

Transforming Your Church: Cultivating a Culture of Peace



By Ken Sande

"Hey, what kept you?" Chuck asked as Frank finally joined him for lunch.

"The phone rang just as I was walking out the door," Frank replied as he sank into his seat, "and it was one of those calls I couldn't cut short." Noticing the troubled look on his friend's face, Chuck asked if something was wrong.

"It's another divorce," Frank groaned, "the third one this year. This couple had been putting up a good front for months, so no one in our church knew about it until after papers had been filed. When we tried to reach out to them, the wife refused to talk with us. They're having a horrible custody battle, and the husband is frantic to stop the divorce, but there's just nothing more we can do."

After a pause Frank went on. "In fact, that's what seems to happen every time we have serious conflict. Once people get mad, they rarely work things out. And someone almost always ends up leaving the church. But I guess that's just how it is."

"Not necessarily," Chuck responded. "We used to see the same pattern in our church, but it's really turned around in the last few years."

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"Really? What kinds of conflicts have you had to deal with?"

"Well," Chuck answered, "in the last year we've seen several troubled marriages, a couple of business disputes, child abuse, and your typical disagreements over music and youth ministry. To top it off, we switched denominations a few months ago."

"Really! You've got conflicts all over the place! Didn't you lose a lot of people?"

"No, actually very few. As far as I know, only four families left the church because of conflict in the last year, and that was because they didn't agree with the denomination change. We had to do a lot of counseling and mediation in the other situations, but most of the time people have reconciled and stayed with us."

Frank was stunned. "All that conflict, and you lost only four families? And you actually mediate disputes between members? That's unbelievable!"

"It's true," Chuck answered. "It's taken a lot of work, and we've failed at times, but with God's help we've seen some amazing reconciliations. Would you like to know how it's happened?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't?"

A Culture of Peace

Chuck and Frank are real people, and the descriptions of their churches are factual. A

few years ago, the leaders in Chuck's church realized that God wants Christians to demonstrate the reconciling power of Jesus in the conflicts of real life. Therefore, they began a deliberate process of training the congregation to respond to conflict biblically. By God's grace, their efforts have produced a noticeable change in the way their church deals with conflict. As a result:

- The church sees peacemaking as a biblical imperative and regularly promotes it as an essential part of the Christian life and an opportunity to bring glory to God.
- The church is deliberately training both leaders and members to respond biblically to conflict in all areas of life.
- When members cannot resolve disputes privately, the church assists them through in-house trained reconcilers, even if the conflict involves financial, employment, or legal issues.
- The church works long and hard to restore broken relationships, especially when a marriage is at stake, and even when attorneys are involved.
- If a member refuses to listen to private correction, the church practices redemptive church discipline to encourage repentance and reconciliation.
- Members who have turned from sins as serious as business fraud, adultery, and sexual abuse have experienced such complete forgiveness that they have remained in the church.
- Leaders and workers serve productively for long periods of time, and members rarely leave the church unless they move out of town.
- Members are encouraged to practice peacemaking so openly in their daily lives that others will notice, ask how they do it, and hear about Jesus.

This may sound like an imaginary congregation, but it is not. Although the church is far from perfect, it is steadily learning how to do these things with growing consistency. And it is not alone. By God's grace, many other local churches are seeing similar progress in developing a *culture of peace*. As they live out the love of God in the conflicts of daily life, they are preserving friendships, preventing divorce, reducing member turnover, and leading others to trust in Jesus.

Leading a Cultural Transformation

Chuck's pastor played a key role in developing a culture of peace. His preaching and personal example set the stage for change. At the same time, he wisely delegated most of the day-to-day educational and reconciliation work to elders and other gifted people in the congregation (details later in this article). By God's grace, this pastor has received a significant return on his investment. In addition to seeing his people blessed with stronger relationships, he has benefited by being removed from the daily "complaint loop" and spending less time as a lightning rod for others' grievances.

These benefits came about after he and other leaders in the church took an honest look at the church's "peacemaking culture," or *combination of attitudes, traditions, habits, and abilities for resolving conflict*. What they saw troubled them. They realized that their church culture was not conducive to peacemaking. So they asked God to help them change. God led them to make peacemaking a specific part of their overall discipleship strategy. The pastor and elders had primary responsibility for leading this change, but they were able to share much of the daily work with gifted people in the congregation. Together they transformed their church's culture and steadily raised its level of peacemaking productivity.

