter provides an overview of two or three areas in each of these disciplines which have been found to be helpful in the development of this project. The two personality traits addressed are boundary violators and abusers of power. The two relational tools involve triangles and conflict style, and the three conflict management skills are called “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Listen and Reflect.” Their collective purpose is to ensure that processes developed for this project consider theory as well as practice and that there is awareness of further material and resources available for those who need it.

Two Personality Tendencies

In Part One of this project leadership problems facing congregations that involved compulsion, narcissism, paranoia, codependency, and passive-aggressive tendencies were
discussed. Within the realm of these psychological dynamics, two prominent personality
tendencies surface: boundary transgressions and abuse of power. A good description of
boundary transgressions comes from Martin H. Williams who describes such violations of
appropriate limits as occurring “when someone knowingly or unknowingly crosses the
emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual limits of another.” ¹ Abuse of power is defined as
any kind of power—whether physical, sexual, or spiritual—that is used to hurt another. ² It
is important to understand how these two actions contribute to both “puddle” and “cabinet”
problems in order to help those who suffer to come to a healing resolution.

Boundary Transgressions

The term “boundary transgression” is used primarily in psychotherapy and
counseling but has applications in church leadership as well. Expectations and honest
desire for friendship, interest, and affection in a church setting can compromise a leader’s
appropriate limits with members and deserve attention by the congregation. These
deviations from acceptable practices are placed into two categories: boundary crossings
and boundary violations. Boundary crossings are minimal departures and include actions
like sharing personal information, inappropriate gifts, and non-sexual touching. ³
Boundary violations are stronger breaches and occur when caregivers actually go against,

¹ Martin H. Williams, “Boundary Violations: Do Some Contended Standards of Care Fail to
Encompass Commonplace Procedures of Humanistic, Behavioral and Eclectic Psychotherapies?”
Division of Psychotherapy of the American Psychological Association, http://www.williamspsychological
services.com/SAdocs/bv.html (accessed August 31 2011).

² Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences (Downers
Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12.

³ Ibid.
or exploit, the person entrusted to their care or act indecently towards the individual.\textsuperscript{4} It is important to acknowledge that such boundaries and potential transgressions can exist even in churches and among church leaders.

Where boundary crossings/violations are clear in counseling contexts, pastors are not counselors licensed by the state; therefore, they are not under the same rules and expectations. Actions officially considered boundary crossings in a counseling setting, such as initiating a hug, can be common and even welcome expressions of affection in church. Pastors and members regularly hug, share personal stories, and give and receive gifts. In fact, these actions often are expected among members in churches described in this paper. Without being aware of it, such natural, accepted, and expected actions can cause church leaders to walk close to the line of boundary violation regularly. Consequently, this project does not use terms like “violations” and “crossings” and instead favors the more appropriate and useful term “boundary transgressions,” using this description: “when someone knowingly or unknowingly crosses the emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual limits of another.”

When pastors or leaders cross the boundaries of a church member, they violate that relationship, ministry suffers, and the integrity of the church is questioned. The person in relationship with the pastor may be hurt, angry, or confused by the violation even without being able to clearly articulate the breach. The individual may or may not pursue the issue with the pastor. Either way, the relationship is compromised. The ministry suffers when the violation becomes the topic of conversation within the group; or if not discussed, it can be allowed to expand to more people, who benefit less from the

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
ministry. The integrity of the church is questioned if legal avenues are pursued or if rumors spread into the broader church and community. All of these consequences increase if the violation is ignored or hidden and become part of the issues the church does not want to recognize within its “cabinet.” Ultimately, the integrity of the church and its leaders are compromised when such violations occur and are not addressed.

Members, elders, and leaders need to recognize the precarious nature of the leaders in organizations that want and expect expressions of interest and affection that other professionals would consider boundary crossing. By acknowledging the reality of the situation, congregations can establish formal boundaries in the form of policies and expectations about what can, cannot, and must be done in various situations in the church. Having the conversation and developing the policies can help create an environment of awareness. Boundaries clarify where the line of appropriate behavior is and what constitutes violation. Boundary clarification can help prevent the abuse of power associated with boundary violations.

Abuse of Power

Abuse of power is a real occurrence in churches.\(^5\) It causes confusion on the part of victims, can create hurtful silence and indifference, and causes deep wounds that can lead to further problems. When leaders use their authority to coerce or control others, those others can be confused and find it incomprehensible that they were victims. It can be hard for church members who devote hundreds of hours to volunteer church work to

understand how the pastor then could take advantage of their devotion without considering their needs. A leader’s abusive actions, silence, and indifference hurt more than the victim. Abuse of power from a church leader hurts the victim, the church, and ultimately the leader as conflict leads to loss of many kinds.

Any kind of power—whether physical, sexual, or spiritual—can be used to hurt another. This is abuse of authority, and it wounds people. Since pastors and church leaders have spiritual authority, they are responsible for wielding it in a healthy way. “Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.” Abuse of spiritual power contributes to the confusion, silence, and deep wounding that hurts churches.

Abuse of power causes confusion on the part of victims. In healthy environments, power and its use are expected and appreciated. When power is abused, controlled, and manipulated, its victims may not recognize it, can be surprised by it, and even stunned by their own visceral reactions to it. Confusion and lack of ability and knowledge regarding how to respond to abuse of power are recognized by government agencies, which recommend and implement far-reaching community projects to inform and support victims. Abuse of power from church leaders is unexpected and can be dismissed or not believed to be possible by victims. Dupont describes the example of a church staff person. She was a victim of abusive leaders and said that as difficult as the actions taken against her were, so was her own sense of bewilderment. She had no idea how she, “an intelligent, 

---

6 Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 12.

7 Dupont, *Toxic Churches*, 34.

professional woman,” could have gotten herself involved in so abusive a situation.  
Confusion by victims contributes to the power of an abusive person. It is common to hear people describe an abusive situation and ask, “Am I crazy?” This sense of disequilibrium among members keeps them from focusing on the actions of the abusive person and keeps them distracted by symptomatic problems, away from true issues.

Uncertainty, fear, distraction, and a sense of powerlessness can create hurtful silence and indifference among fellow leaders. When a victim or supporters break through confusion and seek to address their concerns, if church leaders turn a deaf ear, accuse them of lying, ignore the problem “for the sake of the church,” or try to protect the pastor from necessary consequences, the abuse and wounding increase. In the case of the staff person above, the silence and indifference occurred in church leaders who ignored the efforts of others to come to her defense. The silence was as much an abuse of power as the original attack. In his speech to President Ronald Regan, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, said, “When there is obvious injustice and principles are violated . . . when your allies find reasons to justify their silence or indifference—neutrality is sin . . . indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten.”

This is the abuse of having one’s injustice ignored by those in power. In churches this can be especially painful, especially when a church community and leaders reject someone for being right about a problem. For this reason, the fear of such rejection can

9 Ibid., 38.

10 Ibid., 39.

stop members and leaders from opening their “cabinets,” hiding in the kind of neutrality that Wiesel calls “sin”—all of which allow the problems to continue and likely increase.

Power abuse creates deep wounds that can lead to hidden, “cabinet” problems. Abuse of power changes the way people think about what is moral and appropriate.\textsuperscript{12} Victims are deprived of fairness.\textsuperscript{13} When abusers seek to justify their actions, more evil is created than is prevented.\textsuperscript{14} The wounds caused by abuse of power change the victim, the abuser, and the culture of the organization. Far more important than decreases in attendance or membership is the sorrow and loss of members and their loved ones when beloved leaders and churches hurt them. One church staff worker said, “I had no comprehension of the deep and devastating wounding that can occur due to the trauma of spiritual abuse. Now I know. If it happened to me, it can happen to anyone.”\textsuperscript{15} This staff person had given of herself passionately and sacrificially to serve her congregation. She was publicly judged and humiliated by the leaders she had served. Such deep wounds lead some to leave the church and others to hide from the problem, both exacerbating the problem and possibly contributing to the wounding of others. Abuse of power and boundary transgressions lead to hidden problems, to good people leaving, and deplete the energy of those who remain. This often leads to the kinds of downward spirals witnessed in the churches that have faced public conflict in SDP over the last ten years.


\textsuperscript{13} Andrés Sajó, \textit{Abuse: The Dark Side of Fundamental Rights} (Portland, OR: Eleven International Publishing, 2006), 1.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 40.
Two Practical Relational Tools: Triangles and Conflict Styles

A church’s relational vitality helps it respond to change and conflict in healthy, life-giving ways. Two practical tools that aid in maintaining relational vitality are triangles and conflict styles. They are particularly useful in understanding and nurturing strength and grace amidst the complicated relationships in a church. Triangles are the natural place two people go when a calm relationship grows anxious. A positive example of triangles is the part they play in the recourse in conflict resolution between two parties going to a third person, as expressed in Matthew 18:16. Knowing how to use triangles appropriately can help to reduce that anxiety.

Additionally, a conflict style is the normal behavior one exhibits in a situation that contains discord or tension. All people have a conflict style. Understanding and being able to identify one’s style is helpful for enhancing self-awareness. This, coupled with understanding the conflict style of others with whom one has relationship, also can help to decrease anxiety when conflict occurs. Knowing and using the two tools of triangles and conflict styles throughout a church overall can contribute to congregational vitality and how it reacts amidst change and disagreement.

Triangles

In relationships, a triangle is two people plus a third. Family systems theorist Murray Bowen states: “The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the

---

most vulnerable other person to become a triangle.” A triangle is the normal human relationship group, not the one-on-one relationship that people often assume is the basic human grouping. Roberta M. Gilbert builds upon this concept and says that triangles are an extremely important concept, appearing five times in Bowen theory. She describes triangles as being neither bad nor good; rather, they just exist. They are always there, because all relationships have some anxiety and need some outlet to release it.

People are frequently in triangles, although though they do not tend to notice them when things are calm. Anytime anxiety increases, a triangle appears. A biblical example would be Jonathan, Saul, and David. In this triangle, Jonathan in 1 Samuel 19:1-7 is able to reduce Saul’s anxiety about David. That triangle is seen very clearly in a conversation between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20:3-4, where Jonathan is torn between loyalty to his friend and father. A modern example of a triangle is a husband and wife in relationship with their pastor. During calm times all three carry on conversations. However, when anxiety between the couple increases, they also might spend their time talking about the pastor and his problems rather than address their anxiety. They may talk through the pastor—for instance, if the husband is upset and sees the pastor at church, he may say to the pastor, “The next time you see my wife you could encourage her to be more understanding.” The pastor—without ever responding or, in some cases, even knowing—has become part of a triangle created when the anxiety of the couple becomes too much for

---

18 Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (Falls Church, Va.: Leading Systems Press, 2006), 47.
19 Ibid., 50.
them to remain only one on one. People siphon off their one-to-one anxiety towards the third person or object in the triangle.20

There is a difference between being part of a triangle and being triangulated. Triangulation occurs when people in anxious situations draw another to their side, over and against the person causing anxiety or to serve as a “go between.” The pastor in the earlier scenario has been triangulated. Friends, people in leadership, and others who know about anxious situations can anticipate “being triangulated” and seek to avoid it. In such situations, pastors can find themselves punished for choosing sides when warring factions in a family exist. At the same time, they may be punished for not choosing sides.21 A person who has been triangulated as a “go between” does not help lower anxiety. That triangle maintains the anxiety and causes the third person to be caught in the tension.

Reducing anxiety in apprehensive relationships through the knowledgeable and positive use of triangles can increase the vitality of the relationship. In the example above, the pastor can offer to be in the triangle without being triangulated. The pastor could say to the husband at church, “It sounds like you have some difficult things you would like to discuss with your wife. I’ll come sit in the room with the two of you if you want to talk to her.” Pastors, counselors, facilitators, and others can provide such a service to anxious groups by remaining non-anxious, neutral third parties. In this way, rather than trying to change either person, pastors can see the anxiety-producing cycle they have created and

20 Ibid., 51.

contribute to reducing frustration. In essence, the pastor offers a third point on a triangle without getting caught in the anxiety.

