2002

Keys to Effective Resolution of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools

Sandra De Jong

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/med_theses

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Education Program Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
Keys to Effective Resolution of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools

Abstract
The purpose of this project is to outline some keys to effective resolution of staff conflict in Christian schools. This project begins by introducing the problems that can occur in Christian community when conflict does not get resolved effectively. This is followed up by a closer look at God's will and purpose for Christian community in resolving conflicts that may threaten to tear them apart. This discussion is followed up with the identification of the characteristics of conflict and the trends that people generally follow when seeking to resolve their conflicts. Since the Bible is known to be a study of conflict resolution, the next section of this paper underlines biblical norms for resolving our conflicts and concludes with a framework of what the literature outlined to be effective keys for resolving staff conflict in a Christian school setting. A method for determining the extent these keys measure up to some examples of present and past conflict resolutions is then identified and followed up by four case studies outlining the nature of a conflict and its resolution. Each case study is followed up by a discussion of how the resolution exhibited or failed to exhibit some of the keys identified earlier. A summary that analyzes each of the identified keys is then offered and implications are made regarding necessary elements for effective conflict resolution in Christian schools.

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Education (MEd)

Department
Graduate Education

Keywords

Subject Categories
Christianity | Education | Teacher Education and Professional Development

Comments
Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

This thesis is available at Digital Collections @ Dordt: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/med_theses/70
The Keys to Effective Resolution of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools

by

Sandra De Jong

B.A. Dordt College, 1994

Master’s Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
2002
The Keys to Effective Resolution of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools

by

Sandra A. De Jong

Approved:

__________________________ Date: __________
Faculty Advisor

__________________________ Date: __________
Faculty Committee Member

Approved:

__________________________
Director of Graduate Education

Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project is an answer to much prayer. Conflict is a touchy subject in all areas of life, including the Christian school. As a result, much thought went in to how to best broach and address the subject of effective conflict resolution in such an organization. I would like to thank all those who took an interest in this study and reaffirmed the necessity of such a project.

I would also like to acknowledge all the participants of the case studies presented in this paper. It was only through the sharing of their stories that I was able to come to an understanding of how vital the basic aspects of community, shared vision and servant leadership are in setting a framework for effective resolution of conflict. To Anna, Joanne, and Kyle: thank you for putting your trust in me by sharing your situation of conflict so that we can all learn from it. It is my prayer that you continue to move past your conflict by trusting God and depending on His grace to lead, guide and heal you.

Finally, thank you to my friends, colleagues and family members who continually shared their thoughts and opinions on the subject, edited sections of this project and encouraged the work done on this project.

It is my hope that this project will ultimately glorify our Faithful God and Creator, who through all circumstances continually reaches out to us in love. May we strive to be like Him!
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to outline some keys to effective resolution of staff conflict in Christian schools.

This project begins by introducing the problems that can occur in Christian community when conflict does not get resolved effectively. This is followed up by a closer look at God’s will and purpose for Christian community in resolving conflicts that may threaten to tear them apart.

This discussion is followed up with the identification of the characteristics of conflict and the trends that people generally follow when seeking to resolve their conflicts. Since the Bible is known to be a study of conflict resolution, the next section of this paper underlines biblical norms for resolving our conflicts and concludes with a framework of what the literature outlined to be effective keys for resolving staff conflict in a Christian school setting.

A method for determining the extent these keys measure up to some examples of present and past conflict resolutions is then identified and followed up by four case studies outlining the nature of a conflict and its resolution. Each case study is followed up by a discussion of how the resolution exhibited or failed to exhibit some of the keys identified earlier.

A summary that analyzes each of the identified keys is then offered and implications are made regarding necessary elements for effective conflict resolution in Christian schools.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ii
Abstract iii
Table of Contents iv

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1 – REVIEW OF LITERATURE 6
The Christian School Community 6
The Nature of Conflict 9
Tendencies in Resolving Conflict 16
A Biblical Mandate for Conflict Resolution 24
Keys to Effective Resolutions of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools 31

CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY 38

CHAPTER 3 – CASE STUDIES 44
When All Else Fails 44
The Different Hats of Teaching 52
Encouragement and Empowerment 68

CHAPTER 4 – SUMMARY 78

APPENDIX A 88
APPENDIX B 89
APPENDIX C 90
WORKS CITED 91
INTRODUCTION

As a teacher in a Christian School, I treasure the bonds of community that are experienced between staff members, students and their respective families. There are days when I can definitely see God’s created purpose spreading throughout the hallways of our building. There are also days when I see this community experiencing the brokenness that can accompany conflict and its resolution.

Conflict rears its ugly head in all aspects of the world we live in and is prevalent within Christian organizations including Christian school communities. Satan works hardest to break apart that which strives to be unified in Christ. He chooses many mediums in which to do this, and conflict is one of them. Conflict can break the spirit of all who experience it and leave them and their communities reeling in shock and searching for reconciliation. This does not exclude Christian staff members in Christian schools.

Conflict and its respective attempts at resolution can be ugly, especially in Christian communities where people expect to be sheltered from the real world. No one really expects to see disagreement between those who are unified in Christ. After all, aren’t Christians supposed to practice humility and forgiveness? The Bible is specific in its teaching about forgiveness, humility and restoration. Unfortunately, sin is prevalent in all of us, and we find it hard to practice these teachings in our own lives. As a result, school staff rooms become war zones, school hallways become gossip centers of information, and in some cases school community gets ripped apart. As a result, Christian teachers start to lose their sense of calling and purpose and schools become dysfunctional.
"Our life is full of brokenness—broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live with that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God’s faithful presence in our lives" (Crabb, 1999, p. 45)? Our lives are indeed filled with brokenness, a brokenness that according to biblical literature originated in the Garden of Eden and has followed us to our present situation wherever we may be in life. In the case of Christian teachers, that includes the environment they work in. This brokenness involves conflict and conflict resolution. Conflict follows us like a shadow. It is “latent in every human relationship at every moment” (Crabb, 1999, p. 200). Like a shadow it simply awaits a “trigger.” Our self-occupied passions and brokenness can serve as some of those triggers and often encourage us to create, promote and allow conflict to consume our relationships with family, friends and colleagues.

In addition to this, Lodewyk reports that in a Christian school setting “Organizational factors like effectiveness in administering school discipline, general working conditions, styles of leadership, school ethos, opportunities for professional growth, incentives, and having assigned roles that match teachers’ gifts...influence teacher well-being and performance” (2001, p.20). He has found that conflict in the form of “emotionally demanding and divisive interpersonal relationships between teachers, students, and colleagues...can lead to feelings of disillusionment and inconsequentiality as well as feeling that one’s work or oneself are unimportant” (2001, p. 20).

As a result, conflict and the way it is resolved can affect our attitude towards teaching and therefore the quality of our teaching. Lodewyk reports that when staff members are consumed with feelings such as negativism, depersonalization, and anxiety
that often stem from conflict resolution, it can lead to a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. This implies that students can be the ones who ultimately suffer. Kreider (1989) also suggests that the feelings of frustration as well as anxiety associated with conflict can reduce productivity. A person who is experiencing conflict often becomes so sidetracked by the conflict they are facing that it becomes hard to set aside their emotions and focus on their purpose—which in the case of Christian educators is educating students for a life of service in God’s kingdom. Therefore, it is important that Christian teachers and administrators do not allow conflict and the process of resolving it to rip apart community and destroy our spirit, but handle it in ways that can ultimately glorify God (Crabb, 1999).

Conflict and conflict resolution must be seen as something that will be experienced in all settings, including the Christian school community. Acknowledging that conflict is prevalent in all aspects of our lives and seeking to reconcile it in as agents of God’s grace will help to keep our school communities united in purpose instead of leaving members with feelings of accusation or injustice. Carrying out this ideal is not simple. We need to realize that despite working in a Christian school setting, “we can’t deal with conflict any more than a man with a dollar can buy a house. He doesn’t have what it takes and neither do we. Without finding the divine resources needed to support us through conflict, to free us to forgive and love, we have no adequate response to conflict. We have no way to relax in its presence, no way to avoid hating either ourselves or others, no way to move past grudges and guardedness to compassion and freedom” (Crabb, 1999, p. 40). In other words, without the work of the Holy Spirit, a proper biblical and theoretical understanding of conflict, conflict resolution and the theories that
surround it as well as personal accountability and openness to grow in skill set and grace; we often have a difficult time resolving our conflicts in a non-threatening or non-competitive way.

The purpose of this study is to suggest approaches to conflict resolution in Christian schools on the basis of a review of relevant literature, an interpretation of biblical themes, and case studies of conflicts in schools. The importance and uniqueness of the community that exists within the Christian school will also be examined so that the role conflict can play in preventing a community of trust and unity within such an organization can be clarified. An understanding of why conflict can occur in a Christian school setting and the cycle it can follow when it is not always effectively resolved will also be explored since the cause of a conflict and the cycle it follows can play an important part in the way a problem is resolved. Along with this, several theories of how people tend to deal with and resolve conflict will be examined alongside what the Bible and other biblical literature identifies as important factors to resolving conflict in Christian community. It is my hope that in exploring this, staff members in Christian schools may come to a better understanding of their own natural tendencies in dealing with conflict, and seek to enhance their skill set by implementing some of the identified keys in resolving conflicts that may arise in the workplace. In order to help identify some keys and patterns to effective resolution of conflict that will equip those who teach in Christian schools to model Christian humility and forgiveness in their own relationships with each other the following research questions will be asked:

1. What is community?

2. What is God’s will for Christian community?
3. What is conflict?

4. What are people’s tendencies in resolving conflict?

5. What is the biblical mandate regarding conflict?

6. What are some biblical keys that will help us resolve conflict effectively?

7. How are conflict situations being resolved in Christian schools?

8. How are the keys to effective resolution being used to resolve conflict in Christian schools?

9. What can we learn from the way the identified keys are being used to resolve conflict in Christian schools?
Chapter 1

Review of Literature

The Christian School Community

It is important that we understand that part of God’s purpose for His people is that they live in community with each other. Gorman (1993) writes, “Community is never optional—it is a necessity for being what God designed us to be” (p. 30). Because there are many different types of communities that exist in the world today, it is important to acknowledge what a Christian community is and how a Christian school is called to be one. Members of Christian community “meet together as bringers of the message of salvation” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 23). Since the purpose of the Christian school is to educate students according to God’s word, the Christian school can therefore be identified as a Christian community. VanderKloet (1992) informs us that the Christian school is a unique community because it is a combination of a work community and a Christian community. While a Christian school is similar to the average work community in that one of the reasons people also seek employment is economic, it differs in that it is deliberately founded as a Christian organization, which allows its Christian character to emerge blatantly.

Therefore, the Christian school community is complex. VanderKloet (1992) implies that what binds together a Christian school community should be different than what binds together a regular work community. A shared passion between teachers to work together to educate children in the knowledge of God’s sovereignty and develop their gifts for present and future service in His kingdom is what should bring staff
members together in community and complement their need for economic income. Since the Christian school is bound together in Kingdom work, it is hoped that staff members are bound together by covenant rather than contract (Vryhof, 1989). This means that each and every teacher and administrator is a member of the Christian school community not only to earn a pay cheque, but because they also feel they have been called by God to be there. In such a community “Trust and cooperation should characterize student, staff and community relationships. The key principle of Christian community—Christian love in action—means worshipping, sharing, counseling, encouraging, and celebrating with Christian joy and hope” (Vryhof, 1989, p. 69).

Unfortunately, Christian schools often fall short of implementing Christian love in action. Vryhof points out that we live in a “selfish world in which people exploit their relationship with others for self-serving purposes” (1989, p. 7). This includes teachers and administrators in Christian schools. Nice people do bad things to each other in their efforts to have their needs and goals met. As a result of our sinful nature, “humans have always been more prone to destroy than to redeem if it suits their purposes” (Thomas, 1994, p. 3). The resulting destruction then floods into our hallways in the form of conflict that can be hard to control, consuming and destroying more readily than saving and reaffirming those whom it affects.

Therefore, the Christian school should strive to be a place whose staff members seek the restoration and peace that can be provided only in a biblical community where people are allowed to be themselves without the risk of rejection (Crabb, 1999). Such a goal is virtually impossible in a society that is self-centered, but is known to be present in the Body of Christ. As members of Christian community we need to get away from the
tendency to act as though conflict is an abnormal part of community, but as one that is real and ever-present and develop an attitude that builds the skills of conflict resolution into everyone’s paradigm. Romans 12:4 and 5 stresses, “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (NIV). We need to acknowledge the fact that God created us each differently and understand that this means we will not always see things the same as other members of the body of Christ. “We bring different backgrounds, viewpoints, emotions, and even different cultures into our relationships” (McDowell, 1993, p. 3). Fortunately, biblically, we all have varied gifts and uniqueness’ that through the use of this “body” makes our community richer and more effective for Christ. Unfortunately, when these different backgrounds, viewpoints, and emotions have to come together and be unified in Christian community, conflict often arises, as everyone believes their perspective is right. Crabb (1999) acknowledges that it is not always easy to live in community with each other. He claims it means that “…our determination to fully trust no one must die and an eager willingness to receive what is best from others and to give what is best from within ourselves must take place” (p. 47).

Crabb’s words especially come into play when we examine the fact that while many Christian school communities began out of the Reformed tradition, Christian school communities today are becoming increasingly denominationally diverse in regards to both student population and teachers. While this is very positive and allows for a growing and more diverse community, it also creates a natural framework in which conflict can arise, especially in regards to differing theological and philosophical
perspectives on what Christian schooling should be. Staff members and leaders in Christian schools therefore have an obligation to learn more about how to manage conflict and restore harmony to avoid the breakdown of community and the relationships that are vital to that community. Gorman (1993) claims that when we come together in Christian community, it is important to constantly remind ourselves “What we have together is greater than the sum of the individual parts. No one loses individuality in this coming together but rather one discovers and esteems individual uniquenesses as they are revealed in the web of relationships” (p. 64).

In order for this to become true practice in our respective school communities we need to acknowledge that such community between staff members is vital to the success of the Christian school. “When the people of God function together, it is a living organism. When they come together, Christ has promised to be there among them in a way that He is not present for the individual alone. He dwells in us individually, but when we come together corporately we reflect the image of God” (Gorman, 1993, p. 64). Therefore, it is part of our calling to learn how to maintain such a Christian school community that reflects God’s image by learning how to effectively manage and restore harmony. We can do this by first having a proper understanding of what conflict is and acknowledging the different ways it can plague the Christian school community.

*The Nature of Conflict*

Conflict has been around as long as the human race has existed on the face of this earth. It is a reality in all of life...it began in the Garden of Eden when God put enmity between Satan and all of Adam and Eve’s offspring (Thomas, 1994) and is therefore an inevitable result of our sinful condition. Therefore, conflict shouldn’t be something new
to Christians. We are born into a world of sin and conflict, a world in which we must fight our own self-serving sinful nature and strive to do God’s will. We need to learn that it can’t be avoided in the world, in the family, or in the Christian school. Despite our best intentions in our relationships with other teachers and staff members, there will always be some difference of opinion or purpose that will frustrate someone else’s personal goal or desire (Sande, 1997).

