

Bibliographic Essay: Conflict Management

Apart from careful study of the Bible itself, the area of *conflict management* can be seen as most important for the pastor to learn about. In fact, conflict is part of the pastor's life. Research Institutes confirm what was already recognized by one's own personal experience: "Conflict is a synonym for congregation."¹ The ministry that started with good intentions out of faith, commitment, love, often ends up in frustration and despair caused by conflict. While expecting persecution and pressures from *outside* the church (cf. 2 Timothy 3:12), the pastor soon finds himself confronted with people from *inside* the church. The student is still undecided whether he should feel *encouraged* since he is not alone with his struggles or to feel *discouraged* since conflict can hardly be avoided. In any case, the issue is certainly worth studying.

Three books of excellent quality shed light on the subject. Written from different perspectives and with different goals, they complement each other neatly. In short, the first book is about peacemaking, the second more specifically about church discipline and the third provides case studies of conflicts in different congregations. The present essay will provide annotation and discussion first about each book and then conclude with a synopsis. The student aims to extract certain conclusions of practical value for his own pastoral ministry as well as to address areas that require more investigation.

¹ Hartford Institute for Religious Research about churches in the United States, in Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 9.

Alfred Poirier. *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict.*

“The Peacemaking Pastor” lays the ground and sets the goal of conflict management – godly peace in the church. Alfred Poirier is well qualified for writing this book both as an experienced senior pastor and in addition as chairman of the board for Peacemaker Ministries where he ministers to a variety of churches and gains even more experience and wisdom.² Vivid examples from his own ministry illustrate that Poirier does not shy away from conflict but really serves in the midst of it. The reader is called to follow his model and to put his teachings into practice.

The book interacts between biblical theology and its application. More precisely, the author’s premise is that “peacemaking is Christology.”³ He recalls the humanity of Jesus Christ and teaches that we should live up to this confession. Jesus has come in the flesh to live among humans and to face human conflict no less than we do today. Jesus met the conflicts with self-denying service and ultimately by way of the cross. He reconciled man to God and in this sense he was the peacemaker par excellence: “Jesus is the ground of peacemaking through his reconciling death.”⁴

Applications in the form of simple analogy such as this one at some points challenge the careful reader to think deeper. Poirier calls Jesus “the Pastor of pastors”

² Poirier refers to the useful website which is now <http://www.peacemaker.net/> (formerly <http://hispeace.org/>).

³ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26; with reference to 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 and Colossians 1:19-22.

though the church age started later at Pentecost. Jesus' service to the disciples is equalled with the pastor's service to the church. The comparison seems to be forced since Jesus' ministry (including the conflicts) centered on his person, whereas the pastor nowadays should lead to faith in Jesus, not to himself.

With this in mind the reader may deal with Poirier's choice of references. For the most part the epistles apply. (Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:3; Hebrew 12:14) In the gospels, Jesus at times instructed about peacemaking but only with reference to the later apostolic church. (e. g. Matthew 18:15-18) Other instructions do not apply to the unique nature of Jesus since he was human *but* sinless. (e. g. Matthew 5:23-24) Christology is a complex issue since Jesus is unique, and so was his earthly ministry (also compare Luke 12:14 with 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

Poirier's general point may be better understood in the short subchapter "Scripture Speaks" where he argues his case with exegesis of 2 John about the theme of divine love. The call to love one another like Christ somehow equals the call to peacemaking. This may then be taken as the overall guideline and general principle in the realms of conflict management. The student may note that the simple call to love, though essential, may not always be practical. Moreover, the biblical imperative of "love and peace" is largely misunderstood today as Rogers points out.⁵

⁵ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel* (Enumclaw: Pleasant Word, 2004), 137-142.

The strength of Poirier's book lies in the more practical teachings rooted in deeper exegetical insight he provides. Common occasions for conflict are illustrated with biblical examples, and the common responses to conflict are studied in light of related biblical teachings. The root of conflicts is found in the people's hearts, which is demonstrated by way of insight into James, chapter four. The biblical theory states that the demanding desires of our hearts cause conflicts once they become our priorities, even idols. Not following the model of Christ, we then love ourselves more than others at the cost of peace. Here it is noteworthy that Poirier wisely continues to lay the foundation of his teachings when he now refers to God's promise of grace and peace. Instead of calling the reader merely to do better (e.g. to "love"), the author preaches the transforming power of the gospel. Only God can change man's hearts. The practical step for man to take is first of all repentance.⁶

