AOSIS

Observing systemic conflict: The emotional affect on pastors in the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa

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The Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA) did not escape this existential crisis of conflict. It manifests in various ways resulting in the bleeding of congregations, the exodus of congregants and the closure of congregations, as many congregants that declare themselves as members of the Church do not attend worship services or participate in the Holy Communion and exit the church. The study was conducted in the NRCA to determine the effect and response formation of observed conflict by ministers in their respective congregations. The results of the study indicate that pastors and/or ministers do suffer emotional trauma because of the conflict in the congregation which, according to their own statements results in a loss of role performance. We provide an overview of the problem statement and methodology of the study. We discuss an abbreviated, theoretical perspective on conflict as a social phenomenon. We present the findings of our study and conclude with an abbreviated process to equip pastors with the necessary emotional maturity and self-management.

Contribution: This study uncovers emotional trauma experienced by ministers, affecting their role performance. We offer a succinct problem statement, research methodology, and propose a scientifically informed process to enhance ministers' emotional resilience within the NRCA.

Keywords: well-being; conflict; congregation; emotions; change; behaviour; systems thinking; competencies.

Introduction

The publication of Wim Dreyer's 'Praktiese Ekklesiologie' (2016) is stimulating and provocative specifically in its global perspective regarding the crises of the churches within the Reformed tradition as well as the situation in South Africa.

This article, presented here as part of the dedication to Wim Dreyer, is based on a study of a project team of which the authors were part. The study was conducted in the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA) to determine the effect and response formation of observed conflict experienced by ministers in their respective congregations.

As will be pointed out later in this article, the results of the aforementioned study in the NRCA indicate that pastors and/or ministers[1] do suffer emotional trauma as a result of the conflict in the congregation that, according to their own statements, results in a loss of role performance. They also observe negative effects within the congregation itself, thereby accentuating the crises in the church.

We commence this article with an overview of the study that investigated conflict as one of the crises in the NRCA. We provide an overview of the problem statement and methodology of the study. This is followed by a short and eclectic overview of a systems perspective based on Dreyer's 2016 publication as mentioned above. In the following section, we discuss an abbreviated, theoretical perspective on conflict as a social phenomenon. Lastly, we present the findings of our study and conclude with an abbreviated process to equip pastors with the necessary emotional maturity and self-management.

1.The concepts pastors and minister will be used interchangeably.

Note: Special Collection: Wim Dreyer Dedication, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

The church in crises

Crises are an existential reality in the church, specifically, according to our study, specifically related to negative emotional effect on ministers.

The NRCA[2] did not escape this existential crisis of conflict. It manifests in various ways resulting in the bleeding out of congregations, the exodus of congregants and the closure of congregations, while many congregants that declare themselves as members of the church do not attend worship services or participate in the Holy Communion and exit the church because of conflict in the congregation, according to the results of our study.

Wim Dreyer (2016:5) refers to the crisis of and in the church, that has '… deepened since the beginning of the 21st [c]entury'. He is, however, not convinced that the crises can superficially be described as the crises of secularisation. In his own words: 'It is clear that the church crisis should not be attributed primarily to external factors, but inherent systemic problems'.

This sentence alone reflects his thoughts as predisposed to systems thinking. Kinnaman and Lyons (2007:11) argues that 'Christianity has an image problem'. He also refers to systemic problems such as 'institutionalism', 'materialism' and 'sexual maleficence'. We would like to add conflict as a further factor that contributes to the image problem, specifically when conflict immobilises the functioning of pastors and paralyses the congregation. All the above contribute to the dysfunctional nature of the empirical church, which starkly contrasts with the calling and the being of the ideal church.

