CASE STUDY IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE

The case studies presented by students will center around a current or recent conflict situation in the field setting. Issues of conflict and managing conflict will be dealt with along with issues surrounding the student’s view of the role of the clergy and laity in the church, and the student’s theology of ministry. Each student will have the opportunity to present his/her case study in small group discussion.

The preparation of the Case Study is intended to aid the students in developing skills to describe and analyze parish problems. The Case Study Method calls for the concise communication of the problem or conflict from the field setting, including the presentation of the relevant background and facts of the case, the lifting up of the major issues of ministry raised by the case, and the focusing upon the particular theological, political, psychological, sociological and ethical factors that effect decision making.

METHOD

In the preparation of case studies for class consideration, it is important to be as succinct as possible, bringing out only essential facts and attempting to focus on the key issues. Many case studies can be done on one page, single-spaced. Two pages should be the maximum. The case presenter should make copies for the entire group. They will be handed out in class the day they are discussed.

During the class session, discussion should be focused and to the point. The presenter will be given five to ten minutes to make clarifying comments on the facts of the case and to respond to questions about those facts. During this initial period, there should be no discussion of interpretation of issues, nor of “solutions.” During a second period of ten or fifteen minutes, the class members may identify the issues of ministry and the relevant theological, political, sociological, psychological and ethical factors that emerge from the case, including those which the presenter has not noted in the case study document. If there is time during this period for debate or discussion opinions, that is fine, but the first task is to get all of the issues out in the open. The remaining time should be devoted to a detailed in depth discussion of two or three issues related to decision making, to be selected by the presenter, which the presenter feels are the most significant for him/her from the various issues listed. This must include a discussion of the key theological issue in the case.

The method described above may seem to be unduly rigid and restrictive. However, experience with the Case Study Method in various educational institutions has indicated that maximum value and learning come when there is disciplined and focused discussion.
The outline suggested here consists of three parts.

1. **BACKGROUND:** This section describes the setting for the case. It might include some statements about the principals involved, including the pastor, his/her tenure, and general position on the issue under consideration. If this issue has been dealt with before by this church congregation or agency, what was the outcome at that time?

2. **EVENT:** The event which precipitates the conflict should be carefully, but briefly, narrated here. Sometimes it is very to use dialogue in order to get at positions tersely and effectively. Dialogue would be recorded as accurately as possible. The Event section should be carried to the point at which decision making is called for. It should express clearly the competing viewpoints and/or alternatives which the case involves. The class members are asked to limit their case to either an issue now in process (decision still to be made) or a past situation that did not go as the class member wished. Please, no success stories!

3. **ANALYSIS:** This section primarily raises and clarifies the issues which the presenter feels are crucial to the analysis of the case. It is from this section that the final and largest segment of the discussion of the case emerges.

**SAMPLE CASE STUDY**

**BACKGROUND:** In my efforts to help the youth of my church grapple with difficult issues facing them today, I have planned a series of programs on teenage suicide and the causes of it. In one session we will be talking about contemporary rock music (in particular that music referred to by the title “Heavy Metal”) and its suspected role in leading teens to attempt suicide when faced with difficulties in their lives. I will be printing out and duplicating the lyrics from several songs and we will discuss them in the group. By doing this I hope to help the youth listen more carefully to the words of the songs so that they can be better able to make judgments about what the songs are espousing instead of being subliminally influenced by unexamined lyrics. I plan to set this discussion within the larger context of theological messages of the songs as opposed to the gospel message.

**EVENT:** As is usually done, I discussed these upcoming sessions with the youth in advance of the actual programs. Since I did that I have had a small group of parents express their concern that any talk of suicide might contribute to the youth actually attempting it. While no parents have spoken directly to me, it is quite clear via the grapevine that there is a lot of concern about the proposed series. Particular concern has been voiced about the idea of the youth sharing, reading, and discussing the lyrics of the aforementioned songs. Some parents are angry that such music would be allowed to be heard in the church.
The following exchange took place between myself and Mr. Lawson, father of one of the group members.