Poirier goes even so far to say that conflict is "ordained" by God since he put enmity between the sons of God and the sons of the devil.⁷ (cf. Genesis 3:15; 1 John 3:7-10) Again the student feels that the author's application of Scripture overshoots the mark. Enmity between light and darkness may not be confused with conflict among the people of light in the church. Moreover, the author here touches the difficult issue of God's sovereignty in relation to man's responsibility. If the root of

⁶ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 63ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75ff.

conflict lies in man's heart, does God predestine his will in order to cause conflict? Poirier simply equals conflict with suffering. (cf. Hebrews 12:7-14; Romans 5:3-4; James 1:2-3) He writes as a pastor, not as a professor of biblical theology.

The author's explicit goal was to provide a book about conflict theory that is, in contrast to the secular models, "theologically rooted and ecclesiastically integrated."⁸ After his outline about the nature of conflict and its God-dimension, Poirier finally reminds the reader that church conflict relates to the whole church, which is the family of God.⁹ Conflict in the church is 'family conflict' among brothers and sisters. The theology of sonship is a foundational element of Poirier's biblical conflict theory. At length he grounds this aspect in the teachings of the Bible and so prepares the way for the Christian practice of how to respond to conflict.

To some extent based on all those foregoing theological considerations Poirier next provides practical guidelines for peacemaking.¹⁰ He presents the "Seven A's of Confession" and the practice of "Overlooking an Offense" in light of its seriousness. Biblical forgiveness practically includes four concrete key promises. It should be offered but it also needs to be received. Peacemaking includes all parties involved. This important ecclesiastical aspect of conflict theory is further taught with the

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 90ff.

¹⁰ Ibid., 112f..

concept of interest-based negotiation. Whereas personal conflicts are solved by confession and forgiveness, peace over material issues requires consensus. Again, Poirier provides a valuable practical guide with his PAUSE principle. His teachings are saturated with Scripture, always with the model of Christ in mind.

Poirier's point that Christ is the mediator par excellence reminds the reader of his introductory premise. Also Paul wrote his letters as mediator and peacemaker to the churches in conflict. Much can be learned by reading the epistles from this new perspective. Poirier concludes and emphasizes that mediation as well as arbitration and church discipline are divine mandates of the church. The same burden of emphasis feels Roger in his book that concentrates on church discipline.¹¹

Overall the book is a valuable source for concrete help in conflict situations written from a biblical perspective.¹² Some theological weaknesses may be mended by the professor but they are minor for the pastor. What Poirier says about church discipline is studied by Rogers even more thoroughly. What the book does not include is the aspect of real-life group dynamics, something which Becker provides.¹³

¹¹ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, esp. chapters 4, 5 and 6.

¹² With frequent reference to Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Poirier also recommends Ken Sande and Ted Kober, *Guiding People through Conflict* (Billings: Peacemaker Ministries, 1998) and the *Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation*; see Internet <<http://www.ccef.org/>>.

¹³ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999).

Ronnie W. Rogers. *Undermining the Gospel: The Case for Church Discipline*.

The lack of church discipline is beyond doubt one of the common pitfalls of the church today, and the widespread practice of disobedience in this regard is what Rogers criticizes from the outset of his book. The author is pastor of an apparently rather healthy church. His predecessor practiced church discipline under great cost, and Rogers took the ministry over in the same spirit.¹⁴ Like Poirier, he writes about his own practice; his teachings are based on experience and illustrated by examples.

Rogers is well aware of the fact that in his endeavour to promote church discipline he stands rather alone. In his own vivid words, books on the subject “are as sparse as ducks in the desert”, and a meeting with like-minded pastors “could be held in a phone booth.”¹⁵ He states as a factual reality “that the church where you presently serve is probably not practicing church discipline.”¹⁶ It follows that his instructions are not that much about the concept of church discipline itself as they are first of all about its necessity. Common misconceptions about church ministry are exposed, e.g. deceptive goals of short-term benefits like numerical growth. In the long run, “church discipline is essential for the church to be the church.”¹⁷ Throughout the book Rogers warns the reader in the spirit of seriousness and urgency.