The church as a living and dynamic organisation can be described as living system. *Systems* are dynamic in nature and the different functions in the church cannot be separated as if these do not have an influence on the system as a whole. The church represents a whole and integrated systemic phenomenon. Three concepts act reciprocally: 'ecclesiology' as a theological discipline, 'comprehension of the church' [*kerkbegrip*] 'and being church', which refers to the empirical church that manifests in a denomination and various congregations. 'Being church' is a reflexive activity to comprehend and discern what the church is (being) and not primarily what the church does. The question regarding the life of the church accentuates congregations as empirical phenomena within the denomination in a concrete historical situation.

When the church is viewed from a dynamic-systemic perspective new perspectives are formed *vis-à-vis* the institutional perspective. Although there are various juxtaposed concepts, three are selected for the purpose of this article: relationship,[3] forgiving and grace. Conflict undermines these perspectives especially when conflict between congregants immobilises the pastors in their functioning. The assumption is that the pastor functions from the baseline of the calling to serve the congregation with the gospel that seeks relationships between congregants and God, to live a life of forgiving and reconciliation based on the certitude of the forgiveness by Christ and demonstrating grace towards each other.

Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021:7) pose the following question: What is the relationship between the quality of church life and exodus of congregants?[4] Stressors such as time constraints (or poor time management) and financial survival place the relationships in the church as a family under duress. We would like to add conflict in the church as a contributor to the dysfunctionality of the minister and eventually the flattening of congregational life or a loss of quality of congregational life.

The psycho-emotional health of ministers reflects that only 30% of ministers are happy in their role in ministry. This is ascribed to high workload, unrealistic role expectations, demotivated clergy and demanding congregants.

Research purpose and objectives

This article provides a condensed version and perspective on the type of study that was conducted in the NRCA. The Committee responsible for the well-being of ministers of the NRCA became aware that ministers become emotionally and functionally stuck because of certain phenomena in congregations including, but not limited to, conflict. This awareness prompted the study to determine whether this awareness was accurate or perhaps a predisposed observation. The committee decided to launch a study to determine the effects of conflict in emotional and functional terms in the life of ministers when observing (thus being confronted with) conflict between congregants.

Aims and objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the effect on the emotional and functional effectiveness (response formation) in the life of ministers in the NRCA. The study does not focus on the effects of interpersonal conflict between the minister and one or more congregants as this would amount to determining the conflict management strategies that ministers employ in such situations.

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2. The Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa is a well-known Reformed Christian denomination in South Africa. The English version of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA) is The Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa. The latter is often confused in literature with the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk abbreviated NG Kerk or NGK) and the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika).

3. See Dreyer (2016) for a comprehensive list of juxtaposed concepts that are characteristic of a church as an organic movement *vis-à-vis* an institutionalised church.

4. The question and the subsequent discussion are not followed on in this article. The question will be implicitly answered throughout the discussion. 'Membership reduction is a sign that processes occur that are not typical of the church' and discuss the relationship between the quality of life of the church (i.e. believers) and relate the decline in numbers to a lack of quality. Although this perspective should be pursued in more detail, we will not embark on this matter. Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021) implicitly force a very acute question to the fore: Is membership decline the real decline of the church or are there other dynamics at play as well?

As has been stated above, the study endeavoured to determine the emotional affect and the impact thereof on the functionality in their role fulfilment and by extension, the impact of such experiences in their personal relationships. Do pastors have the emotional and cognitive capacity to deal with conflict when they observe this phenomenon in the church? The assumption featured in the reasoning of the project team was that as an observer of conflict (and not necessarily as a participant), pastors will experience some form or measure of emotion that can be verbalised. The question underlying this assumption is based on what the emotional effect of pastors on observed conflicts in the congregation is?

In addition to the primary purpose, a secondary purpose was sought to determine the underlying stimuli to conflict in the congregation based on the question: 'What do congregants quarrel about'.

Research design

Research approach

It has been mentioned above that the research team designed a small-scale study utilising a questionnaire.[5]

The following contains an abridged version of the process that was followed. The response rate as well as the quality of response, specifically those questions that required verbatim/written responses, provide sufficient data to be of value.

