



Guidelines for Peacemakers

Eddy de Pender

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Introduction

Regularly we hear about conflicts in churches. Sometimes someone in leadership has to leave, sometimes a church splits, or a large group leaves the church. Quarrels and conflicts are just as common in churches as in other groups where people work together. It is my experience that conflicts in churches very easily become emotional. Because people in churches identify themselves with the vision in the church as well as with the belief in what the church stands for, differences of opinion become personal. This makes it difficult to look at conflicts in a rational way.

Another big problem in churches is that we feel that conflicts are not supposed to happen. Because we preach the gospel and talk about love, we tend to ignore problems. We try to please everybody and hope that problems will go away. Often leaders in churches do everything to avoid emotional tension. Recently I attended a meeting for the whole congregation. The leadership gave a long introduction for an hour and 50 minutes. So there were only 10 minutes left for people to tell what they thought of the situation. After the meeting, the leaders were happy that the meeting went well, but most of the members went home frustrated.

Probably everybody who has been in churches has these kinds of experiences. We speak of harmony and peace, but there are a lot of conflicts and we don't know what to

do about it.

This booklet is meant for everyone in a church who wants to deal with problems, differences of opinion and conflicts. It is not a big book, so the scope is limited. But I hope to give some guidelines about how to think about conflicts and how to manage them.

The Bible teaches us how to think about conflicts. For example, in Romans 12:18, it says: *Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.* And in Ephesians 4:3, we read: *Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.* So how do we deal with this tension between the ideal we read in the Bible and the reality we live in? Problems are seen as unspiritual, so we tend to avoid them. But they do not go away by themselves. They pop up at a moment we do not expect and in a way that is usually not very nice.

It looks like we only have a choice between two things that are both disagreeable. One choice is to refuse to see conflicts by closing our eyes. Another choice is to see the conflict as being so bad that nothing can be done about it. In most of the cases when people sought my help it was too late. For instance I received a phone call from a church leader that asked me for advice about their situation. I suggested to him to let me help them. But they thought they could solve the problem themselves. Half a year later I received another phone call from the same person. Now they wanted my help. But as you can guess, the problem had become worse. Additional damage occurred in the relationships in the leadership team of the church.

In this booklet, you will find ten Guidelines for Peacemakers. They are written from the desire that churches have more possibilities than just two: ignoring problems or letting them explode. The Guidelines give some help to churches in dealing with differences of opinion. I hope they will be helpful to people for communicating about situations and for finding solutions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This process will help the church do what it is called to do, and not let all the energy be spent on internal problems. This will help the church be the Light of Christ that shines in a dark world.

1. Conflicts: 'A Fact of Life'

People hate conflicts. Not many people are happy to have trouble with other people. Instead we want to have good connections. Nice and warm relationships, harmonious family connections, open and honest communications, peaceful church meetings. This is the kind of atmosphere we like. It is completely different when we consider words like conflicts, irritations, disharmony, misunderstandings. That doesn't feel good and our tendency is to run away.

Sometimes you are a spectator of two or more people having an argument and screaming to each other and you do not want have anything to do with it. Last week I was in a supermarket and saw a mother screaming at her four year old son. A situation like that triggers emotions. I have, depending on my mood, sympathy for the child or the mother or for both of them. I would very much like that mother and son to be in harmony with each other. If it isn't solved quickly, I go away, because I do not like to witness such a scene.

The world we live in is in constant change. Developments in society present us with new ideas and new thoughts to which we have to react. This causes tension, because our peace is disturbed. This is also the case within our churches. Young people have new ideas and challenge the status quo.

We can react in different ways. We ignore what people are asking, we react negatively or we are open to listen.

Some people get anxious when changes are proposed, while others welcome them. So changes bring about a lot of confusion. But one thing is sure, we cannot put our head in the sand and pretend that everything remains as it has always been. Differences of opinion are a fact of life.

So, why is it that we find it so difficult to handle conflicts? This is odd, really, because conflicts are a part of everyday life. Small annoyances and heavy fire storms, we see them around us everyday, in the world around us and in our own lives. And not just between individuals, but also between groups and nations. Skills to handle conflicts would come in handy.

I once heard somebody say that the word 'peace' is in the Bible 365 times, one for each day of the year. So we need it, because peace is not the natural situation. Since the fall of man and the tower of Babel, misunderstanding and miscommunication is our daily bread. So why is it, that we pretend not to see them? What is so attractive about sweeping it under the carpet?