Knowing that people use triangles to defuse anxiety allows groups to actively use them, drawing in third parties in socially acceptable ways. The concept of triangles in relationships explains so much of what happens in any kind of relationship and is therefore easily recognizable when pointed out. Once incorporated into a church’s common vocabulary, triangles can be seen for the kind of help or hurt they cause among members on a regular basis. The appropriate use of triangles can mitigate some of the leadership dysfunctions discussed in this chapter.

Conflict Styles

Managing conflict styles provides people with tools to choose different reactions that can be more helpful in resolving their conflicts. Knowing how people react when they are in conflict, and recognizing that they react differently when in conflict with different people, can provide insight as to how to manage conflict styles. When individuals simply respond to a conflict without evaluation, they act as though triggered—essentially, having no choice in the matter. Their contribution, whether helpful or not, is all they bring to the situation. By recognizing their reaction and being aware that other reactions are possible, it is possible choose to respond differently. Work done with leaders to help them deal well with conflict in their organization offers a practical application. Knowing their conflict style can help them avoid being thrown off balance when conflicts arise. Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan say that when people understand how someone else’s behavior

---

becomes irritating, they can calm themselves down before engaging and doing something they might regret later.23

Training in conflict styles offers resources to church members, staff, elders, and committees. Simply being aware that there are constructive and destructive behaviors when it comes to conflict can prompt people to behave differently.24 Using a conflict style resource normalizes conflict, lets people recognize that it is natural, and can contribute to a creative process if addressed properly. Simply knowing this is the first step toward becoming better at resolving conflict.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) measures how people act when they are in conflict.25 Ralph H. Kilmann, assisting Ken Thomas at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1971, developed the tool. Kilmann refined it and for forty years has been using it in researching, teaching, and consulting in conflict management.26 The instrument measures people’s assertiveness, meaning how much they work to take care of themselves in a conflict, as well as cooperativeness, which refers to how much they work to take care of the other person. The combination of a person’s assertiveness and cooperativeness determines their conflict style, and the combination can change depending on with whom they experience conflict.

---


24 Ibid., 46.


The TKI categorizes five conflict style combinations with varying amounts of assertiveness and cooperativeness. People who are assertive and do not want to cooperate with the other person will enter into competing to win the conflict at the cost of the other person losing. Someone who is both assertive and cooperative will tend to collaborate with the other person, so that both interests are met. When people have a restrained or temperate amount of both assertiveness and cooperation, they will compromise both people’s goals. They do not give up nor do they give in. People who are both unassertive and uncooperative tend to avoid conflict and accomplish nothing in way of a solution. Their goal is to avoid the conflict altogether. The last style is that of unassertive, cooperative individuals who will accommodate the other person and meet their needs at the cost of their own. These five styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating are the conflict styles measured by the TKI.27

The TKI is used by organizations to help individuals recognize their own style as well as that of others. It is a method of beginning dialogue and helping members of groups handle conflict in effective ways. The actual instrument is a brief, fifteen-minute, self-scoring exercise. It does not require specially trained administrators and is designed to make sense to the average employee.

People can use all five styles and move among them. Rarely does an individual use only one style all the time; however, people tend to rely on one style more than others.28 People also may use different styles in different settings. This is where the TKI becomes quite revealing and freeing. For instance, a person who avoids conflict with a spouse at

28 Ibid.
home may discover a tendency to collaborate with coworkers in the office. Using the TKI can lead that person to reflect on why the difference exists. Church members can realize why they deal with possible conflict with a pastor the same way they did with their father and come to realize that they deal with conflict with the chair of a church committee differently. It is freeing to recognize that one has multiple modes that are familiar and need not be locked into or required to use an unhelpful style. Change is possible.

The TKI is considered non-evaluative, with a sense that each mode may be appropriate in different situations and helps people learn to be more comfortable with each mode. While people are able to move among response modes, they learn from the TKI that collaboration is generally the most successful in the long run. TKI helps group members understand how each of them responds to conflict and why it is important to move towards collaboration. The kind of personal insight the instrument gives can open people to new ways of behaving and new appreciation for others and their styles. All of these reactions are helpful in times of change and conflict.

**Three Conflict Management Skills: “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Listen and Reflect”**

Managing conflict well can redeem difficult situations and strengthen a community that works through conflict in healthy ways. Hugh F. Halverstadt, in *Managing Church Conflict*, says that faith gives meaning to conflict and values it “as the necessary means of

---


Genuine human community is one that has become stronger through addressing its conflict in ways that bring greater clarity, trust, and mutual respect. Working through conflict in healthy ways requires listening and understanding one another, even if all parties continue to disagree. The management tools of “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Listen and Reflect” have the capacity to help establish genuine human community by building clarity, trust, and mutual respect. The first two skills in particular can generate clarity, trust, and mutual respect quickly. “Start With Heart” refers to the skill of beginning with working on oneself before trying to focus on others. “Master Your Own Story” is about recognizing that it is something inside the self, not something someone else says or does, affecting one’s emotions. When individuals first take responsibility for themselves and recognize that it is something inside them that causes their emotions, how they act and respond brings clarity to a conversation, builds trust, and expresses mutual respect.

“Start With Heart”

The skill of being able to “start with heart” refers to people considering what they really want and staying focused on achieving that goal. This involves better relationships, solutions, valuing others and being valued by them, and expressing love and consideration. Once emotions are strong, the stakes become higher, and opinions vary, people act in ways that seem designed to get the opposite reaction than the one desired.  

---


32 Ibid.

For instance, a mother and daughter both want a good relationship filled with understanding and mutual respect but find themselves yelling at each other and calling each other “irresponsible,” “unfair,” and “uncaring.” They storm off having achieved exactly the opposite of what both wanted. When a person has strong emotions—for instance, anger or hurt—due to something another says or does, starting with one’s heart allows one to pause and ask this question: “What do I want for myself, for others, and for this relationship?”34 By pausing to ask and find the answer, people become open to change the way they see a situation and in how they will respond. Conversations are challenging when the outcome is important, and people differ on what the outcome should be when their emotions are strong. In those conversations, if people will begin with a heart evaluation and work on that first to recognize what they really want, they will have a better chance at engaging in the conversation in a way that brings clarity, trust, and mutual respect.

“Master Your Own Story”

“Master Your Own Story” is a process based on the concept that people cause their own emotions and therefore are responsible for and able to control their actions. Others do not make a person mad or cause any other emotion. Rather one’s own story, often triggered by something someone else says or does, provokes an emotion and therefore a resulting action.35 People directly influence their own emotions and problems.

“Master Your Own Story” is a process that allows people to recognize their own part in

34 Dupont, Toxic Churches, 30.
35 Ibid., 98.
causing their emotions and actions along what is called a “path to action.”\textsuperscript{36} The path to action begins with an experience that causes people to create a story. That story generates feelings, which lead to an action. The point where change is possible is in the story.

Having clarity about the facts as well as story and feelings is important to any dialogue.\textsuperscript{37} By seeking more information, considering other possibilities, understanding another person’s story, one’s own story changes. Consequently, the emotions and actions change as well. This skill is extremely useful in many settings and begins to alter the way people look at their experiences. Individuals who have learned “Master Your Own Story” can help others see that their initial stories and feelings also might be reevaluated.

Engaging in these conversations adds clarity, builds trust, and demonstrates mutual respect.

Listening and Reflecting: “Let Me See if I Got It?”

“Let me see if I got it?” is a reference to a mirroring dialogue technique by Harville Hendrix, a clinical pastoral counselor recognized for his work with couples, much of which is focused on communication. The technique consists of the repetition of several questions: “Let me see if I got it?” “Did I get it?” “Is there more?” and “Let me see if I got it all?”\textsuperscript{38} Each is followed by the listener repeating what was heard. The technique gives the listener a concrete task to accomplish in the conversation and communicates desire for clarity and understanding, sincere interest in the other person, and a clear concept of what the other

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 99.


person has to say. This is a simple-to-remember and easy-to-implement skill. This makes “Let me see if I got it?” a very useful tool for a discovery process.

As the first step, “Let me see if I got it?” provides a listener with a concrete task to accomplish in the conversation. Once the speaker has said what he or she wants to say, listeners ask to see if they properly and fully understood. The listener does this by repeating back to the speaker what was heard. By knowing that they are going to report back to the speaker, listeners often seek to listen more closely in order to hear and remember what the speaker expresses. This focuses the thoughts of listeners and helps them understand what they are to do. They might take notes or simply absorb the words and meaning carefully. In any case, they are working on their task of listening. In doing so, this means they are not interrupting or correcting, challenging, thinking of a response, or daydreaming. In this way, “Let me see if I got it?” sets the stage for the rest of a positive interaction.

The second question communicates desire for clarity and understanding. Having repeated back what they heard the speaker say, listeners ask, “Did I get it?” and make it clear that they are sincerely interested in hearing and understanding the other person. If the speaker says the listener did not get it right, the listener invites the speaker to repeat the message and goes through the process again until the speaker is able to say, “Yes, you got it.” This process expresses a desire for a clear negotiation of meaning by both parties.

“Is there more?” is the third question and communicates sincere interest in the other person. Having made it clear that they heard and understood what the speaker had to say, often listeners desire to respond or rebut what has been said. Instead, they ask this simple question: “Is there more?”—listening to whatever else the speaker has to say.
Then they go back through the first two steps to ensure mutual understanding. By doing so, listeners demonstrate that they are more interested in hearing what the speaker has to say than in starting to talk themselves. It communicates sincerity.

“Let me see if I got it all?” is the fourth step. With it, listeners have the opportunity to communicate that they have a clear understanding of what the other person has to say. Once the speaker is able to respond with certainty that he or she has no more to say, the listener now seeks to summarize and repeat back everything the speaker has said from the beginning. While this may seem tedious, the speaker has the experience of being truly heard and understood. The experience creates clarity, builds trust, and mutual respect. Also, having felt heard, the speaker has been prepared to listen and has received a good model for how to do so through the recent interaction with the listener.

Awareness of personality tendencies, relationship tools, and conflict management skills all contribute to significant insight into the challenges faced by members seeking to discover and address issues in their churches. In particular, boundary violations and abuse of power exist in churches and need to be understood. Triangles and conflict styles significantly impact the way people respond during conflict, and understanding them gives people the power to use them constructively. “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Listen and Reflect” are practical skills that will help people in any conversations they have.
PART THREE

AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS LEADERSHIP-INITIATED CONFLICTS
CHAPTER 5

EXPLORING REAL-LIFE CHALLENGES

This chapter explores the experiences of members in the three profiled churches with respect to what might have aroused their suspicion of true “cabinet” issues, what would have been helpful in addressing their issues, and what would have been the best way for SDP to provide help with their conflict or challenge. A discovery process begins with a suspicion or sense that something might be odd or wrong in the church. A presbytery has different ways of helping, and these churches had views on what manner of providing help would have been most effective. Lessons learned from churches that have addressed their challenges can be informative with regard to what is helpful and how that help is best delivered. These lessons learned stem collectively from the same sources and circumstances already reported in Part One of this project and encompassed personal interviews, SDP administrative meetings and reports, and town hall meetings at the churches themselves. Any new sources contributing to this section will be cited.

What Would Have Been Helpful?