The results correspond with the reality of the phenomenon of conflict in the church. The questionnaire was distributed to all 280 active ministers in the church. Twelve per cent of the questionnaires were returned.

Research method

The project team not in the same geographical location relied on a virtual process, following a Delphi – type technique (Twin 2023).[6]

An initial questionnaire was drafted and distributed to the four members of the project team. Comments and suggestions were received, and the questionnaire was reworked/edited and referred to the team members. More comments and suggestions followed which were again incorporated and sent to the project members in round three.

5.Because of space constraints, the questionnaire and raw data are not included. However, any person interested in these documents can request such, see the Data Availability Statement.

6.The Delphi method is a forecasting process framework based on the results of multiple rounds of questionnaires sent to a panel of experts. After each round of questionnaires, the experts are presented with an aggregated summary of the last round, allowing each expert to adjust their answers according to the group response. This process combines the benefits of expert analysis with elements of the wisdom of crowds. Reviewing the above description, a 'double' Delphi technique was utilized. In the first round (the compilation of the questionnaire) a team of subject matter experts was assembled. The takeaway from this phase was a questionnaire that was distributed as indicated. In the second phase, respondents responded to the questions. The respondents represented ministers of the NRCA, who are viewed as subject matter experts ministering in congregations. In this manner, a quality perspective was embedded in the research programme in the NRCA, which lends credibility to the methodology as well as the raw data that was gathered.

All project team members were satisfied that the questionnaire would serve its purpose and was subsequently tested before distribution. Despite this, there were still questions or statements in the questionnaire that were ambiguous. These were indicated by the respondents. However, despite the ambiguity, the overall results were not affected.

Questionnaire distribution

The questionnaire was distributed via the office of the (then) General Secretary of the NRCA per email. An accompanying letter was distributed that contained a link to access the questionnaire. Upon completion, respondents selected a 'Submit' button, which then routed the questionnaire to an independent administrator.

The *Administrator* provided the project team with an Excel spreadsheet wherein responses were captured under the headings as provided in the questionnaire.

Data analysis

The responses were analysed and as a **first step**, a list of themes or concepts was identified and tabulated.

Step two entailed an interpretation of the tabulated concepts and ordered into broad themes.

Thematic responses were reworked using an Excel spreadsheet, and graphs were created for every question based on the raw responses. The raw scores were used based on the options in the questionnaire. The graphs are available but not included herein.

Literature review

Although we do not intend to provide an elaborate perspective regarding the relationship between conflict and emotional affect, it is, however, apt to provide a short overview for the purpose of this article. We commence with a short discussion and definition of conflict followed by an overview of emotions prior to discussing the emotional effect of conflict on emotions. These are necessary to eventually describe the emotions of ministers when conflict is observed in the congregation.

Conflict as a phenomenon in organisations

The focus on conflict as a dimension of human behaviour acknowledges that behaviour as such is complex, multifaceted and multi-layered, but observable. Conflict from this perspective is therefore only one of the observable patterns of action on the same level as the demonstration of love or loyalty.

Gallo (2012:1) defines conflict as a 'special kind of system whose complexity stems from many different and sometimes unrelated elements', while Fink (2017) describes social conflict as any social situation or process where two entities stand in an opposing antagonistic-psychological relationship towards one another.

Augsburger (1981) underlines this with the following statement:

> Conflict is natural, normal, neutral, and sometimes even delightful. It can turn into painful or disastrous ends, but it doesn't need to. Conflict is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. Conflict simply is. (p. 4)

However, to view such a statement as sufficient for a study such as this is to deny the complexity of interchanges that takes place and which can be described as conflict.

According to Schmidt, Thomas and Kochan (1972:1), conflict is also an ambiguous concept and presents a behavioural conceptualisation of the process of conflict. 'It is proposed that goal incompatibility, perceived opportunity for interference, and interdependent activities among organizational subunits increase the potential for conflict'.

