

MAKING THE MOST OF THE “CONFLICT CHECKUP” SURVEY

Introduction

Doctors examine patients to detect melanomas before they become life threatening. They seek to make skin cancer a talked about subject and encourage a regime of regular checkups. This survey takes a similar approach. Conflict between Christians needs to be talked about because it is a real issue for every church and every Christian organisation. Regular checkups are needed so that the symptoms of conflict are identified before they become divisive and destructive. This survey seeks to begin this process by seeking to achieve three objectives:

- (a) provide early identification of the extent of existing conflict within a congregation.
- (b) give some indication of the preparedness of a congregation for handling conflict issues
- (c) give some indication of particular conflict issues

How to administer the survey

The survey could be given to a sample of a congregation but it is better if the whole congregation participates. Be wary of collecting a biased sample. For example it is better to ask parishioners to complete the survey during a normal service rather than a church business meeting where only the “inner circle” may be present. If there is more than one congregation ensure that all have opportunity to participate. (You may wish to keep the results from each congregation separate) Allow church leaders and pastors to complete the survey but it is best to keep their responses separate from the rest.

Caution: If there is already a high level of conflict in your church or Christian organization there is a risk that a survey like this could make the problem worse. For example, people previously unaware of the problem could suddenly become involved. Before administering the survey it may be helpful to talk to some of the key players in the conflict and gauge their reaction before proceeding.

Give people adequate warning that the survey is going to take place. This could be a written notice in the church bulletin as well as a spoken announcement in services the week before. Explain that the survey is being carried out as a “health checkup” rather than an indication that there is a problem. An ideal time is after a service in which there has been teaching on the issue of conflict between Christians. Keep discussion about the survey light – humour helps to decrease the tension that often surrounds the topic of conflict.

Ensure that adequate time is allowed – ten minutes will be sufficient for most people. Have sufficient pencils/pens available for distribution. It helps if people are free to leave when they have completed their answers rather than having to wait for everyone to finish. Give clear instructions about what people are to do with their completed sheet e.g. push it through a slot in a large closed cardboard box.

Give clear instructions about how to complete the survey. You may need to define some terms e.g. what is meant by “lay leaders” in relation to your congregation.

Assure participants that their answers are confidential and ask them not to identify themselves by writing their name on the survey sheet. Be sure to thank them warmly and assure them that their responses will make a valuable contribution to the ongoing life and health of the church family. You may wish to reward participants by, for example, attaching a wrapped sweet to each survey form.

People love to see how their views compare to others. Unless there is a good reason not to, make a summary of the results available to those who participated in the survey. Make sure there is nothing in the report that could identify individuals. Transparency about the results shows parishioners that the church leaders have integrity and are willing to face issues, even if the survey results identify some “negatives”.

How to interpret and respond to the results

As a minimum church leaders and pastors should have full access to the survey results. It is helpful to meet together to discuss the results as a single topic rather than squeeze the discussion into another agenda.

If you are looking for a quick indication of whether or not your church has a problem with conflict look at the results of questions 3 and 6.

CHURCH POLICY ON CONFLICT ISSUES (Question 1)

If your church doesn't have a written policy for dealing with conflict/grievances this will be apparent. A generic policy prepared by *Alongside Ministries* is available from the *Resources* page of www.alongsideminstries.com.au

If you already have a written policy responses to this question will indicate if people are aware of its existence and committed to following its principles. If they are not, you have some obvious homework to do.

THE RESPONSE OF PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS TO CONFLICT (Question 2)

This question measures the perception of parishioners regarding the way in which pastors and church leaders respond to conflict. If most of the responses are "generally true" you may pat each other on the back. If there are a significant number of "generally not true" responses there are obviously some issues to address. Compare the results of the "pastors and church leaders" group with that of the congregation(s). Look for possible explanations to explain significant differences. For example, if leaders and pastors think they promptly deal with conflict but the congregation disagrees there could be several explanations. There could be a communication issue i.e. leaders do deal with conflict promptly but the congregation is not aware of it. Or it may be that the understanding of "promptly" is different for both groups.

THE NATURE AND LEVEL OF CONFLICT (Questions 3-5)

Question 3 will provide you with a quick indicator of whether or not there are significant issues of conflict within your congregation. If there is a problem, Question 4 will help you to identify the individuals or groups perceived to be in conflict. This will give you a starting point in dealing with real conflict if it exists.

Question 5 seeks to identify issues over which there is perceived to be conflict. Issues which stand out may need to be investigated further. Some issues, such as communication, may be solved relatively easily. Conflicting personality issues may be addressed with the aid of instruments such as the "Leadership Style Questionnaire" written by Rev Dr John Sweetman and available through *Alongside Ministries*. Some issues of conflict are complex and difficult to deal with. Patience and prayer are essential. You may need to call upon outside help from within your denomination or from specialist agencies.

Question 6 is included to give a quick indicator of high levels of conflict. If there are a significant number of ticks in the "agree" column you may have a serious problem that needs to be addressed quickly.

PREACHING AND TEACHING ON CONFLICT (Questions 7-8)

Questions 7 and 8 will indicate whether or not people feel that they are receiving sufficient teaching on the topic of conflict. If you feel there is a need for more teaching, sermon outlines and resources are available from *Alongside Ministries*. A guest preacher may have more freedom to speak than a local pastor.

MY PERSONAL PROFILE

It may be helpful to divide the response sheets into groups by gender, age and time of participation in the church. Look for patterns e.g. Does one particular age group see that there is an issue with worship style.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:18