The workplace is seen as fertile ground for conflict (Potter, 1996). The Christian school is no different since teachers and school leaders have different priorities for their students. One teacher may insist that her grade six students use correct punctuation and spelling in all of their Bible memory work, while another sixth grade teacher insists that knowledge of Scripture should be the priority in learning Bible memory work. One teacher thinks that the other is wrong in expecting her students to spell and punctuate all the Bible passages correctly and that it will take the joy out of memorizing Scripture. The result is conflict.

Conflict can also stem from major philosophical differences or when discussions regarding mission statement, development, or expansion arise, especially when everyone has a different idea of what the purpose of Christian education should be. Therefore, when issues come up that affect the structure of what we believe to be the ideal, conflict often looms around the corner.

Conflict is also a result of differing work styles. One teacher could see what another teacher may view as acceptable classroom behavior as inappropriate. It is important to realize that the more people depend on one another to achieve their own objectives, the greater potential there is for conflict to occur. If a sixth grade teacher does
not require his/her students to raise their hand to answer questions, the habits they have learned may conflict with the type of order the seventh grade teacher expects from his/her students.

Conflict in Christian school situations can also occur over issues that question our value system, such as holding a student back a grade. Some educators look only at the academic aspect of a student’s growth when deciding whether to pass or fail a student, while other teachers feel that it is important to look at the physical, academic, spiritual and social growth of the student. Thus a conflict arises over our sense of the purpose for education. Are we a school that educates the mind or a school that values the education of the whole child?

The methods by which we accomplish our goals can also cause conflict within the Christian school. When issues such as semester system, class size, year-round schooling, block scheduling, funding, and testing strategies are discussed, conflict between faculty, administration and board can soon follow because of people’s needs to realize their own interests in what they believe to be right.

It is important to realize that because of sin’s presence in the world, conflict in the Christian school is often unavoidable, yet it is something that can be positive when resolved properly and gives Christians an opportunity to serve as agents of God’s grace. Conflict, and effective resolution of that conflict often functions as a necessary factor within a healthy relationship. The process of resolving conflict “establishes our boundaries, defines our identities and helps us emerge with a clearer, stronger sense of ourselves” (Smalley, 1996, p. 59). Without conflict we, and the Christian school, remain stagnant. We become passive and are content to just “go with the flow.” “ Most people
do not enjoy facing conflict because it can be a debilitating force in the workplace. The frustration and anxiety associated with conflict and its resolution can reduce productivity and lower job satisfaction. On the other hand, it can also bring about positive change and result in more bonded relationships in the workplace” (Kreider, 1989, p.18).

In the Christian school setting conflict and its resolution can be constructive in the way that it pushes staff members and administration to make a needed change. If conflict is seen as a sign that things aren’t working and that something needs to be changed, it can then be used as a positive opportunity to clarify people’s expectations and goals. It can also create a problem-solving atmosphere in which staff members work together to resolve conflict and gain confidence in their ability to solve other problems that may arise. Conflict is to be redeemed as an opportunity to solve common problems in a way that honours God and benefits those involved (Sande, 1997).

Christian school staff members, therefore, must acknowledge that conflict does exist and embrace it as an opportunity to grow and change in a way that will unify us in our task of serving God through our teaching.

God expects us to learn from the experiences of other people. There are times when people in family groups, Churches, schools, businesses, and community organizations have different points of view about issues facing them. How they handle those differences is extremely important for life to flow positively, happily and smoothly. Those who don’t experience a successful resolution of conflict will encounter the pain, problems and struggles which conflict brings in their lives. Those who do find the right way to resolve their differences and settle
dispute in their lives will experience the gracious and bounteous blessings of God (Thomas, 1994, p. 63).

It is important that the Christian school community embrace conflict and effective resolution as an opportunity to grow because Thomas (1994) distinguishes that conflict is known to be cyclical in nature. He explains that when it is not handled and resolved carefully it can turn into a vicious circle that only grows in intensity. Therefore, it is important that Christian school staff members, boards and administration learn to resolve conflict properly because, if it is resolved poorly, unfinished feelings and issues will come up again and again (Thomas, 1994). Thomas also identifies that the cycle of conflict often begins with the development of tension. People often know that they are suffering tension through their own "early warning system" in which they notice intensified physical functions, feelings of unrest or imbalance occurring while they are in a non-physically threatening situation that causes them to question their own perceptions about the world (Anderson, 1996). Such feelings of tension may occur during a staff meeting when another teacher makes a motion to start ability-grouping students according to reading ability. If people are not able to clarify the situation or decide to run from the situation that has caused them to become tense or uncomfortable, they will often move to the second stage of the cycle—that of role dilemma.

When people are unable to make sense out of what has made them uneasy, they try to determine who is in charge of the situation and seek guidance from that person. In the case of ability grouping, teachers may debate the positive and negative aspects that come with ability grouping but get nowhere in their discussion. Ultimately the people involved will be looking towards the school principal, education committee or the
school’s core values to help guide them through this process. When and if this guidance is not found, the cycle can get more intricate because people will start collecting injustices about the other person or other group of people that is involved.

If, for example, there is a situation in which ability grouping is the issue of conflict, teachers may come to work loaded with educational psychology and learning theory textbooks, ready to defend their own platform. Unfortunately, people tend to stray from the factual knowledge that they could find in such resources, and instead start accusing the other teachers as those who are “old-school,” and start collecting information against “the other side.” Unfortunately, injustice collecting only separates the two groups further and does nothing to confront the problem or work together towards a resolution.

If steps are not taken to resolve the conflict by way of mediation and unification, conflict starts to spin out of control and results in confrontation or “war.” When the two sides have collected enough injustices on the other, they start to throw them at each other through hallway gossip, innuendos in staff room conversations, and at meetings. The main goal with regards to confrontation is that a compromise may be reached between the two parties. In the case of ability grouping, teachers may decide to engage in action research and recommend a trial program in one of the first grade classrooms, while the other class continues a more collaborative team approach to learning. If, however, a compromise is not made, the conflict moves to the next stage in which adjustments will automatically take place.

Regardless of the circumstances, conflict, or confrontation, adjustments automatically occur. Something will inevitably change. In the ability-grouping scenario
those involved could choose a variety of options. They could choose to deny the motion, further research the option, fully integrate the option, or engage in their own action research of the benefit of ability grouping. Regardless of the compromise or decision made, people involved in the conflict will have to make a choice as to how they are going to respond to the compromise made. They can choose to agree and submit to the decision, disagree and submit unwillingly, or remain uncooperative. In many cases, it is hard for people to participate in an activity that they do not wholeheartedly support, and they may find that their only option is to make an honest choice and leave.

The above cycle continues to repeat itself when conflict is not resolved properly. People who feel that they were not heard or dealt with fairly in a conflict situation are quick to jump on the conflict bandwagon to look for issues to start the process over again, causing it to grow in intensity. As this cycle continues, the conflict will also tend to get both tighter and uglier. Even when conflicts are resolved in a successful manner, we must realize that conflict will inevitably return. The people involved may be similar or different, and the issue may or may not be the same, but the negative energy will be similar if not identical to the previous cycle. If, however, “a group chooses to learn something about conflict resolution while working through one conflict, succeeding conflicts will not seem so severe or be as difficult to resolve” (Thomas, 1994, p. 28). In order to glorify God and avoid brokenness in resolving and dealing with conflict that may occur in Christian schools, it is important to know what our natural tendencies are in responding to conflict so that we can avoid this “vicious cycle.”
Tendencies in Resolving Conflict

Conflict is something that we would like to avoid; yet we know that in this life we can’t (Thomas, 1994). Some people see conflict as “a hazard that threatens to sweep them off of their feet and leave them bruised and hurting” (Sande, 1997, p. 17). As a result, we find it hard to face and try to resolve conflict without being hurt by it. That is because people react differently to it. Some people react to conflict aggressively, some people react passively, and others easily accept it. Therefore, before we can identify effective means of resolving conflict between Christian school staff members, it is important to understand what our human tendencies are in resolving conflict.

Sande (1997) identifies some of these tendencies and has represented them on what is known as “The Slippery Slope” (Appendix C), which coincides and will be further explained with some of the tendencies identified in a formalized conflict mode instrument designed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974). Sande looks at this slope as one that is covered with ice. If you go too far to the left or right, you can easily lose your footing and slide uncontrollably down the icy slope by responding out of aggression or passiveness.

On the left hand side of the slope (Appendix C) Sande says we have what we call the “peace-faking” responses of denial and flight. He writes that these responses are used when people want to escape or avoid conflict rather than solve it. These people often believe that Christians should always agree and are scared that conflict can do nothing but harm relationships. Some people become dishonest with themselves and therefore others, or they believe that “God wants me to go through this, so I’ll do His will
spiritually" and endure this conflict by pretending it doesn't exist. As a result, they have a tendency towards denial and flight (Sande, 1997).

When people go through denial, they pretend that there is no conflict to be dealt with or they refuse to take necessary steps to resolve a conflict properly. In this case, the problem often gets ignored and is expected to simply go away if it is left alone. The people involved in this behavior seem to think that if they believe “everything is great,” the conflict will disappear. Sande (1999) writes that when people come into situations of conflict, they often internalize it and feel that their personalities are being attacked. They have a tendency to believe that if they are faced with a conflict, their purpose, identity, and reputation may be threatened. As a result, they tend to engage in ineffective responses such as denying that a problem exists or withdrawing from the source of tension. These denial mechanisms are often accompanied by not taking a conflict seriously. Sande (1999) writes that many people fail to face conflict because they don’t believe they will be listened to, or they feel that the situation will blow over.

Sande (1999) identifies a second escape response as flight. When people respond with this passive mechanism, they often self-talk such phrases such as, “I’m too stupid,” “I’m a victim,” or “It’s too painful and I’ll get hurt again.” As a result, they try to escape conflict by running away from it. This involves such responses as quitting your job or taking a position at a different school in order to avoid dealing with conflict. While there are circumstances in which this response may be the only constructive way in which to resolve a conflict, in most cases it only delays or prevents a proper resolution.

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identify our tendencies to deny, take flight, or fake peace in a conflict situation as avoidance. This style of managing conflict acknowledges
the fact that none of us desire to live in conflict with each other. We want to avoid conflict because we want to avoid being hurt or rejected by others. Our ultimate goal is to survive the conflict by avoiding it and pretending that it does not exist. “It is not unnatural for us to want to avoid conflict. There are not many people who enjoy the tension and negative emotions that are often associated with confrontational experiences” (Smalley, 1992, p. 59). Such thought patterns make this mechanism a popular one in Christian communities. Those in Christian community often mistakenly interpret love as “turning the other cheek” or bending over backwards to accommodate the conflict because they view differences in Christian community as negative. Therefore, conflict often goes unresolved or gets “explained” away by external forces beyond our control rather than taking responsibility for them. Unfortunately, this leads to people bottling up their resentment and anger because the conflict is avoided and people can often end up exploding, or resenting the person they are in conflict with. In this case the focus can shift from finding a resolution to the problem to “keeping score” on the person. At this point, irrelevant facts and issues are raised which have no significance in the conflict situation.

Accommodation is another shadow identified on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument that many people may hide behind in resolving conflict. Instead of resolving the issue of contention, people often acquiesce and say, “Okay, have it your way this time, I’ll go along with you.” The person neglects his/her own feelings and concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person in self-sacrifice. As a consequence, many people not only experience physical signs of tension, but also may become apathetic and passive in their approach to their work. It is the writer’s observation that
people who respond to conflict in this way often become hesitant to offer their creativity
or ideas, feeling that they may not be good enough or smart enough and that no one
listens to them or appreciates what they have to say.

Crabb (1999) identifies our tendency to escape conflict by hiding behind
congeniality. He sees people rechannel conflict into cooperation on worthy projects and
soothe pain using consolation or relief in the midst of conflict. He states however, that
such relationships provide no cure for conflict; they simply hide it and allow those
concerned to channel their self-serving agendas into doing apparent good. He also claims
that people often double their efforts to conform to what others believe to be moral
principles of living.

When people engage in the above conflict management styles, they are using
escape tendencies that fall under the category of "peace-faking" or pretending that a
problem doesn't exist. This practice ultimately results in people evading the conflict and
searching within themselves for a reasonable solution or using a superficial coping
mechanism other than confrontation because they don't think that anything will change if
they take the conflict seriously and make attempts to resolve it. In many cases, people
also find it too personally painful to have the courage to engage in proper resolution of
conflict.

The opposite of "peace-faking" responses are those that we find on the right hand
side of Sande's (1999) "Slippery Slope." These are identified by Sande (1999) as attack
responses and are used by people who see conflict as a contest or an opportunity for
aggression. People who engage in these responses are often more concerned with coming
out as the winner in the conflict situation than in preserving their relationships. They
often take advantage of conflict situations and put as much pressure on their opponents as they feel necessary in order to dominate. In many cases, they would rather be “right” than “happy”.

Such an aggressive and “peace-breaking” response to conflict is identified as *competition* on the Thomas and Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. Competition occurs when a person or group of people decide that they want to have their way. The person or group then sets about to weaken the opposition either subversively or through direct, accusatory attacks and humiliation. This can be in the form of working quietly in the background, humiliating or weakening the people in opposition as well as going head to head with them and is often pursued at another’s expense. These methods of resolving conflict have a tendency to “demoralize” some and “neutralize” others so that positive resolution cannot occur.

Interestingly, Sande (1999) reports that while you would think that the people who use such attack responses have strong and confident personalities, the opposite is usually true in that those who feel weak or insecure in conflict situations also use them. The number one emotion behind anger is often fear of humiliation, failure, loss of control or respect. He explains that some people resort to such attack responses the minute they encounter conflict, while others move to these responses after they have tried to escape from conflict unsuccessfully (Sande, 1997) often because as a result of trying to avoid their conflict they have started to “keep score” on the person they are in conflict with and build up enough defenses against them to meet them in an aggressive and competitive way.
In the center of Sande’s (1999) “Slippery Slope” we find what he calls “peace-making” responses of overlooking an offense, discussing and negotiating a situation of conflict on a personal level, as well as receiving assistance through the help of a mediator or arbitrator. He identifies that such “conciliation responses” are ways in which we can respond to conflict biblically and seek out just resolutions to our differences.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument also points to human nature’s tendency to manage conflict in a way that seeks out peace. They identify people who tend to seek an acceptable agreement within a group as consensus builders or collaborators. This management style mirrors negotiation in that they allow others to express their own personal ideas and feelings about the issue. Collaboration facilitates building a better sense of community through the exchange of ideas. People are encouraged to talk about the values and issues at stake. They are motivated to seek an optimal solution for the good of community as opposed to protecting their own self-interests. Collaboration requires that people work at developing stronger relationships with each other so that they can take more ownership of their place within the organization to which they belong.