In retrospect, members in the profiled churches had several suggestions for what would or would not have helped address their respective situations. They felt that there were
four elements that need to form part of a useful strategy of assistance. First, they expressed
the desire for a neutral process to help churches look at their issues that did not assume there
were problems. More than one of the churches did not think it had difficulties and might not
participate in something geared toward solving problems. Second, they expressed the wish
for a personal self-awareness element. Members felt that their pastors and leaders could be
most supportive of a process that helped individuals grow and seek transformation. Third,
they thought SDP’s culture could be more conducive to voluntary participation. Several
people from different churches said their leadership would resist outside interference of any
kind and that the whole presbytery needed a healthier culture where it was assumed and
natural for churches to participate. Finally, they yearned for training in conflict management
and communication techniques. Members conveyed concern that people in their churches
had almost no understanding of how to confront, or respond to, difficult people or situations.
These four suggestions would have helped these churches.

A Neutral Process

The first suggestion regarded a neutral process to help churches look at their own
issues, which are not necessarily difficulties. People felt this was important, because in
the beginning many members and churches did not know they had difficulties and so
were not interested in a process designed to address them. Some conclusions from
interviewees that led to this suggestion included thoughts that their leaders would be open
to a process to help the congregation move forward without the formality of a strategic
planning process as well as a vehicle that gives people permission to evaluate their
church without it feeling critical.
For example, during Church Y’s nominating process a committee member brought a “friend” of his who happened to be in town to meet the committee. The friend ended up becoming the future pastor. This was a complete breach of protocol for a committee that should read a hundred résumés and interview many candidates long distance before meeting any face to face. Interviewees began to realize that abuse of power and manipulation by leaders was present in their church before the pastor came. The group began glimpsing issues they would like to have looked into and could imagine practices being put in place that might have helped the church resolve its issues rather than allowing them to escalate. These topics could have surfaced in a neutral process designed for general congregational evaluation without the onus of having to look for problems. Had such a process been in place in the presbytery, members and staff could have begun to engage it without causing defensiveness among their leaders.

Personal Self-Awareness Element

Encouraging self-awareness on an individual level is a kind of intervention that encourages self-discovery. Members felt that in order for members and leaders to be open to exploring the process for churches, they might first be introduced to a similar process for individuals. A member from Church Z felt very strongly that her church needed to explore its challenges. She suspected there were unrecognized issues within the church and among leaders that caused some of the more visible problems.\(^1\) She was frustrated by a sense of ambivalence on the part of other leaders who did not think there were problems and saw no reason to go “digging them up.” Nevertheless, she knew of a number of members of the

\(^1\) Members of Church Z, interviews by author, San Diego, CA, 2010-2011.
church who shared her concerns and who also sought personal growth and direction. The idea that came from this was that a process for individuals would not raise any of the concerns that a church-oriented one would, and a few members at a time might be introduced to such a process. Over time, as more people benefited from a process focused on individual breakthrough and came to trust the process and see successful outcomes, an interest in a church version might build without having to be forced on leadership.

This idea resonated with members of Church Y. One interviewee had experienced uncomfortable situations with the pastor that called his character into question on two occasions, but she had no idea how to broach the subject with him or anyone else. While she felt that training in conflict management skills would be helpful, she also questioned her own lack of follow through. She wondered why she hid from her questions, concerns, and worries that things might have been different had she acted on her suspicions sooner. She felt that a personal process for her own self-awareness would be very helpful. Had such a process been available, she felt it would have aided her and could have opened a new avenue for addressing her church’s issues that could have led the church in a healthier direction than the one it ultimately took. In both examples, a process for individuals carried the potential to benefit members of churches and provide a path for moving their church toward health in non-aggressive ways that can be embraced by leadership more easily.

San Diego Presbytery’s Culture

If a personal self-awareness element were introduced at the presbytery level, the culture of intervention would change to be one geared towards encouraging personal self-discovery, which naturally would lead to encouraging member discovery. In the previously
mentioned example from the member from Church Z, for whatever reason, she had no encouragement from her church to seek out resources to help with her concerns and few if any resources available to her from the presbytery should she want them. This would change were SDP to have a culture that encouraged personal growth and inter-church involvement. Such a culture would have regular invitations to training in personal and church development. It would encourage transparency in leadership and remain open to talking about success stories where churches had addressed their challenges and come through as a healthier and better prepared congregation to face the future.

With this kind of core change in SDP culture, resources and tools would be available to help churches long before the need for administrative commissions or COM subcommittees to work with isolated individuals. These kinds of responses chill efforts to seek help from presbytery, because they seem too drastic and create a culture of heavy-handed power and authority. Members who seek help would benefit from a safe environment of openness and invitation with resources and opportunities that look attractive enough to lead people into wanting, and choosing, to open their personal and collective “cabinets.”

For example, one elder interviewed from a church which had faced conflict in the past said there was no way her ex-pastor would have allowed anything like this. Members simply would not have considered it. They all revered but feared their pastor. Their church “cabinets” were securely closed. When asked what would have helped in their situation, this same individual initially said, “Nothing.”\footnote{Members of church of adulterous pastor, interview by author.} However, upon further reflection, she agreed that perhaps if SDP had a culture that emphasized “getting unstuck”—with many testimonies and examples of God at work through this process—then members in her
church might have been open to stepping into the unknown. Congregants may have been willing to bring it into their midst as a growth and discipleship tool.

Such an environment allows for participation at whatever level and intensity that members are able or willing to become involved. Invitation means that it cannot be imposed on churches or members from the outside. There is not enough authority to force churches to participate nor is coercion helpful for adaptive change, which requires ownership and recognition of the need to change.³ For this reason, it would be helpful for both churches and members, if SDP were to create an environment within the entire presbytery that encourages member discovery.

Training in Conflict Management and Communication

A desire for training in conflict management and communication surfaced time and again during the interviews due to people’s biggest fears; inability in, and lack of knowledge about, conflict resolution; difficulty in facing conflict in helpful ways as it occurred; and lack of tools for having conversations about what seemed to them to be scary topics. At Church Y, interviewees felt that better orientation for elders and practical resources from the presbytery might have helped. They believed that behavior like those displayed by the pastor should be expected and should not surprise elders. Training in leadership and conflict issues might have helped this. In the situation with the nominating process, a stronger nominating committee versed in both conflict and communication skills might have stood up to manipulation by individuals and perhaps have kept them from choosing that pastor.

At Church Z, interviewees felt that training in conflict management and communication would help them reframe the criticism of the complainers. However, some of the criticism was likely valid—for instance, that staff and elders were not given freedom or training to talk and that there was not a safe environment in which to raise concerns. Another complaint was that there was no transparency from session and leadership. As interviewees reflected, they realized that these were exactly the kinds of concerns that could be addressed through conflict management training and probably needed to be. From fear of conflict to lack of skill in addressing it helpfully, needs of members in churches in SDP would be helped by training in conflict management and communication.

**What Would Have Been the Best Way to Provide Help?**

In all three churches, there were suggestions for how the presbytery might have best provided help. The kind that would have been most well received was help that gave members responsibility, did not come as enforcement, and did not feel punitive. Churches like the idea of putting responsibility into the hands of members and not session or pastors. It seemed to some people that pastors and sessions were already too busy and that a process that could be left in the hands of members might be well received. Members also said that help should not come from the enforcement arm of the presbytery. Some had experience with positive involvement from presbytery officials; but since it came from COM, it was perceived by others as enforcement and not to be trusted. Finally, members felt help should be provided in a way that would make participation normative and not punitive. Members expressed that if people all across the presbytery were regularly participating in a process voluntarily, then a church with difficulties could take part
without fear that such participation would be seen as punishment. Overall, the three churches were hopeful that assistance could be provided in new three-pronged way.

Placing Responsibility in the Hands of Members

One of the best ways to provide help was seen as putting responsibility into the hands of members instead of session or pastors. The logic had to do with a motivational factor. When members are motivated to move forward in a discovery process, it was felt they ought to be given the freedom and trustworthiness to do so without having to rely on pastors or elders for leadership or implementation.

According to members, the need from leaders is one of giving permission and/or neutrality rather than direction and implementation. This perspective from members was due to their seeing how leaders already are busy with full schedules. While there is no guarantee that any process ultimately will succeed in avoiding public conflict, interviewees at Church Y believed that personal development and insight gained by members would be beneficial regardless of the outcome, if those members could have taken responsibility for their own process.

Help versus Enforcement

Providing help that does not originate from the enforcement arm of the presbytery was important for those who offered suggestions. There was concern from interviewees that appeals to the presbytery for help often resulted in an official response from COM. This felt like a last resort that could brand members as traitors to leadership.⁴

⁴ Members of Church Y, interviews by author.
Church Z had experience with a COM subcommittee, called the Peace and Harmony group, which was successful. It helped several churches resolve issues, thereby averting conflict. However, these situations were kept confidential. No one in the presbytery outside the specific churches knew much about them. In other cases, the Peace and Harmony group was not successful in averting conflict. In those cases, COM had to step in with traditional mediation techniques like administrative commissions. Over time, the group developed a negative reputation as the forerunner to a full COM intervention. Members of the committee became unwelcome in congregations with concerns. The group was disbanded. It was felt that any COM efforts could be viewed as enforcement.

Members of Church Y had experience with their pastor not wanting COM or other presbytery intervention. They believed he felt defensive and threatened by the outsiders over whom he did not have control. Also, their church experienced very difficult and divisive conflict over a conflict management expert sent by the presbytery to work with leadership. These examples demonstrate the kinds of resistance there can be to even well-meaning, expert intervention. Therefore, for the greatest potential fruit of any help that is provided, it is important that when help is offered by the presbytery that it not come from any group of committee that could be perceived as enforcement.

Normative versus Punitive Participation

The final recommendation on how to provide help was to find a way to make participation normative and not punitive. The point that interviewees were trying to make with this suggestion is that the process, attitudes, or activities should be typical and standard in the presbytery and not only enacted as punishment or correctively.
Essentially, this is a pro-active versus a reactive perspective. It engenders an environment of self-discovery. Some of the comments were about having a culture in the presbytery that assumed churches were authentic and talking to one another rather than staying isolated and on their own. They talked about a normative process that could encourage leaders, elders, and members toward interaction in non-threatening environments which allow transparent communication. They imagined a personal growth or discipleship process unrelated to conflict or problems for members which leadership could embrace and encourage participation.

Participation could be in a style of attraction and invitation. Participation should look attractive enough to help people want it and choose to become involved. It allows for involvement at whatever level and intensity members and churches choose to invest. Invitation means that it cannot be imposed on churches from the outside. There is not enough authority to force churches to participate. From this project’s perspective, imposing action on churches is not helpful for adaptive change, which requires ownership and recognition of the need to change.

**Summary of How Information Was Gathered**

A total of five interviews were held with members of the two focus churches. Church Y held two interview meetings on May 19 and July 26, 2010 with a combined total of ten participants. Church Z held one meeting on May 25, 2010 with twenty-five participants. The outcomes of those interviews became part of the research and input for this project along with the experience and feedback from RBCPC. The strategy and process were developed and implementation in San Diego Presbytery began in the fall of 2010.
After the first introductory meeting in January 2011, the first full seminar embodied the model and curriculum contained in this project and occurred in June 2011. Follow-up interviews were held with the project coordinators from both churches. They participated in the presbytery’s introduction of the project and provided feedback on the both the introduction and seminar. Comparisons were made between what the original interviews revealed about what would have been helpful and how those elements had been introduced in the seminar. One more seminar occurred in October 2011 at Church Z, with the expectation that further adjustments will be made in response to lessons learned at that event. Additional adjustments to timing, emphasis, worksheet materials and how to position the entire project to the presbytery are helping to prepare it for a broader launch in early 2012 to SDP leadership.
CHAPTER 6

ESTABLISHING A MODEL AND CURRICULUM FOR DISCOVERING PROBLEMS IN LEADERSHIP

This chapter considers Scripture, theology, lessons learned, and practical studies of this project and develops an integrated model and curriculum for individuals, congregations, and SDP to help create a healthy environment in which to discover and address problems in local church leadership. The model includes steps of active participation for members, churches, and presbytery from the time a concern is raised in the mind of a member until a satisfactory outcome is achieved for a congregation. Such a model begins with individual self-awareness, expands into congregational discovery, and incorporates presbytery support. It must begin with individuals because they are the ones who become aware or begin to suspect that there may be unaddressed issues. Without them, there is no intentionality or motivation.