This process was like nurturing a stunted tree and bringing it to a point of abundant fruitfulness. It involved five levels of growth and productivity:

- Level 1 - A Culture of Disbelief
(Missing Fruit)
- Level 2 - A Culture of Faith
(Blossoms Appear)
- Level 3 - A Culture of Transformation
(Pruning and Cultivating)
- Level 4 - A Culture of Peace
(Harvest Time)
- Level 5 - A Culture of Multiplication
(Reproducing)

The purpose of this article is to describe this cultural transformation, and to show how, by God's grace, you can reproduce it in your church. As you pursue this growth, please realize that churches do not always fit neatly

into one specific level; as they change, they will often straddle some of these lines. The important thing is not your church's level today, but the direction in which you are heading.

The Level 1 Church—A Culture of Disbelief

A church has a culture of disbelief when its people lack practical training in resolving conflict and they doubt that the church can do much to help them resolve their differences. This church is like a tree that is missing some of its sweetest fruit.

Many people would say Chuck's church sounds too good to be true. In fact, they would identify more closely with Frank's church. It has many fruitful ministries and leaders who truly care about their people, but when it comes to peacemaking, the leaders believe there is only so much they can do to help members deal with conflict. When reading about Chuck's church, their reaction would be, "That's great, but it's just not realistic in today's world." This attitude is evidence of a culture of disbelief with regard to resolving conflict. There are many understandable reasons for this attitude.

- Most church leaders are already overworked, and they cannot imagine finding time to get more involved in members' disputes.
- They often lack training in conflict resolution and fear their involvement in a conflict might actually make matters worse.
- It is difficult for them to envision having the time or qualified people to peacefully settle real-life problems that might otherwise become legal disputes.
- There is often a concern about offending someone and triggering a lawsuit against the church.
- Having never seen church discipline used redemptively to promote peace and reconciliation, they doubt that it would be helpful or even accepted in today's culture.
- Thriving churches face an additional hindrance to peacemaking. Having a big vision for what a church should be, they give themselves enthusiastically to many fruitful ministries and are blessed with steadily growing numbers. It is often difficult for such churches to see why they should divert time and energy from productive ministries and devote it to the time-consuming and

seemingly fruitless work of helping people resolve conflict.

Given these concerns, it is understandable why many churches do not give much attention to peacemaking. This lack of attention has consequences, however. It usually robs a local church of the sweet fruit of peacemaking and creates a culture marked by the following patterns:

- The church does not have a clear vision or specific plan for making peacemaking an effective ministry of the church.
- Little effort is made to provide leaders and members with practical training in personal conflict resolution.
- If members have unresolved conflicts with other believers, they rarely seek assistance within the church, especially if the dispute involves employment, business, or legal issues.
- If members give up on a broken relationship and do not want to discuss reconciliation any further, church leaders usually decline to press the matter, even if it is a couple moving towards divorce.
- The church does not consistently practice biblical church discipline, and probably hasn't for many years.
- If it becomes widely known that a member has committed a serious sin such as embezzlement, adultery, or child abuse, he is more likely to leave the church than to seek restoration.
- There is a high burnout rate for leaders and workers, and a steady turnover of members.
- Members of the church are not equipped or expected to respond to conflict in such a uniquely Christian way that the door is opened for witnessing about Jesus.

These patterns are so common in modern churches that few people even notice them. When a broken relationship results, people naturally grieve. But they seldom believe that there was anything more the church could have done to produce different fruit.

What we also fail to notice is how much these patterns reflect the culture of the world around us. Instead of providing a radically different model for how people can look to God and help one another preserve relationships, we allow the world's self-reliant and individualistic values to seep into the church, reducing us to

the world's fruitless level of resolving conflict.

What about your church? What kind of culture does it have when it comes to resolving conflict? What kind of fruit is it producing when relationships are threatened? To answer these questions, take another look at the bulleted lists above. Which list comes closest to describing your church—the list for a culture of peace or for a culture of disbelief? Please think about this and note your answer before reading on.

