

Guidelines for Christian leaders when *NAVIGATING COMMUNITY CONFLICT* *involving differences/conflicts* *over beliefs or doctrine*

1. Background

This resource has been developed at the request of the Baptist Association of NSW & ACT for use by its church health consultants and the leaders of its affiliated churches. Sections 2 and 3 below are summarised from Alan Kelshaw's book, *NAVIGATING COMMUNITY CONFLICT: what Christian leaders need to stay steady at the helm* (Ark House Press, 2022). They are used with the author's permission and have been adapted for this resource.

The eight leadership principles, questions and suggested strategies are fully developed in the book along with their scriptural basis, *Notes of caution* and other helpful insights, guidelines and resources. Readers are recommended to consult the book to gain a more wholistic perspective for use in their particular context.

2. The context involving differences/conflicts over beliefs or doctrine

Disputes or conflicts involving differences in beliefs or doctrine are as old as the Christian faith itself. From Old Testament characters, Jesus' disciples, early church leaders and throughout Christian history, these types of conflicts have always existed.

What we believe goes to the foundation of our identity (who we think we are). What we believe gives us purpose, motivating us to work with like-minded communities (why we do what we do). When our beliefs are challenged, it is therefore not surprising that we react. What is disappointing, however, is that when our Christian beliefs are contested, how we react does not always reflect those beliefs. Instead, we often respond in ways that dishonour God. The genuine danger here is that people who have co-laboured in the gospel together in a community over many years can quickly break fellowship. Hurtful things can be said. Unexpected emotions can be aroused.

In the heat of the moment, it is easy to forget a few obvious facts which can help protect us from destructive responses:

- There have always been and will always be differences in belief. Diversity is a reality in the Christian community. The depth of mystery inherent in our Christian faith means we must allow for other points of view to exist.
- Coupled with mystery is the truth that, in our humanity, we only see partially (1 Cor 13:12). No one can claim to ever be one hundred percent right on any given position. So, be mindful of your limitations and remain open to the possibility of

more facts and perspectives than we think exist or are relevant at any given moment.

- Differences in belief and purported 'guidance' may be valid, or they may arise from decidedly subjective and self-interested motives. This can be the case for even the wisest person. So, maintain a generous spirit even as you listen with discernment for the reasons behind other perspectives.
- Arising from experience and ongoing teaching, we, and others with whom we differ, do change perspective over time. So, be patient with one another and allow for the work of God to take effect amongst us.
- Sitting behind the differences, there may be a divergence in fundamental core beliefs and worldview. So, don't be unduly shocked if such deeply held differences sometimes result in a parting of the ways.
- Conflicts involving beliefs or doctrine are just as much an opportunity to grow in knowledge and faith and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ as any other conflict.

Recognising the above will help leaders remain objective, open to alternative perspectives, humble and steady at the helm.

3. Leadership principles when navigating differences/conflicts over beliefs or doctrine

The following is a summary of (1) biblical principles, (2) relevant questions, (3) suggested strategies, and (4) useful resources for leaders to consider when leading their community as they navigate disputes over differences in beliefs or doctrine. The biblical principles have been developed around the mnemonic HELM and are summarised in the following diagram:

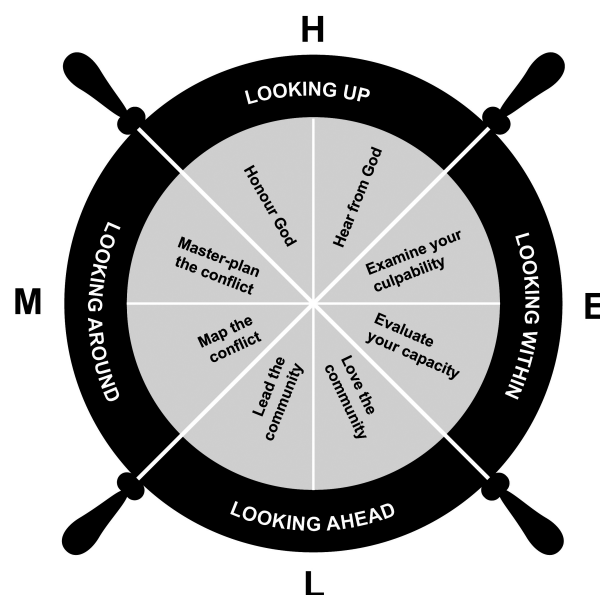


FIGURE 8: THE HELM

Principle 1: HONOUR GOD

From beginning to end, scripture exhorts the people of God to uphold his honour and give him glory above all else.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- How can you honour and please God in your leadership of this church throughout this dispute?
- How can you lead your community such that it, too, constantly honours God as it wrestles with the current issues?