The Thomas-Kilmann instrument classifies a less practiced method of managing conflict as compromise. When people compromise, they try to negotiate or mediate a mutually acceptable solution to partially satisfy both parties. Compromise is something that some people avoid because it involves risking their ego. People tend to avoid it because they think that it involves giving in or accepting something that they don’t feel right about. This can happen when compromise is handled improperly. When handled in
a biblical and proper way, compromise acknowledges that none of us is perfect and that some ideas could perhaps be melded together to reach a solution to the conflict situation.

In understanding the above tendencies that we are drawn to in resolving conflict we need to acknowledge that the evil in conflict does not come from the fact that we have differences with each other, but occurs in doing wrong things to resolve the conflict. It is in the way we or others respond to the conflict that makes us want to avoid it. We need to acknowledge Plato’s statement that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and come to the realization that “Life without confrontation is directionless, aimless, passive. When unchallenged, human beings tend to drift, to wander, or to stagnate. Confrontation can be a gift” (Donahue, 1996, p. 120). Having conflict, then, is not the issue. The real issue is whether we can resolve conflict in a positive way.

McDowell (1993) states, “Our serious inability to cope with conflict is exhibited daily in the workplace” (p. 4). He is amazed at how quickly people will seek a job change after running into discord at work. He points out that most people would rather go through the effort of finding and taking a different position than attempting to resolve the tension in their current relationship. Unfortunately, such people still carry hurt, and painful emotions that may trigger conflict in their next job situation. This also rings true in the Christian school community. It is the writer’s observation that many teachers would rather move on to a different school situation or job that better fits their value system than face conflict with their peers or administration.

Despite the fact that we understand our sinful nature, living and working in a Christian community is never easy because our closeness to our colleagues often makes our imperfections glaringly obvious. While we must admit who we are at our worst and
acknowledge our brokenness and errors, we also need to understand our tendency to reaffirm our own identities and engage in “peace faking and breaking” tendencies when faced with conflict. As Christians, we need to move more towards “peace-making” habits and demonstrate our integrity by admitting and revealing our imperfections in conflict situations. This will enable us to resolve our problems in the spirit of love and humility, ultimately moving us towards acceptance and leading us to unification and togetherness in Christ. Gorman (1993), in interpreting Christ’s command of “Live in harmony with one another...if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:16, 18) points out that “harmony and peace speak of living positively with differences, not being uniform in thinking. True harmony comes from different notes played at the same time in an enriching, not discordant, manner” (p. 192).

As staff members and leaders in Christian schools, we need to realize that, when our lives are filled with unresolved conflict, we will have little success in sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ with others. We will be too busy reaffirming our actions and ourselves rather than learning from them. Crabb summarizes our calling to resolve conflict: “You were put here to reflect the character of God in the way you live, to pour out His life through yours towards whomever you’re with, however they treat you” (Crabb, 1999, p. 24). As people reconciled to God we are called therefore, to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict (Sande, 1998, p.253). We can do this by looking to the Bible and other biblical literature for further guidelines to effective conflict resolution.
A Biblical Mandate For Conflict Resolution

We don't often see the Bible as a study in conflict resolution. Yet, the struggle for harmony happens in virtually every chapter as God's people long for reconciliation and forgiveness from their sin. From the stories of conflict between Jacob and Esau, David and Saul, Solomon and the two mothers, Paul and Timothy, the Bible leads us through over 133 occasions in which people disagreed with each other. In telling the stories of conflict, Thomas (1993) tells us it also teaches us useful lessons in the art of conflict resolution and instills in us Christ’s calling to us to be peacemakers.

Jesus spent his final hours praying not that His life would be spared, but that His followers would get along with one another. John 17: 20-23 is Christ's prayer for us as a community of believers,

My prayer is not for my disciples alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus was deeply interested in peace solely because his purpose for being on earth was that of a peacekeeping mission. He came to earth to die on the cross so that we may have peace with God. While Christ was on earth He also called us to have peace with one another by using these words, "Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, he stated, “Blessed are the
peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” Peace and keeping the peace between others is part of our calling especially because peacemakers provide a powerful testimony to people who observe their character. When people strive to be peacemakers, others will eventually recognize that God himself is working in and through those who make peace.

Peace and unity are so important to God that Jesus’ command is to seek reconciliation with a brother even ahead of worship. He wanted us to know that we cannot love and worship God wholeheartedly if we are at odds with another person and have not done everything in our power to be reconciled. Matthew 5:21-22 states: “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 to your brother, then come and offer your gift.”

In responding to conflict as a peacemaker God calls us to, “rejoice in the Lord, always.” If we are dealing with conflict in a Christian school setting, we can rejoice that, because we exist in a faith community, those involved in the conflict situation with us also know the promise of salvation. Ultimately, “no conflict should overshadow the joy of having received forgiveness through Christ” (Sande, 1997, p. 77). As Christians, we need to be responsible makers of peace. Instead of avoiding conflict or demanding agreement with each other, we need to rejoice in the diversity of God’s creation and accept people who see things differently than we do. We must let others be whom they are in a way that shows we care, acknowledging God’s image in everyone and everything around us. We also need to be honest and accepting in the way that we respond to conflict. If we truly care for our colleagues, we will respect their perspective and rights and strive to resolve conflict without allowing it to grow to a deeper level of conflict.
By calling us to be peacemakers, God also calls us to accept that, because of sin, conflict is a natural part of life. Christian teachers need to be encouraged to see conflict as an assignment rather than an accident. We need to give life permission to be the way it is and acknowledge that God will not give us more than we can handle. God is working for good in every situation even though we may not always immediately know what that good is. When faced with situations of conflict, therefore, we need to replace our anxiety with prayer and thank God for what has already been done and ask Him for guidance through our current challenges.

In allowing us to endure conflict and other hardships, God teaches us to rely more on Him. He allows us to suffer the unpleasant consequences of our sins so that we will see our need for repentance (Psalm 119:6-7, NIV). Therefore, we can be encouraged to look at conflict as an opportunity to develop perseverance: “Consider it pure joy my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:3). If we acknowledge that “all things work together for good,” and that conflict is an inevitable part of life, Sande (1997) claims that we can then see conflict as an opportunity to strive to be more Christ-like in resolving conflict instead of looking at it as a personal challenge and threat.

The Bible calls us to glorify God in resolving conflict. Christian teachers can glorify God by asking Him how we can please and honour Him through the situation of conflict we are involved in. Asking ourselves questions such as, “Will exercising my rights please and honour God?” “Will it advance God’s Kingdom?” “Will it benefit others or is it essential for my own well being?” will allow us to stay focused on our
calling in responding to conflict. It will also keep us honest in regards to our own motives in resolving conflict.

The Bible teaches us that there are several ways in which we can be more like Christ in the way we deal with conflict. Romans 14:1-10 and 15:1-7 calls those who are strong in Christ to be patient with those who are weaker in Christ. In a conflict situation this rings true in that some people cannot handle conflict as well as others. In this case, those who are able to handle conflict and dispute confidently are called to overlook the weaker person’s follies for the sake of peace and harmony in the family of Christ.

Christians are encouraged to embrace and love those that they are in conflict with. We are encouraged to adopt the mind of Christ in resolving conflict. “Do not resist an evil person who sins against us. Christ was a friend to sinners…” (Matthew 11:19), he didn’t condone sin, nor reject sinners as people. Christians need to realize that sincere love overcomes all obstacles. It is important that we love others in our Christian school family and community regardless of their sin. True Christian love means that we care for the needs of others. When others make mistakes, we must continue caring for them and look for ways to help make their life better.

A necessary element in resolving conflict in a Christ-like manner is using humility when faced with conflict. When we realize that we, as Christian teachers, are not free from sin and face up to our own faults and imperfections, we are practicing humility. The key to practicing humility is to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3-4). Christians must “take the plank out of their own eye” (Matthew 7:3-5), and recognize the limits of their own understanding. Christian teachers must strive for a spirit of unity among staff and
accept each other just as Christ accepted us. We also need to look at other people as reasons for celebration. They are fellow strugglers, who, like us, sometimes fail miserably in their efforts to live their life in Christ. The most important lesson we can learn about humility, however, is that it does not forbid confrontation in conflict situations. It instead forbids the premature and improper confrontation we often engage in by using aggressive and self-preserving methods to resolve conflict instead of “submitting to each other out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

Christian teachers can submit to each other in a conflict situation through confession and repentance. James 5:16 call believers to “Confess your faults one to another and pray for one another that you may be healed.” One of the most freeing acts in life is that of confessing to God and the person(s) involved, what occurred between them to damage the relationship such as wrong actions, thoughts or feelings. When we confess our wrongdoings or feelings, we must be sure that we address our confession to all those whom are involved in the conflict situation. If this involves only one person such as another teacher or administrator, the confession needs to be done in private with that person. If, however, the conflict involved an entire staff of teachers, the confession needs to be made to all of those involved either publicly or privately. Confession is an intricate art. When we confess to our wrong actions we often feel humiliated and want to excuse our actions. Therefore, it is important for the person confessing to avoid using words such as “if,” “but,” and “maybe.” The incorporation of these words in a confession/repentance situation takes the responsibility off of the person and allows them to put the blame on something other than their own action. Because confession leads to
repentance or a "coming to our senses," it is important that we specifically admit what we have done and apologize for our behavior and seek forgiveness for it (Sande, 1997).

A vital part of confession is a change in behavior. This process is an important part of confessing because it demonstrates that the person is able to accept the consequences that are a result of their actions and make a conscious decision to change their behavior. Conflict should ultimately end in reconciliation, or a making right of the situation, since hurts in relationship can only be healed in relationship. This means that those involved in the conflict will have either accommodated, collaborated or compromised with each other to come up with a creative solution to the conflict. A change in behavior also ultimately means that the conflict is restored or "made right again." This does not only refer to the situation of conflict, but also to the relationship between the two people who are in conflict with each other. A change in behavior involves restoring the relationship of those involved in the conflict situation. This does not mean that the people involved in the conflict have to come out of the situation being best friends, but that they come out of the situation with a new regard for the other’s diversity, perspective and rights as a fellow image bearer of God.

True reconciliation or resolution of conflict cannot possibly happen without forgiveness. "In the middle of the wild ocean of shattered dreams and broken lives, the community of Christ celebrates God's forgiveness; they believe in what each other could become, they never minimize sin, but exercise grace" (Crabb, 19, p. 178). True forgiveness cannot happen without grace. In practicing forgiveness with others we must forgive others as He has forgiven us. Because we are the most forgiven people in the world, Christians have a responsibility to be the most forgiving people in the world.
Forgiveness is not easy. Many Christians are willing to forgive a person for what they have done wrong, but are not willing to forget the wrongdoing. Such forgiveness is not true forgiveness because memories of wrongdoing build up and simply lead to future conflicts. Forgiveness must involve a conscious choice and deliberate action to move past the action or conflict situation and not talk or act on what was done in the future. When we wholeheartedly forgive people, we must promise to move past the incident and not dwell on it, bring it up in the future, talk to others about it or allow it to stand between or hinder a personal or working relationship with the other person.

Asking for forgiveness is also an intricate matter. Those seeking forgiveness must be sure that they want to change the behavior that led up to the dispute or conflict before asking for forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness and not making a conscious decision to change that which caused the conflict or problem in the future is futile if we are simply going to ask forgiveness and repeat the behavior.

Forgiveness, therefore, is difficult and multi-faceted. It is not always easy to ask for forgiveness or to forgive. When this happens, reconciliation of conflict and restoration of personal or working relationships do not always happen. For that reason biblical conciliation responses as identified earlier on “The Slippery Slope” also include mediation, arbitration and discipline. When conflict cannot be resolved on a personal level it often has to be assisted by others. If a dispute can’t be resolved through personal peacemaking, Matthew 18:16 tells us, “If he will not listen, take one or two others along.” Therefore, when we fail to make peace on a personal level using confession and humility in discussing and negotiating our conflicts, we may need to bring along a mediator. This involves asking one or more people to come along with us to help us to
communicate more effectively and advise possible solutions to help reconcile the conflict.

If mediation doesn’t work and the parties involved have still not collaborated, accommodated or compromised, the Bible, in 1 Corinthians 6 tells us to “appoint as judges even men of little account in the church.” When two people or a group of people cannot come to a voluntary agreement in a situation of conflict, other people, such as an education committee or a group of other teachers, may be appointed to listen to the situation and then render a decision as to what they think will best reconcile an agreement. When people or fellow staff members still refuse to listen or refuse to be reconciled or do what is right, other people such as school board members, teacher federations, or even Christian Teacher Associations may have to intervene in the conflict situation to promote justice, repentance, and forgiveness.

Resolving conflict is an intricate matter. Just as surgery is not the answer to all pain and suffering, the above biblical means for resolving conflict is not the answer in all conflict situations. Some conflicts that occur in Christian school settings are minor conflicts that can be ignored and overlooked as easily as a paper cut covered with a band-aid. Other conflicts that arise in the Christian school setting are like broken bones. They need the assistance of a splint or a cast and need to be nursed back to working order. Still others appear in the form of life and death situations in which the only viable option left is prayer and God’s miraculous intervention.

**Keys to Effective Resolution of Staff Conflict in Christian Schools**

In light of the intricate nature of Christian community, our tendencies in dealing with conflict, and God’s desire for us when facing conflict, it is important that we have
guidelines that we follow when seeking to honour and glorify God through the process of conflict resolution. The following keys briefly outline the biblical aspects discussed in the previous chapter that are important to the process of effective resolution of staff conflict in a Christian school setting.

1. Acknowledge that conflict is a necessary part of life and a healthy aspect of Christian organization. Conflict is not negative. It has been a part of life since the fall of man and is therefore inevitable. God created each person in the body of Christ with different gifts, talents and perspectives. As a result of our differences we often face conflict. Without conflict, Christian schools can remain stagnant in practice since, in many cases, conflict brings about necessary change.

2. See conflict resolution as an assignment from God, not an accident. It is our assignment to resolve any conflict we face in a way that enables us to learn from it rather than come out the winner in the situation. Without conflict in our lives we often remain stagnant and get stale in fulfilling our purpose as Christian teachers. It is only by learning from each other and our differences that we can grow as a body of Christ to create more unified relationships between staff members. We must strive to follow God’s command to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4) and understand that conflict is part of God’s leading path. We should desire to learn from the conflict by asking God what He wants us to learn from it.

3. Pay attention to the conflict’s significance and acknowledge the problem. This includes weighing whether the conflict is a minor offense
that can be overlooked, or if it is one that needs to be confronted and dealt with. This involves facing a conflict head on and acknowledging the problem and not withdrawing from it. Many people have a tendency to avoid dealing with conflict by hiding under the “all things work together for good” principle, undermining the significance of the problem by sweeping it under a mat and not confronting it. When people do this, they shrug off conflict because they don’t feel that it is a big enough issue to deal with, yet subconsciously allow injustices to collect in their mind thus “keeping score” on the other person.