Missing Fruit, Missing Witness

It is difficult for most Christians to imagine how a church could intervene effectively in serious disputes. It is also hard to believe that most conflicts can end in reconciliation, and that deeply conflicted marriages don't have to end in divorce. But isn't this exactly the fruit that Jesus wants a local church to produce?

The night before He died, our Lord set forth a key ingredient in our witness for Him. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John

Sunday morning. But you can find the same unchallenging and superficial love in countless social gatherings where people are pleasant and agreeable. As Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them" (Luke 6:32).

The love that distinguishes us as being the children of God is the love that Jesus describes in Luke 6:27-28: "But I tell you who hear Me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). This is the kind of love that Jesus showed on the cross. And it is the kind of love He commands and enables us to show in midst of conflict to those who oppose or mistreat us.

This is why peacemaking is an essential mark of a Christian and of a church, and why it has power. It is supposed to shine so brightly that people cannot help but see it. When Jesus taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9), He was not promising us a *heavenly* title. Instead, He

When Jesus speaks of "unity," He does not expect us to agree on everything.

13:35). "I pray that all of them may be one, Father.... 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" (17:20-23).

When Jesus speaks of "unity," He does not expect us to agree on everything. He is calling us to *love one another through our disagreements*, whether that requires accepting a debatable difference, overlooking a minor offense, confessing a wrong, gently confronting others, or even submitting to church mediation or discipline. Our love for Jesus compels us to do everything in our power to preserve our relationships (Rom. 12:18; Eph. 4:1-3).

Thriving ministries and good preaching can attract people to a church, but the Bible teaches that the most powerful testimony Christians can offer for the reality of Jesus Christ is to love one another. Many churches think they are demonstrating the love Jesus calls for if their members are smiling and friendly on

was teaching that when we draw on His grace to resolve difficult conflicts and restore broken relationships, those who are watching us will recognize that we are the children of God. This recognition opens the door to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with those who do not yet know Him (Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12).

But the opposite is also true. If we do not love others in the midst of conflict, forgive those who have hurt us, and restore broken relationships, our Christian witness is profoundly damaged. As 1 John 4:20 warns, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." When the world looks at our churches and sees the fruit of unresolved conflict—quarrels, broken families, estranged members, and church splits—it makes all Christians look like hypocrites.

Thus, a culture of disbelief has a double cost. When church leaders do not teach biblical

peacemaking or get involved in members' conflicts, families fall apart, friendships and jobs are lost, and the church sees a steady turnover in members. At the same time, when unsaved people see our failure to reconcile with one another, they dismiss Christians as hypocrites and liars when we try to speak to them about reconciling with God.

To put it simply, when the fruit of peacemaking is missing in a local church, that church will also miss many opportunities to give witness to the reconciling love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Missing Fruit, Smaller Harvest

As I mentioned earlier, thriving churches often ignore their weakness in peacemaking by focusing on their growing numbers and the success of their other ministries. What they do not see is how much more genuine growth and lasting fruit they would experience if they strengthened their ability to resolve conflict.

No matter how fruitful a church's other ministries are, if it does not have a culture of peace, every ministry is weakened to some degree. As people work together, they will inevitably have differences. If they have not been taught peacemaking, even minor differences can grow to major proportions. Members may hesitate to clear up misunderstandings, to overlook minor offenses, or to stop gossip. They may not seek reconciliation with someone they have offended, or gently confront others, or negotiate issues in a way that satisfies the interests of all those involved. Worst of all, they may fail to practice genuine forgiveness and may miss experiencing the reconciling power of Jesus.

Without these peacemaking activities, relationships within families and church ministries will inevitably suffer. Unresolved differences will take a toll on members' enthusiasm, commitment, creativity, giving, and productivity. As a result, their witness and circle of influence will be reduced, and many people whom they might have served will be neglected. And even if many new members are coming in through the front door, church growth will be sapped by a steady exodus of unreconciled people out the back door.

No matter how strong a church's

ministries are, a culture of disbelief will weaken those ministries and prevent them from being as fruitful as they could be. Conversely, when a local church develops a culture of peace, everything is strengthened. The church's families and ministries are protected from debilitating conflict and given the opportunity to achieve their maximum impact in the kingdom of God. The fruit of peacemaking enhances the entire harvest.

The Level 2 Church—A Culture of Faith

A church has a culture of faith when its people begin to understand God's peacemaking commands and promises and believe that His ways will work in today's culture. This church is like a tree blossoming in the spring.