The Bible warns us against false prophets who speak about peace, while there is no peace. *They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when there is no peace* (Jeremiah 6:14, New Living Translation). It is like putting a cast over an open wound. Jesus is also very clear about the fact that life does not consist of only peace and harmony: *Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword* (Matthew 10:34).

But we have no reason to despair. At Christmas we sing "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to

those with whom God is pleased” (Luke 2:14). The Bible is full of promises for peace and safety. We know that Jesus is our Prince of Peace. God wants peace for us, and to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11). He also commissions us to be peacemakers and to seek the peace for others. I think that it is so difficult for us to be open and honest about conflicts. Our longing for peace and harmony is so strong, that we don’t like to be confronted with the ugly reality of everyday (church) life.

So, we are caught in the tension between our longing for peace and the reality of everyday life with its conflicts. How do we deal with this? In what way can we solve this problem? How do we react when there is a difference of opinion or another way of looking at a situation? Pretending there is no problem? Always giving in and being the servant? Trying to win the argument, because we are convinced of God’s leading in this situation? Compromising by giving in a little and taking some in return? There is no one best strategy. All ways of solving this conflict are legitimate. It depends on the situation which one is best. The exception is holding your breath and hoping all will blow over. Conflict management requires courage. Therefore it is important that we know that Christ is with us in the midst of conflict.

We can make a lot of things in our society. Peace is not one of them. Sometimes we think that making good plans and communicating them well will create smooth functioning in our church. But alas, that is not reality. The Bible talks about peace as fruit, not something we can make. It is dependent on the way we treat each other. *And this righteousness will bring peace. Yes, it will bring quiet-*

ness and confidence forever (Isaiah 32:17).

Suggestions and questions

- Accept the deep longing in yourself for peace (shalom), which only can be found in God.
 - Accept the reality of a broken world in which conflicts are part of everyday life.
 - Accept that peace cannot be made but is a consequence of acting just.
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2. Warm and Cold Conflicts

A church decided to focus more on youth. Besides planning all kinds of activities specifically for youth, they wanted to give the youth the opportunity to let them prepare a Sunday service, the way young people would like it to be. This was risky, of course, for churches normally are very attached to their traditions for Sunday services. The youth group, however, was very enthusiastic and developed all kinds of plans. They prepared very well and the service was dynamic and interactive. There was some drama and good music.

After the service, the opinions differed widely. Many people were enthusiastic, but some people were very critical. Older people found the music too loud, others found the drama too explicit and some young people thought that the group who prepared the service listened more to the older people than the younger. In short, there was a lot of discussion going on.

It was a difficult situation. Should the youth continue with their experiment with the risk that some older people will not come the next time? Or should church leaders decide against these kinds of services and risk frustrating the young people? Or, is it best to choose a middle of the road solution that makes everyone somewhat unhappy?

More important than the solution itself is the way the church comes to that solution. The situation can easily escalate. There can be heated discussions and people can say things to each other that can be insulting. The risk of

these kinds of experiments is that it can lead to division. There can be a group of people who are for the experiment and another group of people who are against it. The problem of these types of situations is that people only talk to other people in the church who share the same views. Their opinions are constantly affirmed so the gap between the groups grows deeper and deeper. Maybe it appears on the outside that the conflict has been solved, but on the inside people still are hostile to the other group.

We can identify two types of conflicts: warm and cold. Warm conflicts are visible to everybody. There are heated discussions, people slamming doors and other heated tension. With cold conflicts, everything on the outside looks fine. Maybe people ignore each other, but not everybody notices this. It can be peaceful, but all of a sudden, in a moment that nobody expects it, someone can explode, which leaves everybody puzzled.

I'm concerned that in many churches there are cold conflicts. There are situations that are stressful and full of emotional tension, but that are not yet resolved. Jesus talks about this in Matthew 5:23-24: *So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.* What keeps us from going to the other person? Thoughts like, 'it isn't that important and, it is best to swallow the pain for the good of the church and, I will be the humble person' prevent us from looking for a solution. But to keep this tension inside doesn't solve anything. Often we

talk to others about the tension we experience and look for affirmations of our views. This is dangerous, because talking to others about our problems could lead to gossip.