Potential leadership strategies here include:

- Formally agreeing that honouring God will undergird all you do in leading this dispute.
- Plan and carry through with an ongoing prayer strategy within your leadership group and in the community.

Principle 2: HEAR FROM GOD

The inner turbulence associated with periods of discord and heightened emotion can easily dull our sensitivity to our personal relationship with God and what we know of biblical truth. A vital role for leaders during such times is to empower their community to hear from God. Clear biblical guidance at such a time will assist your community in coming to grips with their many questions and anxieties.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- How can we encourage ourselves and our community to maintain a healthy relationship with God at this time?
- What does God want to teach us about responding well to disputes over differences in beliefs or doctrine?
- What does God want to teach us and our community about this issue?

Potential leadership strategies here include:

- Hold a leaders' retreat to discuss your leadership strategy.
- Teach the principles of biblical peacemaking.
- Research relevant biblical materials on the issues in dispute.

Potential resources here include:

- The book: *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 2004)
- The PeaceWise website: www.peacewise.org.au

Principle 3: EXAMINE YOUR CULPABILITY

Leaders need to ensure that they come to navigate the current issues with clean hands. Examining your potential culpability as a leadership group for past and recent events is a core leadership responsibility. Acknowledging failure may not come easily. However,

being willing to admit that a leadership group is functioning with even a minimal level of culpability – just a ‘speck’ (Matt 7:3) – can protect and strengthen a group’s capacity to lead well when significant disputes and conflict arise.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- Do we, individually and collectively as leaders, carry culpability for anything we have done or not done, said or not said, in our leadership in our church, or in contexts beyond our church that we need to confess to our community and others?
- In our leadership of the current issues, have we, individually and collectively, failed our community in any way?
- What actions do we regret taking or not taking in this situation?
- Could others perceive us as having been heavy-handed, quick to lay blame, judgemental, or overly legalistic?
- Where might we have been overreacting, underreacting or reacting wisely in this situation?
- Are we viewing the parties to this dispute, even those who attend other Baptist churches – or even other denominations – as enemies or as brothers and sisters in Christ?
- What language have we been using to describe the parties to this dispute?

Potential strategies here include:

- Undertake an attitude and culpability check as individual leaders and as a leadership group responding honestly to the questions above.
- Admit (confess) and apologise for any identified individual and group failings.

Potential resources here (found on a website accessed via a password available in the book, *Navigating Community Conflict: what Christian leaders need to stay steady at the helm*) **include:**

- *Attitude check list*
- *Guidelines for writing a holistic confession and apology*
- *Guidelines for a confession and apology by leaders*

Principle 4: EVALUATE YOUR CAPACITY

Wise leaders sensibly evaluate their capacity to navigate and respond to significant conflict in their community.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- What time, skills and resources do we, as leaders, possess to effectively lead our community in resolving this conflict?
- Is the situation in our church such that it has moved beyond a simple issue or disagreement which needs to be addressed and become a contest with power and win/lose dynamics emerging?
- Do we have people in our leadership group or community trained to resolve conflict biblically?
- What has been our track record in resolving community conflict by ourselves in the past?

- Could this situation be an opportunity to model healthy conflict resolution strategies that honour God, group relationship with Jesus and build community?

Potential strategies here include:

- Assess whether to seek assistance from experts outside your community (sooner rather than later). If the issue has become a contest with power and win/lose dynamics emerging, it is vital you seek outside assistance.
- Consider who might be the most appropriate person to hold the role of chair of your leadership group as you navigate this conflict.
- Discuss how you as leaders will manage yourselves and keep yourselves healthy (spiritually, physically, emotionally and socially) while navigating this conflict.

Principle 5: LOVE THE COMMUNITY

Love is the hallmark of Christian community. A leader's wise and genuine love of his or her community is a crucial antidote to destructive conflict. Without love, no leader can effectively navigate conflict.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- How will we model and practise love in our community as a hallmark of our leadership throughout this conflict?
- How will we manage the situation if it emerges, on the one hand, some believe they have had a theological victory and feel triumphant and on the other hand, there are those who conclude they have lost the argument and feel despondent?
- If, as a result of the resolution of the issues, changes need to be made to our church's statement of beliefs, how will we manage the situation so that all stakeholders are included and loved unconditionally?

Potential strategies include:

- Consider the kind of pastoral care needed and put it in place.
- Visit those who have become detached, drifted away or left as a statement of grievance.

Principle 6: LEAD THE COMMUNITY

When conflict unfolds, providing God-honouring leadership is never optional. Leaders are responsible to provide leadership to every individual in their community. This includes people on both sides of the dispute and those specifically impacted by the events.