Once a church realizes it has a culture of disbelief, it can begin to replace it with a culture of faith. This change can begin only when we understand the root cause of a culture of disbelief. As we saw earlier, there are many understandable reasons why churches hesitate to get involved in conflict. But behind most of them are two basic factors: a failure to understand what the Bible teaches about peacemaking, and a lack of faith that biblical principles will actually work in today's culture. As Jesus taught, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). Hence, a culture of disbelief is usually the result of ignorance and unbelief.

This is an unpleasant diagnosis. But if we simply deny it, our churches will not change. On the other hand, if we admit our lack of understanding and our unbelief to God, He is ready to forgive us. More than that, He is eager to lead us into all truth and increase our faith so that we can become His agents of change in our congregations. There are five ways that we can cooperate with God as He strengthens our faith.

1. Nurture a budding faith through prayer: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Go to God in faith and confess your unbelief, and thank Him for the forgiveness He has given us through Christ. Ask Him to guide your study of His Word so that you can understand all that He teaches about peacemaking. Pray that He will replace your unbelief with faith. And then ask Him to give

you strength to do whatever He commands, even if it requires making major changes in the way your church responds to conflict.

2. Rejoice in God's grace as revealed in the gospel of Christ, which is the driving motivation for peacemaking. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This incredible news reveals our radical sinfulness: nothing could save us except the death of God's only Son. But it also reveals the depths of God's radical mercy: He gave His Son to die for us! As we reflect on and rejoice in the gospel of Christ, two things happen. Our pride and defensiveness are stripped away, and we can humble ourselves and admit that we struggle with sinful conflicts that we cannot resolve on our own. At the same time, the gospel shows us how important reconciliation is to God, and it inspires us to do everything we can to see that the love and forgiveness of Christ is reflected in the way we make peace in our families and churches.

3. Dig into God's Word. Learn more about how He wants us to bring the love and forgiveness of Jesus to bear on everyday conflicts. You can start by studying Bible passages that describe eight characteristics of a church that has a culture of peace:

- *Vision:* The church is eager to bring glory to God by demonstrating the reconciling love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and therefore sees peacemaking as an essential part of the Christian life (see Luke 6:27-36; John 13:35; 1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:12-14).
- *Training:* The church knows that peacemaking does not come naturally, so it deliberately trains both its leaders and members to respond to conflict biblically in all areas of life (see Gal. 5:19-21; Luke 6:40; Eph. 4:24-26; 1 Tim. 4:15-16; Tit. 2:1-10).
- *Assistance:* When members cannot resolve disputes privately, the church assists them through in-house trained reconcilers, even when conflicts involve financial, employment, or legal issues (see Matt. 18:16; Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 6:1-8; Gal. 6:1-2; Col. 3:16).
- *Perseverance:* Just as God pursues us, the church works long and hard to restore broken relationships, especially when a

marriage is at stake, and even when attorneys are involved (see Matt. 18:12-16; Rom. 12:18; Eph. 4:1-3; Matt. 19:1-9; 1 Cor. 7:1-11).

- *Discipline:* If members refuse to listen to private correction, the church practices loving, redemptive discipline to encourage repentance and reconciliation (see Prov. 3:11-12; Matt. 18:12-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; James 5:19-20).
- *Restoration:* Wanting to imitate God's amazing mercy and grace, the church gladly forgives and fully restores members who have genuinely repented of serious and embarrassing sins (see Matt. 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11).
- *Stability:* Because relationships are valued and protected, leaders serve fruitfully year after year and members see the church as their long-term home (1 Tim. 4:15; Heb. 10:25).
- *Witness:* Members are equipped and encouraged to practice peacemaking so openly in their daily lives that others will notice, ask why they do it, and hear about the love of Christ (Matt. 5:9; John 13:34-35, 17:20-23; 1 Pet. 2:12, 3:15-16).

Even though it is clear that Scripture commands these activities, it is plain that most of these characteristics are contrary to our culture and uncommon in our churches. Therefore, it is still difficult to believe that we could actually live them out in daily life. To overcome this unbelief and build hope for change, read what God promises to do for those who are determined to obey his will:

The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose...and nothing is impossible with God...Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (2 Chron. 16:9; Phil. 2:13; Luke 1:37; 1 Cor. 15:58)

Read these promises through several times, and then ask yourself, "Do I believe that God has the power and willingness to enable our church to obey what He commands?" If so,

renounce unbelief and move ahead in faith!