Conflicts are sometimes compared to fires. A fire can be small, but if nobody takes care of it, it becomes bigger. In Holland, we have something we call 'veenbrand'. A fire starts somewhere, we put it out and we think it is extinguished. But we do not know that the fire is still burning below the surface. Underground it goes further. Then, all of a sudden, at a place we do not expect, the fire comes above the ground. It gets some oxygen and we have a real fire again. A lot of our conflicts in churches are like that. We think something is solved, but all of a sudden in a situation in which we don't expect any problems, it comes to the surface. Often in meetings where the whole church is gathered a conflict arises. Many people know nothing about what is going on and are frightened about what is happening. This leads to enormous tension and leaders often don't know what to do. They want to get rid of the problem as quickly as possible and make a decisions in which they have not taken the time to think through all the consequences. The situation is emotional and the decisions are communicated poorly, which again leads to more stress.

For leaders it is very important to work on an open and transparent culture. The fact that conflicts arise are taken as part of life. Leaders face problems head on and don't become anxious. Then good decisions can be made and rest and peace comes into the church again.

- Acknowledge irritations in yourself. Accept the fact

that you are not perfect and have the courage to have a different opinion in situations and at the same time stay connected.

- Don't talk to others about your irritations in a negative way.
- Take time as leaders to formulate some guidelines how to deal with conflicts.



3. We Are Not the Same - About Differences

Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, 'I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,' that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'I am not part of the body because I am not an eye' would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. (1 Corinthians 12:14-22)

The Bible is clear: we are not the same. We just have to look at the outside to see big differences: man/woman, tall/small, black/white, and so on. But there are also big difference in character, intelligence, cultural and social background. Mankind is a colourful blend of physical, spiritual, emotional and social characteristics.

It is a pity that we don't find it easy to deal with these differences. But if we succeed to acknowledge and value the differences, beautiful things can happen. I know of a project to renovate a church that was led by a creative ar-

chitect and a bookkeeper. Because of their mutual respect for each other the project succeeded. Two people, who have different interests, worked together successfully and created a very good solution. They trusted each other and valued the qualities of the other person.

Because churches are faith-based, we can easily have differences of opinion about the vision for our churches and the way we should be the church. Professor Lucas Meijs teaches volunteer work and civil society at the University of Rotterdam. He researched the influence of ideology on the way people work together in an organization that is based on an ideology. He discovered that a community, formed around an ideology, has three 'souls':

- *service delivery* - service to the society; social concern; the focus is outside
- *mutual support* - mutual connectedness and giving support to each other; the focus is inside on relations
- *campaigning* - studying the bible and evangelizing; the focus is both inside and outside

Professor Meijs states that these three ideologies are difficult to combine. Seen from the standpoint of the Bible all three are legitimate. So everyone who is supporting a certain viewpoint has the backing of the Bible. The conclusion is that in every church there is an internal tension between these standpoints, because in almost every church these three 'souls' are present.

Because we base our opinion on the Bible, we think that our vision on certain issues is the right one and that everyone should have the same the same vision. Jesus is the Truth, so as followers of Him we also have the truth.

If we find that other people who claim to follow Jesus have a different opinion than we have, we sometimes get confused. Confusion is maybe the best reaction. Anger and the inclination to convince others that they are wrong about their views is less fruitful. Because our faith is important to us, we find it difficult to cope with other opinions. It touches the core of our existence. Sometimes we cannot handle the tension of these differences and our rising anxiety . It is of the utmost importance that we learn how to deal with differences of opinion. If not, we can expect big clashes that could cause much damage in the church. We can learn from Paul who says: *But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice* (Philippians 1:18).

In a church where there is room for different ways of looking at things, beautiful things can happen. But, when the main goal is to have everybody think the same way, it can become ugly. When we have no room to express our feelings and thoughts we keep them underground. But they don't go away and the tension rises. Again, we can expect a big clash to happen. In Acts chapter six, we read about a conflict in the church that is elegantly solved. The apostles made room for different tasks and gifts and continued in their own calling. They didn't want to do everything themselves and or only inn the way they wanted it to happen. So they delegated tasks to other people and gave them the freedom to do the jobs in the way they thought best. Later, in chapter 15, the apostles made a decision to let the disciples who lived in the world of the Gentiles have other habits than those who lived in the Jewish culture. They stuck to the basics and let less

important opinions flourish in the community.
I love the saying of a Dutch pastor: *Unity on basic issues,
diversity on other issues, and love in every issue.*

- Think of a situation in your life in which you learned from someone who is different from you.
 - Look at the three 'souls' of a community. In which do you feel most comfortable?
 - Actively look for the qualities of the other two 'souls'.
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4. Behind Every Reproof Lies a Desire

- About What's Below the Surface.