Next, the congregation needs to get involved because hidden “cabinet” issues require more than technical fixes by a few leaders or presbytery representatives. “Cabinet” issues require adaptive changes to large portions of the congregational system and membership. Finally, the presbytery provides resources and a culture of expectation that such issues exist and can be resolved. It creates an environment of safety and
empowerment. As individuals and congregations are involved and resourced through a presbytery-wide structure incorporating scriptural, theological, and practical studies, they will become equipped to discover and address issues in their church and leadership.

**Key Conclusions from Scripture, Theology, Practical Studies Undergirding the Model and Curriculum in Light of Ministry Implications**

The power of God to grow members and transform congregations is learned from and comes through Scripture. The key scriptural lessons undergirding this model are environment from Mark 4, synergism from Acts 10, and true versus symptomatic problems from 1 Corinthians 1 through 15. This new ministry effectively draws on historic principles and values within the Presbyterian Church. It recognizes that human beings are not able to grow themselves. Instead, they are to pursue goals of spiritual growth and personal discovery by creating environments where God’s Spirit can work in their hearts, as is illustrated in the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4. A process of discovery must incorporate ways for people to be involved in one another’s journey because God chooses to use people as his synergistic instruments for growth and transformation, as seen in Acts 10 with Peter and Cornelius. A community of believers, guided by the Holy Spirit, is able to discover the hidden issues that cause symptomatic ones, as was demonstrated by Paul in 1 Corinthians. In this way, the “cabinet” doors are opened and the challenges within can be discovered and addressed by the community in a safe and hopeful environment.

There are four theological principles that undergird and inform the discovery process: depravity of humanity, community of God, grace, and sacrifice. At the SDP level, the principle of depravity of humanity leads to the recognition that human brokenness exists, even in the Church, and can cause people to hide, to seek to control, and to manage
one another and the outcomes of their efforts. Practically speaking, this propensity for control can manipulate a church’s organizational system to work against the discovery of hidden issues. This dulls a congregation’s ability to reflect the community of Christ and its kingdom work in the world.

At the individual level, grace must be introduced into the process. Pastors and leaders who are involved in conflict or negative behavior are the very individuals most in need of help but can be the most resistant to it. If they sense that challenges in their church have something to do with their own inadequacy, they may avoid any discovery process. When grace is modeled by members and leaders, then an individual—even a pastor or leader—may feel secure enough to genuinely participate.

Grace among members invites sacrifice by leaders. The potential for transformation and healing can move leaders to sacrifice their defenses and their confidence in their own ability in order to surrender to the work of God in their lives and their church. In return for the grace offered by the congregation, the sacrificial leader can draw the community into unity and be a witness to the work and power of God in this world.

In addition to Scripture and theology, practical lessons learned from the focus churches about what would have been helpful and the best ways to provide help have contributed to the final process. These have led to keeping the final processes for individuals and churches neutral without necessarily dealing with problems. The processes work within the presbytery environment and encourage members to embrace their power and responsibility. Participation is voluntary and is not led by any enforcement committee, nor will it be assigned punitively. By incorporating lessons learned, the process is strengthened with practical wisdom that stems from dealing with difficulties in SDP churches.
The model developed that takes all these elements into consideration has three modules designed for members, congregations, and the presbytery. The modules for members and congregations are intensive, one-day seminars geared toward personal learning and incorporates material from Scripture, theology, lessons learned. The presbytery module is focused training and introduces the practical studies in more of a classroom setting designed to provide resources to people involved in discovery processes in their church. As members and congregations become personally involved and invested in their own discovery process and are resourced by the presbytery, they will grow in their own faith and develop the capacity to be able to address the issues they discover about themselves and their churches.

Two tools facilitate the formation of an environment open to the Holy Spirit and the experience of synergy: reflection and listening. Reflection on significant people, circumstances, and events in one’s life helps create an environment open to and expectant of the Holy Spirit. By looking at these significant elements in their lives, people begin to see patterns and God at work in them, which encourages them to look for and expect the Holy Spirit to continue his transformational process. Listening to others through intentional interaction with other individuals and groups throughout the seminar process invites a synergistic experience. By turning to the person next to them and sharing some of what God seems to be saying to them, participants engage in the very process that Peter and Cornelius entered into in Acts 10:29-34. These two tools are integrated into the process intentionally to engage the scriptural lessons so important to growth and discovery. Reflecting on how God has used people, circumstances, and events to shape
one’s life can create an environment open to and expectant of the Holy Spirit.¹ The experience of discovering patterns of God’s activity in personal or corporate history heightens believers’ expectations and hope of God’s ability and desire to work in them, thus creating anticipation that God will continue to do so as they focus on that work.

Module One for Individuals: “Discovering Your Next Step”

The module geared toward individuals is called “Discovering Your Next Step” (DYNS) and is designed to integrate the three biblical concepts of environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems as well as lessons learned from interviewees regarding what would be helpful and how that help can be provided in a fruitful way. Specifically, regarding the kind of help, the module provides a neutral process to help individuals look at their own issues without necessarily dealing with difficulties and as such makes the presbytery’s invitation a voluntary participation. Regarding how to provide the help, the module gives members responsibility for their own process rather than their pastor or elders; and since it does not come as enforcement, it will be experienced as normative instead of punitive. The four theological foundations of depravity of humanity, community of Christ, grace, and sacrifice undergird DYNS.

Discovering Your Next Step is a day-long seminar, from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and begins with an overview of the module and how it integrates the elements of human depravity, community in Christ, grace, and sacrifice. Sessions teach on the biblical concepts of environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems and use interactive reflection and listening tools. Over the course of the morning, participants will

¹ Terry Walling, *Focused Living Resource Kit* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996). 9
reflect on three questions in their own lives, listen to one another share personal insights gained, and summarize what they learn. After lunch, they will take those summary lessons and begin to make decisions about what to do with each, in order to have several specific steps to decide about and work on over the next weeks and months. This also will involve brainstorming the people from whom they may need to seek support as they engage in their individual process of growth and self-discovery. The seminar ends with prayer. In each session throughout the day, the elements of human depravity, community in Christ, grace, and sacrifice are highlighted and woven together.

Discovering Your Next Step: Three Biblical Concepts

The three biblical concepts of environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems are shared throughout the day. Environment as understood from Mark 4 is the first and foundational concept for the entire seminar. Understanding that they are not able to cause their own growth requires participants to rely on the Holy Spirit and to trust the outcome of the day to God’s Spirit. Synergy, taken from the experience of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, is the experience of having the outcome become more than can be expected based on the participants and what they contribute. People are invited to participate in the synergistic process by sharing some of what they have been reflecting on with one other person. Groups vary from three to eight, and all are encouraged to share only what they wish, with no pressure to share anything they do not want to divulge.

The third and final Scripture lesson is true versus symptomatic problems, as seen in 1 Corinthians 1 through 15. Here, participants learn how Paul addresses both “puddle” and “cabinet” problems. This concept of true versus symptomatic problems is introduced;
however, it is not assumed that participants have true, hidden problems. People benefit from gaining personal clarity and direction with or without having uncovered hidden problems. Environment, synergy, and true versus symptomatic problems bring scriptural truths to bear on participants’ discovery process. Basically, it paves the way for their process to begin, if they are not involved yet in any beneficial self-reflection.

Discover Your Next Step: Reflection and Listening Tools

The reflection and listening tools begin with positive questions and are used extensively to enhance the environment and the synergism of the group. In this context, reflection is defined as looking back on people, circumstances, and events that had specific and positive impact on their lives; all is for the purpose of opening oneself to the work of the Holy Spirit. Listening tools are defined as a series of questions one asks regarding those people, circumstances, and events and seek to focus individual’s attention on hearing what God has been doing through them.

The reflection tools are motivated by a series of three positive questions taken from Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is an approach used by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney in *Appreciative Inquiry* to connect with the deepest and most positive parts of people and organizations in order to work for positive change. It basically asks this question: “What is going right?” rather than “What is going wrong?” AI connects with the positive elements in a given situation; by focusing attention there, it draws on positive power to alter attitudes like hopes, shared dreams, common values, personal competence, and good will within the organization. There are four basic questions asked in AI, and

---

Branson uses the same ones with his church in his book, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations.* Three versions of those same questions are used in the seminar.

Participants first are asked to reflect on what has been the most important spiritual experience, faith lesson, or step of faith that has occurred for them. Next, they are asked to “look at the best core of who they are and what they do or what activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important to them.” Finally, participants write in present tense a “stimulating sentence” that describes who they “are” five years from now or make three wishes for their future.

Using these questions as tools to get to the positive behavior in a life or church, this project seeks to open leaders and members up to the possibility of creative cultural change, the kind of change necessary to address true problems.

For each answer to these three AI questions, participants further reflect with four observations. First, they determine the people, circumstances, and events that led to this answer. Second, they contemplate what have they learned about God. Third, they ask God what else God might have been teaching or instilling in them. This observation opens the heart to the Holy Spirit. Finally, they ask themselves what holds them back from living into these lessons. After answering this information, participants practice listening by turning to their partner and sharing one lesson or insight. Listening continues after each AI question, and the table group debriefs the whole experience. These reflection and listening tools create an environment of expectation, safety, and openness.

By providing many opportunities for interaction, prayer, and feedback, opportunity is created for synergy to occur.

---


4 Ibid., 77.
Discover Your Next Step: Applying Lessons Learned

The discovery process is neutral, voluntary, and driven by the individual for the purpose of giving responsibility to members. From the title of the seminar, the questions that are asked, and the Scripture lessons that are taught, emphasis is on the individual finding God’s direction for personal life, relationships, and church experience. The program is voluntary, with introductory classes taught at presbytery leadership events and invitations extended to pastors and leaders to participate when other churches host a seminar. This member-driven process begins at the individual level, and people are invited to attend for their own edification. When members attend a seminar for individuals, they are introduced to the church version. It is clear that the church seminar is designed to occur once enough members have gone through the personal version that they feel their church would benefit as well. All participants of church events must have participated in a personal version first. Everything about the process makes it voluntary, neutral, and puts responsibility in the hands of members. Members benefit from the lessons of being neutral and voluntary as well as driven by the individual for the purpose of giving responsibility to members. Modules are directed at self-discovery, introduced at presbytery events, not imposed by policing committees, and ultimately are advocated by members in their own churches.

The entire presbytery is invited to participate in each event, so nothing is secretive or isolated. This leads to the process feeling normative and not punitive. No one will try to make someone learn what God wants to do in their lives. The process begins slowly in SDP with introductory classes at leadership training events. As members become interested, a facilitator talks with them and arranges to lead a seminar at their church. If
they make the arrangements and get the proper approvals, a more localized DYNS experience occurs. The enthusiasm of participants will be contagious, encouraging others to attend. All of these steps accomplish the recommendations of the interviewees and work towards making this process normative, voluntary, and anything but enforced.

There are four theological principles woven into the activities and intentionality of the seminar: personal and denominational depravity, community of Christ and the congregation, grace and the individual, and sacrifice and the leader. They are less explicit than the biblical concepts or lessons learned. They are not taught in the seminars but do undergird the strategy and process.