The church, as an empirical phenomenon in society, is not exempt from conflict. Oppenshaw, Nel and Louw (2018) are correct in the following observation:

> Society in general neither understands conflict nor willingly participates in conflict situations. Paradoxically, for Christ-followers, scriptures that encourage 'loving one another' (cf. Jn 13:34–35;15:12–13; Rm 12:8,10; 1 Jn 4:7–8) or 'turning the other cheek' (cf. Mt 5:38–40) or 'do not judge' (cf. Mt 7:1–5; Lk 6:37–42; Ja 4:11–12) create unrealistic expectations of conflict-free congregations. (p. 1)

Conflict in the church expresses the human side of congregational life. Conflict also reflects the religious challenge of voluntary faith communities that try to understand, articulate and live by their highest beliefs and ideals.

De Dreu and Gelfand (2007), from a process perspective describe conflict as:

> [… A] process that begins when an individual or group perceives differences and opposition between itself and another individual or group about interests and resources, beliefs, values, or practices that matter to them. (p. 6)

The perspectives that deserve our attention is the response by ministers who assume responsibility for the ministry of salvation. This responsibility implies a ministry that focuses on the calling of believers to 'crucify' the 'old person' and to become a new being in the Lord. This implies a change of the construct system of the believer or rather a replacement of the construct system of the old person with that of a new creature in Christ.

Emotions

This perspective brings the total construct system of individuals in social exchange to the fore. A review of the literature indicates that conflict can have negative as well as positive effects and outcomes. As far as the negative outcomes or rather responses are concerned,[7] Omisore and Abiodun. (2014:127–128) classify these in terms of three categories, that

is, 'negative psychological responses, negative behavioural responses, and physiological responses'.

Were some, all, or certain of these responses reported by ministers?

Emotions exert an incredibly powerful force on human behaviour. Strong emotions can cause you to take actions you might not normally perform or avoid situations you enjoy. In psychology, emotion is often defined as a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that influence thought and behaviour. Emotionality is associated with a range of psychological phenomena, including temperament, personality, mood and motivation. Human emotions involve arousal on a physiological level, expressive behaviours, as well as conscious experiences (Meyers 2004).

The above is sufficient to create an awareness that conflict is a more complex phenomenon than may seem on the surface thereof.

Systematic conflict

As a normal social phenomenon, the potential for conflict, wherever and whenever people enter relationships or form voluntary groups, even though they might agree on certain broad values and principles, such as in a congregation, is always latent (Hussein & Salem Al-Mamary 2019).

Response to conflict irrespective of the cause thereof is inevitable.[8] The severity, as well as the perceived threat by either of the two parties, will eventually determine the outcome, based on the neurological response by either of the conflicting parties in the conflict situation. Personal orientation in terms of fixated principles or values, traditions, et cetera. will of necessity play a role in the course and process of the conflict.

It is often stated that congregants become alienated from the congregation or denomination because of the conflict. It would have been ideal to study this phenomenon from such a broad perspective.[9]

A dimension that features prominently in the word-of-mouth discussions is that some pastors and/or ministers as observers of conflict respond with negative emotions to the conflict between congregants.[10]

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7. See Omisore and Abiodun (2014:127–128) for a tabulation.

8. This study does not embark on the means, strategies, or actions to either minimise or resolve conflict. Any response in the interaction between people where conflict develops can be of a superficial or serious nature, resulting in either a total breakdown of the relationship or the resolution of differences.

9. The possibility to conduct the research based on two other dimensions, that is, the perspectives of congregants and the response of congregants and pastors involved in one-on-one (between the pastor and a congregant) or in a group context (multiple congregants involved in conflict with their pastor) was considered but decided against such an approach as it would have been too broad an approach. There is, however, nothing to prevent research regarding the two positions mentioned above.