We often hear and read the thought that a church is similar to a family. This is not a bad thought of course; the Bible gives us many clues in this direction. A family is seen as a place where you are protected and fed, where you find shelter and acknowledgement, where you can practice how to deal with people and develop yourself in many directions.

The Christian community has the same intentions. The church's desire is to be the place where people find themselves comfortable, valued and respected, where they are challenged to grow (spiritually). We all know that reality is not so ideal as we wish but we all feel the need for acknowledgement, acceptance, validation and love.

A family is a place where we also learn to deal with differences. Children often do this by quarrelling. Quarrels among children occur in every family with more than one child and parents don't like this. Still, quarrelling is good practice for learning how to deal with yourself and others. The family is the best practice situation for quarrelling and fighting. Kids feel safe and have the courage to fight or quarrel; that's why siblings practice this.

When you learn in your early years how to deal with conflicts, it is an advantage for your adult life.

We also can learn how to quarrel and fight in our Christian community in a healthy and constructive way. Learning this means that we have to leave old, unhealthy and dysfunctional habits of coping with others behind.

We all know them, the sweet kids who gain much from their charming behaviour and the aggressive kids that cause anxiety or fear with other kids. Both characters can get what they want by their behaviour. We also recognize this in adults, even in church. In many church you can find manipulating, aggressive, cranky or piteous people who strive for getting what they want. Or maybe you recognize yourself in this description?

What are the quarrels between siblings about? Of course about material things like toys but mostly there is a deeper need behind this. TV shows like 'The Nanny', show that kids long for confirmation (positive or negative) from their parents.

It can become a fight for kids to get the attention they want. They get it by fighting about toys or by showing who is the strongest.

Is it any different in the adult world and in our churches? Someone once said: behind a conflict is often no affair but a hurt. When we are irritated about someone's behaviour, it could be that it says more about our own needs than about the behaviour of the other person. Maybe we want to get acknowledgement to compensate our own lack of self-confidence.

Wouldn't it be great if the church is the place where we can learn how to extinguish destructive behaviour and learn how to deal with others in a new, constructive way. Annoyance, miscommunication, misunderstandings of good intentions, happen every day. If we respond emotionally to these incidents, we tend to respond in the

way we learned to deal with conflict in our childhood: by threatening, manipulating, teasing or whining. The Bible teaches us to bring our needs before God and not to others. We should learn the promises of God about His protection so that we can leave our defence to Him.

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; Psalm 68:5-7.

- Try to remember how you dealt with conflicts in your childhood and how this relates to the way you deal with conflicts now.
 - A natural response of people in anxious situations is to fight or to flee. If you notice a fight or flee response within yourself, what is then the threat you experience? What is the hurt that could be behind this response?
 - What are ways to find your refuge in God when situations get tense or anxious? Are you able to trust God?
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5. The Speck and the Log

- About Your Own Part

If you ever witnessed a fight between two parties, it is fairly easy to see that both parties communicate that the conflict can be resolved easily when the other person changes his or her point of view. The OTHER!! That's what it's usually about in conflicts. In your opinion everything is clear. You thought about it, your intentions are positive, so when the other person understands that clearly, all problems will be resolved. It's only a shame that your intentions are interpreted so wrongly. With this line of thinking, we have the main reason for the stalemate in conflicts. Both parties are convinced that they are right and expect the other party to do something. The first move is expected, which means there is no movement towards a solution. Even more, chances are that both parties keep talking about it with others, which will enforce them in their belief about being right.

When someone is in a state of conflict and wants to get out of it, there is no other way but to look to your own part. This starts with the realization that your perception of reality is selective. As humans we are inclined to assume that our perceptions with our senses are 'the truth'. Scientific research has shown that of all information that reaches us through our senses, only a very small part reaches our brain. We all know that from experience, because if several people experience the same situation, some will remember very different things than the others. This 'selective perception' is very useful to make

sense of the world around us in our everyday life, but in situations of conflict this becomes very counterproductive. In a tense relationship you will unconsciously have certain biased views, which makes it impossible for you to perceive the other person 'objectively'. You will interpret the other person's behaviour with coloured lenses. This mechanism is so strong, that when two people involved in a heavy conflict with each other, and they are asked to mention one positive trait about the other person, they will come up with nothing. The other person has become negative and threatening in his entirety. This, of course, is not ever realistic, because everyone has positive traits.

