

*The following are the notes of a recent session I gave to a group of local city ministers at their request.*

## Handling difficult Congregational Groups by John Walton

Firstly, what is the problem and how did the group become difficult?

Over the years we have had problem groups, but not so much in my later ministry. I think I had learned how to trust and maintain trust in my leaders. Trust requires wise and gracious communication. Having honest transparent communication is very important. These days I trust people more; if you sow trust you'll reap trust.

Keeping the upstream right saves problems downstream; an upstream openness and friendly atmosphere. Be strong on encouraging your leaders.

Also I think I am broader in my allowance level. Perhaps we need a 'fatherly' spirit enveloping the church with God's grace. Bathe yourself in grace.

We need to teach people how to handle their genuine concerns without those concerns fracturing the community.

Causes of conflict or tensions can be: Leader ambition; an independent spirit; an extreme emphasis on perhaps a pet theme; unbalanced prophesy; a bitterness that has spread and poisoned others. It could even be racial or social prejudice or just a clash of different personalities, underlying sin unsolved.

See my article on 'Seven causes for Conflict in 1 & 2Corinthians'.

Groups can polarize within the church and increase in intensity through whispering and talking in the dark with the like minded. These negative attitudes give ground for the enemy. Exaggeration also blows things out of proportion.

There are ways that we pastors can further isolate such a group, and ways to win and restore such a group.

Some Don'ts:

1. Don't initially try to bring into line through confrontation.
2. Don't minister to them through the pulpit. ('Towards castle').
3. Don't neglect the problem and keep your distance from the leaders involved, thus furthering the isolation and therefore empowering it.
4. Don't pull rank; treat it as being him and you on the same journey. Displaying your position or authority doesn't solve things at a heart level.
5. Don't be defensive or reactive.
6. Don't communicate it by e-mail, this usually brings misunderstanding and more distance from the persons involved.
7. Don't throw scriptures at it or prophesies.

Some Do's:

1. Honestly and objectively assess what is the root cause.
2. Keep in mind all the good things about the person or persons involved. Meditate in Philemon on Paul's step by step diplomacy of grace in winning Philemon around.
3. Take him/her or them out for lunch to restore friendship before directly addressing the issue.
4. Consider --- have I contributed to the cause? (Read: "How to bring the best out of People" by Alan Loy McGinnis..... Outstanding book.
5. Pray with others privately about the problem.
6. Take the leaders out for lunch; develop and restore friendship..... don't even talk about the problem.
7. When the relationship is reviving and trust growing, share your concerns in a restful way, but always begin with emphasising the person's qualities.  
(Don't do this from behind your office desk.)
8. Remember we are all on a learning journey, and that includes how to work together in harmony.
9. Listen carefully with an open mind. Try to experience what they are feeling.
10. If necessary take an experienced minister with you.

Note: Some issues lie under the surface and cannot always be solved directly, and in trying to it rebounds on you and gets worse. You can only judge overt, provable matters; issues you can get hold of. Underlying state of heart that shows no manifest behaviour can only be handled through prayer and indirect ministry. "*Judge no matter before the time.*" Move man by God through prayer alone. This requires patience and grace. God can solve things in a way we wouldn't think of.

If a person's behaviour is factually sinful, like causing division, apply

Matthew 18: 15-17; this shows the best procedural steps:

1. Your brother (first consider the value of your brother).....vs 15 Selah - pause and consider.
2. See you & him alone.... vs 15
3. This can often be resolved at this point.
4. If unresolved take another one or two with you.... vs 16
- 5. Final appeal is from the church leadership.... vs 17

What I have written above doesn't cover all the ground of such a topic; I trust it helps, but it needs more dialogue between leaders.

Love & blessings, John

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