



Healing Hearts • Restoring Relationships • Liberating Lives

When Conflict in the Church Hits Home

**by Janet Burns, LPC
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Janet Burns, LPC, has 31 years' experience as a ministry wife. She understands the rewards and challenges that pastors and ministry families experience. She assists her husband in the work he does with pastors and their wives through the Center for Ministry Leadership. In addition to being a staff counselor at Wellspring Christian Counseling, she also instructs counseling students at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Pastors generally have personalities conducive to loving and shepherding people. Most are proficient at walking others through conflict. *Many are equally adept at avoiding their own.* Often pastors do not feel equipped to handle conflict in the ministry, but that conflict is inevitable for church leaders.

For four years' time my husband and I worked with a total of 62 pastors in a research project, seeking to understand what it takes for them to survive and thrive in ministry. One of the realities we explored was the ongoing, persistent experience of conflict in the ministry.

Although some of the episodes below may sound vaguely familiar to your own life, they are actually composites of stories, used with permission. All names and identifiable information have been changed.

George went to plant a church fresh out of seminary in a southeastern community. There was a small group of influential business persons who formed the core group for his church plant. After 18 months of hard work, the eldest member of his leadership group asked him out to lunch. In a matter-of-fact way this man informed the pastor that he was inadequate for the task and his services were no longer needed. He received a month's severance pay. Years later, the pastor reflected: "Seminary did not prepare me to deal with the relational difficulties of ministry. Seminary could not possibly prepare someone for the rejection and betrayal I faced."



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Pastor Reese worked with “Couple X” for two- plus years, guiding them through crises with their child, financial struggles, and marital distress. The couple became disillusioned with him as he challenged them to a more Biblical lifestyle. They eventually exited the church leaving a wake of gossip and distrust. The pastor was confused and hurt, wondering if he ever wanted to put himself out for someone again. His wife knew the story first-hand and carried her husband’s silent pain. The pastor and his wife noticed that the increased stress over this experience was affecting their whole family. Pastor Reese could have echoed the sentiments of another pastor who said: “When we are in seminary, we are taught how to preach and how to exegete Scriptures. I wasn’t taught how to exegete people, nor to recognize that pastoring is dealing with the messiness of people’s lives.”

Perhaps you can relate to one pastor who said:

“I don’t know how to deal with my own or others’ emotions, so it hasn’t become part of our discipleship agenda.... I see my weaknesses reflected in the church I pastor.”

These anecdotes are all confirmed by the research of Hoge and Wenger who interviewed 963 pastors from five different denominations. In their book, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry*, they state: “The most common reason Protestant pastors leave church ministry is an experience of stressful conflict. The most interesting fact is that this conflict was not about doctrinal differences.” They further relay:

“Most notable about the main conflicts experienced by ministers who left parish ministry is their ‘everyday,’ prosaic nature. They were not doctrinal differences or inflammatory issues, but rather the day-to-day functioning of the congregation: the style of the pastor and of worship, the relationships among staff, and the handling of finances and building space.” (Pastors in Transition, p. 84)



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Here is a checklist of questions to assess your readiness to handle the next church conflict without becoming a ministry casualty:

- ✓ Think of the last major conflict you were involved in. How was the conflict resolved? In what ways were the relationships strengthened or diminished?
- ✓ Who are the trusted, spiritually mature individuals or counselors that you feel safe to unload on?
- ✓ What are the indicators you look for to discern when you are overburdening your spouse by talking about the difficult situations you face?
- ✓ How many of the following stress-busters do you utilize?
 - ✓ Are you taking a day off during each week?
 - ✓ Do you and your spouse have regular date nights?
 - ✓ Can you set aside pastoral concerns and be emotionally present when you spend time off with your mate or family?
 - ✓ Are you taking time for: Sleep? Exercise? Recreation?
 - ✓ Are you able to “unplug” from all technology without experiencing anxiety or restlessness?
 - ✓ Is “NO” a word in your vocabulary?

The ultimate question:

Is your marriage relationship and lifestyle one that you hope other couples and families in your church will adopt? What is healthy about it? What needs to change?

Do the above questions indicate your need to learn to manage conflict?

Christian therapists are trained in conflict management and are prepared to train and support you in this necessary task. They also provide you with a safe place to process the personal stress of loving difficult people.

Do the above questions indicate your need to set healthy boundaries?

Christian therapists can help you assess your need for boundaries and train you in establishing and protecting them.



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When conflicts in the church and/or the stress of your ministry demands are sapping your strength and you need Christian professionals to help you through it, Wellspring's counselors can walk alongside you, your wife, and your family.

If you are searching for a “safe place” to be in community with others who understand the unique demands of ministry, consider participating in Wellspring's care group for pastors and their spouses called "**Ministry Couples**" Care Group.

Author's Recommended Reading List:

Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger (2005: Eerdmans).

God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations by Jackson W. Carroll (2006: Eerdmans).

**Going the Distance: How To Stay Fit For A Lifetime Of Ministry* by Peter Brain. (2004: Matthias Media). (Note: This resource may prove to be a little more challenging to acquire because it is published in Australia. You can Google Matthias Media to find a contact number in the U.S. for their distributors.)

**Author's favorite resource for pastors*

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Arnold * Chesterfield * Creve Coeur * De Soto * Ferguson * Harvester
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