4. **Attack the problem and not the person.** In resolving conflict we must recognize that God is greater than our mistakes. We need to watch our reaction in situations of conflict and see anger as something that should be our reaction to an unjust situation and not the faults of another individual. It is important that we understand that we are all broken people living in a broken world. As a body of Christ we need to understand that no matter how hard we try, we still err in our ways. Part of our Christian duty is to encourage others in their walk as followers of Christ. That encouragement can take place through proper resolution of conflict.

5. **Strive to be Christ-like in resolving conflict.** The way a person deals with a situation of conflict and goes about resolving it is vital to effective resolution. In seeking resolution to conflict, it is important to consider others better than us and recognize the limits of our own understanding. When faced with situations of conflict we must:
• **Pray** and ask God what He is saying to us and seek His guidance in the matter. Ask God to humble you and acknowledge the fact that we are all broken beings living in a broken world.

• **Be honest** about how you feel about the situation of conflict, how it has affected you, and how you may have contributed to the problem. If you played a key role in causing the conflict, remember the following steps for confession as taken from Sande’s *The Peacemaker* (1997):

1. Address all involved in the situation.

2. Avoid the words “if, but, and maybe.” When you use these words you avoid taking responsibility for your actions as you are ultimately making excuses for what you have done.

3. Admit specifically. Don’t beat around the bush. Be direct in acknowledging what you have done.

4. Apologize with sincerity.

5. Accept the consequences of your actions.

6. Alter your behavior as a heartfelt sign that you have learned something from the situation.

7. Ask forgiveness and allow the person some time to forgive you. Forgiveness doesn’t always come immediately as it is a process that takes time.
• Demonstrate integrity first of all by going to the person with which you are experiencing conflict and speaking the truth in love. Admit to the other person how their actions made you feel, how your actions may have contributed to the situation, and remove the log from your own eye by putting the other person at ease by humbling yourself. Seek to see the other person’s side, exhibiting empathy by looking beyond your hurt and acknowledging the other person’s view and the reason for their actions (stress, emotional well-being, etc.).

• Show love for one another and realize that sincere love overcomes all obstacles. We need to make sure we are not attacking the person but the wrongdoing. After all, there is no better place to be able to deal with conflict than with fellow believers who like us are sinful by nature. If we acknowledge our sinful nature, we understand that we are all sinful people in need of others to help correct, encourage and build us up through the body of Christ. Romans 14:15 says “Stop turning critical eyes on one another. If we must be critical, let us be critical of our own conduct and see that we do nothing to make a brother stumble or fall.”

6. Go and be reconciled. This is the last step in resolving conflict. It is the step that allows us to demonstrate repentance, and restoration by replacing hostility and separation with peace and friendship (Sande, 1997). Complete reconciliation is dependent upon two steps: forgiveness and being reconciliation.
Forgive as God forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

Forgiveness is not easy. People walk away from conflict feeling hurt and attacked and often end up forgiving the person but not wanting anything to do with them afterwards. It is important when seeking or granting forgiveness that we remember the four promises of forgiveness as outlined in Sande’s *The Peacemaker* (1997).

i. I will not think about this incident by dwelling on it.

ii. I will not bring up this incident in the future and use it against you.

iii. I will not talk to others about this incident.

iv. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our relationship.

It is not expected that forgiveness will always be an easy thing. It needs to become an act of will and is very dependent upon God’s grace. Since the act of forgiveness is really about our personal freedom and less about the other person we need to realize that when repentance does not occur God still calls us to forgive the person through what is known as positional forgiveness in which we make a commitment to God in which we
pray that He will instill in us a loving and merciful attitude towards the person who offended us.

**b. Reconciliation.** The act of forgiveness ultimately removes the barrier between us and the person who wronged us. Reconciliation is similar to tearing down a wall and clearing away the debris. It is important to recognize that while this person does not have to become our best friend, it does mean that while we work through our differences, we discover a respect and appreciation for each other allowing the other person to regain our trust.

7. **Seek wise counsel.** Conflict does not always happen on a personal one-on-one situation. If following the Matthew 5 principle of going to our respective brother and showing him his fault, just between the two of us through discussion, does not lead to reconciliation, it is important to seek wise counsel on the matter by seeking the aid of someone who will negotiate the conflict and strive to find a solution that meets both interests. If a resolution still does not occur, follow the principle found in Matthew 18 by taking one or two others along to mediate the situation of conflict.
Chapter 2

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify the keys to effective resolution of staff conflict in Christian schools in an inductive manner, it was necessary to look at examples and situations that have already occurred within this setting through case studies and learn from them. These case studies identified the fact that conflict is indeed a part of life within the Christian school and prove that we are dependent upon effective biblical keys in resolution of conflict to help maintain unity and trust within the Christian school community. These studies also bring to attention factors that were not outlined as effective keys in the literature review. Such factors as servant leadership, community, and common vision come into question as being necessary not only to the resolution process, but to the Christian school organization as a whole if it is to go about resolving conflict effectively and according to God’s calling.

Since the focus of this study was concerned with the process of how conflict was resolved and sought to better understand behavior from a subject’s own experience or reference, no precise measurements or data collection to test a hypothesis were used. The description of findings occurs through narratives as opposed to statistical measures found in quantitative research. Since no specific scientific method or theories existed that directly applied to this study, the best approach to develop an understanding of how conflict has been resolved was through qualitative research in the form of case studies. A case study is a “detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents or one particular event” (Bogdan, 1998, p. 54). These case
studies focused on situational analysis to study how different situations of conflict between teachers or administration were resolved within the Christian school setting and remained open to lessons of what went well and what opportunities for learning occurred.

The director of the Society of Christian Schools in this area was contacted and gave assurance that there were several situations of conflict that he knew about and would be worthy of such a study. He contacted people, told them about this study, and determined their willingness to participate in the proposed case studies once approval of this project and the formation of an ethical release statement were completed (See Appendix A and B).

All of the situations represented in these case studies are different in nature. Some situations represented are minor while others are more significant. Some are examples of resolved conflict while others are unresolved. Information for the case studies was obtained through various interviews with those who experienced conflict in Christian school settings with other teachers or their respective administration. Information from teachers about the nature of the conflict, the effect it had on staff unity, and the means through which they believe the conflict was effectively or ineffectively resolved was received through a series of open-ended questions. It should be noted that the information contained in these studies were based on one person’s perspective of the conflict and represents their perception of how the situation was handled effectively or ineffectively. In all of the case studies included in this project, the names of those involved, as well as the respective school involved have been kept confidential. The names of teachers and schools have been changed to respect anonymity and protect the identity of situations that may remain hurtful or unresolved.
By telling the stories of those involved in both resolved and unresolved situations of conflict some insights have been gained. Important questions regarding the role servant leadership, shared vision, and community play in being vital to the successful utilization of the presented keys to effective resolution of conflict arose as a result of the studies and stand as possible questions for further study. These stories brought to attention that such factors (as listed above) could play out in conflict situations and prevent effective resolution even when many of the biblical keys presented as being effective are implemented. It is hoped that from this information, teachers may identify the traits that are needed to effectively resolve conflict and add them to their skill-set so that they and their colleagues may embrace future situations of conflict as a chance to model their Christ-like image. In addition, these studies stressed the importance of remaining unified in task and purpose by responding to conflict in a non-threatening, and unobtrusive manner as agents of God’s grace so that it won’t obstruct Christian community or the education of God’s children!

Results

The learned effective and ineffective keys to resolution of conflict uncovered through these case studies were evaluated according to the trends (The Slippery Slope and Thomas-Kilmann Instrument) that they followed in resolving the conflict and then compared to the outlined biblical keys to resolution of conflict in a discussion following the case studies. Implications such as servant leadership, shared vision and community came into question as being an important framework for effective resolution and will be discussed in a final chapter.
Delimitations

There are several limits to this study. The first limitation is that it focused only on teachers who teach in a Christian school. This assumed that all those involved in the conflict situations knew the saving grace of the promise of salvation and accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. It also assumed that the people involved understood the basic framework of the Bible and the character of Jesus Christ. This limits the study in that it was hoped that Christians have a different understanding of how to conduct themselves in a situation of conflict and would feel compelled to honour God through all aspects of their life.

A second limitation of this study is that the people involved in the case studies were not identified at random. The case studies represented in this project were identified either by word of mouth and recommendation from people who knew about my desire to complete this study. The other subjects for case study were identified by the Director of the Society of Christian Schools, who was familiar with situations of conflict that have occurred in this particular area and recommended these people as potential case studies for this project. Furthermore, because all of the scenarios represented occurred between an administrator and a teacher, there is a power differential that exists. This differential comes into play in the understanding that an administrator is in a leadership position and has the authority to make decisions that he/she believes to be in the best interest of the school community. Some of those decisions are not always in all staff members' interests but in the interest of the school community as a whole and there are situations in which staff members are expected to accommodate.
Because a power differential exists between teachers and administrators there are also confidentiality constraints that prevent an administrator from sharing information regarding some situations of conflict. Therefore, all of the case studies represented follow qualitative research in that they capture one person’s interpretation of his or her situation of conflict and their perception of the way it was resolved. It is important to understand therefore that there may have been underlying circumstances that caused the situation to be resolved in a way that the represented teacher did not classify as effective.

When engaging in qualitative research the researcher is concerned with understanding behavior from the subject’s own frame or reference. Therefore it is important to realize and acknowledge that all researchers are affected somewhat by writer’s bias. Even though guard was taken to prevent bias through honest and accurate field notes and editing, it is important to realize that the researcher’s main goal was to add knowledge on effective resolution of conflict rather than pass judgement on a setting or situation. It is important to acknowledge, however that when writing from one person’s perspective, writer’s bias can come into play in writing up such case studies.

A further limitation of this study is that the case studies all took place in a geographical area of North America that spans a radius of approximately 200 kilometers. It is an area that is very ethnically and denominationally diverse and encompasses both rural and urban areas. It is unique in that there are over twelve growing Christian schools in such a small area. The conflicts that schools in this area are faced with may or may not be the same as those that may be found in Christian schools in other areas.

Finally, it is important to realize that in uncovering effective and ineffective keys to the resolution of conflict in Christian schools through case studies, a whole other set of
issues regarding organizational structure were uncovered as being foundational to 
effective resolution of conflict between staff members in Christian school settings. These 
issues of community, servant-leadership and shared vision were those perceived by the 
researcher and respective teachers to be lacking in some of the presented case studies and 
stand as possible implications and questions for further study.
Chapter 3

Case Studies

When All Else Fails

*All names of the people involved, as well as the school involved have been changed.*

Anna was hired by Unity Christian School in 1987. She taught at this school for two and a half years during which time she experienced conflict with her administrator. This is a recounting of her story.

Anna began her career teaching seventh grade at Unity Christian School. According to her colleagues, she was a confident, fun-loving and creative teacher who continually challenged and encouraged her students. While Anna loved teaching the students in her class, she soon realized that she had a personality conflict with the administrator of the school. She describes him as a “man who demanded control in all situations.” Anna remembers him walking into teachers’ classrooms (her own as well as other teachers) and correcting or arguing with the teacher in front of their students about theological or philosophical issues being taught in their classroom. She recounts that this behavior was also often repeated in the staff room where he would continue to berate her and fellow teachers in front of colleagues.

Anna describes her administrator as a man who was not only “power hungry,” but also as a man who also had a very dismal sense of Christianity which he believed his staff members should share. Instead of celebrating Christ’s forgiveness and sacrifice on the cross, he would focus on the “war within Christian’s souls” and resist the redemptive aspect of Christianity. Anna claims that his need for power and passion for this view of Christianity led him to continually correct and belittle his staff in hope that they would
conform and teach his theology. His goal each time was to intimidate his employees in front of students and colleagues thus maintaining a controlling atmosphere throughout the school community. She remembers one specific incident in which she had invited a war veteran to speak to the students about his experiences for a Remembrance Day chapel. After the chapel (which she thought was highly effective) was over he paid a visit to her classroom and in front of her students told her how awful the chapel was and how terrible it was that the veteran didn’t talk about God’s love or address the war all Christians had going on within their souls.

Anna describes herself as someone who is not easily intimidated and as someone who stood strong not only in her theology, but in her abilities as an educator. Unlike other teachers who simply accepted the administrator’s intimidation as part of daily routine at Unity Christian, Anna would not allow herself to be belittled by him. When approached by him, she would confront him and argue back instead of succumbing to his endless intimidation. Realizing that Anna would not be intimidated and controlled by verbal intimidation, he found that he could control her by sexually harassing her.

Anna recalls the first instance of harassment. “He was berating me and I was arguing with him. All of a sudden, he put his hand on my buttocks and I froze. He knew right away that what he had done scared me and that I didn’t know how to react. As a result he repeated this action knowing he had control over me.” Despite being asked to stop this action, Anna explains that he continued it, sometimes placing his hand on her buttocks for as long as ten seconds at a time.

Two and a half years into her job at Unity, Anna had enough. After another episode of being berated in front of her colleagues she marched into the administrator’s
office and quit on the spot. She went to the board president and told him about the administrator’s intimidation tactics and sexual harassment. He initially believed her but didn’t realize the extent of what Anna describes as, “her administrator’s psychological problems,” and ended up believing the administrator’s side of the story. Anna followed up this visit by writing many letters to the board. However, the board of this school, Anna explained, was made up of many people who shared the same theology as the administrator and generally followed his guidance under any circumstance. Anna’s letters didn’t lead to any resolution of the alleged issues at all. Instead she ended up being fired because board members sided with the principal claiming they didn’t believe her accusations.

Anna was determined to deal with this problem. She took her allegations to the Society of Christian Schools in hope that they would further investigate her accusations. In hindsight Anna claims that the Society was fairly naïve in dealing with issues of sexual harassment, not believing it could happen on their doorstep. She also claims that they didn’t realize the extent of this administrator’s psychological problems. As a result, the Society acknowledged that the harassment did take place but shared the blame between Anna and the administrator. Anna was told that she should not argue with administration and that she should be more sensitive to constructive criticism. She was also told she needed to watch what she wore to work. They offered her a half a year of severance pay and she was told to “drop the issue.”

Upset that the Society of Christian Schools failed to acknowledge her concerns she went to the Human Rights Commission and reported what had happened. The Human Rights Commission investigated and threatened legal action against the Society
of Christian Schools for being naïve regarding the possibility of sexual harassment in Christian organizations. As a result of negotiation between the Human Rights Commission and the Society of Christian Schools, the Society agreed to create a policy regarding sexual harassment in Christian schools and was required to hold educational sessions regarding sexual harassment at the annual Christian School Teacher’s Convention and Professional Days.

Anna never returned to Unity Christian School, instead she got a job at another Christian school. Despite the horrific experience she endured with her administrator at Unity Christian, she had a very successful and rewarding teaching experience at her new school. From her experience at Unity Christian Anna has learned to stay away from people who display personality traits similar to her former administrator. Anna feels that the Society of Christian Schools was very naïve in thinking that sexual harassment couldn’t happen on their “back door.” She feels satisfied though that her case was proof that this type of harassment does happen in Christian organizations. She is pleased now that as a result of her experience other teachers have been educated on this issue and now have a policy in place to protect them if they are confronted with sexual harassment.