¹⁴ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 173.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

Whereas Poirier proclaimed *peace* as the ultimate goal of conflict management, Rogers sets forth *liberation* as the goal in the realms of discipline. “Liberty is the true end of all biblical discipline. Hell is reserved for those who refused discipline.”¹⁸ Eventually, God will establish both peace and liberty in heaven. Until then, the believer is called to be a peacemaker liberated by discipline. If parental discipline, self-discipline and governmental discipline failed, church discipline becomes necessary before God himself interacts. The moral decay of society makes church discipline even more necessary for the believing community today.

The reader feels comforted by the truth that our depraved society will be taken away and replaced by a new creation of peace and liberty. The idea sometimes shines through but is not a main issue addressed. Rogers’ book is not eschatological but for practical ministry here on earth. The five reasons for church discipline illustrate this point. Discipline is for redemption, correction, protection, purification and justice.¹⁹ The matter of justice points to the day of the Lord, but only insofar as it serves as an exclamation mark behind the preceding reasons. In the final analysis, justice prevails. The individual as well as the whole church is called to prepare for this day.

Strong emphasis is laid upon the doctrine of man’s responsibility. Whereas secular psychology postulates that man is not self- but “other-determined” and

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49-86, esp. 83.

“dysfunctional” rather than sinful, the biblical model sees man in the image of God, created with a free will and therefore fully responsible for his own sinful actions.²⁰

The book here touches the difficult topic of predestination and free will. Rogers indicates that extreme Calvinism is misleading. For further investigation and a more balanced view, careful study of the works of Calvin and Luther may help at this point.

Rogers writes about the practice of church discipline, not doctrinal theology.

Even so the roots of his teachings are certainly biblical. He argues his case with many theological points. Above all stands the Great Commission, in particular Matthew 28:20a: “...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Western society may understand the phrase only on the intellectual level, but surely Jesus expects obedience of the commands to teach. Unfortunately, discipleship today is largely conceived as mere scholarship. Reversely, biblical scholarship often misunderstands Scripture. Thus beside the Great Commission, Rogers provides exegesis of the most common passages that are misinterpreted against discipline. Most serious is the distorted understanding of God’s love. Discipline, including church discipline, is part of God’s fatherly love, not an expression of hatred.²¹

Rogers next refutes the practical reasons against church discipline, before he sets forth the positive arguments, both biblical and practical. Here the book often

²⁰ Ibid., 62-73.

²¹ Ibid., 137-142.

harks back to the themes already introduced, a weak point in regard to structure. Rogers apparently feels the burden of proof for the validity and significance of his subject. The student sadly agrees that such intense reasoning is indeed necessary, since the church today lacks sense and understanding of many issues like purity, holiness and the seriousness of sin. The studies of Becker, though not explicitly, provide useful insight into present-day church life even in this regard.²²

Finally, from page 241, Rogers deals with the practice of church discipline, and now the reader feels committed to follow at all costs. Vital precondition is the biblical attitude of the church, or else “what God designed to be a beautiful act of selfless love is transformed into an ugly act of power.”²³ Rogers’ words are best understood as a call for caution, and in the student’s view this call is not clear enough. The danger of what some have labelled “spiritual abuse” is real and its practice not at all rare.²⁴ Rogers says “I have experienced time after time when the chairman of the deacons or pastor would stand before the flock of God sharing with tears the sin of a wayward brother or sister.”²⁵ Honestly, the student’s experience was different. Such practice may promote the hypocrisy that Rogers intends to expel.

²² Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*.

²³ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 241.

²⁴ Cf. David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minnesota: Bethany House, 1991).

²⁵ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 244.

If genuine, the biblical attitude of grief, humility, love and forgiveness has grown as the fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22), which takes time and, more significantly, God's heart-changing grace. The student here refers to Poirier's teaching of the transforming power of the gospel²⁶, an aspect that is overall missing in Rogers' book. Man's responsibility notwithstanding, God reigns over all conflicts and church discipline. Moreover, what is relevant for those in leadership also applies to the whole church and even the wayward. Church life is complex.

Thus Rogers' teachings in theory should be practiced with caution, a realistic view of (Christian) humanity and utter dependency upon God. Becker adds to it with her case study of real-life in churches and so provides a realistic view.²⁷ The lack of church discipline has led to the poor spiritual state of Christianity, which certainly speaks for its re-implementation. Yet the state of the church has to be considered, which Rogers actually tries but fails to do sufficiently. Paul addresses his church in Galatia as "my dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." (Galatians 4:19) In this process, as Poirier put it, "promise precedes commandment."²⁸ Is the church we serve ready for discipline or does it still need to understand the nature of God's promise?