If you have reached the point that you no longer believe your perception of reality is absolutely true, a space is created to look at yourself. What are the actions I have taken up till now? Have I said something that is not fully uplifting? Have I overreacted? The challenge here is that when looking critically at your own part, it is natural to think: but what about the other person? If you can repress this thought for just a moment, maybe something positive can happen that gives room for change.

The Bible speaks about this very clearly: *'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye', when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.'* (Luke 6:41:42). We are challenged in cases of conflict to first look at our own part. If we look only at others, we are hypocrites. In such cases we are people

who pretend to be better than others when in reality, we are inclined to hide own weaknesses and limitations.

Apply, as I call it, the '40-60 rule.' Suppose that the blame lies for the large part (at least fifty percent) with the other party. This means at least you have some work to do to look at your own part and take positive action based on that. Even if the blame lies with the other party for 95%, you still have 5% work to do. The beauty is that when one person has the willingness to look to him or herself, often the other person will come across with their share. In this way, you have changed a negative stalemate into a positive flow that can result in good solutions and reconciliation.

In case of conflict

- Be open to review your own version of the truth.
Actively approach people that have the courage to ask difficult questions
 - Consciously look for your own speck. Don't be distracted by the other persons behaviour, but investigate what you could have done differently (better) not to have the conflict escalate.
 - Apply the 40-60 rule and communicate your own part to the other party.
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6. It's not Meant Personally

- About Anger

Conflicts can arouse strong emotions. And often the emotions are anger or fear. In this chapter, I will concentrate on anger. Anger can vary from a slight irritation to shouting in somebody's face. It is normal that we get angry if someone hurts us. The emotion helps us be active and defend ourselves. God wants all of his children to be treated with respect. So, if we defend ourselves, we are cooperating with God in being treated with due respect. Furthermore, anger can help to restore a relationship. If someone hurts us and we do nothing, the relationship is damaged. Feeling angry and acting on it, helps to be open about what is going on and to restore what has gone wrong.

Jan is in a meeting and during the break he talks enthusiastically about his first grandchild. Dana is getting quieter and quieter. She and her husband are trying to have children for years, but with no success. Jan knows this, but in his enthusiasm, he has forgotten about it. At a certain point Dana can hold it no longer and blurts out in an angry voice: 'Jan, what a rude person you are; don't you know that the subject of children is a sensitive one for me?!' Jan and the others in the meeting don't know how to react. At first Jan feels guilty, but after a while he thinks, 'she cannot call me rude, is it forbidden to be enthusiastic about my first grandchild?..'

Dana and Jan avoid eye contact during the rest of the meeting and at the end they go home without greeting

each other. At home they are both angry and talk about it with their partner.

Jan and Dana have a conflict and are both angry. Jan swallowed his anger and didn't do anything with it. He didn't show it, but it is there; it can be seen in the way he talks to his wife about the situation. Dana showed her anger, but not in the right way. The other people in the meeting are divided about whether Jan or Dana caused the conflict and who is to blame. Some say that Dana is guilty of the conflict because of her outburst. Doesn't it say in the Bible: *A fool is quick-tempered, but a wise person stays calm when insulted.* (Proverbs 12:16). Dana doesn't feel at peace about the situation, but in her mind she tells herself that Jan should be more sensitive. Others feel that Jan is to blame. He paid no attention to the reaction of the people he was talking to and was totally absorbed in his own story. If he had been sensitive, he could have seen that Dana had a difficult time and could have reacted to that. He was full of himself and went on and on. The Bible says: *Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too* (Philippians 2:4). Jan also feels not at peace, but he still thinks that he hasn't done anything wrong.

Dealing with anger is not easy. Pretending nothing happened doesn't help. Often it doesn't go away and is working underground. This attitude is called passive-aggressive. Anger is not vented, but in all sorts of indirect ways people fight the other and talk negatively. Or when someone has been hurt over and over, he can explode. I see this a lot in churches. We all tend to sweep difficult things under the carpet. We swallow much for the good

of the cause and do everything to try keeping the peace. Reacting in an aggressive way doesn't help either. It separates people from each other and often an angry reaction leads to another angry reaction.