The Cycle of Conflict

The root of this conflict seems to have started with a difference in philosophical objectives. It is clear that Anna’s administrator wanted to ensure that his staff accepted his theological and philosophical views within their respective classrooms and the school as a whole. In order to do this Anna reported that he often argued and belittled his teachers personally and in front of others in an effort to get them to conform to his educational and theological philosophy.
This conflict cycle seems to have started as a result of the tension that took place when Anna’s administrator repeatedly used argumentation and other intimidation tactics to get his way. In this case the tension caused a role dilemma that seemed to develop as a result of Anna’s confidence in her own theological views and pedagogy and failure to be dissuaded by his tactics to get her to conform. Anna’s administrator eventually responded to this role dilemma in a competitive way through which he sought to control her through sexual harassment. Even though the harassment took Anna by surprise and she repeatedly pleaded for it to stop, it continued until it led to a confrontation. When Anna could take no more of the intimidation that she was enduring, she confronted her administrator and quit her job.

This cycle and confrontation was intensified by the fact that after she quit her job, Anna went to the school board to voice her complaints and was as a result “fired” from her job. Despite the fact that Anna sought many different measures to seek resolution to the conflict and harassment she endured, this situation shows us how the conflict cycle can keep going when it is not resolved effectively. This conflict continues to play out in Anna’s life in that it not only caused her to seek other employment, it has also made her avoid people with personality traits that were similar to her former administrator’s. It is obvious that this cycle of conflict was not resolved properly and has in turn had life altering affects on a teacher and a school community as a whole.

Discussion

In a conflict situation such as Anna’s, effective resolution seems impossible. Despite the bitter resolution that occurred in this case, several conflict management styles
as well as strengths and weaknesses were displayed in relation to the keys identified as being important to effective resolution of conflict.

One of the strengths in this case study is that Anna repeatedly confronted her administrator when he would try to belittle and intimidate her in front of staff members and students. Here we identify that Anna initially dealt with her administrator through what Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identify as going “head to head” and competing with him in order to try to stop his ongoing intimidation and belittling tactics. Unfortunately, competing with him only seemed to make the problem grow in that it led to more power control on the administrator’s part, ultimately leading to sexual harassment as a form of control. When Anna confronted her administrator on the issue of sexual harassment and asked him to stop, he seemed to realize that he found a tool with which he could control her. Several months later, unable to bear the intimidation any longer, she again confronted him and quit her job in an effort to end the abuse.

Despite getting herself out of this abusive situation, Anna wanted to prevent what had happened to her from happening to anyone else, so she went to the school board and wrote letters explaining the wrongdoing. When this didn’t bring resolution to the conflict, Anna pursued it further by going to the Society of Christian Schools and the Human Rights Commission to pursue effective resolution of the conflict. Thus, she demonstrated Sande’s “peace-making” traits by showing what one could do when conflict isn’t resolved by discussion between two parties by seeking wise counsel through negotiation and mediation.

A further strength in this case is that Anna has learned a lot more about her own personality. She has learned to discern and stay away from people who display
personalities similar to her former administrator thus evading future conflict. A positive result of this situation is the fact that awareness that sexual harassment can occur in the Christian workplace grew as a result of Anna’s experience. Because Anna ended up compromising with the many parties involved in the resolution of this conflict, many teachers have been educated through abuse workshops and seminars at teacher’s conventions.

A big reason this issue was not resolved effectively was because Anna’s administrator showed no humility, repentance, or integrity in regards to her accusations. As a result, he never admitted his wrongdoing, apologized for his actions, or sought forgiveness. In essence, his style of managing any sort of conflict was through what Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identify as competition, demoralizing those he was in conflict with in an effort to “win” the situation. This management style was not only seen in the resolution of this conflict, but more specifically in the way that he intimidated and belittled his staff as well. Therefore, reconciliation and restoration of relationship was impossible without his having the courage and integrity to look inside himself.

Anna’s problem was made more complex by the fact that Unity’s School Board didn’t acknowledge that a problem existed and in essence fired Anna from her position as a teacher. It heightened when she went to the Society of Christian Schools with her problem and after mediation was told she was partially responsible for the conflict, given a half-year severance pay and told to “drop the issue” and move on.

In hindsight, I am left with a couple of questions. Would Anna’s problems with her administrator maybe not have reached the point of harassment if she had been more confrontational with him on his intimidation tactics before his need for control led to
harassment? Perhaps, if she and other staff members had been more proactive in dealing with his tactics by going to the school board with her concerns it is possible that the administrator might have been dealt with on this issue and her accusation of harassment might have been taken more seriously if prior problems had already been documented.

Anna’s story shows the sad reality of what can happen when people who abuse power are put in a position of authority through which they intimidate others to conform to their ideal. Despite feeling misunderstood and hurt from the resolution of this conflict, Anna has dealt with the fact that humility and repentance were not expressed and has done her best to not let this hinder her career as a teacher. She instead pursued a successful and rewarding teaching career at another school. Anna is, however, thankful that this administrator’s problems have come to light in recent years and is reassured by the knowledge that he is no longer serving in such a position.
The Different Hats of Teaching

*Names of all involved, as well as the identity of the school have been changed.*

Joanne has been a teacher at Gateway Christian School for twelve years. She loves the school and has the utmost respect for her students, colleagues and administrative team. Her colleagues know Joanne as a teacher who has a passion for teaching and as a compassionate advocate for the students in her classroom. She is seen not only as an academic coach and mentor for her students, but also a character and spiritual role model for them as well.

While Joanne claims that she has experienced minor conflicts with staff members in the past, she found that they were always resolved quickly and effectively. The conflict that she recently faced, however, was quite different from ones she had experienced before. It was different in the sense that it did not get resolved quickly and was centered on something that was not even remotely academic.

The conflict that Joanne experienced had nothing to do with the regular ins and outs of school life. She recalls that it originated over the annual Hepatitis B shots that the Ministry of Health administers to all sixth grade students throughout the province. Public health nurses regularly come in to a school a couple weeks before the shots are to take place to show the students a brief video outlining the procedure and necessity of becoming immunized. During this visit teachers are simply asked to prepare the students for the inoculations by handing out and collecting parental consent forms, and reminding students to wear short sleeves and eat a good breakfast on the day the inoculation is to take place.
Over the six years that Joanne taught grade six she has found that most of her students face Hepatitis B shots without batting an eye. She has also found that there are a small percentage of students who fear the thought of receiving a shot. During her first year as a sixth grade teacher, Joanne had a parent specifically request that she accompany and sit beside her child for reassurance during the shot. Realizing that some students were quite traumatized by the prospect of a needle, she recognized that other students might desire the same reassurance. She told all of her students that if they would like her to accompany them during the shot to let her know and she would gladly sit with them during the procedure.

When the time came for the Hepatitis B shots, Joanne allowed students who had no problem receiving the shot to go first and then accompanied the students who wanted her reassurance into the library. Janet, the public health nurse, however, did not like the fact that Joanne wanted to sit beside some of her students during the shot and insisted that it would only make matters worse. Joanne advocated that some students were a little frightened and would like to have a familiar face in the room with them and proceeded to sit with her students when requested. While the health nurse wasn’t happy about this, Joanne continued on in what she described as “part of her role as a teacher.”

This pattern continued each year Joanne taught grade 6 despite a change in health nurses. She felt that she was always able to come to a mutual agreement with the new nurses regarding her arrangement with her kids. This past year, however, Joanne reported that a new public health nurse was assigned to her school and came in to speak to the principal regarding the upcoming Hepatitis B shots. Her visit included questions and comments about a certain teacher who some of the nurses claimed, “instilled
unnecessary fear in students by insisting she is present during the procedure." The teacher that she was talking about was Joanne.

Apparently the original nurse Janet, whom Joanne encountered six years before, had warned Cora, the new nurse assigned to Gateway Christian School, about Joanne’s desire to sit with students who were worried about receiving a shot. This information was heightened by a phone call to the Public Health Unit by a parent of one of Joanne’s student’s who had a lot of questions about the procedure because her child seemed hesitant. The combination of these two events left the new health nurse with some concerns that warranted a visit to Gateway Christian School to find out what was going on. Thus, the conflict as Joanne perceived it, began.

Cora made a visit to Gateway Christian School to introduce herself to the administration and dispel her own concern that students at the school had unnecessary fear instilled in them about the Hepatitis B shot. During her meeting with Bill, the principal of the school, Cora brought up her concern regarding what she knew about Joanne’s presence during the HB shot procedure. Unaware of what Joanne’s actions during HB procedure were, Bill called upon Vera, the vice principal of the school and Joanne’s fellow sixth grade teacher, to verify what was happening when the shots were administered. Vera acknowledged that Joanne did sit with some of her students to reassure them during the procedure. Neither she nor Barbara, the other sixth grade teacher, had found it necessary to do so with their students, and she agreed that Joanne’s doing so might turn a procedure that is simple to many students into an ordeal that students dread going through.
During the meeting with Vera and Bill, Cora mentioned that Janet, the first health nurse that Joanne encountered, refused to come back to Gateway to administer the Hepatitis B shots. Upset by this, Bill asked Joanne to take part in the meeting that was going on. During this meeting, Cora, Bill, and Vera confronted Joanne with the fact that they felt she was unnecessarily instilling fear in the students in her class about the HB shots and that her presence during the procedure made the procedure a bigger deal than what it was. Joanne reports that she felt attacked by the insinuations made by those in attendance at the meeting and felt that her administrative team did not support her and humiliated her in front of Cora. She felt that she was not given fair warning about the purpose of the meeting and that she was not given a fair hearing during the meeting. Joanne reports that she what bothered her even more was that accusations about her actions were made in a confrontational way in front of a fellow teammate and a stranger (the new health nurse). She felt that if a problem existed, Bill should have talked to her about it one on one rather than confronting her with it in a group setting.

Joanne recalls that the meeting ended with Bill telling her that she was to say “nothing” further about the HB shot process to her students and that she was not allowed to be present during the HB shot procedure. Joanne angrily and grudgingly agreed to say nothing to her students and steered clear from the HB shot process when it was time for her class to be administered the shot. Joanne was quite upset, however, that, after forty minutes of time since the shot had been administered, two of her students had not returned to class and she did not know of their whereabouts. When she questioned other students about their absence, she was told that one student had passed out after the shot and was in the library still very distraught. She found him lying on pillows behind
bookcases in the library. When she went looking for the other student she found her crying and being reassured by Vera, the other 6th grade teacher up in the office.

Feeling ambushed and attacked in the meeting that had happened a few days before the immunization, and now upset that no one had informed her where her students were, Joanne wrote a fairly inflammatory note to Bill outlining her concern that the health nurse had not notified her that two of her students were upset and not able to return to class. She followed up this note with a call to the Health Unit to talk to Cora about the HB shot process. She felt that, if she was not able to be present during the procedure, she should at least be told if some of her students were ill, distraught, or unable to return to class. When Joanne placed the call, Cora was not in so she left a message for Cora to call her back.

When Cora called Joanne back she got Bill on the phone. Bill had not yet read Joanne’s note regarding the nurses’ lack of professionalism and was upset that she had tried to contact Cora regarding the HB shots. This incident and the contents of the note started a fierce letter writing process between Bill and Joanne during which time they did not speak to one another about resolving the issue for at least a one week time period (partly because government evaluation was taking place at the same time). The letters that followed this note were exchanged on the same day, and read as follows:

Dear Joanne,

Thank you for your note you put in my box yesterday.

In response, I am going to say some hard things. But I say them out of love for you.

First of all, in response to your note, the nurses did not have to tell you where your students were. That is not their job and they don’t know which student belongs to which teacher in any case. They don’t even have to consider looking for the teacher. Anyway, the classes had different teachers during that time. That is your team’s responsibility. The nurses did a professional job in taking care of the students who had extra fear. Vera was there. I was there. Please do not accuse them of a lack of professionalism.
You need to realize that these students are not just your students, but our students. This is our village. These are our students. We are in charge of them, not just you.

What was exciting according to the nurses is that the students did it: they faced the unpleasant situation with courage and a brave face. Cora was quite pleased with the students' attitude and behavior.

I am irritated that you phoned Cora, our nurse, yesterday. To voice a concern or a complaint or suggestion to her is none of your business. It is mine. This is especially irritating to me since we did have our discussion last week. If you wanted to voice an apology or a compliment, that is fine. But it would be better in writing, rather than phoning. I have asked Cora not to return your call.

Bob (former principal) has talked to you about this issue in the past. He and Janet, our nurse, at the time, talked to you about changing your attitude on how to treat the students. Janet no longer wants to come here because she doesn't want to deal with your attitude on this issue. Your attitude continues to be a problem. It irriantes me that it is still an issue. I was quite astonished last week at your lack of a teachable spirit on this issue. Vera, Cora, and I gave you our thoughts on what we thought was best and you grudgingly agreed to say nothing, but your attitude and body language told us that we were out to lunch. It humiliates me that GCS has this reputation of having this problem of students having too much fear and that nurses don't want to be at our school. I thought that nurses would jump at the chance to be at our school because of our great staff and atmosphere. Instead, I get the sense that nurses are tripping over themselves to stay away. Your attitude on this issue has been the source.

I don't want you to address our students, again about HB shots or their fears about it.

If your view and attitude on this issue does not change, I will recommend a change of teaching assignments for next year.

By the way, speaking of professionalism, the issue of lateness is also still a concern.

Sincerely,

Bill

Dear Bill,

You are someone I respect tremendously. You have been a great impact on my career and my life. I have admired your love for the Lord and have valued your friendship. This is why I am so utterly shocked at this recent chain of events over the issue of HB shots and nurses. Because we have had a great, twelve-year working relationship, I am confused over the developments of this situation. It is so important to me that you can understand my feelings and views.

As for our initial meeting last week with you, Vera, Cora and myself, you wrote, "I was quite astonished last week at your lack of a teachable spirit on this issue. Vera, Cora, and I gave you our thoughts on what we thought was best and you grudgingly agreed to say nothing, but your attitude and body language told us that we were out to lunch."

I came to this meeting in good faith and met Cora for the very first time there. Immediately, insinuations were made by the nurse that I was instilling fear among my students about HB shots. This is a completely false accusation and I objected wholeheartedly. Neither Cora, you nor Vera have ever witnessed my discussions on the HB shots or the way I support a child, during the procedure. It seemed to me that I was alone in objecting these claims apparently made by a past nurse. I was shocked and saddened that my administrative team, who has worked with me for
twelve years and knows my character well, remained unsupportive of me as these accusations of fear mongering were made. It saddens me greatly that I was given no prior warning as to the agenda of this meeting and that I was given no pre-meeting opportunity for a fair hearing over the procedure of HB shots. I was then further humiliated when you began to give me a character analysis in front of this near stranger nurse and in front of my colleague and friend, Vera. I would have preferred you to have done this privately. My values that I hold dear as a teacher on the rights of the child, and my position on the procedure of the injections were not appreciated. Any body language you may have observed reflected my shock at being so attacked. Under these circumstances, I became angry and for this anger I should and do apologize. Please forgive me for my anger.

