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Quiz: Congregational conflict in changing times

Periods of change can stress the relationships among church members and leaders. But there's also good news related to such conflict, research shows. Take our quiz to test your knowledge of issues and trends related to congregational conflict.

by [David Briggs](#)

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The pastor was at a reception on his last day at the congregation when he noticed that a member was crying.

Take the quiz

The cleric approached and said, "There's no need to be upset. The next pastor may be even better."

"That's why I'm crying," the congregation member said. "That's what the last one told me."

This joke -- which can be told about a pastor, priest, rabbi or imam -- illustrates two issues with potential to cause conflict in congregations: leadership and change.

Thirty-five percent of congregations in the [National Congregations Study](#) reported conflict over clergy, and 12 percent reported conflict over leadership issues.

[The Faith Communities Today: American Congregations 2008 survey](#) found that leadership, money and worship "were the big three for congregational fights."

But conflict over leadership had the most serious consequences.

When the struggle was over leadership, the result in nearly a quarter of the congregations was that members or a leader left or money was withheld. When the fight was over budgets or finances, only 13 percent of congregations reported suffering similar consequences.

Even if conflict begins elsewhere, over changes in liturgy or finances, for example, it tends to engulf

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congregational leadership. In a 2004 [Leadership Journal survey](#) of 506 pastors, 95 percent of respondents said they had experienced conflict, and 71 percent reported that the conflict eventually centered on them -- their vision or pastoral style.

The consequences can be painful. A quarter of pastors in the Leadership survey reported feeling “broken” because of congregational conflict, and more than two-thirds said the conflict left damaged relationships in its wake. More than three in 10 said attendance declined.

There is some good news from research findings about conflict. Studies indicate that conflict has held steady in recent years. The Faith Communities Today study found that 75 percent of congregations in 2000 reported conflict in the past five years in the areas of finances, leadership, worship or program priorities. In 2008, 74 percent of congregations reported conflict in those areas.

And some conflict, such as reaction to the introduction of new music or other outreach efforts to broaden church membership, is the necessary precursor to growth and mission, church officials note.

Even when it is painful, some good comes out of conflict. Seventy-two percent of the pastors in the Leadership survey said they were wiser after experiencing conflict, and more than a third reported better communication with their congregations.

What steps can congregational leaders take to promote healthy resolutions to conflict and avoid tears - among congregants and pastors?

Kirk Hadaway, the director of research for the Episcopal Church, says it is important for leaders to be open and nondictatorial. “Leadership is about empowering people, more than it is telling them what to do,” he said.

When conflict arises, it should not be allowed to fester. “Dealing with conflict openly and soon is the best approach,” Hadaway said.