It would be great if we learned to know ourselves in the area of anger. Do we need to take it more seriously or do we have to control ourselves more. Whatever it may be, the Bible encourages us to take it seriously. *'So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbours the truth, for we are all parts of the same body. And don't sin by letting anger control you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil'* (Ephesians 4:25-27).

We know that God says, I am with you, always and in every situation. So when there is a conflict and we are angry, we can ask God to come in this situation. We don't have to solve everything first. We can look up to the God of peace and let Him help us solve the situation.

- Allow yourself to be angry and don't judge yourself about your angry feelings.
 - Take this feelings to God and let Him help you.
 - Pray in what way you can talk to the other person if something is bothering you.
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7. Talk to Each Other and not Behind Their Back

Jan (from chapter 6) is a member of a sports club together with Karel, who was also at the meeting where the conflict between Jan and Dana started. When they meet the next evening Jan talks to Karel about the situation. Jan repeats his displeasure with the outburst of Dana and Karel agrees with him. A few days later Dana meets Petra, also present at the meeting, in the supermarket. They also talk about the conflict that happened the other day. And they both agree that Jan could have been more sensitive in this situation. Petra, who has children of her own, is very empathetic towards Dana. Both Karel and Petra talk with their partners about the situation.

When we look at a conflict this way, it very much resembles a virus that quickly spreads throughout the church. When conflicts are not dealt with properly, something negative creeps in. The conflict between Jan and Dana is not very big, but when two people have a conflict on a major issue, parties can easily form. People have the inclination to take sides for one of the two parties. For instance when there is a conflict between the pastor and one of the elders, the people in the church feel pressed to take a side. The one complains about the other and vice versa. Negative talking about the other party can influence the atmosphere in the whole church. In the case of Jan and Dana, at least twelve people are influenced. Jan and Dana, their partners, the people present at the meeting, and the partners of Karel and Petra. And in talking

to others, people have the inclination to defend their own standpoint. In the next meeting everybody feels the tension and is anxious about how things will go between Jan and Dana.

The Bible strongly warns us against gossiping and talking behind someone's back. Because as a church we are part of a body, unresolved issues between people influence the whole community. That is why it is important for us to do our utmost to solve conflicts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: 'Every member serves the whole body, whether to health or to destruction.'

A problem in situations of conflict is that the people who are involved often are very determined to find out the truth about what happened. When I ask the question in workshops about who is right and who is wrong in the case of Jan and Dana, I hear different answers. Some say that Dana is the problem, others find that Jan is to blame, while still others think both are guilty in the conflict. But in relationships it is not about the truth. We need to be acknowledged in our feelings. We want to be accepted for who we are. Of course Dana understands that Jan can be enthusiastic about his grandchild. And Jan sees that having children is a sensitive subject for Dana. They both want to be acknowledged in their feelings. If this happens, a conflict can easily be solved. Probably if they talk it out Jan and Dana will feel closer to each other than before the outburst. So a conflict can bear positive fruit.

That's why the saying 'talk to each other and not about the other' is so important. To speak with a third party about someone, the conflict can grow and grow until it becomes

very nasty. It spreads anxiety to people who are not involved, but have to watch what is going on. So, make a decision in situations of conflict not to talk to others about someone else. Take initiative to talk to the person you have a problem with.

As a third party you can play an important role. When someone starts talking to you about another person, you can stop the escalation. Choose not to be involved in a conflict between two other people or parties. You help to stop the virus spreading. Plainly refuse to talk about someone else. A next step can be in asking: did you talk to the other person about this? And when the answer is no, you can ask: what are you going to do about it. In this way you can act as a peacemaker by not getting involved and helping people to take initiative in solving their own problems. Do not try to mediate. That is tricky and I have seen very bad results from people with good intentions who tried to mediate but ended up in a difficult situation with both parties. Try to appeal to the responsibility of each person and make it clear that you do not have an opinion about who is right or wrong.

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:17-18)

- Make a decision not to talk to others in a negative way about people who are not in the room.
- Seek ways to let go of the question 'who is right' or 'what

is the truth' but seek ways to help in restoring relationships

- Swallow your pride and look at your own part in conflicts.
 - As a third party: challenge others who have a conflict to take the initiative. Be a peacemaker.
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8. Where do you Find the Courage to Speak - About Expressing Thoughts

One of the aspects that make it difficult for us to speak with others about matters that generate tension is the fact that we do not always know how to do this. For example, we are afraid that we will use the wrong words and hurt the other. And that is not what we want of course. It is also possible that we find it hard to start a difficult conversation, because we have the impression that the other person is a better debater than we are. We may already have some experiences that someone has run over us, leaving us with a mixture of anger and guilt. Therefore, it is important to prepare well if you have something to discuss with someone.