You have called me, "unteachable." The fact is that we have a difference of opinion. As I said at the meeting, we will have to agree to disagree, but recognizing your authority as my principal, I asked you to tell me what exactly you would have me say to my students. You have stated that I said, "nothing" to my kids. The fact is, I did say exactly what you wanted me to say to my students after the meeting. Further, I am asking the Lord to make me teachable and open to whatever He would have me learn from this situation.

As I explained in the meeting, I do not have a problem with the professionalism of the nurses I have a problem with the procedure. These students are ten and eleven year olds. These students are not adults. Some have never had a needle before and do not have any prior past experience on which to draw form. Some have had negative experiences in the past. Some parents have requested that I be present at the time of the shot to be a support to their child. Does it not make sense to have a familiar, trusted face in the room, demonstrating a positive example of how to deal with the injection. To expect a child to enter a room full of strangers with needles, as nice as the nurses may be, is an unrealistic expectation for all students. A child and or a parent should have the right to request the presence of their child’s teacher during the injections. It is beyond my comprehension why any nurse should object to a calming force in the room, which only proves to assist them in their task at hand. I can’t help but wonder why a nurse would have such an antagonistic attitude to a teacher expressing compassion and support. I question the rights of the child in this procedure.

I whole-heartedly agree with your “village,” analogy. Interesting, how you were present and that Vera was present during the injections, but I could not be. Am I also not part of that “village”?

You have written: “Bob has talked to you on this issue in the past. He and Janet, our nurse at the time, talked to you about changing your attitude on how to treat students.”

I honestly have absolutely no recollection of any such meeting, ever taking place. I don not know where you got your information, but this doesn’t sound in the least bit accurate. However, as I am human, I could be mistaken. I will definitely contact Bob and ask him about this. What is this attitude that needs changing? I have always had a compassionate attitude and have treated my students' feelings with respect and caring.

You have written: “I don’t want you to address our students, again about HB shots or their fears about it.” “It humiliates me that GCS has this reputation of having this problem of students having too much fear, that nurses don’t want to be at our school...Instead, I sense that nurses are tripping over themselves to stay away. Your attitude on this issue has been the source.”

First, let me respond by saying I have never had a discussion of student fears regarding HB shots. This would be counter productive in my goal of assuring them that these shots are not painful and that everything will go fine. I have always been a calming, reassuring, positive force in dealing with the HB subject. I am extremely hurt as my integrity as a caring teacher is insulted in assuming otherwise. I would have thought to be rather commended on being a dispeller of fears, a gentle presence and I hope, a Christ-like example being sensitive and compassionate to the needs of the children.
Next, it bears mentioning that for the last one or two (?) years we've had an outstanding nurse, who's never objected to me being present at the time of injections, who welcomed my assistance in calming kids who cry, swoon or throw up. She always communicated with me what was happening, organized classes to come in one at a time; thereby knowing which students belonged to which teacher. She was very kind and friendly to work with. There was no evidence of her "tripping over (her) self to get away."

Finally, I would like to discuss this large assumption about me being the "source of fear" among the students. In my twelve-year record at Gateway Christian School, never have I had a complaint as being a source of fear in a child's life. Students have expressed anxiety about the shots after hearing exaggerated claims from students in grade seven who've had the shot and want to tease the new grade sixes. After our India field trip, Mr. John Doe, not realizing the effect of his words, laughed and stated in front of the class about unusually large HB needles and gestured with his hands. The students looked quite fearful and I immediately said that the needles were in fact quite small and there was nothing to be afraid of. Students also react quite dramatically to other students who swoon, scream out, cry, throw up, or hold their shoulders with pained grimaces. It causes a fear chain reaction. I have observed this myself in the past and students reported these happenings to me after last week's HB session. Let's not forget the fact that getting injections is basically uncomfortable in nature to begin with, and as you've said, "unpleasant." Given all these factors, it seems incredulous to point at me being "the source of students' fears." If you have concerns over how I deal with the HB issue and my students, please, you, Vera and Cora are more than welcome to observe me and participate in the discussion.

I am delighted to hear that most of the students "...faced the unpleasant situation with courage and a brave face." You continued to state: "Cora was quite pleased with the students' attitude and behavior." I am very glad to hear it as this is just further evidence that I do my job well in preparing the students for the injections. I also received such feedback with our nurse of the past couple years. I am sorry that I do not recall her name.

You wrote: "I am irritated that you phoned Cora, our nurse, yesterday. To voice a concern or complaint to her is none of your business. It's mine...I have asked Cora not to return your call."

I am quite surprised at your reaction. What must you think of me in order that you felt it necessary to protect Cora from me? In my 12 years at GCS, have I proved untrustworthy? Shall I go through other staff, parents and community resource people through you as well? In 12 years, when have I had any history of trying to undermine you? Why would you assume that I was attempting that now? I am deeply saddened. I was following Biblical principle, in going directly to the person to which an offense has occurred for the purposes of working out reconciliation. I hoped that Cora and I could work out an amicable and mutually convenient plan so that when she felt she needed to assist one of my students further and keep them from going back to class, I could be notified. I had absolutely no antagonistic motives toward Cora. As I have said before, I have a problem with the HB procedure not the nurses themselves. Again, I am saddened that I was not given a hearing about this before action took place. I did, as you said I should, direct my concerns to you, in written form. It was not my intent to argue or criticize Cora, but rather work out a mutually co-operative plan, professional to professional. I can't help wonder what on earth it suggests to Cora when she is told not to return my call. I wonder if this adds to the idea that I must be the (alleged) source of conflict with nurses and GCS. I feel that I have been unfairly labeled and unfairly judged.

You have stated: "the nurses do not have to tell you where your students are...they don't even have to consider looking for the teacher." It seems to me that it is my responsibility as a teacher to know where all of my kids are at all times, to the best of my ability. I believe this is why we emphasize attendance in the mornings, during fire drills and during outings at sports events and field trips. It seems common sense that the person who detains the child, knows where the child is and therefore would be the logical choice to send word to the teacher.
You've stated: "This is your team's responsibility." Unfortunately, and because you have also stated that, "the classes had different teachers during that time." My team was unable to communicate with me. When I returned to my own class forty minutes later, after a random check, I noted that David Jamison and Julie Brown were missing. The students informed me that David was in the library, distraught and that they had no idea what happened to Julie. I had to go look for them. David was lying on pillows, behind the bookcases by himself in the library. He said he had been given something to eat and I asked him to say thank you to the nurse and accompanied him in saying "thank-you" to Cora. Next, I found Julie in the office. Vera was assisting Julie and another girl from another class who had been in tears. Vera was doing an excellent job of re-assuring the girls, exactly in the manner I would have done.

As you do not think nurses should be involved in communicating with us as teachers and more specifically, me, then may I suggest that a better system of communication should be in place? It is concerning to me not to know where a child is after 40 minutes.

In conclusion, I wish to say that I have always found you to be compassionate, supportive and willing to discuss issues with me. This is why I am so saddened and bewildered that we've come to this point. You have, on the other hand, made many things clear to me. Because of my love for Christ and His commandments, I will continue to submit to your authority and do exactly as you have outlined in your letter. I will also continue to pray for you.

Sincerely,

Joanne

Exactly one week after these letters were exchanged and the government evaluation team had completed their evaluation of the school, Bill pulled Joanne aside and asked her if she would like to meet. Joanne describes the meeting as one in which she witnessed Bill acting very differently than she had ever seen before. He was someone whom she had looked at as a father figure in the past, but in this case he appeared very disturbed and angry regarding the whole issue and her lack of "teachable spirit."

During the meeting Bill did admit that he should have met with her on a one to one basis about the issue rather than pulling her out of class to meet with the whole group of people involved. He also complimented her on the letter she had written in response to his but did not back down from his stance on the issue. Not only did he not let this issue rest, he also brought up and discussed issues that bothered him about her actions, such as her lateness for school in the morning and her allowance of students to wear stocking feet.
rather than insisting that they wear their indoor shoes in the classroom (an issue of contention between her and the other sixth grade teachers).

After Joanne pled the case of the rights of the students in her class to have someone with them while having the HB shots, Bill stressed, “Joanne, just forget it!” “It isn’t an issue.” Joanne, feeling very strongly about the rights of the students in her class realized that this would have to be an issue in which they simply would not and could not agree. Together with the fact that she and Bill had worked together for twelve years without incident and seeing him as someone put in a position of authority over her by Christ, she followed the Bible’s guidelines to submit to authority and pray for him and thus dropped the issue.

Despite the fact that Joanne has forgiven Bill for the hurt feelings she felt as a result of this incident, she would have liked to see this conflict handled more effectively. This issue has become a mute point between Joanne and Bill, however their relationship continues to grow in a healthy way.

**The Cycle of Conflict**

This situation of conflict is quite unique in that the root of this conflict arose from something that isn’t classified as something that is academic or educational. The source of this conflict was a result of a difference in values in regards to the rights of child and a teacher’s perception of her role as a child’s educator in regards to her presence during student inoculations. Even though the conflict stemmed from something as minor as the health nurse coming in to inoculate students against Hepatitis B, it goes deeper than this in that it led to a significant conflict between Joanne and Bill.
This cycle of conflict started when Joanne was called into Bill’s office and in front of Cora and Vera was accused of instilling “unnecessary fear” in her students regarding HB shots and as a result, caused them to become a bigger deal for students than they needed to be. Joanne admitted that she felt attacked by such accusations and did not feel that she was heard in regards to her views of her role as a teacher and what she believed to be the wishes of many parents and students. These feelings led Joanne to question her role as a teacher in that she was instructed that she could not be present during the upcoming HB shot process and was told not to instruct her students any further regarding the inoculations.

Feeling that this was unfair and that she had been improperly judged, Joanne seems to have felt further discredited in her role as a teacher when the two other sixth grade teachers were allowed to be present with their students while receiving the shot and she was not. This was further enhanced when she returned to her homeroom 40 minutes after the procedure was completed and found that two of her students were missing and was told by their fellow students that they were sick and upset as a result of the HB procedure. As a result of this role dilemma, Joanne wrote a note to Bill voicing her concerns and then placed a call to the Public Health Unit in an attempt to speak to Cora to reach a mutually convenient plan to let her know when one of her students needed further assistance and could not return to class. Because Cora was not in, Joanne left a message for her to return her call.

This conflict became more complex when Cora returned Joanne’s phone call the next day and Bill answered the phone. Upset by the note Joanne had sent him regarding the HB procedure the day before, Bill seemed to be further bothered that Joanne had
taken it upon herself to call the health nurse without consulting him. He seemed to be further aggravated by the fact that a simple HB procedure seemed to be a continuing issue. Thus a letter writing campaign ensued and took on the form of further confrontation and competition between Joanne and Bill in which a collection of injustices seemed to play out in the way that other issues of professionalism and fairness seemed to be brought up.

This cycle seems to have been made more difficult to resolve quickly in that the school was facing Government Evaluation soon after this conflict arose. As a result of the possible stress this placed on both administration and teachers, silence between the two went on for a week before discussion and resolution were sought. Another factor in the resolution of this conflict is that it occurred between and administrator and teacher. Someone placed in and administrative role has the authority to make decisions that are in the best interest of the school as a whole, rather than in the interest of the teachers. The fact that Gateway was getting a bad name among public health nurses, led Bill to make a tough decision that in this case did not meet the interest of one of his staff members. The cycle however, did complete itself in that adjustments were made on Joanne’s part in that she realized Bill’s role of authority over her, as well as the fact that he felt that the HB shot procedure shouldn’t even be an issue and agreed to not bring it up again. It has been further completed in that Bill and Joanne’s relationship has been restored to what it had been prior to the conflict.

**Discussion**

We can all learn important lessons from Joanne’s story. Not many people have the capacity to look beyond their hurt and feelings of injustice by dropping an issue they
feel passionate about in order to restore a relationship. This is why this study teaches us so much about accommodation, forgiveness and integrity.

A definite strength in this study comes through in the letter that Joanne received from Bill, her administrator. Despite the fact that Bill admitted that he was going to say some hard things in the letter, he insisted that he was going to say them out of love for her. Even though Joanne reportedly felt very attacked by his letter, she responded to it in a way that was respectful and non-threatening. She showed humility in her response and voiced her concerns in a way that showed integrity, while clearly explaining her position.

The most important implication we can learn from this study is the fact that Joanne and Bill followed some of the identified key biblical principles in trying to effectively resolve this conflict. Joanne realized that the issue was somewhat minor in relation to a good twelve-year working relationship that the two had and thus dealt with the conflict through what Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identify as accommodation. She also realized that Bill was put in a position of authority over her and that she was called to submit to the authority he had over her. Joanne admits to spending a lot of time in prayer, especially during the week of silence that ensued after letters were exchanged, seeking guidance from God in how to best solve the issue.

Through prayer Joanne was able to empathize and understand that stress may have played a role in how the situation was dealt with seeing as how the school was undergoing a government evaluation at the same time this incident occurred. As a result, she was able to see beyond the issue by looking at the relationship she had with Bill in the past and accept his authority, thus forgiving him for the way he dealt with the issue.
Despite the admirable strengths that were outlined above, there are also some definite weaknesses this case displays. The first happened early in the conflict in that Joanne was confronted on the issue in a fairly aggressive manner. She was asked to join a meeting that was already in progress. Joanne should have been approached on this issue on a one-to-one basis with Bill, not in front of a colleague and complete stranger. At the same time however, Bill showed integrity in admitting that he understood he had been unfair to her by not meeting with her first and informing her of the health nurse’s concerns.

Another definite flaw in this process is that Bill followed the tendency of collecting other injustices regarding Joanne’s character and brought them up in their meeting. He attacked her lack of “teachable spirit” on this issue and then brought other issues such as lateness and the school “shoe rule” as ammunition in his attack on her. Bill followed the tendency Sande (1999) identified of “keeping score” with the person they are in conflict with. This tendency also shows us what can happen when small issues, such as Joanne’s lateness, that bother us get “swept under the mat” and lie in the back of our minds. It demonstrates conflicts cyclical and vicious nature in that the small issues build up and grow into monstrosities when they are finally confronted.

At the same time, the significance of the source of the conflict was also underestimated which is seen in the way that the issue was accommodated and in the long run avoided. Joanne obviously had very strong views of her role as a teacher and the rights of the students in her class. Bill was unfair in telling her, “This is not an issue. Just forget about it.” As a result, Joanne ignored the significance of the problem and accommodated a resolution by putting her feelings aside to resolve the issue. Joanne
ensured that this issue wouldn’t come up between the two of them again as she also followed what Sande (1999) identifies as human nature’s tendency of flight and Thomas-Kilmann’s mode of avoidance by requesting a grade change the following year.