10. It must, however, be clear that this is not meant to be a generalised statement. Not all pastors respond with negative emotions. This is a further theme for research: Why are there different response formations by individuals as observers of conflict between congregants?

Results and discussion

Conflict in the congregation: General responses

The questionnaire is structured in the following manner: The first question required ministers to respond on whether there is conflict in the congregation. Forty-two per cent responded that there is no conflict in the congregation while 55% of respondents acknowledged the existence of conflict in the congregation. The research team observed that 16% of respondents are not *aware* of the conflict in the congregation[11] while 57% of respondents described the conflict in the congregation as social conflict and occurs on an interpersonal level (84%).

Based on the respondent's reports, we can safely state that conflict is prevalent in the congregation. This confirms the general observation that conflict is not foreign or extraordinary in congregations.

Given that conflict is a function of interdependence, it follows that the potential for conflict should be greatest in the most interdependent relationships, such as intimate couples and families as well as organisations such as the church, even though the congregation can be described as a body of religious believers or as a community of shared faith. When subjective perspectives dominate, the conflict evolves into a situation where two or more persons vie for dominance. In this regard, 'conflict is a struggle between two or more interdependent parties, who have or perceive incompatible goals' (Sillars, Canary & Tafoya 2009).

Conflict is therefore not always strictly about objective circumstances so much as subjective definitions and desires. The discussion of goals implies something else quite basic – that there are different levels to conflict, reflecting different types of goals. Most often, authors distinguish instrumental, relational and identity goals, which refer respectively to a concern over a specific problem, the nature of the relationship, and self-presentation or 'face' (Sillars et al. 2009).

Congregants vying for control

The following responses pertain to questions regarding power games that play out in the congregation. The discussion will focus on certain core issues to enhance the understanding regarding the theme of *control by congregants.*

Seventy-eight per cent of respondents indicate that conflict is evoked by congregants vying for control in the congregation. A further response indicates that 71% of respondents declare that conflict arises in cases where congregants compete for leadership positions in the congregation. In 55% of cases, individuals transcend personal boundaries, resulting in conflict, while 57% of respondents indicate that congregants

strive towards domination over other congregants and are manipulative regarding this tendency.

The category 'striving for control', was chosen to encompass a spectrum of tendencies that could manifest in certain behaviour markers, that could lead to conflict. The intent was to determine whether there are individuals in the congregations that display a spectrum of behaviour that ranges from dominance and power games, transcending interpersonal boundaries, (subtly) undermining church staff to position themselves as powerful decision makers, thus attempting to usurp the leadership in the congregation or attempting to 'highjack' leadership positions and behaviour by congregants who strive for control.

The majority of ministers indicated that they have observed and identified congregants who comply with the above constructs that lead to conflict. Two characteristics are common to the three dark personalities: lack of empathy and self-centeredness resulting in a distorted pattern of relating to other individuals (Kaur 2017).

The project team did not create the opportunity to excavate the perception of respondents; it would not serve this study to speculate on the observed behaviour of respondents.

Conflict regarding decision-making and the mission of the church

Ninety-two per cent of respondents reported that conflict regarding the mission of the church is prevalent, while 65% of conflict relates to theological matters and decisions by the church council, and 63% of conflict is about structural church matters and involvement in society.

Rainer (2014) is of the opinion that conflict emanates from the uncertainty of who makes decisions in the church. Most ministers indicate that conflict regarding the calling or mission of the church does occur. This question did not require any specifics regarding this domain. However, a review of the literature reveals that this domain can lead to conflict and even break-away groups.[12]

Crain (2020) discusses the seven causes of church conflict in congregations. Under the heading 'Church Politics', he refers to the conflict that ensues because of 'political manoeuvring' and 'posturing', such as conflict over methods of ministry and music.

Decisions of a theological nature do not seem a major cause on the level of the congregation, although the majority of respondents indicated that this type of conflict does exist but is not reported as 'often' or 'always'. Despite this response, however, it does occur, but it would seem to be sporadic and not a constant source of conflict.