4. Find mutual encouragement with other people in your church. Begin by giving this article to other members or leaders in your church. Approach people who are widely respected and likely to be open to these concepts. Build a core group of three or more people who are willing to seriously study these Scriptures and pray about these issues, and then work together to build faith and promote needed growth, as discussed in the next section.

5. Build faith by contacting people outside your church. Learn how God has enabled their churches to resolve difficult conflicts and build a culture of peace. Start by looking for churches in your area that have a reputation for peacemaking, and ask them how they do it.

As you pursue these five faith-building activities, you and others can gain a better understanding of God's marvelous vision for the church. He wants us to be so effective in imitating Jesus as we build and preserve relationships that the rest of the world will take notice and be drawn toward Him. What an exciting vision!

God not only wants this kind of church—He expects it. He is already at work in many churches so, and He promises to give you the wisdom and strength needed to seek this change in your church. Having faith in His promises, you can put off unbelief and see your faith blossom. As this faith spreads and grows in your congregation, you can move a step closer to the harvest of peacemaking.

The Level 3 Church—A Culture of Transformation

A church has a culture of transformation when its people put off worldly ways of resolving conflict and take steps to learn how to respond to conflict biblically. This church is like a tree that is being pruned and cultivated for greater productivity.

Peacemaking is an attitude expressed through action. The heart of this attitude is the joy and thankfulness that come from fully understanding the gospel of Christ (Phil. 4:4). Jesus died on the cross in our place to release us from the penalty and ongoing slavery of sin. He gave His life to buy our forgiveness, earn our

freedom, and bring us back to God. Now He wants us to pass this priceless gift of reconciliation on to others in the form of personal peacemaking:

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col. 3:12-13; see also Eph. 4:1-3; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:18)

These attitudes and actions do not come naturally to people. In fact, our instincts usually take us in the opposite direction! Therefore, in order to build a culture of peace, a church must do both pruning and cultivating. It must help its people to put off worldly ways of resolving conflict and to put on peacemaking attitudes and actions that mirror our reconciliation with God.

Pruning and cultivating takes a lot of work. The good news is that this work does not have to be done by an elite few, but can be shared by gifted people throughout a local church. Senior pastors in particular do not have time to resolve everybody's conflicts. Therefore, they should follow the advice that Moses received when he became weary from serving as the sole judge for Israel:

The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone...You must teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people...Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied. (Ex. 18:18-23)

Like Moses, a senior pastor is responsible before God to make sure that His people have the teaching and assistance they need to respond to conflict biblically. Since a pastor must play a primary educational role from the pulpit and may occasionally have to assist with

difficult conflicts, he would be wise to develop a solid understanding of the basic principles of biblical conflict resolution. At the same time, a pastor can and should entrust most of the educational and reconciliation activities to capable leaders and members of the congregation.

In many situations, God will give a vision for peacemaking first to members of a church, and then work through them to bring this vision to the leaders. As leaders and members work together to weave peacemaking into their overall discipleship efforts, their church can develop those eight characteristics of a culture of peace: vision, training, assistance, perseverance, discipline, restoration, stability, and witness. This cultivation usually involves the following activities:

1. Gain support from church leadership.

Although God often works through lay members of a church to initiate interest in peacemaking, cultural transformation will take place only when church leaders officially support and lead this effort. The most important “tipping point” for seeing major progress is when the senior pastor sees peacemaking not as a helpful side-ministry, but as something that is vital to the well-being and fruitfulness of the church.

2. Form a core support group (Church Reconciler Team). This team will be responsible for guiding educational and reconciliation activities within a local church. Church leaders should spearhead the team, but it may also include spiritually mature lay members who have gifts for peacemaking.

3. Educate the entire congregation in peacemaking. God’s peacemaking principles are like yeast: the more thoroughly they are worked into a congregation, the more good they can do. This requires an ongoing effort to teach peacemaking to *every person* in the church. The best way to do this is to educate in two stages. Begin by presenting a preaching series that elevates the congregation’s interest in and commitment to peacemaking. Then encourage every person in the church to participate in a Sunday school class or small-group Bible study where he and she can learn specific peacemaking principles. Discuss how the principles apply to conflicts in their own lives.