It starts of course with your attitude. If you tend to tell someone just like it is, you have a good chance of ruining the relationship you have. It is quite possible that this conflict will escalate. You need a certain openness to listen to the other person and hear his or her side of the story. Speaking with fear and trembling in a conversation will also be counterproductive. If you feel inferior compared to the other, he will probably take all the space, so that you will find yourself standing outside the field. The result is that at the end of the conversation you feel worse than at the beginning. A good basic attitude is that you equally respect the other as you respect yourself. In other words, I'm OK and he is OK. If you lack this thought it will become a difficult conversation.

If you conclude that your attitude is good and experience space for yourself and for the other, then you can prepare the message that you want to communicate. The basic rule when giving feedback is that you speak about yourself. You give no comment or judgment about the behaviour of the other, you only describe what has happened with you.

Suppose that Dana starts the conversation with Jan, this can develop as follows:

Introduction	<i>Jan, I would like to talk to you about what happened at the last meeting. I want to say something and I appreciate if I can tell my story first before you respond.</i>
Describe what happened from your point of view	<i>Jan, last week during the meeting there was tension between us from your enthusiastic stories about your first grandchild.</i>
Indicate what it has done with you	<i>I realized that it hit me, because it reminded me of the fact that my husband and I can't have children, although greatly long for this.</i>
Speak your regret (when there is something to regret)	<i>I have responded directly, saying that you are you 'insensitive'. That was not right. It was an emotional reaction. I'm sorry about this.</i>
Specify what you want, your desire	<i>Jan, I would like to say this to you, because I want our relationship to be good and that there will nothing between us.</i>

You can imagine that Jan's response will be very positive. Probably he will indicate that he could have been more thoughtful knowing Dana's situation, and that he is happy that it is out of the way. But even if Jan's response is not good, Dana has done her best and she may close this for herself in a good way.

This example is pretty simple. In everyday life it can be a lot more complicated. When receiving feedback, it is very important that you let the other person finish speaking and that you do not react in a defensive way. Receiving the message, that's really listening to what the other person has to say and giving back that you heard the message, is essential.

Think about how different it feels when you want to return something you bought in a shop and the shopkeeper really has heard your complaint instead of directly giving a defensive answer. Acknowledgment of your feelings is incredibly important. You can probably imagine that Jan and Dana have a better relationship now. They have a better understanding of each other and together they have resolved a tough situation. And, in doing so, the conflict has borne fruit in a positive way.

9. Not Every Conflict can be Solved

It would be wonderful if all conflicts in the world could be solved. Unfortunately, this is not common practice. There can be all kinds of reasons, but the question we have to ask ourselves is: how much effort do we have to put in solving conflicts? Or, in other words: in keeping peace? Romans 12 verse 18 says: *'Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.'*

In this respect, people are very different. For one person it is easy to leave things as they are. Someone else tries time and again to restore the relationship with the other person, because it is very hard for him to live with the thought of disharmony between himself and someone else.

In this context, it is important to understand the difference between 'a goal' and 'a desire', as it is explained in the book *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* by Larry Crabb and Dan Allender. A goal is something that we can set for ourselves and that we normally can reach with the required amount of effort. A goal lies within the field of responsibility of one person. He can set that goal and realize it. For instance, if someone would like to make a city trip to Barcelona on his own.

Besides, a desire is something that we long for very much, but that we cannot realize on our own. For that, we need someone else's cooperation. For instance, I would like to take a trip to Barcelona this year with my wife. That could be something that I want, but my wife has to agree

with it. She might have other plans, so I cannot realize this plan independently.

In conflicts, people often have a very different perception of a certain situation. Maybe both people try very hard to convince the other, that the way they see things is right. But in practice, it shows that this is quite difficult. The other person cannot be convinced easily, because he might see it from a very different perspective. Fortunately, we cannot force others to think or see things in the way we would like them to. We also would not like it if others could force us to share their opinions. In this, everyone has his own responsibility.