²⁶ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 63ff.

²⁷ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*.

²⁸ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 66f.

Rogers closes his book with exegesis of the biblical core teachings about church discipline and useful discussion of its many practical aspects. This last part of the work is of the highest value for the reader who takes the call serious.²⁹ Not addressed is the moral and legal question of confidentiality.³⁰ What if the wayward voluntarily confesses just before you start the process of church discipline, asking you for confidentiality, and then slides back again and again? Another frequent case is when the pastor himself is the candidate for church discipline. Who is to start the process and how? And, even more importantly, who continues with his ministry? According to research almost half of the pastors are supposed to resign.³¹

Overall, however, Rogers' encouraging example shows that the church which practices church discipline is no utopia. The appendix is an exceptional highlight and encouragement to read – "A True Story of How a Church's Willingness to Practice Church Discipline Resulted in Restoration and Rejoicing." The reader is moved and feels challenged to follow the presented model of church ministry.

²⁹ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 279-367.

³⁰ Alan D. Ingalls, "Legal And Biblical Issues In Pastoral Confidentiality," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 6 (Fall 2002): 81-100.

³¹ Cf. Jim Showers, "Can Fallen Pastors Be Restored?," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 5 (Fall 2001): 99-122.

Penny Edgell Becker. *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life.*

Penny Edgell Becker is not a theologian but a social scientist interested in America's congregational religious life. She inspects the group dynamics of conflict in congregations from a healthy distance without emotions or bias concerning aspects like holiness and purity. She discusses church life as it is and not as it should be. She groups the churches she investigated into four cultural models (plus the "transitional") and describes and compares them in regard to conflict issues.³² Unfortunately, Becker does not include the churches of Poirier and Rogers in her studies. It would be interesting to read what the members of these churches report about their conflicts. Not surprisingly, it appears that the churches studied are far away from the theological standards set by the two preceding authors.

Becker emphasizes that she started her investigation with the common approaches in mind but concluded with a different one. She compared the churches in and around Oak Park near Chicago and found that they can be distinguished along certain characteristics (or "core tasks").³³ One obvious limitation is the socio-geographical setting of her studies. Despite diversity, life in Oak Park does not represent life outside the Western society. Besides, the number of 23 chosen congregations might not even be enough to represent the whole range of American

³² Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

church life. However, as far as it goes, Becker's study of reality is certainly valuable and complementary to the more theoretical books discussed above.³⁴

Interestingly, Becker shows that lack of conflict is not always the result of peacemaking but often just the consequence of low participation and involvement, as in the "house of worship" churches.³⁵ In other words, as counsellors also teach about family and marital life, conflict is still better than mere silence. Whereas conflict signals care, silence signals indifference. From this we gain a better understanding of the nature of biblical peace and besides a positive attitude towards conflict. It is not the lack of conflict that is to be desired but the peaceful outcome of it.

"House of worship" church characteristics are individualism and anonymity, contrary to fellowship in support of teachings like Matthew 18:15-17. Thus in light of the other books the question may be raised to what extent they still can be designated as a church, since "church discipline is essential for the church to be the church."³⁶ The apparent disobedience in this respect has now even become manifest in its own culture called "house of worship". Rogers may regard them as the collecting basin for the disobedient. Becker, as mentioned, is reluctant to address the theological issues, but the Christian reader does well not to suppress his discomfort.

³⁴ Becker carefully narrows the scope of her studies and also provides an outlook in her last chapter; Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 206-232.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-75, esp. 72.

³⁶ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 20.

Positively, what can be learned from the “house of worship” churches is that, comparing to the other models, everyone is certainly welcomed here. In comparison, “family” congregations have difficulties to open up for newcomers in fear of change³⁷, at worst in disobedience of the Great Commission. Certainly fostered in these churches is Poirier’s emphasis on the theology of sonship. The church is the family of God, and this is exactly how these churches see themselves. Thus in conflict the members naturally treat each other as brothers and sisters.

What is seen as a good point in times of conflict actually can also trigger conflict in times of peace, since members are easily hurt on the personal level due to the close relationships.³⁸ The parties then need to step back from their emotional ties for conflict solution with the help of Poirier’s tools. Interest-based negotiation might be especially useful for understanding those who feel some kind of ownership of the congregation. Besides, preaching Jesus’ ownership of *his* people and *his* interests in *his* church may further contribute to peace.