11. Awareness is a precondition to cognition and mindfulness. The interpretation of the lack of awareness can be ascribed to either not being aware or that no conflict is observed. We will not embark on this perspective any further.

12. See Dreyer (2014) publication entitled 'Wanneer een twee word' [*When one becomes two*] describing the church schism in the NRCA.

Regarding decisions by the Church Council and resulting conflict, the raw scores do, however, present a specific picture. The cumulative total of 'sometimes, often, regularly, always' corresponds to the majority response from ministers, with 20 instances, as opposed to 18 instances of 'never'. This relates directly to the quality and quantity of communication in the congregation. Decisions about the use of a building or mission fund, the structure of worship services, church events and so forth tend to be at the heart of conflicts. A question, against the background of, or perspectives that warrant more investigation is the prevalence of anxiety and the level thereof in the congregation based on the Bowen Family Systems Theory (Son 2019). Based on this framework, the church is viewed as a family, and the ineffective handling of anxiety is viewed as a main source of conflict.

'An examination of churches with Bowen Family Systems Theory suggests that ineffective handling of anxiety within the church as a system is a main cause of conflicts within congregations' (Son 2019:1). Son discusses the effect of long-term and unresolved anxiety in the church and substantiates the argumentation with real-life examples from churches that were studied. According to Son (2019), in addition to any other characteristics that can be added, also encompasses what can be termed as an emotional system:

> The level of chronic anxiety within the system is the accumulated anxiety that has not been resolved in the past, both in the present and previous generations. If a church as a system has effectively dealt with arising anxiety at various junctures of its life, the level of chronic anxiety would be very low at a very comfortable level. If not, the church's level of chronic anxiety would be rather high, and almost any stressors would cause overreactions and rigidity as the main discourse in relational dynamics such as emotional fusion or cut-offs because of serious conflict. (p. 5)[13]

Change as a source of conflict

Change will produce conflict (Rendle 1998:26), and conflict is defined as 'two or more ideas in the same place at the same time'. Seventy-one per cent of respondents report that change as a major source of conflict in the congregation.

A discussion on the effect of change as a source of conflict can be viewed as superfluous. This is normally the domain of principles and value systems as well as a fixation in respect of certain domains of functioning in the congregation.

Crain (2020) posits that in reality, change is the norm. When policies or priorities change in the church, misunderstandings and stresses are likely to occur. When pastors and church leaders make strategic decisions, an effective process of communicating these new directives and norms is crucial. The adult learning cycle (Rendle 1998:25) helps leaders to include reflection and connection to deal with new learning. Even so, some church members may struggle to accommodate the changes. Often, change leads to feelings

of powerlessness or insecurity because one may trust the status quo at church instead of trusting God for security and peace.

Psychologically, people function from certain psychological and neurological systems. Trying to understand the negative response to change implies understanding the neurological basis and function.

SCARF is an acronym to describe social functioning according to the five domains of needs that drive social behaviour. The acronym stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relations and Fairness. Assumptions, emotions, worldviews and paradigms influence behaviour. Research in the field of neuroscience has provided sufficient information to accept that our neurobiological-initiated behaviour defines how we, as leaders, and followers make meaning, solve problems, and carry out tasks with others. Core neurobiological human processes play out every day in our actions, thoughts, feelings and motivations.