4. Train gifted people within your congregation to become reconcilers.

Reconcilers are gifted church members or leaders who have been trained to help others deal with conflict. This help may be provided through *conflict coaching* (advising one person how to respond to conflict biblically) or *mediation* (meeting with both parties to facilitate discussion and agreement). Well-trained church reconcilers can help members respond biblically to a wide variety of personal, family, employment, business, and even legal disputes.

5. Upgrade your church’s organizational documents to support peacemaking and to reduce legal liability. Churches are being sued at an alarming rate for conflict-related activities. Legal actions against churches include negligence, defamation, breach of confidentiality, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Judgments can be extremely costly, with church leaders sometimes being held personally responsible for the award. Upgrading church bylaws and adopting special policies for counseling, confidentiality, conflict resolution, and church discipline can substantially reduce exposure to legal liability.

Some churches can make substantial progress in each of these areas in two years. Others will take four or five years to overcome deeply engrained attitudes and traditions. Yet even small, initial efforts can produce noticeable fruit. A few people going through a Sunday school class on peacemaking can have a ripple effect on their own families and friends. As they use the basic principles in their daily lives and share what they are learning with others in conflict, relationships can be improved and a growing interest in peacemaking can be nurtured. These benefits will multiply as cultivation continues.

The Level 4 Church—A Culture of Peace

A church has a culture of peace when its people are eager and able to resolve conflict and reconcile relationships in a way that clearly reflects the love and power of Jesus Christ. This church is like a tree producing a rich harvest.

Those who have cultivated diligently will harvest abundantly. This is especially true when it comes to peacemaking, for God promises,

“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). As we will see, this harvest involves a wide variety of fruit.

When a local church develops a culture of peace, it can overcome every one of the concerns that had previously locked it into a culture of disbelief. By delegating much of the educational and reconciliation work to others, church leaders’ time and energy are reserved for other ministry. As gifted individuals are trained as reconcilers, members are able to look to the church for assistance in resolving all kinds of conflicts.

When people see church discipline being taught and practiced in a merciful and constructive manner, they usually come to respect it as a vital shepherding ministry of the church. By upgrading its bylaws and policies, a church can substantially reduce its exposure to legal liability, as just mentioned above. Other ministries of the church are more likely to achieve their full potential as well when members improve their ability to resolve differences and find more productive ways to work together.

These developments open the way for additional fruit. When a church teaches its people to live out the gospel in the conflicts of daily life, people are more willing to admit their shortcomings and ask for help before a crisis occurs. Families are better equipped to handle disputes, which makes divorce less likely. Members are encouraged to go to each other to discuss problems instead of letting them fester. The church is protected from division and splits, and offended members are less likely to leave. As a result, church growth improves.

Pastors and other church leaders can experience many benefits as well. When leaders fulfill their shepherding responsibilities more fully, respect and appreciation for their work grows. As they are taken out of the day-to-day “complaint loop,” they can spend less time dealing with disgruntled members and more time on forward-moving ministry. When members learn to stop gossiping, leaders are subjected to less criticism. As conflict declines in a church, stress on leaders’ families is often reduced. And when respectful discussion and reconciliation are the norm in a church, pastors and other staff are less likely to burn out or be

forced out of their jobs.

Of course, no church sees all of these benefits at once or all the time. Our sin continually works against a culture of peace. Even Paul and Barnabas had a falling out! (See Acts 15:2.) So we should not be surprised when members forget what they have learned, leaders are inconsistent, and our efforts seem to have been wasted. Even though we stumble, we need not fall, for the Lord upholds us with His hand (Ps. 37:24). As He helps us back to our feet, we can learn from our mistakes and forgive one another. We will continue to grow. When we do, God can use both our mistakes and our forgiveness to encourage others.

One of the greatest benefits of resolving conflicts biblically is that outreach and evangelism are enhanced. Conflict is inevitable in a fallen world; Christian and unbeliever alike struggle with disputes and broken relationships. So when the unsaved see Christians admitting their failures and forgiving and reconciling with one another, even after intense disputes, they cannot help but take notice. The more our relationships reflect the amazing love and mercy of God, the more people will want to know about the power that is working in us to maintain peace and unity. What a marvelous way to increase the harvest!

