

Case Study #1

Every year Meg looked forward to organizing the church's Christmas pageant. It was such a wonderful time, with the rented billboard and holiday lights shining brightly outside the church, inviting the community to come in and share the good news. Brightly colored fliers announcing the pageant would be delivered to every home in the neighborhood. The children would be running around the church squealing with delight and changing into their shiny new costumes.

Meg's fond memories were interrupted by the jarring sound of the telephone. Pastor Steve sounded a bit sheepish, "Uh, Meg, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we're going to have to cancel the Christmas pageant this year. Givings have been falling rapidly this year. To keep current on the church's mortgage payments, the leadership team have just past a new, revised, emergency budget which cuts the amount of money we can allocate to community programs like the pageant."

After Meg hung up, her shock soon turned into anger. She phoned her friend Lisa, who had often helped her organize the pageant. Lisa was as shocked and angry as Meg. "They have no respect for us, no respect for all the hard work we put into the pageant every year and they clearly don't care about the community! Why, with so many people out of work this year, there is an even greater need for us to have the pageant, so we can bring good news and holiday cheer to local families who are going through a hard time. Well, we won't back down on this. Let's call the other volunteers who usually work on the pageant and tell them what's going on!"

Pastor Steve blinked nervously as he looked out from the pulpit at his congregation this Sunday morning. A third of the small congregation's members were wearing green ribbons pinned to their clothing that read, "Save Christmas!" The ribbon wearers all sat in a group in the same part of the church, with their arms crossed, staring at the pastor with a stony, hostile expression. Pastor Steve could see already that Christmas this year was going to very, very cold indeed.

Case Study #2

You are the new pastor of Exeter Acres Covenant Church, a church of 200 people in a economically-declining area of downtown Detroit. The church is moderately affluent, even though the neighborhood around it has deteriorated over the years. The church owns a piece of property (adjacent to the church building), on which stood a run-down turn-of-the-century apartment building, long ago condemned and now derelict. The church has to make a decision about what to do with the property because the city has said that the property cannot remain in the state that it is. Church members hold passionate views about what should be done, but are strongly polarized.

Nuns from Mother Teresa's order, the Sisters of Charity, have approached the church to ask for permission to renovate the building and use it as a shelter for the homeless and mentally ill people who sleep on the sidewalks in that neighborhood. The nuns have also invited the church to partner with them in this ministry. Local developers have also approached the church, asking to buy the land to build condos for professionals who work downtown. The church could then use the money from the proceeds of the sale to provide better funding for existing neighborhood ministries of the church, including an outreach to local children.

The discussion becomes further polarized as members start responding to opposing points of view as if they were a personal assault. The evils of self-serving, money-grubbing developers catering to the whims of self-absorbed yuppies are enumerated in detail. Business people in the church are hurt and offended. The business people then criticize the hopelessly unrealistic, poorly thought through dreams of those “social-worker” types. In response, a righteous voice appeals to the image of Mother’s Teresa’s order and the selfless service they provide to the poorest of the poor. Everyone feels guilty and emotionally manipulated.

This conflict involves 40% of the congregation and the various ministries of the church have largely ground to a halt. Like the other 60% of the church, you (the pastor) don’t want to hear about this problem anymore or attend yet another tedious, hostile, pointless, overly long meeting about this subject. You decline repeated attempts from both sides to ask you to “address this subject from the pulpit,” which leaves both sides feeling hurt and angry because you are “unsupportive” and “insensitive,” having “failed to listen” to them or “show any initiative.”

- 1) As your church has ground to a halt and your own position may now be in peril, you can no longer avoid addressing this issue. You keep asking yourself, “How did this situation get so out of control?” As you reflect on this question, what answers might you suggest?
- 2) The conflict having gotten to this stage, what could or should be done to defuse this unhealthy situation and work toward reconciliation?