The position of the pastor in “family” congregations appears to be significant.

To cite Becker,

One feature of congregational life that directly affects conflict is the role of the pastor and the religious authority that inheres in the pastorate. The pastor in the family congregation is either an outsider or a beloved “member of the family.”

³⁷ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 77-99, esp. 93f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

The former is more common...³⁹

Thus new pastors who serve in a close-knit familial church have a difficult ministry to bear. They hardly become part of the family. On the other hand, the long-term pastor perceived and loved as the father of the family contributes much to peace. In one family congregation the pastor served for more than twenty years, and this church reported “no conflict” even in times of change.⁴⁰ Obviously it makes a difference to be outside or inside the group. The common practice of “hiring and firing” pastors may be questioned at this point. Jesus did not leave his disciples to choose others, and Paul did not hand over his churches to another apostle but only to elders he taught and appointed himself. (cf. Acts 20:17ff; 2 Timothy 4:1ff.)

“Community” congregations focus on inclusiveness. In times of conflict, peacemaking is understood to be process- but not goal-oriented, with an inclusive attitude and with the needs of all members in mind.⁴¹ These churches value tolerance and democracy. Even by way of definition this cultural model tends to oppose the practice of church discipline which may eventually lead to *exclusion*, not *inclusion*. Becker reports debates about homosexuality and sexual immorality, obvious cases for church discipline. (1 Corinthians 5:1-13) Again, the student feels some discomfort

³⁹ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁴¹ Ibid., 101-124, esp. 119.

and questions the whole approach in light of the Bible. Discipleship should not be the result of a democratic process but based on true pastoral ministry. Sometimes Becker's records are good to read but hard to digest.

Different from the other models, the strong position of the pastor in "leader" congregations helps him to serve as a peacemaker in conflict situations.⁴² The reader is reminded of the long-term pastor in the one "family" church mentioned above. Moreover, and in contrast to the "community" churches, the peacemaking process is more goal- than process-oriented. While the process is certainly seen as important, in agreement with Poirier⁴³, goals like preserving basic doctrine are of higher value than meeting all the members' expectations. The teachings of the Bible surpass the teachings of man. Rogers showed that heresy calls for discipline. (1 Timothy 1:18-20) The student agrees and openly admits his sympathy for the leaders.

Negatively, the "leader"-pastor may fail to address the real needs of his flock. Pride may ensnare him towards wrong conduct or doctrine, and there is no correction apart from humble repentance. The higher his position, the deeper he may fall. Authority and distance may conceal the pastor's wrongs. The "family" aspect of church life as a whole is missing, so in result Poirier's theology of sonship is not practiced. Much is about power and control, contrary to the message of the cross.

⁴² Ibid., 126-148, esp. 139 and 147.

⁴³ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 211.

Of the highest value is Becker's conclusion that the most severe conflicts appear in "mixed" congregations as a result of transition between one religious church culture to another, usually caused by gradual transition in membership.⁴⁴ Opposing needs, opinions and interests often lead to schism, which may be avoided by way of interest-based negotiation. This in fact is useful insight for practical ministry for those who find themselves in similar situations. Just as the encounter with other ethnic groups inevitably brings about culture shock, religious cultural differences in the church inevitably cause trouble. This point is alone worth the price of the book.

Overall, Becker's work is an interesting source for studying church life as it appears to be in various churches today, but in this sense it is in many ways also a sad documentation of the poor spiritual state of the contemporary church. Much can be learned about social conflicts and group dynamics, but the reader should not miss to keep in mind the biblical model in comparison with the presented ones.

⁴⁴ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 159ff.

Synopsis of Poirier, Rogers and Becker. Conflict Management in Theory and Praxis: Conclusions for Pastoral Ministry.

The student finds himself in the ideal position to start from the beginning with his pastoral ministry. Just half a year ago we started church planting, so now we are a group of about ten people attending our church service on Sundays. In expectation of conflict, what can we learn from the books discussed above?

To start with Becker's book, which cultural model describes our present situation, and, more importantly, which one is to be preferred? We saw above that each model has its strengths and weaknesses. Can we draw practical conclusions? Presently, we are a group of close friends meeting at our home, thus we may likely be classified as a "family" congregation. Honestly, from my understanding of Scripture, this model best qualifies as being the biblical one. The important theology of sonship, as Poirier emphasizes⁴⁵, in the long run asks for familial intimacy.