After lunch, the remainder of the afternoon involves a series of prayer times, sharing in groups, and personal reflection. Through this process, participants discover and write down things they have come to understand that in order to move forward they must surrender, hang on to, or improve. From these insights, individuals determine specific next steps in the form of decisions they need to make, work they need to do, actions they need to take, and people who might come alongside them in their process. Ultimately, this leads participants to a time of personal and prayerful surrender as they offer to God the commitments they are making that day. When the seminar is over, participants actually have discovered ways to become “unstuck” and specific next steps they need to take to move forward in their lives and with the direction God gave them throughout the day. True “cabinet” problems may have been discovered, and steps for addressing them may have been described. In any case, members will have experienced either for themselves or witnessed in others the efficacy of the process for individuals and become open to inviting others personally or as a congregation into this same process.
Everything a participant needs to share with others has been incorporated into the handout they used. Terry Walling explains that only 15 percent of participants can do what they were taught in a seminar. However, 75 percent can do what they did in a seminar. This process is designed so that participants can easily duplicate what they did with others. Therefore, there are no workbooks or facilitator manuals. The original facilitator leads from the same worksheet the participants use. Then, they are encouraged to do the same for anyone interested in learning about what their next step in life might be. At the conclusion of the individual seminar, participants will be invited to stay for a brief optional introduction to the second module, which targets churches.

**Module Two for Churches: “Discovering Your Church’s Next Step”**

The fundamental core of the discovery process is the ability of members to become responsible and empowered for their own process; and the design of Module Two, “Discovering Your Church’s Next Step” (DYCNS), takes this into account. Members of a church that have difficult, unknown, and entrenched challenges resting in the personality or actions of a pastor have an incredibly difficult and long road of discovery ahead of them. Even members of churches whose pastors are not part of the problem face an ingrained and often deep-rooted church system that can resist discovery and change, the essence of stubbornly closed “cabinets.” DYCNS takes these realities into account and assumes that members may need to work in churches whose pastors may be anywhere from apathetic to opposed to the process. The presbytery cannot impose this process upon those pastors without violating the lessons against enforcement and being punitive. For all these reasons,

---

5 Terry Walling, interview by author, San Diego, CA, June 2010.
the module for churches—like the one for individuals—relies on member responsibility and implementation. If members are able to facilitate the modules in situations where leaders offer no help, then they can be even more effective in settings that do.

Ideally, all participants will have been through the individual seminar and therefore know what to expect. They will know the importance of creating an environment sensitive to the Holy Spirit, which engages in groups for synergism, and the power of discovering and addressing true problems and not just symptomatic ones. By the time a congregation holds a church seminar many individual members will have benefited from the individual version and will have felt a sense of commonality with others. This knowledge and past positive experience can cause excitement and anticipation for the possibilities for their church. They will enter the process with optimism and hope, which ultimately will contribute to the effectiveness of the process.

The effectiveness of the church process is enhanced by two elements that differ from the individual one. The primary difference these participants will recognize quickly is that they are all working on one church together rather than many individuals all working on their own personal processes. The second difference is the way groups engage one another; in effect, the entire group has more interaction for the purpose of arriving at a common understanding of the issues facing their church and the next steps members need to take. A practical difference is that less time is given to teaching the biblical concepts since DYCNS uses the same ones as DYNS. Additionally, more time is given to group dialogue since everyone is working on the same church. With only two changes, the rest of the AI questions, reflection questions, and small group interaction are familiar to participants.
Working on the same church adds a necessary step of synthesis. This is done to move people from focusing on their own answer to an AI question to focusing on a group answer. When asked to describe a single most significant spiritual moment, the question necessarily adds “in the church.” Then, all answers are posted on a wall or table for participants to find natural groupings or patterns of answers. For example, there could be several answers related to serving in leadership and several about short-term missions, small groups, Bible studies, or family camp. These groupings become the answers on which participants will focus. Ideally, each table will have a different answer to work on, somewhere between two and six or eight, depending on the number of participants. The same process of synthesis is repeated for each of the reflection questions.

The seminar continues through the three AI questions, and ultimately the entire group is agreeing on what they as a church need to hang on to, what needs to be surrendered, and what needs to be improved. It can be powerful to have many members, elders, and pastors all in the room together determining what decisions they need to make as a church, what work they need to do, what actions they need to take, and what people might come alongside them in their process. The work of uncovering, understanding, and addressing true “cabinet” issues is not finished by the end of the church seminar; but next steps have been recognized, and a shared experience of synergy inspired by the Holy Spirit can empower a congregation towards change and a new culture in much the same way synergy propelled Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

How the group decides to move forward at the conclusion of the church seminar can be very important to how the discovery process continues and succeeds from this moment forward. Until this point, members have had responsibility for organizing,
coordinating, and giving leadership to the entire discovery process. Now, at the end of the church seminar there will be goals, objectives, next steps, and more decisions to make.

In some churches it might be natural for the pastor, elders, or staff to assume responsibility for accomplishing those next steps. While it may be helpful for staff, elders, and pastors to be more involved at this point, it is important that members maintain significant responsibility. Therefore, the conclusion of the church seminar is crucial and needs to leave the next steps in the hands of members with leader support. With grace, members can guide the process in unexpected ways that cannot be anticipated by the facilitator or designed into the seminar. For this reason, the DYCNS facilitator will guide this final conversation and conclusion while not directing or controlling the outcome.

**Module Three for the Presbytery: “Getting Unstuck”**

Elements specifically related to “cabinet” issues and conflicts are introduced in the “Getting Unstuck” seminar, which is geared for the presbytery level and entails extended resources and training. These include introductions to general, harmful, and self-preserving leadership problems as well as personality tendencies, systems theory, and conflict management. With these introductions, this one-day seminar touches on topics that may be part of a church’s newly revealed challenges. It also acquaints participants with the three key conversational skills—”Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Let Me See If I Got”—and the concepts of triangles and conflict styles. Further resources and support within the presbytery for all these topics are described and offered.

---

6 This will include mere tendencies as well as those which are discovered to be symptomatic of full-blown personality disorders.
Plans for the Discovery Process.

Core plans for the discovery process project into the next five years for San Diego Presbytery to become a community that values and empowers individual and congregational self-discovery that leads to reconciliation, spiritual growth, and personal breakthrough. A body of material will be in use, which is designed to facilitate personal and corporate self-discovery as well as the ability to stay in dialogue when faced with challenging conversations. An integrated delivery system will link the various components of the process with day-long seminars for individuals and church teams, advanced coaching certification, and website training and support.

Pastors, leaders, and members of individual congregations will be aware of and exposed to the processes for Discovering Your Next Step, Discovering Your Church’s Next Step, and Getting Unstuck seminars. A volunteer coaching team will be available to walk alongside both individuals and churches as they travel through the three steps. Coaches also will have access to an online video and print resources designed to go deeper into different areas of personal development with those whom they coach.

Church leaders and members will be empowered to effectively explore challenges and problems in healthy ways. By training both leaders and members to recognize potential conflicts, and address them before they become overwhelming, it is hoped that the presbytery will experience fewer public conflicts. When conflict is inevitable, members and leaders will have better methods for resolving them.

Churches will experience challenges as opportunities to grow in their faith and strengthen their relationships. The devastating trends of 40 to 50 percent drops in attendance and membership due to conflict now can change. Presbytery staff will be able to focus on
positive development among its congregations rather than slow recovery or painful closures of troubled churches. There is something even more important that can occur. Pastors and leaders who have potential for negative behavior, and their churches which historically and unwittingly have enhanced that behavior, can start to avoid that downward spiral or head it off before it becomes intensely problematic and harmful. Pastors and churches can be used of God to heal one another’s wounds and build one another’s strength.

When observed from a long-term perspective, people will begin to see how God has been using individuals with personal challenges to work in the lives of others, healing and growing people through one another. This is a practical demonstration of Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” As discovery becomes easier and less frightening, churches will find themselves more easily spotting challenges and even conflicts differently and hopefully with less difficulty. They are not simply “problems” but are symptoms of larger issues hidden within their church family system. Ultimately, members no longer will focus on mopping up “puddles” in their family kitchen; rather, having opened the “cabinet” and “unstuck” the clog under the sink, they will discover their real issues sooner before they become dangerous.
CHAPTER 7
IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPANSION OF STRATEGY
AND ASSESSMENT

This chapter takes the model and curriculum introduced in Chapter 6 and describes how it was implemented at RBCPC. While not a church in conflict, RBCPC does experience issues of general leadership challenges. As a church familiar and open to me as a pastor, it offers a rich environment for study. The processes and seminars were implemented over a three-year period, from 2008 to 2010. This chapter concludes with an evaluation of that implementation.

Implementation at RBCPC

In 2007 elders, pastors, and staff at Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church seemed to share the opinion that the church was thriving. However, some elders and members experienced some concern. Attendance was stable but not growing. From 2004 to 2007 the church had spent $750,000 more than it had received, although in 2007 large estate gifts balanced that deficit. Core ministries seemed to function well; but there was lack of clarity among members, elders, and staff concerning a large outreach program stalled by the city. Members loved the preaching in the church, but there were
individuals who questioned the leadership’s vision or wondered if there even was a vision. Some hints and rumors suggested that staff authority was too strong and that of elders too weak. An assessment taskforce was established by the session in 2008 to help individuals and the church search for clarity regarding God’s direction.

The taskforce began a discovery process early in 2008, which ultimately provided field testing and pilot programs for all three modules of the discovery process: Discovering Your Next Step, Discovering Your Church’s Next Step, and Getting Unstuck. RBCPC is the largest church in San Diego Presbytery and serves as an example of a congregation in the early stages of decline, with members who had begun thinking there was something wrong with church leadership but who had no way of investigating their concerns.

Using an approach that incorporated principles of Appreciative Inquiry, the church’s assessment taskforce was able to clarify present strengths in the church. It reported to session that the church had a history of stepping out in faith, citing the examples of a preschool and contemporary worship. The church already had a heart for community outreach and regularly planned for growth. Creative imagination from the assessment taskforce anticipated a future of significance but also cautioned that there were “puddle” issues that needed to be addressed. Where technical changes had been tried in the past, adaptive change seemed to be the necessary call for the future. There was confusion about a failed outreach plan and the substantial funds that were raised for it. Communication within and beyond the church was lacking. There seemed to be a sense of complacency among leadership. The roles of the senior pastor and executive pastors were unclear.

---

1 Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, *RBCPC Vision Task Force.*
These visible concerns led to opening the “cabinet” of the church and recognizing some challenges that were keeping the church stuck. There was no clear understanding of the roles of elders and senior staff. Elders had been disempowered while staff was assumed to be making decisions but did not have clear direction. Over time, the senior pastor had stepped back from day-to-day leadership. While the executive pastor led the senior staff members, they did not trust that the senior pastor agreed with the executive pastor’s direction.

All of these observations and conclusions surfaced through the collaboration of more than two hundred members, elders, staff, and pastors. The work was accomplished through nascent versions of the discovery process as well as multiple training and teaching events. Ultimately, all the work at RBCPC was formulated into the three modules described in Chapter 6. The summary of the process at RBCPC is gathered and framed through the lens of these three modules for the sake of clarity.

Individual Module: Discovering Your Next Step

When the first generation of DYNS for individuals was implemented in 2008, 185 people participated. Several different two-day seminars engaged participants in a personal reflection process that prompted them to look at their entire lives and describe people, circumstances, and events that were significant for them. This process led participants to recognize key experiences and personal drives. All of this was aimed at helping them discover their ultimate contribution in God’s kingdom as leaders in the church. Participants reported very positive results. This included a new sense of direction, renewed passion for particular themes in their lives, joy at recognizing that God had been active in their lives, and excitement at how God was shaping them for his purpose.
At the same time, participants had several critiques. Three primary issues were clarified. Many did not consider themselves leaders and too much time needed to be spent convincing them that they were. Participants also felt that discovering their “ultimate contribution” for God was bigger, more intimidating, and less immediate than what they felt they needed from a seminar designed to give them clarity about their lives. Most significant in terms of limiting factors was that the seminar was too long of a commitment for many people. This information was factored into a revised process and format that became the most current version of DYNS.