Our brain is structured to 'keep us alive' and as such will function in such a manner as to avoid threats and seek rewards and the SCARF model (Rock 2008) provides some insight into this dynamic. In this instance, we apply this model in respect of understanding conflict when social needs are frustrated.[14]

Conflict in the congregation: Pastors responses

It is often thought that observing conflict does not influence the observer. From the responses by participants, this seems not to be the case. Observing conflict does influence the observer. However, it must be noted as Cooper (1986) in a study to investigate 'the relationship between observer and participant attribution of affect intensity in interpersonal conflict interaction and the occurrence of verbal behaviour', notes:

> While some evidence was yielded to suggest that observers are more likely to be sensitive to behaviour in their attribution[15] of affect intensity than are participants, these results imply significant differences in the attribution of affect between some observers. (pp. 134–144)

Observed anger affects observers' performance via emotional and cognitive routes that are interrelated. Conflict does inevitably affect pastors within the context of role fulfilment in the congregation. Eighty-one per cent of respondents acknowledge that conflict (when observed) does have an effect. Observers of anger and/or conflict get distracted and cannot perform their work optimally (Miron-Spektor & Anat 2009).

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13. A detailed investigation of anxiety and conflict based on the Bowen Family systems Theory is not undertaken at this juncture.

14. We will not elaborate on this perspective as it entails a detailed discussion of the neurophysiological process as well as the social dynamics that are at play, A study such as this warrants an investigation of its own, albeit a theoretical discourse.

15. Attribution in psychology is defined by Merriam-Webster as: 'the interpretive process by which people make judgments about the causes of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Psychologists have long documented what they call the fundamental attribution error, the tendency for people to explain human behaviour in terms of the traits of individual actors, even when powerful situational forces are at work'.

Pastors enter ministry and the congregational ecosystem with the perception that the church is a conflict-free environment. The advent of conflict would necessarily cause an emotional shock reaction that has a psychological and physiological effect.

'I am affected by conflict in the congregation'

Eighty-one per cent of ministers acknowledge that conflict in the congregation has a negative functional effect. How does this affect the ministers? Of the respondents, 68% indicate that conflict has a destructive and immobilising effect.

The sympathetic nervous system drives the fight-or-flight response, while the parasympathetic nervous system drives freezing (PEDIAA 2017). How you react depends on which system dominates the response at the time. In general, when your autonomous nervous system is stimulated, your body releases adrenaline and cortisol, the stress hormone. The reaction to sensed danger or threat commences in the amygdala (Sternberg 2009:211).

Immobilisation whether physical or emotional is brought about when the brain 'observes' that there is 'danger' around, because of which it triggers the primal fight, flight or freeze response. The fight-flight-freeze response is the body's natural reaction to danger or perceived threat.

Fight-or-flight is an active defence response. Your heart rate increases, which increases oxygen flow to your major muscles. Your pain perception decreases, and your hearing sharpens.

Immobilisation can be viewed as a state of limbo, unable to react or to activate an appropriate response to a threat or perceived danger. The perceived threat or danger is not only limited to physical danger but to emotional threats as well.

Loss of meaning

Respondents indicate a loss of meaningful experiences in their role fulfillment as a result of conflict.

A sense of a loss of meaning in work (ministry) could reflect an alienated response formation. It is noteworthy in this context to distinguish between the meaning of work and meaningfulness at work (Chalofsky 2010).[16] When the work environment (the church as ministry space) becomes toxic, it inhibits the feeling and experience of meaningfulness while embarking on role fulfilment, as well as creating negative experiences in terms of which ministers lose their sense of calling.

When either or both the meaning of work and the meaning at work diminish, the inevitable result could manifest in behavioural markers that border on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

16. Meaning *at work* refers to the work environment that includes all the relevant systems such as policies, work behaviour, etc., while meaning *of* work refers to the work experience during role performance or conducting work activities. In a certain sense the congregation represents a *work environment* where the pastor *has to fulfil certain role functions and activities.*

'Flight' responses

Seventy-three per cent of respondents are aware of colleagues purposefully seeking a calling to a different denomination or congregation to escape from their current congregation. The 'workplace' (congregation) has become unsafe, and unbearable and ministers perceive a change of scenery as an ideal escape from a toxic environment.

The movement between churches or congregations might seem a suitable and satisfactory solution when there is conflict in their congregations. However, the move does not guarantee that the next congregation will be either without conflict or at least less serious conflict. The pastor relocates with their own conflict-initiated trauma, The fact, however, is that trauma and the initial flight-or-fight reaction, if not resolved, remain an 'emotional passenger'.