The Level 5 Church—A Culture of Multiplication

A church has a culture of multiplication when its people delight in expanding God’s kingdom by showing other people and churches how they too can be peacemakers. This church is like a tree that is spreading its seed and reproducing.

With many blessings comes great responsibility. God has given the church a unique and precious talent: the power and ability to bring peace, unity, and reconciliation to a broken and conflicted world. Sadly, many churches have been afraid to use this talent; like the unfaithful servant, they have hidden and neglected it for years. If they do not repent, they will be ashamed when Jesus calls them to give an accounting someday (see Matt. 25:24-27; Ezek. 34:1-16).

How much better it would be if your church could say what the faithful servant said:

“Master, ...you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more” (Matt. 25:20). What a joy it would be to hear the answer, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness” (v. 21).

How can your church produce the maximum harvest with the peacemaking talents God has given it? Start by weaving peacemaking thoroughly into the fabric of your congregation, as discussed in the previous section. But if you stop there, you may still be hiding part of your talents. Ask God to help you build a culture of peace that is so fruitful that it overflows into your community, other churches, and your denomination. The following are steps that many churches are already taking.

1. Equip and encourage members to carry peacemaking into everyday life. As church members interact with their family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers, they will naturally have opportunities for peacemaking. When they themselves are involved in a conflict, they can ask God for the grace to respond with humility. If they see others in conflict, they can ask God for wisdom on how to offer advice or encourage agreement. As word spreads about their ability to resolve conflict effectively, others may seek them out for advice, which can open the way for witnessing and inviting others to church. And when a church gains a reputation for resolving “small” problems, it will have greater credibility when it speaks to “large” issues that impact an entire community.

2. Teach peacemaking to children. Most parents would welcome any program that could teach their children to resolve conflict.¹ Churches can respond to this need in Sunday school or in vacation Bible school classes that are advertised to people outside the church. As children and their parents benefit from this training, many of them may be drawn to the church and to the Lord.

3. Send peacemakers with mission teams.

Churches can strengthen their mission efforts and promote peacemaking overseas by including trained peacemakers on their short-term mission teams. These peacemakers can protect teams from destructive internal conflict by teaching members conflict resolution skills and by serving as reconcilers if conflicts occur on the field. Peacemakers can also teach these principles to pastors in other countries. Those pastors will teach and model peacemaking in their own congregations, and the benefits will continue to spread.

4. Develop a church-based reconciliation ministry. Once your church reconcilers have gained experience by working within your congregation, they can expand their ministry by making their services available to people outside your church. This kind of practical ministry provides an excellent way to demonstrate the power of the gospel to unchurched or unsaved people who are in conflict. It could draw them to the Lord as it helps them to make peace.

5. Share your experience with other churches in your community or denomination. As God blesses your church with a culture of peace, you can multiply that blessing by sharing what you have learned with other churches. For example, your church can host a peacemaking seminar for your community or train your reconcilers to assist neighboring churches when they cannot resolve internal conflicts. You can also share your church’s testimony by working with your denominational leaders as they seek to promote biblical peacemaking in your district.

6. Plant new churches that have peacemaking as part of their original “DNA.” As God enables your church to support church planters and give birth to new congregations, you can pass on the spiritual characteristic of peacemaking. This precious gift will increase the new church’s ability to survive natural growing pains and thrive as a family of believers who are visibly committed to living out the love of Christ in the natural conflicts of real life.

It Can Start Today with You

Even if a church is stuck in a culture of disbelief today and sees little peacemaking fruit, by God’s grace it can eventually overflow with a culture of peace that benefits its entire community and brings praise to God. What a

¹ For example, see Corlette Sande’s *The Young Peacemaker* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd’s Press, 1997).

wonderful way to fulfill Jesus' command in Matthew 5:14-16:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

All it takes is one person who hears the call of God and responds, "Here am I. Send

me!" (Isa. 6:8). Perhaps, for your church, that person is you. Please pray about it and reflect on the Scriptures in this article. Ask God to give you a longing to see a culture of peace in your church that reflects the love and power of His Son. If He gives you that longing, hard work awaits you, but great blessing is also in store, for Jesus' promise is absolutely dependable:

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the sons of God.*