On the other hand, the strong point of close relationships at the same time may become our weak point in regard to newcomers. Indeed, we prefer 'one on one' growth, just as Becker reports about the "family" churches.⁴⁶ But isn't this the nature of discipleship, spending time with individual people and teaching them just as Jesus did with his apostles? Churches measure their success in terms of numerical growth,

⁴⁵ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 92-111.

⁴⁶ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 99.

as Rogers rightly criticizes.⁴⁷ Jesus was not interested in numbers but in individuals.

Indeed he fled when the mass chased him out of wrong motives. (cf. John 6:15)

Another important point to note is the crucial position of the pastor. From the biblical perspective, pastors are appointed to make disciples but not to leave them. Where is the father who abandons his family to take care of a new one? Where is the shepherd who leaves his flock for other business? The student disagrees with the common opinion and practice that pastors may easily change their place of ministry. Our own goal is church planting and church growth of the one church we now serve. At the point of retirement or death, the leadership ideally has made other disciples who can take the ministry over. Sadly, today churches commonly call a stranger who manages the flock just like the hired hand. (cf. John 10:13) This in effect results in conflict, both because of natural distrust and also because of cultural differences. Becker's studies repeatedly illustrate this point.

Both Poirier and Rogers seem to have a rather strong position in their churches. One of Poirier's key teachings is about the role of the pastor, starting with his emphasis that Jesus came in the flesh to take part in humanity. Likewise, the pastor has to take part in the people's lives.⁴⁸ This becomes rather impossible in cases where the appointed pastor is a stranger who does not really know his flock. How can he

⁴⁷ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Undermining the Gospel*, 166-175.

⁴⁸ Alfred Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor*, 21.

even practice church discipline, possibly to the point of *excommunication*, if he himself is not part of the family, *inside* the church? The same problem appears when large numbers of newcomers attend the church and form their own cultural group. Some peacemaking tools may help, but relationship takes priority, in my view.

Apart from church planting, the student goes along with two traditional churches that currently undergo deep conflict. These two churches have a problem in leadership. One has dismissed her pastor who did not fulfill the member's needs. The other belongs to a denomination that does not employ pastors but is led by lay preachers, and the preacher of this church passed away. Both churches have difficulties to accept new preachers or leaders, since they come from outside the close-knit community. And both churches, due to decrease in membership, undergo crisis in terms of cultural transition from a rather closed to a more open congregation. Finally, potential church ministry is greatly hindered by the presence of carnal Christians in leadership.

Study of the three books discussed greatly contributes to a good understanding of the situation of these two churches. Becker shows that conflict grows out of cultural aspects and different needs or interests, the latter also taught by Poirier. Rogers recalls that church discipline preserves the church and protects, for example, from the damaging influence of carnal Christians. At the same time he implicitly admits that the current state of the church has not left much to be preserved. In other

words, in these real and concrete church life situations described above, how can the student practically minister to help and prevent the decline of the churches? My own personal case study painfully exposes the practical limitations of the books. Sadly, application is largely confined to the ministry in our own church we planted.

We know that we will undergo conflict and crisis. Next will be, for example, the movement from our warm and personal home setting to a more public place. This will bring transition from a more intimate to a more open atmosphere. Newcomers will challenge the members with their own needs and interests. Now we are well prepared, since Poirier has presented practical tools and Rogers has reminded us of the importance of discipline. By God's grace the church will grow and remain.

Overall, the conclusion must be highlighted that the pastor makes the difference, both his position and his attitude. To him the books written by Poirier and Rogers are addressed. It is the pastor's task to pass this down to his flock faithfully. Leaders will support him, and God will bless the church according to his promise. Nonetheless, the question about the global church remains: where are the faithful (lay) leaders who are not only committed and involved (for their own interests) but also biblical, self-denied, and supportive of their pastor's ministry in service of the whole church?

It is the pastor's opportunity and responsibility to labour in making disciples among his own entrusted flock. Beyond that, time has already come "when men will

not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

(2 Timothy 4:3) Becker soberly reports what was prophesied in the past: “Selecting a pastor is seen by many in lay leadership as an opportunity to symbolize the congregation as a whole.”⁴⁹ In such a system, who is in charge of conflict management? God’s comfort and hope in the gospel of grace remains, and so the pastor shall put his faith in Him who will surely bring peace, liberty and purity.

⁴⁹ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, 190.

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