The more radical alternative is to exit the ministry. Respondents (65%) are aware of colleagues who have exited the ministry, while 55% are seriously considering exiting the ministry because of the conflict in the congregation.

'Need to know more about conflict'

Eighty per cent of respondents indicated that they require more intensive development in respect of conflict and how to handle conflict in the congregation.

The NRCA (Dreyer 2016:175 ff.) instituted a research programme to determine the possible tendencies of why ministers tend to leave the ministry. The results indicate a lack of training and development of ministers. According to the research results, ministers indicated that they do not have sufficient knowledge regarding theological and non-theological competencies to enable them to fulfil their roles in congregations.

Ministers do not always have the competency or capacity to handle intrapersonal emotional conflict. Dreyer (2016:176 ff.) argues that '[*t*]heological training is confronted with the challenge to train and develop pastors through a process of integrating other subject matter such non-theological subject matter into the curriculum'. Such integration of knowledge requires a well-structured systemic approach.

This could be indicative of an experienced deficiency in the preparation of ministers for their tasks and roles in ministry. To address such a need would entail equipping ministers with the required knowledge and capacity to deal with conflict in the congregation and their own inner world of emotions.

Conflict in the congregation: Consequences

In response to more focused questions, which will not be discussed in detail, respondents indicate that conflict has a detrimental effect on and in the congregation. The responses are listed below without any discussion, purely because of length constraints and the complexity of interpretation without testing these with congregants.

This does however not negate the importance of these responses as they could collectively and individually, provide some reasons (real or imagined) for congregants exiting the church because of the conflict, thus resulting in the decline in membership of congregations:

- Congregants leave the church but do not invest in another family of faith.
- Congregants who have left the congregation as a result of conflict often remain 'unchurched' rather than re-enter where they will once again be reminded of the experience of hurt and deep disappointment.
- Congregants withhold tithes and other financial contributions.
- The congregation becomes heartbroken and grieves because of the conflict in the church.
- The attendance of church services and other congregational activities declines.
- Trust relationships are broken, and a substratum of distrust becomes prevalent.

Conclusion

As God has chosen people (1 Pt 2:9), we need to seek and create safe spaces and an environment for humans to flourish. The congregation is a deeply relational and emotional reality. The congregation needs spaces where reconciliation and peace may lead to new relational realities.

Change confronts us with uncharted areas. The NRCA needs to review, reorganise and reconfigure its modus operandi by revisiting the roles and tasks of the pastor. We are constantly in the process of adapting to the rapid expansion in all facets of life. Churches and institutions need to reorganise training and develop leaders for the new territory of the church. We also need to process the direct and severe impact radical and transformational change has on the church and its members.

The NRCA makes use of an assessment centre to provide a rational, consistent and practical basis for understanding people's behaviours at work and their likelihood of succeeding in certain roles and unique environments. Assessment centres and developmental programmes (Pastoral Development Programmes [PDP]) are increasingly used for developmental purposes: training needs; formalisation of personalised developmental recommendations and to skill development based on immediate feedback and real-time practice.

The Reformed Theological College identified eight competencies that form part of the library of behavioural competencies. These competencies are essential in terms of supporting the pastor and developing the role and the scope of their work.

Effective communication (including conflict management) is one of the competencies within the library that needs to be developed.

Effective communication is the ability to actively listen to others, establish a good rapport and show empathy and understanding. To convey information clearly in a way that enables meaningful understanding and insight. Manage and defuse conflict constructively through effective communication.

The PDP is a church-based, context-sensitive process and is intentionally aimed at continuous training and the development of pastors based on a competency model. The focus of the PDP is to create awareness and insight regarding the pastors' unique competencies. Resolving conflict constructively and respectfully is in all terms for the benefit of the congregation.

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