Finally, this issue teaches us something about the role of emotion in a conflict situation. Joanne admitted to feeling very “attacked” and “ambushed” during the meeting with Vera, Bill, Cora and herself and acknowledges that her body language during the meeting came off as very hostile and defensive. She understands how this might have been misinterpreted as a “lack of teachable spirit.” Bill, however, also responded to the nurse’s concerns in a way that showed anger. Instead of thinking about the issue and steps that he could take to resolve the problem, he acted impulsively by calling Joanne into the meeting without giving her fair hearing. Both parties, in their letter writing that followed the incident, also demonstrated impulsive action and emotional reaction. For example, Bill, while admitting he was going to say some hard things to Joanne, appears to be writing the letter when he was feeling angry or as if his authority had been undermined.

Emotion also plays a role in this case study in that Joanne says stress contributed to the way this issue was dealt with from day one. She explained that every five years a school has to go through a government evaluation in order to maintain its government funding. Bill only took over the role of principal a year and a half ago and this was to be the first evaluation he faced as an administrator. This, Joanne believes, caused the issue to play out the way it did. Joanne claims, “In all my twelve years of working with Bill, I have never seen him display the characteristics I saw when I dealt with this conflict. I have forgiven him and have attributed a lot of it to stress.”
A concern I have about this case study is that in conversation with Bill to seek his permission to use this incident as a case study he claimed he could hardly remember it. As I reminded him of some of the details he gave me permission to use it and said, “See, this is what happens when conflict is resolved effectively. You don’t even remember it when it is over.” This leads me to believe that Bill feels like this conflict was resolved effectively. The feeling that I got from Joanne on the other hand is that while the conflict is no longer an issue it is because she managed her conflict by accommodating and thus sacrificed the issue to restore relationship. Her feelings are supported in that the issue of Hepatitis B shots remains a mute point between the two of them. In this case many biblical aspects of conflict resolution were displayed as forgiveness took place and relationship was restored, but the issue simply came down to, “We’ll have to agree to disagree,” and a teacher making a grade change to ensure that the issue would not come up again.

Finally, a celebration in regards to this study came when I shared this case study and analysis of conflict with Bill. He shared with me that, while reading the study, he came to understand how important it is to confront little issues before they turn into bigger more uncontrollable issues. He was able to look back and see that issues such as Joanne’s lateness to school and her passive stance on the school “shoe rule” contributed to the way this incident played out. In his words, he claims, “It (the Hepatitis B incident) was the straw that broke the camels back.” He said that he has learned that he has to be more aggressive in confronting small issues when they happen so that they don’t build up and end up spinning out of control as they did in this particular situation!
Encouragement and Empowerment

*Names of all involved as well as the name of school have been changed.

Kyle accepted a job at Shalom Christian School in 1990. He took on the job of athletic director in a school that he describes as having a struggling athletic program and a less than adequate gym for a school of its size. He recalls that the school's athletic program had such a bad reputation when he took over that it was on the verge of being kicked out of the high school sports association. Kyle admits that he took on a very challenging role, but was excited about the challenge of developing a high quality athletic program and having input into a new gym facility for the school.

Kyle experienced conflict during his ten-year teaching career at Shalom Christian School for what he explains as a variety of reasons. Developing a decent athletic program entailed a lot of extra work to raise funds for athletics, organizing tournaments and coaching teams. While he enjoyed his work, he felt as if he was working alone. Kyle knew what his vision for the athletic program at Shalom Christian was, but didn’t feel like Calvin and Doug, the school’s administrative team, had any idea as to what his vision was or the work and funding it would entail to realize this vision. In essence, he reports that he didn’t feel as if they shared his passion for a successful athletic program partly because they themselves were very much into the arts and also wanted to see the fine arts program thrive.

As time went on Kyle claims he began to feel more and more alienated by administration and other staff. He felt somewhat used in the way that other curricular areas were receiving adequate funds, yet he had to work hard to raise ample money to make the athletic program become a reality. He knows that Calvin and Doug knew how
much work he was putting into the program and could see him become more and more exhausted in his efforts. Yet, Kyle claims, they would never encourage him or offer to help him in what he was doing. They would simply offer him an empty solution by telling him, "Kyle, why don’t you just go home.”

In the meantime, all of Kyle’s hard work was paying off. The athletic program was thriving and receiving recognition for several local, district and Provincial championships. He perceived that as the program received more and more recognition, administration started to feel more and more threatened, especially since they put high value on the arts program, which was not thriving at that time. Kyle says he started to feel as if he and the administration grew more and more distant, almost to a point where he believed that they wanted to see him fail in his endeavors.

This was made more apparent to him as time went on. Concerned about the lack of chapel time that the school was implementing and what was happening during that time, Kyle brought it up at a staff meeting. Kyle felt as if the administration team handled the issue as if they were being attacked. Instead of opening his concerns up for staff discussion, they challenged him to become weekly Chapel Coordinator in addition to his already busy extra-curricular schedule. Despite the fact that they gave him one planning block per week to work on planning chapels, he felt like they showed no empathy whatsoever in terms of knowing how busy he already was in organizing and maintaining the athletic program. During the two years that he worked coordinating chapels for the student body, the only type of feedback he ever heard about them was critical. If a chapel happened to be particularly moving or meaningful, he never heard any type of positive reinforcement or support for what he was doing.
Kyle’s feeling of not being supported only became clearer when two years later, he resigned from his duties as Chapel Coordinator and the person who took over his job was given two planning blocks per week to plan the weekly chapels. He felt heightened frustration at the reaction of administration when he resigned his duties as athletic director in order to pursue his Doctoral Degree. Administration, faced with the task of replacing Kyle, decided that they needed to better empower the new athletic director by giving whomever it was another planning block per week to prepare for tournaments and other athletic duties. They also offered a ten percent increase in pay to the person who took on the job realizing that it entailed a lot of time outside of school hours. This came as a blow to Kyle, especially since he had worked so hard for ten years and sacrificed a lot of his own time to build up the program without reasonable empowerment from the administration to help him to meet the challenges.

Kyle also experienced conflict in other ways. He remembers Calvin approaching him early in his career at the school and telling him that he "was principal material and that he would be a principal within five years." While becoming a principal was never Kyle’s pursuit, he did have an interest in the administrative aspect of education. He admits being disappointed that Calvin and Doug recognized his leadership gifts, but never encouraged or empowered him to use his leadership abilities in an administrative realm.

Five years into his work at Shalom Christian a note on the staff room wipe board appeared announcing an opening for vice principal. All those who were interested were to let Calvin know in the next two days. Kyle went home and thought about Calvin's words several years before and decided to let his name stand for the position. He was
disappointed when, only a week or so later, the administration announced the name of the new vice principal (a fellow staff member) without even giving Kyle an interview for the job. He admits feeling stung by the entire process and feeling as if they knew whom they wanted in the position before even announcing that the job was open. When Kyle approached Calvin on the fact that he didn't even receive the benefit of an interview, he reports that he was told that they didn't interview him because they felt that he would make "a better principal than vice principal." Kyle says that he found this to be a "cop-out excuse" because it is reasonable to assume that it makes more sense for someone to learn the role of a vice principal before becoming a principal.

Feeling unsupported and unappreciated in his job as Athletic Director and upset over the process of picking a vice principal, Kyle decided that he was going to address Calvin with some of his concerns. Kyle admits that during his first five years of teaching at Shalom Christian he treated Calvin the way he expected to be treated, as if he was a "big daddy" or "king" over the school. Frustrated by what was happening, Kyle decided it was time to get away from tiptoeing around him and decided to confront some of the issues he had and express some of the concerns he had.

Kyle met with Calvin and politely addressed some of the issues that were bothering him. He found that Calvin became really mad and got really defensive when Kyle voiced his concerns. He claimed that Kyle just had "sour grapes" over the fact that he didn't get the job as vice principal and that he needed to get past it. He felt that Calvin became more and more threatened by the fact that there was conflict between the two of them, especially since he found him to be a top-down administrator who usually called the shots at the school. The two continually grew more and more apart until Kyle
finally requested calling someone in to help them resolve their differences. The Chairman of the Shalom Christian School Board agreed to try and help them resolve their differences.

The meeting between the three of them did not go well. Kyle found that Calvin was defensive throughout the meeting and that he wouldn't listen to his concerns. At one point during the meeting he even threatened to open a file he kept on Kyle to share his concerns about the conflict they were experiencing. The Chairman could see that this meeting was not going anywhere and made a recommendation that the two of them meet together outside of school on a regular basis to try and appease the situation. Kyle remembers that Calvin agreed to initiate regular breakfast meetings so they would each gain an appreciation for each other's concerns. These breakfast meetings happened just once.

Kyle reports that he felt more and more estranged from the administration and the people he worked with and decided to take a year's leave of absence to finish up his Doctoral Degree. At the end of that year he decided to resign from his job at Shalom Christian and pursue other opportunities. As a result of his experience at Shalom, he learned not only a lot about himself, but also about the importance of servant leadership. Kyle pointed out that he did not feel Calvin and Don were servant leaders. He found that they were powerful managers rather than empowering people who encouraged their staff, or related to their staff in an interpersonal way. He also found that they were unable to confront situations of conflict and embrace them as a necessary aspect of a healthy organization. He found that they were reactive rather than proactive leaders and didn't handle confrontation or conflict with humility or grace. Kyle pointed out that Calvin and
Doug had taken over leadership of Shalom Christian School several years before by leading somewhat of a staff revolt against a former principal. He commented that they maintained their leadership in the same way they gained it; as powerful warriors who were afraid that they were going to lose power the way they had won it.

As a result of the conflict he experienced, Kyle acknowledges that he has also learned things about himself. In hindsight, he admits that he might have had expectations of administration that they couldn't meet. Therefore, he felt conflict because they couldn't match his expectations. He now realizes that he has to take responsibility for "staying fresh" and avoiding burnout by not overworking himself and taking responsibility for his own mental wellness rather than depending on the support of those around him.

The Conflict Cycle

It is obvious that Kyle's conflict with Calvin was cyclical in nature. Kyle's conflict seemed to begin with feelings of tension he experienced over being overworked in his vision of implementing a successful sports program within the school and mounted when he did not feel that his goals for the program were understood or appreciated by his administration.

These feelings of tension led to a further role dilemma when other teachers and administration, noticing his heavy work load would simply offer him empty solutions that did not lead to a reduced work load. Fuel was added to this dilemma when, during a staff meeting, Kyle brought up his concerns about the school's chapel program. Instead of looking at and discussing ways in which the program could be made better as a whole staff, Kyle was challenged by administration to take this responsibility on in addition to
his already heavy workload. The cycle seems to have turned heated and confrontational when, after being told five years previously that he was “principal material,” Kyle was not even given an interview when the position of vice-principal became vacant. This was enhanced by the fact that, when he resigned from his position as Chapel Coordinator and Athletic Director, the people who filled his vacancy were given increased prep time and pay as a perk to carrying out their responsibilities.

With all of these feelings of tension bottled up, Kyle seemed to have had enough “injustices” collected to lead to confrontation. Unfortunately, all attempts at seeking sound resolution to this conflict even through mediation did not work. This conflict seems to have resulted in a competition in which neither party wanted to back down in order to seek resolution. As a result, the cycle of conflict was never effectively resolved and simply faded away when Kyle adjusted by resigning from his position to pursue other opportunities.

**Discussion**

Once again there is a lot to be learned from this case study, especially since effective resolution didn’t happen. Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from this story is that clear vision is a necessity for unification between staff members, and that unification is of vital importance to relationship between staff members. Kyle and Calvin obviously did not see eye to eye on Kyle’s vision for athletics at Shalom Christian School. In fact, it’s not even clear if Calvin had any idea as of what Kyle’s vision for the athletics program was. This lack of communication became a source of tension between them.
A lack of unity regarding Kyle’s goals for the athletic program also led to his feelings of being unsupported. He reported that he felt as if he was working alone with no one sharing his passion for a successful athletic program. Therefore, a whole string of problems lay in waiting. It is obvious that in the first couple years of Kyle’s teaching career at Shalom, he and Calvin seemed to have a neutral working relationship that gradually deteriorated as time went on. One of the key factors in the deterioration of this relationship was the fact that Kyle felt more and more autonomous and alienated in his work as time went on. He not only felt unsupported by a lack of funding that Shalom provided his athletic department, he also felt unsupported when people pretended to acknowledge that he was overworked by telling him to go home but never empathized by offering to reduce his work load. In Kyle’s eyes this didn’t help the problem because it simply put off work that eventually had to be done.

The problems between Calvin and Kyle seemed to escalate when the job for vice principal came up. Kyle remembered Calvin’s encouragement during his first year of teaching and felt cheated when he didn’t even receive an interview when he applied for the job. This disturbed him because he felt that Calvin had instilled empty hope by telling him that he “would be a principal within five years,” especially since he didn’t follow up his words with any type of encouragement or mentorship program. This incident, as well as being pressured to take the role of Chapel Coordinator, left him feeling more and more unsupported in his work. Not only that, but it taught Kyle the lesson of, “don’t criticize or you’ll get more work”. It seemed that the more he complained or questioned the administration, the more he got alienated.
The incident with the vice principal application seemed to be the breaking point in this story. Kyle finally had enough and was ready to confront the issue. Unfortunately, the fact that the problem had been bottled up and avoided for so long might have hindered effective resolution of this problem. When Kyle let his administrator know how he was feeling, Calvin became quite defensive and appeared to feel like he was being attacked. He responded to the conflict through what the Thomas-Kilmann instrument identifies as a competitive style of conflict management. Because Kyle’s description of those meetings were not clearly recalled, one has to wonder if Kyle’s feelings had been expressed to Calvin several years before when it initially arose, if the problem might have not escalated to the point it was at. The fact that Kyle approached Calvin about issues that had been brewing for five or six years perhaps caused him to perhaps “keep score” and become too emotionally involved to be able to attack the problem and not the person.

At the same time, Calvin, when confronted with the problem, avoided it and seemed to make no acknowledgement that a problem existed. He reacted in a way that lacked integrity and undermined the problem that existed between the two. In no way did he empathize with the way that Kyle was feeling, show any understanding, or take any responsibility for what he was going through. Instead, he attributed the problem as one that was brought on as a result of Kyle having “sour grapes over the vice-principal issue.”

It was encouraging to see that when resolution did not happen in a one-on-one situation, Kyle and Calvin did make attempts to bring in a third party to help them resolve the issue. Unfortunately, this mediation didn’t really bring about any productive results. Even though Calvin and Kyle did compromise and agree to meet for breakfast on an occasional basis to try and restore their relationship, neither of them seemed
committed to doing so. This suggests an important point in resolving conflict effectively. True effective resolution of conflict happens when relationship is restored, not when one person walks away from a situation feeling like they have “won” the conflict. It seems as if the conflict between Calvin and Kyle would only be resolved if it came down to what the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument identifies as a competitive verdict of, “I was right and you were wrong,” instead of a situation in which they could be honest about what happened and learn from it, trying to restore their relationship and build each other up.