Mr. L1 – “I understand the youth group will be listening to some of that rock music that leads to suicide in teenagers.” (In a very rough tone of voice.)

SS1 (Seminary student) – “I do plan to discuss some of that music as part of the series we are doing on suicide.”

Mr. L2 (Cutting me off) – “I don’t think it’s a good idea, in fact, I am opposed to it completely. I don’t even think you should be discussing suicide at all. I don’t believe in giving young people ideas about things like that. I especially don’t approve of that music in the church. Why, it’s not even Christian, not even close. And whose approval did you get to have these programs anyway?”

SS2 – “I planned them after consulting with the youth and the advisors to the group. I didn’t think I needed anyone else’s approval. I understand you are upset, but I think one of the best ways to prevent suicide is to talk about it and recognize that very likely some of our youth have thought of it from time to time. At the very least they are aware of it as a problem and are concerned about their friends. They need to understand it and to understand the Christian view of it as well.”

Mr. L3 – I disagree. Talking about it only makes it more attractive. I see I am getting nowhere with you about this. You can be sure I’ll be speaking to the senior pastor about you and this program of yours. And I’ll tell you right now my son will not be attending any of the discussions.” (With that he turns away.)

ANALYSIS: As with every case study in conflict, there are several issues contained in this situation. On the surface, there is a power struggle between Mr. L. and the SS. They do not agree on who is in charge of the youth group’s programming and activities. Mr. L. sees the senior pastor as being somehow responsible overall. The SS sees herself as having been charged with that oversight.

On a deeper level, there is a conflict over a fundamental approach to difficult issues. For Mr. L., the less said about them the better. For the SS, the preferred approach is to talk about them and get them in the open so that feelings can be shared and anxieties relieved in the process. At issue here is the way that they will (or might) go about handling this fundamental difference, and hence, manage the conflict.

Looking at this case theologically, one of the predominant themes leading to this conflict is that of fear. Mr. L. is very afraid that thinking about something will lead to doing it. He is therefore nearly panic-stricken to think that his son will spend several nights contemplating suicide as an option when facing life’s difficulties. His fear can be translated into a lack of trust in God and in the psychological and spiritual health heretofore evident in his son. His fear has lead him to attack the SS in a very hostile way.
A second issue has to do with the view expressed by Mr. L. and evidently shared by others, that this kind of music has no place in the church. Such an attitude belies a dualism between the sacred and the secular. Some things “belong” in the church, others do not. Questions to be asked then are, “Is there any part of life that is inadmissible for consideration and exploration in the church? Is there any area of life that should not be discussed in church and upon which the resources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience should not be brought to bear?

One of the most profound issues in any conflict situation is the issue of forgiveness. And reconciliation. Mr. L. is angry. The SS is hurt and angry. The mistrust between them grows steadily. How can reconciliation be effected between them?

A FINAL NOTE

As Christians we are all called to be theologians. As clergy we have an added responsibility (and privilege) to help our lay people theologize and discover the deeper, theological issues of life. When we do that we can make connections between our faith and our daily life.

Therefore, one of the most crucial elements of this case study method is the theological analysis. It is this segment alone that makes our use of it different from other helping professions, e.g., social work and medicine. Our failure to be able to theologize about a given situation greatly increases the risk that we become well-meaning secularized counselors and that we fail to give leadership when it is most especially needed.

All of this is not to say that you should not analyze your case situation from a social and psychological point of view as well as the theological one. That is encouraged. However, the temptation frequently is to stop there. As clergy, we must go farther and push ourselves until we discover the deeper theological issues involved.

Conflict situations hold within them the seeds of growth, reconciliation and deepening relationships for all involved. In spite of this, clergy and laity alike often shy away from facing conflict in an open and honest way. Conflict does not necessarily mean the destruction of a relationship or organization. The final outcome depends upon how the conflict, once felt, is responded to and dealt with.

It is our hope that through the presentation of case studies of conflict situations, you may grow in your theological understanding of conflict and its resolution as well as gain some specific insights into how to respond helpfully when conflict arises.

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