

HANDLING CONFLICT



Interview

Conflict Above Ground

Building community out of controversy.

1 John 3:14-15; 1 Corinthians 13

In this interview, Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, discusses biblical ways to handle church conflict.

Given the assortment of people and ministries at Willow Creek, how does the church stay united?

Bill Hybels: Unity isn't the word we use to describe relationships at Willow Creek. The popular concept of unity is a fantasy land where disagreements never surface and contrary opinions are never stated with force. We expect disagreement, forceful disagreement. So instead of *unity*, we use the word *community*.

The mark of community—true biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit.

How do you teach people to fight fair?

First, we acknowledge that conflict is inevitable. Then we go the next step and say, "When your nose does get bent out of joint—not if but when—you have a biblical responsibility to take the high road of conflict resolution."

That means going directly to the person with whom you're having this conflict rather than building a guerrilla team to ambush this person later.

We also teach a kind of reverse accountability. In staff meetings or in front of the congregation, we say, "If someone whose nose is bent out of joint comes to you for a 'Won't you join my cause?' conversation, you have a biblical responsibility to interrupt mid-sentence and say, 'I think you're talking to the wrong person. Please go to the individual with whom you're having this conflict and seek to resolve it in a God-glorifying way.'"

By expecting people to fight, and teaching them how, have you created more conflict in the church?

Yes. But most of it stays above ground. Conflict that goes underground poisons the soil and hurts everyone eventually. We would rather have conflict within community than a mask of unity.

What are the issues for which the leadership of Willow Creek will go to the wall?

First, we will not tolerate biblical infidelity, a discounting of the clear teachings of Christ. ►



BILL HYBELS

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Second, we insist on the enforcement of Scripture, the "living out" of the teachings of Christ. We'll not only defend the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, but also the indisputable importance of applying biblical teaching to our daily lives in practical ways.

Third, we expect lay and staff leaders at our church to be on board with the basic vision of Willow Creek.

The last nonnegotiable is verbal discipline. In confrontation too often our verbal discipline goes out the window. People make *always* and *never* statements. They exaggerate the truth or get careless with facts. Volume levels increase. And then we wonder why we're unsuccessful in finding resolution.

Are certain types of people more prone to create conflict?

People who are unhealthy emotionally. In contrast, healthy people are less likely to internalize difference of opinion and less likely to assume the worst. For that reason, we are committed to placing healthy people into key leadership roles, both on staff and lay level.

How can you be sure you're looking at a healthy person?

You can't be 100 percent sure. But a person who has never wrestled with how his upbringing impacts his adult relationship is a sure bet for a barrel of conflict.

In our interviewing process, we often ask, "Were you raised in a perfect family?" Most often, of course, the answer is no. Then we probe deeper: "How did your parents let you down? Have you worked through that?"

People on the journey toward health generally can answer yes to two important questions: (1) Will you admit that you have baggage from your past? and (2) Will you do honest work on it so it doesn't distort your relationships and work around here?

How does an unhealthy person create unnecessary conflict?

Often, an unhealthy person will say yes when he should say no. For example, we look for people who, when asked to do additional work, have the emotional health to say, "I'm swamped right now. I won't be able to get that assignment done by the due date. Can we discuss how the assignment can get done another way?"

Another tip-off is when a person cannot subject himself or herself to loving, constructive evaluation. If people are terrified of the evaluation process or hostile to it, there's usually an underlying issue that needs to be explored and understood.

What are some standard precautions to head off unnecessary conflict?

Around Willow Creek we talk about having "check-ins." If we sense tension with someone, we sit down and say, "I just need to check in with you. Is everything okay between us?"

Once a month, we also have a question-and-answer time with the staff, and in addition, we have regular talk-back sessions with those who work in the sub-ministries.

The more interactive we are, the more we preempt serious conflict, because we get people talking before conflict goes underground.

To Discuss

1. How would you define "healthy handling of conflict"?
2. How does our nominating process for boards and committees ensure we recruit emotionally healthy people?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate our verbal discipline as a team? How could we improve that by several points?