Despite the fact that Kyle resigned from his teaching position at Shalom without effectively resolving the conflict between himself and Calvin, he is not bitter about it today and admits that he has forgiven Calvin. We can all learn from the fact that Kyle has acknowledged that he discovered a lot of things about himself through this process. Even though he was not able to show integrity in initially resolving the conflict with Calvin, he admits that maybe he had expectations of administration that they couldn’t meet. He also admits that despite his bitterness at the ineffective resolution of the conflict, he now looks at it as something that has lead him down God’s path.
Chapter 4

Summary

In summarizing this study I am able to draw together several implications that we can learn about effective resolution of conflict between staff members in a Christian school. The first implication is obvious. Even though all four case studies show evidence of attempting to resolve their conflict with some of the keys identified earlier as being effective, none of them were resolved in a way that demonstrated true reconciliation. Therefore, it is conclusive that effective resolution of conflict is also dependent upon other factors that were not outlined in the model presented earlier. In arriving at this conclusion, it is important to summarize what was learned and affirmed in regards to the keys earlier presented as being effective to the resolution of conflict.

First of all, it is my understanding that most of the people involved in the case studies had trouble acknowledging that conflict is a necessary part of life. This is especially evident in Anna’s story, as no one should have to endure the intimidation tactics that she endured at the hands of her administrator. I highly doubt that Anna today could say that the conflict she experienced was a healthy part of Christian organization; nor would I expect her to change her opinion to fit into the mold of what was outlined earlier as a key to effective resolution. There are some conflicts that are negative by nature and despite our efforts to learn from them and seek God’s guidance in resolving them, they stay with us as scars from open wounds, never disappearing and constantly reminding us of the sin that exists in this world.
Despite the fact that all of these conflicts were painful for each of the teachers involved, it is gratifying to see that when looking back on it, Kyle could recognize that even though his conflict was not resolved, he could see that God had worked in his life through the conflict and realize that he has become a better person because of it. In other words, he could identify how his situation was not an accident and may have actually been part of God’s plan in leading him down His path. In Anna’s case, part of the resolution meant that she needed to put aside thoughts of winning her case by looking beyond herself and her needs, ensuring that other teachers learned from her conflict by receiving education about sexual harassment in the workplace. Joanne also learned something through her conflict with Bill. She learned that stress can sometimes play a role in how resolution of a conflict plays out and that sometimes you have to sacrifice an issue to maintain a relationship. She was also reminded of God’s calling to obey and submit to authority.

Secondly, all of the study cases exhibit some form of acknowledging the significance of the problem they faced. This is especially evident in Anna’s case as she quit her job and immediately took the problem to the board level. Due to the severe nature of the problem she took the issue to a higher power until she felt that it was resolved in a way that she could live with. In Kyle’s case, he might have addressed the significance of his issue earlier by discussing his feelings and concerns with his administrator or board members before the problems bottled up and escalated to the level they did, thus becoming a major issue. In Joanne’s case, however, it is obvious that she felt very strongly about the issue she was dealing with, but realizing she was not being
heard or understood regarding the situation, decided to sacrifice it by agreeing to disagree.

Thirdly, Joanne’s story clearly showed a situation in which she *attacked the problem and not the person*. While upset by the problem she faced, she looked beyond the situation and justified the matter in accordance to the fact that she had always had a great relationship with Bill. Because of this she was able to come to an understanding that the reason the conflict played out the way it did was partially due to stress. In Anna’s case, however, we find another implication that we can take away from this study. Anna’s situation was one in which her administrator was the source of the conflict. Specific actions carried out by him led to the problems of intimidation and harassment. Therefore, it makes it difficult to separate the problem from the person. Despite the fact that we all need to understand that no matter how hard we try, we all err in our ways; the resolution of this conflict is empty in that Anna’s administrator received no encouragement to change his ways through proper resolution of conflict. Therefore, an implication that I can take away from this study is that when proper resolution of conflict doesn’t happen through confession or reconciliation, it is hard to not attack the person for his or her wrongdoing.

Fourthly, this leads us to the key of striving to be *Christ-like in resolving conflict*. Anna’s case study was not resolved in a Christ-like manner. Despite several confrontations between her and her administrator, the problems only deepened. There was no evidence of honesty, integrity, or love shown when seeking to resolve this conflict effectively. Since there was no confession on the part of Anna’s administrator regarding his wrongdoing, it was hard for the conflict to be resolved effectively as it came down to
a “your word against mine” situation in which it was determined that only one person should come out the winner. Kyle’s situation also seemed to come down to a win-lose situation. It appeared to be a situation in which “I was right and you were wrong.” Even though they attempted to discuss their differences in the presence of a third-party, Calvin still defensively denied that his actions played a role in the way that Kyle was feeling. Therefore, it is important that we acknowledge conflicts when they first arise so that they don’t grow and fester, making a bunch of smaller problems grow into bigger ones. It is important that we learn to embrace conflict as it unfolds and be honest with each other so that conflict can be resolved in a non-threatening manner in which we speak the truth in love, preventing it from becoming a competition.

We can, however, learn from Joanne and Bill’s efforts to be Christ-like in resolving their conflict. Bill admitted that even though he was going to say some hard things to her in his letter, he admitted that he said them out of love for her. At the same time, Joanne, when responding to his letter, was honest in her thoughts and showed integrity and humility throughout the process. She also demonstrated the fact that she had really prayed about the issue and realized through prayer that she was to submit to “those whom God put in authority over her.” Despite her strong views on the issue, she chose to let them rest realizing that in comparison to restoring the relationship between her and Bill, the issue was minor. Even though Bill and Joanne agreed to disagree and move past the issue, this case shows us that when conflict is resolved effectively accommodation on the part of one person still plays a big part in the resolution. Therefore, another implication we can take from this study is that effective resolution of
conflict doesn’t always mean that both parties are satisfied with the end result. One often needs to accommodate or collaborate in order to move past it to reconciliation.

This brings us to the fifth issue of reconciliation in which forgiveness and restoration of relationship play important roles. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect to analyze as in Anna’s situation. Without her administrator confessing or showing integrity in the part he played in the conflict, it is impossible for transactional forgiveness to take place. The nature of the conflict also made it virtually impossible for restoration of relationship to occur. Despite the fact that Calvin played a fairly passive role in trying to resolve the conflict Kyle had with him, I do believe that forgiveness occurred. It is questionable, however, the extent that restoration of relationship occurred. This is evident in the fact that he resigned from his duty at Shalom Christian and pursued work in other areas. Although he admits that he often runs into Calvin at different social events, the relationship is neither one of hostility or friendship. The one case in which forgiveness and restoration is evident is in Joanne’s story. Joanne was very honest in admitting that she has forgiven Bill, accepted the conflict and resolution of it and made attempts to restore her relationship with her administrator.

The fact that only one of these situations was handled in a way that exhibited most of the biblical norms outlined as keys to effective resolution of conflict is disturbing. It is disturbing because they all took place within Christian school settings. In my interviews with the subjects of my case studies, it became obvious that the way conflict has been resolved has led to initial bitterness and disbelief that Christians can be so ineffective in their dealings with each other. After much thought, it has led me to
question whether there were important factors missing within the walls of these Christian school’s that were vital to effective resolution of conflict.

The first factor that I question as being essential to effective resolution of conflict and evidently missing in Anna, and Kyle’s stories is that of true Christian community between staff members. **If there had been a stronger sense of true Christian community between staff members in those schools, would the conflicts have even arisen, or been resolved so ineffectively?** Christian school staff members must strive to be a community of teachers who practice open communication with each other by seeking to build each other up through their daily work. In Kyle’s situation, it did not seem as if his staff communicated with each other or exhibited openness and honesty with each other. He felt as if he were functioning as an autonomous island striving to prove himself through his work. A very important factor in staying unified as a staff is making sure that staff members meet together on a weekly basis for prayer and devotions, during which time they not only pray for the school, but practice building each other up by praying for and encouraging each other in their work. Without an open and honest working relationship in which staff members already understand and communicate regularly with each other, can conflict be resolved effectively when no relationship existed prior to the situation? It is no wonder that Calvin, Kyle and Anna could not restore the relationship they had with the people they were in conflict with as there was no relationship to begin with.

This leads to a second important question. **In order for Christian school staff members to be proactive in dealing with staff conflict, what is the role of shared vision?** It is obvious that in Anna, and Kyle’s situations, staff members did not share a
common vision of what the school should be. In Anna’s case it is obvious that one man had a vision and directives for the school and it was expected that everyone else conform to it. The fact that Anna did not conform to his views through intimidation led to conflict between the two. If the vision of the school was clearly outlined when Anna took the job could she have foreseen that her theological views would not fit in to this school’s vision and perhaps decline the job when it was offered to her? The same question reappears when we read of Kyle’s situation. It is obvious that when he accepted the role of Athletic Director at Shalom Christian School, Kyle had a lot of work to do in repairing the program. Unfortunately, Kyle had a vision for the program that administration did not understand. Kyle knew that they desired a successful sports program but felt as if they had no idea what that entailed. Therefore, I question whether vision (not only for the school as a whole but for all aspects of school life such as athletics, fine arts, and building relationships with students) should be more openly discussed, understood and set by all staff members so that staff can become united in their common purpose and goal so that when conflict does arrive, there is a vision on which all staff can anchor their purpose?

This brings me to my final question in regards to Christian schools. How important is it that the Christian school seeks to find and train administrators who are servant-leaders? All of the cases that were presented earlier deal with conflicts that happened between staff members and administration. It is important to note that in most cases, the problems existed as a result of an administrator demanding too much power or providing a lack of encouragement for his teachers. In Anna’s situation, we see the story of an administrator who in her words, “intimidated and berated” his staff members to
conform to his worldview and theology directives. When teachers didn’t conform through his intimidation tactics, he tried different methods such as harassment that put him in an increasing position of power. In no way did he encourage his staff members to become better teachers; he intimidated them to become his puppets, teaching exactly what and how he wanted them to.

We also see a slight issue of power in Joanne’s case. In his letter to Joanne, Bill is very brash in saying, “That is not your responsibility. It is mine.” Other statements, such as, “If your view and attitude on this issue doesn’t change, I will recommend a change of teaching assignments for the next year” also show up in the letter. When Joanne and Bill finally sat down to talk about their conflict, power became an issue when Bill insisted that she just drop the issue because it was obvious that they were not going to see eye-to-eye.

We can really see a need for servant leadership when we look at the case of Kyle. It is very evident that he was in need of some understanding as well as encouragement in his role as Athletic Director. I question therefore, the importance placed on Christian schools and educational leadership programs to seek out and train leaders who can guide the school in a way that can balance the managerial aspect of it, yet still remain approachable and encouraging to his/her staff members? Lodewyk (2001) writes,

Our leaders and colleagues need encouragement and prayer to grow as authentic servants who model professionalism, integrity and well-being. They need to demonstrate discernment in adapting to serve those within the organization with needs for safety, identity, belonging, empowerment, meaningfulness, and risking. Effective work communities cooperate in supportive teams that offer physical and
emotional support, healthy communication, and enhanced self-awareness. Constructive activities like worship, discussion and play facilitate such community building and shared vision (p.22).

As a result of the case studies that were presented I have questions concerning the much-needed framework that seemed to be lacking in some of the stories told. I do believe that the keys presented earlier in this study can be effective in resolving staff conflict in Christian schools, but when the important base provided by a strong sense of community, servant leadership and shared vision between staff members are missing, I question whether these biblical keys take on the role of a ship lost at sea without a lighthouse to beacon it rather than an effective model? Staff members seem to go about using biblical tools and go through the motions of resolving conflict without fully understanding “why” they should want to resolve their conflict effectively. I am left to question whether it is even worth the effort of trying to resolve a conflict effectively without the existence of these often-underestimated components to organization? When these components are missing as they were in most of these case studies, we have situations in which people are misunderstood and not encouraged, many times leaving their roles as teachers.

It is important therefore, that Christian schools be proactive in making sure these factors are examined and questioned as to the importance they play in their organization so that when conflict does arise, it can be handled in a way that allows staff members to abandon themselves to God’s purpose by building each other up through their impending conflict situations. Above all we need to question how, when our lives are filled with unresolved conflict, we will have success in sharing the Good News about Jesus with
others? We must understand that, "You were put here to reflect the character of God in
the way you live, to pour out His life through yours towards whomever you’re with,
however they treat you" (Crabb, 1999, p.24). Therefore, we need to make a conscious
decision to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the
world deals with conflicts by praying to God for His wisdom and grace to help resolve
our differences in a way that ultimately glorifies Him.
Appendix A
Ethical Agreement

March 2001
Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in my research to determine effective keys to resolution of staff conflict in the Christian school. During our interview I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions to best determine the nature of the conflict that you found yourself involved in. I will also be asking you to outline the events that occurred in trying to resolve the conflict.

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, I want to assure you that I will do my best to set the situation and events in context and seek to accurately reflect your story. Your identity as well as the name of your school will not be identified in the final draft of my study. The only information given to readers of my project is that the conflict occurred between staff members in a Christian school in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

In telling your story I will strive to be sensitive to the feelings and emotion you may have endured and may still endure as a result of this conflict. I will also be asking you to identify ways in which you believe your conflict may have been more effectively resolved. You will also be invited to review a draft of your case study for completeness and accuracy before it is put into final draft form.

All information and notes that I take during our interview will be kept private. In discussing this project with my advisors or others, your identity shall remain anonymous as will the name of the school and the other individuals involved. All notes taken will be viewed only by me and kept in a locked filing cabinet at my home when I am not using them as a reference. Once this study is complete I want to assure you that all notes taken during our interview will be shredded at my workplace so that this information will not be accessed by anyone but myself.

As a participant in this study, I want you to know that if at any point you begin to feel uncomfortable with it, I will respect your wishes to withdraw and all information taken by me will be returned to you or destroyed. I would like to thank you for considering participation in this study. Conflict can be a very painful experience, especially when it is not resolved effectively. It is my goal that through your story, Christian teachers may learn more about their natural tendencies in resolving conflict and become better equipped to deal with conflict in a God glorifying manner that maintains Christian school staff unity.

Sincerely,

Sandra A. De Jong
Appendix B
Ethical Study Approval

We affirm that Sandra De Jong is a registered student in the Dordt College Education Program. We understand the purpose of her project and hereby approve her wishes to determine effective means of resolving staff conflict in Christian schools through qualitative case studies. We have read her proposal and understand the measures that she will be taking in regards to ensuring anonymity and accuracy in reporting her findings. We also understand and approve the measures that she will be taking to ensure confidentiality and privacy of information while this study ensues.

DATE: _April 5, 2001_

Dr. Rick Eigenbrood- Director of Graduate Studies
Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA

Mr. Lloyd Den Boer, Project Advisor
Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA
Figure X. The Icy Slope of Conflict as taken from Ken Sande’s book The Peacemaker (1997, p. 17) demonstrates the slippery slope people can fall down when trying to resolve their conflict ineffectively. In the middle you find conciliation responses that are peace-making responses. On the left hand side you see the escape responses that people use in order to avoid confronting a conflict. On the right hand side you find the attack responses that people often use when dealing with conflict aggressively.
Works Cited