So to live in peace with others is a desire and not a goal. To be able to have peace with someone else takes two persons. You cannot have peace on your own with someone who sees the relationship as a source of conflicts. Therefore, in the definition of the word 'conflict' it is says that one person is enough to have a conflict, even if the other one is not aware of it. The tension that lives within one person will always have consequences in the relationship. Maybe not in the short term, but surely in the long term.

How far do you have to go in trying to live in peace? The starting point is that good relationships with each other are terribly important. For example, in Matthew 5 verses 23-24 it says: *'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother; then come and offer your gift.'* This means that people who can live easily

with a conflict, are urged not to take it easily, but do the utmost to look for harmony. Or as it says in Romans 12: *'Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.'* Go that extra mile for your brother or sister and look for peace.

And for those who find it difficult to live in conflict with others, this applies: 'Do all that you can.' You cannot take the full responsibility for a harmonious relationship. Some people do that, or would like to do that very much, but usually that is not very helpful. If you keep haunting someone else with your good intentions, there is a good chance that the other will withdraw more and more. Every attempt for reconciliation will be interpreted wrongly and therefore will be counterproductive. You can take the initiative, but if there is no positive reaction at all, it is better not to go on endlessly. At some stage, you must be able to say to yourself: 'I have done what I could do, now I must let it go.'

Suggestions & Questions

- Looking for peace with others is an important starting point.
 - For someone that finds it not too difficult to live with disharmony: go the extra mile in looking for chances to restore relationships.
 - For someone who finds it difficult to live with conflicts: accept the fact that other people are different and that your value does not depend on the fact that everybody likes you.
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10. A Clean Slate?

- About Forgiveness and Reconciliation

To me, this is one of the hardest topics related to dealing with conflicts. The reason is that the concept of forgiveness is often used to deny differences of opinion or discomfort. Or, as one person calls it: covering an open wound, before it is really healed. Forgive and forget. Although deep inside we know it's not the case, for the time being it comforts us.

Still this topic is part of the deal. First and foremost because the Bible is clear on the matter. In the 'Lord's Prayer' Jesus teaches us: *'Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.'* Maybe that's why it is difficult to apply it in real life, because it seems almost unreachable. Are Jan and Dana indebted to each other (chapter 6)? These are everyday situations that we all face.

To add the concepts of debt and forgiveness, seems a little overdone. If we take these issues so seriously, life becomes complex. In the letter to the Romans Paul writes: *'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.'* (13:8). As followers of Christ, we are being challenged to reach out for the other and not lock ourselves into being right. Love is the motivation to restore the relationship with the other. To put it in another way: if it is in your power to do good to someone else, for example to reach out in a case of conflict, then it is love that helps you do it.

Apart from the biblical motivation to take forgiveness and reconciliation seriously, there is another motivation: the effect of human interaction. What a freedom it is when you can look someone freely in the eyes after having gone through tough times! What a peace it can be if you don't have to go over solving a conflict in your mind constantly! All sorts of emotional and physical challenges can be the consequence of carrying negative feelings towards other people. The danger is that a rather small disagreement can lead to a full scale conflict where many people are involved. It can result in dissension, division and split in a family or community.

A difficult aspect of forgiveness is that granting forgiveness only works when it is unconditional, when it is not linked to receiving something in return from the other person. As soon as it is linked to a condition, usually a positive reaction from the other person, you are still not free. In my opinion, that is one of the biggest reasons why we find it so hard to take the first step. We are afraid of a negative reaction and then we feel we are further of then when we had not done anything. But if you take a step and leave the other person free to react, you have granted forgiveness already. Granting forgiveness goes so far, that we can do it independently; we don't need the other person. In this way you can forgive people with whom you are not in touch, or even when they are deceased. Forgiveness is letting go of something negative in yourself, and the fruits are freedom and peace.

Reconciliation between people can only take place after granting forgiveness. Maybe not total forgiveness, but in any case a step in the right direction. The first step is

letting go of the need to be right and create a space for the other in your heart. Only after this can reconciliation be offered. This step comes down to the step of asking the other person for forgiveness. Although this is primarily a matter between God and you, in light of the restoration of the relationship it can be necessary to say sorry about your own part and communicate this to the other person. From his side, he can grant forgiveness and say sorry for his part. In this way a potential minefield can be transformed into a fruitful oasis where peace and freedom rule. In this way, a church can be a source of renewal, a place where we can learn to grow in love and truth. In this way... *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.* (Ephesians 4:15). Praise be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