In order to address the concerns expressed by participants while still providing the benefits, DYNS was changed in several ways. First, the focus on leaders was removed. DYNS now is available for all parties interested in knowing God’s direction for them. Second, the process was changed so that participants are asked immediately to focus on key experiences and internal drives and motivations. Then they are invited to reflect on people, circumstances, and events that impacted those specific situations rather than their whole lives. This contributed to the biggest limiting factor of the seminar being two days and too long. Changing the process reduced the span of the seminar from ten or eleven hours down to six. Finally, the emphasis on “ultimate contribution” was changed to “next step.”

In a much more modest way, people are invited to discover what God might want them to do today or this week to move forward in his direction for their lives. The process becomes more about the individual journey with God rather than the destination. These changes have been tested and received very well by participants, who have expressed having received many of the same benefits of the original version without prompting any of its frustrations or limitations.
Church Module: Discovering Your Church’s Next Step

Many who participated in the DYNS seminar went on to be involved either as facilitators or participants in the church version of the same seminar in September 2009. At that event, 150 members and elders participated. That seminar led to the recognition of “puddle” problems and at least one “cabinet” issue the church needed to address. Two “puddle” issues that were recognized were a need for a clear vision from leadership to the congregation and a conclusion to concerns about the Porch Outreach program that seemed to linger for years. With both issues, the congregation felt it was not being given information and it did not seem that leadership knew where it was going. These visible problems seemed symptomatic, and those involved in the process began to sense that something else might be causing both of these concerns. This led to the recognition of a key “cabinet” issue. Elders and senior staff were unclear about their roles and their relationship to one another due to the senior pastor’s philosophy of leadership.

The pastor held the belief that in a large church it was necessary for staff to lead, make decisions, and implement them and that elders on session were a vestigial organization appropriate for smaller churches. At the same time, with regard to senior staff, the senior pastor highly valued theological reflection, relationship, and trust building and focused his time and attention of senior staff meetings towards those goals. Senior staff did not have time or direction to develop overall church direction, goals, or objectives. Therefore, senior staff did not lead as much as they managed. Elders did not lead as they were not given any opportunity to do so. It seemed to those in the process that this unrecognized “cabinet” situation was causing the “puddle” issues related to vision and the Porch. The clarity achieved on these substantial issues led to changes in
policy, budgets, staffing, and philosophy of leadership as will be demonstrated in the evaluation and preliminary response.

While keeping these positive results in mind, reflection on the process of the church seminars also raised an issue of lack of long-term ownership by members. Over two hundred members participated in the seminar. Their insights were very helpful; but practically speaking, their participation, passion, and creative energy for change ended at the completion of the seminar. They had been invited for that one purpose and experienced no more investment after that. They were sent the results and final report from the event; but if any of them felt compelled to follow through with anything they or the church had learned, none have come forward to inquire about progress.

Technical changes can be mandated from the top to address specific “puddle” problems; but the “cabinet” issues, and the system’s resistance to addressing them, require adaptive change. For this kind of lasting, transformative change to occur, more than a committee must believe in and want the discovery process to continue. At RBCPC, without continued effort on the part of one or two individuals, the entire process could have ended. In some ways, it did end without substantial, adaptive changes being implemented. Entrenched patterns are hard to change, and “cabinet” problems are not solved without intentional effort. Once the official process ended, the church’s infrastructure and system at RBCPC tended to close its “cabinet” doors, choosing to ignore or forget some of the issues it had discovered.

In order to keep lessons learned before a congregation, the process was changed so that all participants of the church module need to have participated in the personal module first. Therefore, DYNS now is a prerequisite for DYCNS. This puts the church
process in the hands of those members who have benefitted personally from the individual process and who are invested in the outcome. The church seminar does not happen until there is enough of a ground swell of interest and investment by enough members to make it happen. The process at RBCPC had been the responsibility of staff, so ownership stayed with staff. The new DYCNS, like the individual seminar, is the responsibility of members. As such, members own it and the “cabinets” cannot be closed by the staff or leadership. This is vital since the problems discovered in the process often reside with those same staff members and leaders. Lessons learned in the RBCPC process have strengthened the church module for future congregations engaging in the process.

Getting Unstuck: Extended Resource Training

This third module was practiced and introduced in a variety of formats and settings, as the skills were being learned and the delivery systems were developed. “Start With Heart” and “Master Your Own Story” were taught to senior staff and then elements of it were shared with all RBCPC staff. “Let me see if I got it?” was taught to senior staff and with eighty couples in a marriage seminar and then practiced in multiple settings.

“Start With Heart” and “Master Your Own Story”

This skills training was implemented extensively among RBCPC senior staff. In January 2010, twelve senior staff and pastors as well as the executive presbytery of SDP were led by me as RBCPC’s executive pastor in an off-site, two-day training. “Start With Heart” and “Master Your Own Story” were practiced by the group over the next several weeks in their regular directorial meetings. Later, a larger group of RBCPC staff were introduced to the program’s key. The senior pastor expresses positive results from the
experience and says, “The language of ‘my story’ has become a normal part of the language among senior staff and one of the most helpful tools for working in challenging conversations that he has learned.”

Essentially, the skills of “Start With Heart” and “Master Your Own Story” are a safe way to honestly seek to deal with conflicts that are going to be difficult and challenging. People often find themselves engaged in important dialogues where stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. The skills basically entail the ability to bring safety back into a conversation when it has been lost, to help keep one’s own perceptions clear and under control so as to be able to remain calm in difficult situations, and to clarify common purpose.

“Let Me See If I Got It?”

In March 2010 the listening skill of “Let me see if I got it?” was introduced to RBCPC staff. At RBCPC, and in other churches who participate in these modules, people face many tense situations and misunderstandings and can benefit from skills that make those times easier and less tense. Essentially, exercising “Let me see if I got it?” creates a road through the tension and provides opportunities to build trust and strengthen relationships. This listening skill demonstrates genuine respect for others, builds confidence, and fortifies personal connections. Participants develop a strong ability to truly hear and understand the other person and, in so doing, give confidence to the other person that they really care.

In the seminar, participants were paired with another person and both took turns describing the last time they participated in a large meal with friends or family. Participants

---

2 Bruce Humphrey, senior pastor of RBCPC, interview by author, San Diego, CA, 2011.
each took a turn asking, “Let me see if I got it?” and repeating what the person said about the meal. The second question, “Did I get it?” communicated a desire to be sure they understood correctly and invited correction if they did not. After repeating the description of the meal back to the speaker, listeners asked if they got it accurately, inviting the speaker to correct anything necessary. The third question, “Is there more?” communicated continuing interest, patience, and a desire to fully understand the other person. Then the fourth question was asked by listeners, “Let me see if I got it all?” and they summarized everything the speaker said, thus communicating understanding. Finishing with asking if they got it all, the listener thanked the speaker for sharing. At no time did the listener correct or interpret what the speaker said. The exercise then involved the two conversational partners switching roles.

Having a technique that offers respect to the speaker taught participants to focus positively on the issue rather than the conversation. The dialogue technique is effective, because it is easy to teach and enjoyable to implement. It was taught verbally with no materials and practiced in a group setting quickly. Once understood and practiced, it helped people listen better, knowing they would need to be able to repeat back what they had heard. It had a positive reinforcement component in that people genuinely enjoyed being heard and understood. Whether in the course of dealing with discovery issues or in life in general, people who learn to use this technique can practice it in many and varied situations.

**Triangles and Conflict Styles**

The concepts of triangles and conflict styles were used as part of a management training class for senior RBCPC staff in 2008. Then they were integrated into pastoral
counseling by me as the executive pastor. Ultimately, the language of triangles became familiar among staff.

In particular, triangles and conflict styles helped staff become aware when they were being negatively triangulated or when conflict styles were clashing. Through their new knowledge, staff started offering to be in a positive triangle with two others in order to reduce their anxiety as they worked through some issue. Conflict styles became very helpful in team conversations as team members came to understand the benefit of collaboration and could modify their own, more natural, styles when in challenging deliberations. Both triangles and conflict styles have been used in counseling settings effectively at RBCPC since this time.

**Implementation at Church Y and Church Z**

Implementation occurred only partially in Churches Y and Z, due to resistance in the case of Church Y and appropriate processing time in Church Z. In each case, the results proved useful in developing the strategic modules—DYNS, DYCNS, and Getting Unstuck—already described. Church Y had enthusiastic participants in conversations in July 2010, which addressed the issues in the Getting Unstuck module, but they were not ready to engage with either the individual or church discovery process. At Church Z, one member was introduced to the individual process at a presbytery training event in January 2011. She then coordinated an individual DYNS seminar for twenty-five individuals at her church in October 2011. Those individuals began taking action on what they learned; and it is anticipated that additional DYNS seminars will be arranged, perhaps resulting in a DYCNS seminar sometime in the future.
For both Church Y and Church Z general, harmful, and self-preserving leadership problems were introduced and discussed. The problems were described, examples were given, and tentative steps for beginning to resolve each were suggested. Participants discussed their own situations and compared notes about their experiences in light of the leadership problems. Like RBCPC, the knowledge itself was helpful. However, it became clear that having this information would not have been helpful early on in their process. This information was only helpful once problems were discovered. These conversations led to the present strategy of saving this information and the practical conflict management tools until the third module, once problems are discovered and members are ready to address them.

At Church Y, the introductory conversations and discussions of leadership problems and what would have been helpful were as far as the process progressed. While the new pastor welcomed the conversations and initial interviews, neither he nor the participants appeared to have the desire to delve into further processing of their issues. Their public conflict had been devastating and had occurred within the last few years, lasting over a protracted and difficult time. While participants were able to recognize their own situation in the descriptions of leadership problems, they were content to let others benefit from their lessons rather than pursue them more themselves. There was some interest in mild exploration of individual lessons, but none had the energy for large-scale or lengthy processes. Looking back on their situation, they felt they could identify what leadership problem their pastor had; but they could see no way that information would have been helpful, when no one was aware that there were problems. From these conversations, the present strategy is to keep the length of each individual seminar short.
enough to encourage as many people to participate as possible. Also, the process only provides the information that would be useful at that stage in an individual or church process. For this reason, leadership problems are kept until the third module.

Church Z began with conversations and interviews that included Module Three material. Unlike Church Y, there were members who were enthusiastic about moving forward with the discovery process. They felt that their public conflict only had surfaced some of the concerns. They suspected that the church had real, hidden problems that needed to be discovered. The member most interested arranged for the first module for individuals to be led at Church Z. The grassroots approach of the process requires that the participants from that module experience its benefits and begin to share them with others. They will encourage others to attend an SDP-sponsored introductory meeting and then send participants to a DYNS seminar at another church. Eventually, enough people at Church Z will have benefitted from Module One that they may begin talking about a church module. From this church’s experience the present strategy is to provide enough information to be helpful, along with options for more resources, without giving the impression that what members have received is sufficient training for them to tackle their issues without help. This in turn leads to churches developing a positive, voluntary engagement with SDP.

The Committee on Ministry conversations achieved two benefits. First, they corroborated the underlying lessons about general, harmful, and self-preserving leadership problems. One participant said, “Just having this information would help members understand that they were not ‘crazy’ for thinking their pastor might have a problem.”

---

3 Committee on Ministry, interview by author, San Diego, CA, 2009.
The second benefit came late in 2011 when the final process and strategy were introduced to the full committee. Participants began immediately to explore ways it might recommend the process to churches without it being perceived as a new directive or policing activity of the committee. Understanding that the process needed to come from elsewhere in the presbytery, COM nevertheless gave its support and encouragement.

**Summary of Implementation Steps**

The discovery process began as designed with a few elders being introduced to the process, then some members, and twenty more elders during the first year. From what they had been learning as a community, in a safe environment that expected the Holy Spirit to be active, elders and members found their voices to acknowledge issues which previously they had not been able or willing to identify. The three modules were introduced at RBCPC from 2008 until 2010. All told, almost five hundred members, elders, pastors, and staff participated in about twenty events. From February to October in 2008, DYNS was introduced three times. First, it was held with a small number of members; then, it included elders, pastors, and staff, and then 130 members. A total of 185 people participated. In the appendix is a detailed description of the implementation of the three-year discovery process for RBCPC from 2008 through 2010.

Members of each group were invited to participate as table guides for subsequent seminars. During five months in 2009, five different DYCNS seminars and follow-up meetings took place with two hundred participants and twenty facilitators. In 2010, senior staff participated in a two-day “Start With Heart” and “Master Your Own Story” seminar taught by me and were introduced to “Let me see if I got it?” Also in 2010, the first
introduction of DYNS was made at an annual training event for presbytery leaders, with thirty participants from six churches. In 2011, the first San Diego Presbytery DYNS seminar was hosted at RBCPC with twenty-five participants from three churches. In October, the second San Diego Presbytery DYNS was led at another church in the presbytery with twenty participants from four churches and ministries in the presbytery. In November, DYNS was introduced to the Committee on Ministry, who accepted it as a potential resource for churches in the presbytery and pledged to consider ways to recommend it.
CHAPTER 8
EVALUATION AND EXPANSION OF IMPLEMENTATION AND STRATEGY

This chapter evaluates the preliminary results from implementation at Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church and provides a process for introducing this strategy into the culture of San Diego Presbytery so that members, leaders, pastors, and elders are aware of and become familiar with the basics. Through annual elder training events and ongoing SDP updates, it will become clear that resources are available and that individual members need not feel isolated. Since presbyteries are connected, and other parts of the country face similar challenges, the ultimate hope is that word of mouth and active communication spread the use of this strategy throughout the denomination.

Evaluation and Preliminary Results

At RBCPC, an assessment taskforce was responsible for implementing and reporting on the personal and congregational discovery processes. The taskforce chose to create a 100-day action plan, which set goals to accomplish the recommendations that resulted from the RBCPC discovery process that occurred between 2008 and 2010. That plan, as well as the findings of the taskforce, was given to RBCPC’s session in the form
of a final report. The taskforce’s final report provided a summary of the discovery events, a list of strengths and challenges that were uncovered, and recommendations regarding both. The 100-day action plan has goals and objectives designed to respond to the major challenges from the report and offers steps needed to address them. In November 2009, the session reviewed and approved the final report of the assessment team.

Strengths and Challenges Discovered

Strengths outlined in the final report include the church’s willingness to step out in faith. While historically true, this is being exemplified in a commitment of resources and staff to a new outreach to a “next generation.” It also became clear that the church has resiliency in the face of tough times. This was demonstrated in a significant recovery ministry created after wildfires in 2007 burned four hundred homes in the community, seventy of which were member’s homes. Diversity of worship styles is another strength on which the church is prepared to build. The church embraces traditional and contemporary worship as well as a worship café; and, worship services include youth, music, and drama. It is expected that these strengths can bolster the new outreach to young families in the “next generation” ministry.

Obstacles that could hold the church back also were described as well in the final report. These are strategic issues discovered by taking an honest look at the church’s history which, if not addressed, could impede its ability to move forward. The first was the need for the role of elders and staff to be better defined. This is in relationship to leadership, implementation, and decision making in the church. Poor communication between leadership and members can hold the church back. In general, it was felt that
pastors and staff did not communicate effectively. This led to another obstacle, the lack of clear vision as well as finalization of the Porch outreach project. Members did not know what was happening with the Porch or with the money that had been contributed to it as well as not knowing what the new vision was after the Porch was shut down.

Changes that Happened as a Result of the Discovery Process

The lessons learned, problems discovered, and strengths revealed led to changes in policy, budgets, staffing, and philosophy of leadership. Policy changed, increasing the amount of interaction between elders and senior staff. Budgets changed with $140,000 being redirected toward “next generation” ministry. Staffing changed, with communication staff restructured and a “next generation” director hired. Philosophy of leadership changed, with the senior pastor no longer seeing the church as a staff-led church but rather to be elder-led and staff-run. Each of these changes represents significant movement toward addressing “puddle” and “cabinet” issues.

**RBCPC Policy Improvements**

Policy changes address both the “puddle” issue of lack of clear direction for staff as well as lack of clarity regarding the role of elders and the “cabinet” issue that the senior pastor did not believe that elders should lead the church. Elders who admitted at the beginning of the process that they did not even know who the senior staff members were or what they did now have greater access to them. This includes more formal meetings and, for the first time, a combined Christmas party in 2011. Also in 2011, session recognized and demonstrated its role of setting goals and directing staff regarding new budget priorities. Staff acted in its role of implementing leadership’s direction,
reducing their own budgets in order to add a new “next generation” initiative, when so instructed by session. The changes were accomplished amicably and have changed the dynamics of interaction between the two groups.

Previously, session and staff may have wanted to move forward on a plan but neither knew how, which often resulted in the existence of resentment between them. Now, both are accomplishing what they want in partnership and with clear roles. The need to define the role of elders has expanded to a need to clarify the roles of senior staff as well as those of executive and senior pastors. This single issue easily could have become an open conflict without this process. As it is, three elders resigned over elements of this issue. They felt that their opinions were unwelcome or that their abilities would be more appreciated and better used elsewhere. Their resignations allowed the presence of a problem to be identified while not raising it to a level of public conflict. Progress at identifying the changes was made. Clarity regarding the outreach project finally was provided, and the congregation has moved forward in healthy ways.

**RBCPC Budget and Staffing Improvements**

Regarding budget, the senior staff has turned its focus on action toward the “next generation” world and culture. Two part-time coaches have been contracted to guide this transition and now meet one on one and in team meetings with senior staff in order to increase the connection between session and staff. This already has changed the staff’s orientation towards engagement with the community. This has resulted in a strong new outreach to young families. In 2011, the session required staff to redirect $140,000 of their departmental budgets to begin implementing “next generation” ministries, as
mandated by the final report of the discovery process. This is a significant change from previous years, in which session exercised no more than a rubber-stamp approval of the $3 million budget that staff usually employed to allocate the same things year after year.

With regard to staffing, the call for communications within and outside the church has resulted in a redesigned RBCPC Communications Department. The director of Communications realigned her staff to be more accessible and responsive to members and elders. The department moved beyond managing the printing of weekly bulletins and seasonal resources to taking responsibility for connecting members to staff and leadership through newsletters, email, and web presence. In addition, the director took responsibility among senior staff to lead communication as a ministry to members in its own right and not simply as a support system for other programs and ministries. This strategy ultimately included a vastly improved website and digital posters across the campus, to more adequately communicate the many messages to which members need to have access on a regular basis. These actions ended years of complaint by ministries who felt they were treated unfairly. A secondary result is a unified campus with clear means of communicating. Recently an elder volunteered this comment, “We have the best communications staff possible.”

**RBCPC Changes in Philosophy of Leadership**

Regarding philosophy of leadership, the senior pastor has been empowered by the challenge to avoid complacency and to implement the changes necessary to address the problems discovered in the process. Where defensiveness could have occurred, he has embraced the need for change. The senior pastor and senior staff have the support of

---

1 Statement made by an elder at a RBCPC session meeting, San Diego, CA, January 2011.
elders based on the outcomes and goals in the final report. Both staff and elders are taking part in the process to clarify the roles of staff, elders, and pastors.

It is important to note that the very people involved in the potential conflicts and hidden issues participated in this discovery. This project empowered the members of RBCPC to open the congregational “cabinet.” By doing so, they have looked beyond their symptomatic “puddle” problems and have come to recognize their deeper “cabinet” issues as well. While there has been significant resolution to some of the issues, resolution is not the goal of this project; rather, the purpose has been to institute a way to uncover areas of potential conflict, begin a process for discovery, and establish healthy parameters for starting to address them.

Assessment of “Success” and Degree of Application to the Ministry Context

Success in the case of RBCPC is seen in two key areas. First, church leaders and members did not perceive the process as being about conflict management. Second, its extended time line allowed leaders, members, and staff to have real ownership of the process and outcomes. The degree of application to the ministry context is seen in its implementation at an institutional level. The potential for impact is visible in the outcomes and changes in leadership strategies. While the significance of application may have been muted by this “top down” approach, lessons learned with regard to grassroots, member responsibility will lead to better acceptance in future settings.

Perhaps the most successful and important point is that this process was not perceived by RBCPC as conflict management. The process occurred over three years with discovery of significant issues leading to substantial change and impact. However,
the process was not undertaken to solve problems but to move forward. It truly was introduced and implemented as a way to discover the church’s next step. This point is critical for working with pastors and leaders. An organization or leader can tend toward defensiveness when people complain or raise concerns about conflict. On the other hand, due to their nature rooted in Christ, churches naturally are attracted to ways to grow their members and help them become “fully devoted followers of Jesus.” The personal and corporate self-discovery processes do this for individuals and congregations. Pastors and leaders do not need to fear this process. They may be overwhelmed with their current level of activity and not particularly open to a new program, but the way it is set up helps to circumvent defensiveness. The ability to apply this project to the presbytery is clear. The elements of the project have been proven sound.

Leaders in a church might want a discovery process to take place relatively quickly, in which case the three-year time frame of the RBCPC process might seem long. However, the results are significant. When the goal is for members, staff, and leaders to grow on individual levels, improve relationships, uncover and address problems, and move forward with God’s direction, then like the seed sown by the farmer it takes time to grow. During RBCPC’s discovery process hidden “cabinet” issues were discovered, potential public conflict was avoided, and enough members and leaders became involved to bring about real change. Additionally, there are signs that the church has embraced adaptive transformation and not simply technical change. Practically speaking, a process like this will take a long time. If leaders push for fast results, they likely seek technical fixes and may be focusing on “puddle” problems without a commitment to exploring “cabinet” issues.
RBCPC is a large institution, so it approached the discovery process institutionally. As the executive pastor, I was a champion for the project and could create session and staff taskforces to implement a strategy and plan events. At RBCPC, there was clearly a desire for technical changes, although there was a sense that adaptive changes might be necessary. This is likely the way the leadership at many churches within SDP will engage the process. By definition, the “cabinet” or adaptive challenges are unrecognized, so focusing on “puddle” or technical problems is what leaders tend to do. However, by keeping the direction moving from executive pastor to elders and members, many of those people participated because they were led to do so by their leaders.

The need for member responsibility was demonstrated during the RBCPC process. At RBCPC, and possibly other churches, members generally are not able to rally large events without pastoral support or direction. While the staff-driven process at RBCPC was able to produce several large meetings and seminars with one hundred to two hundred people, it limited member ownership. Members attended but did not invest themselves beyond the specific event.

A better strategy is the member-responsibility model in the final discovery process—the strategic sequence of DYNS, DYCNS, and Getting Unstuck modules—which is already beginning to be seen in the presbytery. One or two members who are attracted to the process experience it, take it back to their church, and talk to a small group or a committee where they exert influence. They invite a few more to “taste and see” what God can do through the process (cf. Psalm 34:8). Others hear about the seminar and are attracted to the idea of personal discovery or growth, while some just follow the group. Over time, more are introduced to both DYNS and DYCNS in small numbers without any
need for leadership to direct the dynamic. In this way, the self-discovery process does not need to be threatening or interfere with already busy church calendars. The naturally occurring forward momentum of the process will encourage many smaller meetings over longer periods of time. There may come a time when it makes sense for there to be a church-wide DYCNS seminar with active leadership and member involvement. However, until that point, as long as people are being impacted, discovery is occurring and conflict is being abated, so there is no need for hurry or large events.

Ultimately, the field test at RBCPC has been successful. Even as this review is written, the reality of its outcomes is astounding. Had these issues not been uncovered and addressed, the tension among RBCPC staff, elders, and even pastors could have led to impasses and conflict in the congregation. Where the church might have been involved in staff transition, budget cuts, and large public conflict, it now is poised for real transformation. The possibility that other churches can achieve similar results is exciting.

Members of the focus Churches Y and Z have given initial feedback, as indicated in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7. As the discovery process is introduced to the presbytery, Churches Y and Z will be invited to participate. While Church Z hosted its first DYNS seminar in October 2011, by the end of 2012 both churches will have participated in at least one DYNS seminar and members will have been introduced to DYCNS. Once the churches have participated, they will be invited to take part in a survey to share their thoughts and feedback. This will be especially helpful since both gave input initially as to what they thought would have been helpful in the past. It will be informative to see how this process actually helps them now and how their opinions have changed as to what is beneficial.
Developing and Implementing the Survey

Feedback from the two focus churches proved very helpful, so a survey is being designed to elicit feedback from each congregation that participates in the strategy contained within this project. This practice was begun at the first DYNS seminar in June 2011. A one-page survey was handed out before the seminar was over, and 85 percent of the participants completed it that day.

It was learned from that initial survey that participants can respond immediately to some questions about what they found beneficial about the seminar: what could be done differently and whether or not they discovered something about themselves. However, it became clear upon deeper review that additional feedback after participants had time to work on their next steps would be helpful both to those leading the process and to the participants themselves. The goal of the project is personal or church discovery of “cabinet” issues and taking constructive steps towards addressing them. Enthusiasm on the day of an event does not always translate to follow through later on. By inviting immediate and future feedback, the process continues after the seminar and invites contact from the process team with participants.

Development of the survey will need to include both immediate and future response components. Survey development is an art as much as a science. New internet technologies have made survey taking and assessing much more accessible, but the same difficulties on how to craft effective surveys for specific and effective measurements still remain. For this reason, once the process has begun to be implemented through SDP, a presbytery team will draw on expertise from churches throughout the presbytery to work on developing the survey and the specifics it must contain for optimal usefulness.
Administering and Collecting Responses

Once developed, the survey will be administered locally during DYNS and DYCNS seminars. It also will have a remote, online component to be delivered and taken after the seminar at a time yet to be determined but likely will have six-month and one-year components. It will take several churches going through the discovery process to determine what would be an optimal time to connect with individuals and churches. This will be part of the initial seminars and feedback within the presbytery. By the end of 2012, a schedule will be adopted.

Along with the schedule will be a collection process. The local surveys taken during seminars will be done on paper and collected before participants leave. Immediately after the seminar, an initial contact will thank participants and give them an opportunity to give additional feedback online. It then will remind them that an invitation to participate in another survey in a few weeks will be delivered to them via email.

Engaging the Entire Presbytery Before Problems Arise

The discovery process has been designed within the specific leadership context of SDP, acknowledging its diverse socioeconomic and demographic context, and taking into account its heritage and theological beliefs and values. It works within the context of a presbytery that has little or no leadership authority or power over individual pastors or churches. Currently, nothing can be mandated without tremendous negative impact. Therefore, the discovery process is both voluntary and attractive.

The content is sensitive to SDP’s diverse socioeconomic and demographic context. By providing content that is self-directed in the individual components and corporately led
in the church components, the discovery process is effective at any level of education and in any cultural setting. Ultimately, the content is contextually sensitive to the heritage and theological beliefs and values of the presbytery because it is derived from the presbytery’s own Essential Tenets. ²

This process will be delivered in two ways. First, it will be done through the one-day DYNS, DYCNS, and Getting Unstuck seminars sponsored by SDP and individual churches. Eventually, trained facilitators and coaches will lead the training events throughout the year. As others participate, some will be interested enough to lead the events. There are many gifted presenters throughout the presbytery and many associate pastors with skills to teach and communicate with little outlet in their churches. These and others may find this process a chance to express themselves. I will invite such people into a mentoring relationship with me to provide an opportunity to share the training events with them and give them an opportunity to learn as they go.

The second delivery system is an online, self-led process. Like the mentoring program, this is part of a long-range plan that has yet to be implemented. Initial steps have been taken, and relationships are in place for online training to be a practical element of this process once initial implementation has taken place. The goal is to make video versions of each section of the two discovery seminars available online. The seven-hour seminars will be broken into brief sections and uploaded to a website. The sections will include specific step-by-step instructions as well as the teaching of Scripture and

theology. Participants who want to share the seminars with others at their church will be able to access the materials to supplement their facilitation.

**Engaging Members Once They Contact San Diego Presbytery**

Through annual elder training events and ongoing SDP updates, it will become clear that resources are available and that individual members need not feel isolated. The more members participate and talk with members from other churches, the more the culture of openness will spread. Once members have contacted the presbytery, they will be invited to participate in the three parts of this process: DYNS, DYCNS, and Getting Unstuck.

With respect to ongoing resources, “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Story,” and “Let me see if I got it?” are only the beginning. Resources researched for this project have a wealth of material available. While review and inclusion of these resources is beyond the scope of this project, ignoring them would be foolish and possibly an act of hubris. Two resources which readily can be included are Stephen Ministries and PeaceMaker Ministries. Stephen Ministries, courtesy of Kenneth C. Haugk, is familiar around the country and is implemented extensively within SDP.\(^3\) Multiple churches in the presbytery have hundreds of trained Stephen ministers who are familiar with the structure and philosophy of the ministry that comes alongside individuals in times of need. Introducing a similar structure in the presbytery for coming alongside churches will make the introduction easier, as it is familiar and proven effective. Additionally, calling on

those trained Stephen ministers within their own churches to come alongside members throughout this process might also be helpful.

Peacemaker Ministries, courtesy of Ken Sande,⁴ is another important national program with a strong presence in San Diego. Peacemaker directly addresses conflict resolution and can be a significant resource in the Getting Unstuck module. This identifies the reality that this discovery process is focused almost exclusively on discovery and only tangentially on addressing conflict. Resources like Peacemaker provide the skills and tools for actual resolution and includes in the overall process experts and many passionate people already involved in these ministries. This makes DYNS a partner in a larger process, helping to create a larger environment for health in anticipation of synergy taking place among all of these related ministries. The discovery process is a beginning and a framework that can incorporate these and other related, well-established programs.

---

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Open, unresolved conflict has devastated churches in the SDP and has the potential to continue doing so. In the last ten years, those churches studied which have had significant conflict have declined in membership by 44 percent as compared to a similar set of churches without conflict, which have declined in membership by 6 percent.\(^1\) Presbytery leaders admit that their response is limited primarily to cleaning up after conflict has devastated a church.

Congregations are resistant to presbytery intervention and are reluctant to recognize their own issues. Even if they know they have problems, they do not know what to do about them, sometimes for years. Whether exploding in a moment of destruction or simmering for years of quiet ruin, undiscovered problems lead to unresolved conflict. Congregations suffer. Pastors and leaders who may contribute to the trouble can become progressively worse over time, until they become yet another bleeding source of the problem.

Churches and their members owe it to themselves and their pastors to do the work of discovery. To do so, they must push past their own resistance and the resistance of their church. Since congregational systems are like family systems in that they often resist discovery and change, efforts to get directly at the problems likely will be met with opposition from committees, leaders, and even pastors. The culture of churches and the presbytery tends to protect pastors from discovery when they are part of the problem. Important concepts like confidentiality, privacy, protecting the church, and preserving

\(^1\) See Part One of this discussion for details.
ministry are vital but can be manipulated intentionally or unintentionally to avoid discovery. For all these reasons, members who think something may be wrong with the leadership of their church can be stymied, hurt, silenced, and driven off when they seek to explore their concerns.

Rather than be hurt, members can be empowered as they explore their concerns and as pastors and elders enthusiastically endorse a process that affects the church culture, resources, members, and helps to discover challenges before they become conflicts. Such an effort has been field tested in the largest church in San Diego Presbytery with substantial positive results. The strategy presented in this project avoids the primary resistance against conflict resolution by focusing on self-discovery by members and corporate discovery by congregations, instead of avoidance or management of conflicts. In the future, delivery will include personal online learning and trained facilitators. The currently tested model employs a pair of seminars for individuals and churches along with an extended learning event.

The steps of this discovery process are designed to move from personal to corporate involvement. Discovering Your Next Step helps individuals see what God is doing in their lives and recognize the next actions they need to take personally, before they begin trying to uncover what is going on in their church. Discovering Your Church’s Next Step takes members of a congregation who have been through the first seminar through the same process with their church as the focus. Using Appreciative Inquiry and an interactive approach, participants create an environment through community and soul training in which the Holy Spirit is able to work. Once members and churches have begun their discovery process, they quickly will have need of skills for dealing with
challenging situations and conversations. The extended training of Getting Unstuck seminars meets this need by teaching “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Let me see if I got it?” It also will access the large number of resources in the field of conflict management through members of SDP’s Committee on Ministry and others in the presbytery. More options for different training and resources will become available as the process expands.

The next steps already have begun. All elements of the discovery process were tested at RBCPC from 2008 to 2010. There, unknown “cabinet” issues were discovered and addressed before they could erupt into public conflict. Policy, budgets, staffing, and philosophy of leadership all have changed in response to what was discovered. The first two presbytery DYNS events were completed in 2011, and the third is scheduled for March 2012. Those first two events demonstrated the potential for attracting members from a variety of churches with different needs and concerns. Individuals came due to their own need for discovery. Pastors and ministry leaders came to see how this could work for their members and left with significant personal experiences in the process. Members and elders who attended have expressed the desire to continue inviting members to DYNS seminars and are anticipating times when their churches may be ready for DYCNS.

After that, the plan is to lead at least two DYNS seminars for SDP in 2012 and develop a website for further use by facilitators. It will be helpful to recruit one or two coaches/facilitators from participants in the seminars and then to co-lead one seminar with the facilitators. Through these relationships, one church will be sought to participate
in the first DYCNS seminar. In 2013, efforts will be made to introduce the ministry to other presbyteries and the broader Christian community.

The need for discovery of challenges in churches, before they become explosive conflicts, is needed nationwide and across denominations. Without going outside the denomination, the PCUSA has 172 other presbyteries that face the same issues. The need never has been greater for the kind of work this project offers. Traditions outside the denomination are “markets” far greater than anything this project currently can contemplate, but the potential is there and not just for conflict resolution.

This project focuses on more than conflict resolution. It is a personal and congregational process of discovering what God has in store for them and how to move into those next steps, through an environment of supportive community and soul training. The end result is an increase in faith, direction, hope, and passion. The pastors already exposed to this material are excited—not for the conflict they may avoid but for the renewed vision, clarity, and enthusiasm it can elicit in their members.

As SDP develops a culture and environment of discovery, an increasing level of positive impact can be experienced. Every healthy church that participates in the discovery process will make the ministry more attractive and safe for unhealthy churches. In the example of the elder who said there was no way her ex-pastor would have allowed anything like this, examples of healthy churches participating might encourage her members and even challenge her pastor to allow such a presbytery-wide personal growth and transformation tool to be introduced. Ultimately, the hope is that such churches can get their “cabinet” doors open, so that fewer people are hurt than would have been otherwise. The ultimate hope is that more churches and individuals will follow in this trend.
As the basis for this strategy, Jesus’ image of the farmer scattering seeds in Mark 4 is apropos. The soil with weeds and rocks is the same as the soil in the field. The seed, the good news of the gospel that falls in those weeds and rocks, is just as powerful and life-giving as that which falls in the field. The difference is the environment of that soil. The process contained within this project improves the environment of individuals, of churches, and of San Diego presbytery so that they, “like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4:20).
## APPENDIX

### “DISCOVERING YOUR NEXT STEP” SCHEDULE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Test: Test Church, RBCPC—2,200 in attendance, 1,400 worship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2008</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Discovery</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregational Discovery</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Getting Unstuck Extended Training</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2009 - 2011</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presbytery Implementation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


“Statistical Snapshot for Southeast Community Presbyterian Church.”

“Statistical Snapshot for Village Presbyterian Church.”

“Statistical Snapshot for Westminster Presbyterian Church.”


201