A question for leaders to consider here:

- What strategies will maximise the potential for our community to remain organisationally safe, hopeful, healthy and trustful throughout this challenging time?

Potential strategies here include:

- Identify and review your church's foundational documents, such as your constitution, statement of beliefs, conflict resolution policy, statement of values, leadership covenant, code of conduct, philosophy of ministry, membership pledge, etc.
- Identify and table community expectations in the context of this dispute.
- Develop a communications strategy.
- Appoint a community contact person, a person highly respected in the community who is not a leader and who can be a link between your leadership group and those who have concerns.
- Secure your community's commitment to a covenant of behaviour.

A potential resource here (found on a website accessed via a password available in the book, *Navigating Community Conflict: what Christian leaders need to stay steady at the helm*) **includes:**

- *Sample covenant of behaviour*

Principle 7: MAP THE CONFLICT

To map a conflict or disagreement over beliefs or doctrine is the God-honouring process of accurately uncovering the various aspects of the disagreement and identifying any fractured relationships that have emerged.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- How do we, as leaders, gauge the gravity and extent of this conflict, namely:
 - the 'who' – those who are holding tightly to a particular position and those perhaps around whom a faction or group has or is forming
 - the 'why' – their reasons for believing in their rightness, and
 - the 'what' – the impact of the issue within the community, particularly the state of relational fellowship between people?
- How do the various positions taken on this issue detract from or add to the gospel message?
- Is the matter of secondary (peripheral) or primary importance to the central gospel message?

Potential strategies here include:

- Meet to decide on a process detailing (a) what you will do, (b) who will do it and (c) when will it be done by.
- Prepare the best questions to be asked in any interviews. Include questions regarding whether the person/people being interviewed have any broken relationships in the church and how they would like that to be addressed so that God is honoured and the relationships restored.
- Meet with those identified as the 'who', ascertain the 'why' and the 'what'.
- Have those undertaking any interviews refresh or develop their active listening skills.

A potential resource here (found on a website accessed via a password available in the book, *Navigating Community Conflict: what Christian leaders need to stay steady at the helm*) **includes:**

- *Guidelines for developing the best questions to gather information to map a conflict*

Principle 8: MASTER-PLAN THE CONFLICT

Master-planning a significant disagreement or conflict in your community is the highest strategic level of responsibility Christian leaders carry to lead their community to a resolution. It is about taking a step back from the dispute to plan what to do overall. The above principles are designed to serve as a basis, a framework, to master-plan the current disagreement/conflict.

Questions for leaders to consider here include:

- What are the essential elements of a plan which we need to put in place to resolve this disagreement/conflict and bring healing to our community?
- When you have decided on a draft master-plan, ask:
 - Is the process fair and legal?
 - Does everyone have sufficient opportunity to influence the outcome?
 - Will participants view the process as safe?
 - Have clear ground rules been established for all discussions about this disagreement/conflict?
 - Does the community understand the process ahead of time and know how it will unfold?
- Decide how you will handle any challenges to the strategy.

Potential strategies here include:

- Choose who will take the lead – the governing group, the senior minister, someone else from within the community, or someone from outside the community.
- Have all parties set out their positions in writing, holistically and respectfully, to reduce the potential for misunderstanding.
- Use the resource *Sample process to facilitate active listening* listed below, or a similar resource.
- Discuss the relevance of the facts outlined in section 2, *The context* above.
- Slow down, listen intently to what each side has to say, taking the different beliefs or doctrinal positions and reasons for them seriously. Make notes, summarise the arguments.
- Consider what is negotiable and what is not.
- If you assess that a community meeting is necessary to address what is happening, use the resources *Guidelines for a community meeting* and *Sample ground rules or guidelines for meetings* listed below, or similar such resources.
- Ensure you, as leaders and the chairperson of your meetings, remain mindful of your presuppositions or biases concerning the issues.
- Where agreement cannot be reached, develop an interim solution on the basis that people agree to differ for the moment. This will buy time and allow emotions to settle so you can create a different process to resolve the conflict.

- Ultimately, if the community cannot reach an agreement, leaders may need to make the call on the position the community will hold going forward. This is a significant step. It needs to be undertaken with great care, prayer, wisdom, courage and love.

Potential resources here (found on a website accessed via a password available in the book, *Navigating Community Conflict: what Christian leaders need to stay steady at the helm*) **include:**

- *Guidelines for a community meeting*
- *Sample ground rules or guidelines for meetings*
- *Sample process to facilitate active listening*

4. In conclusion:

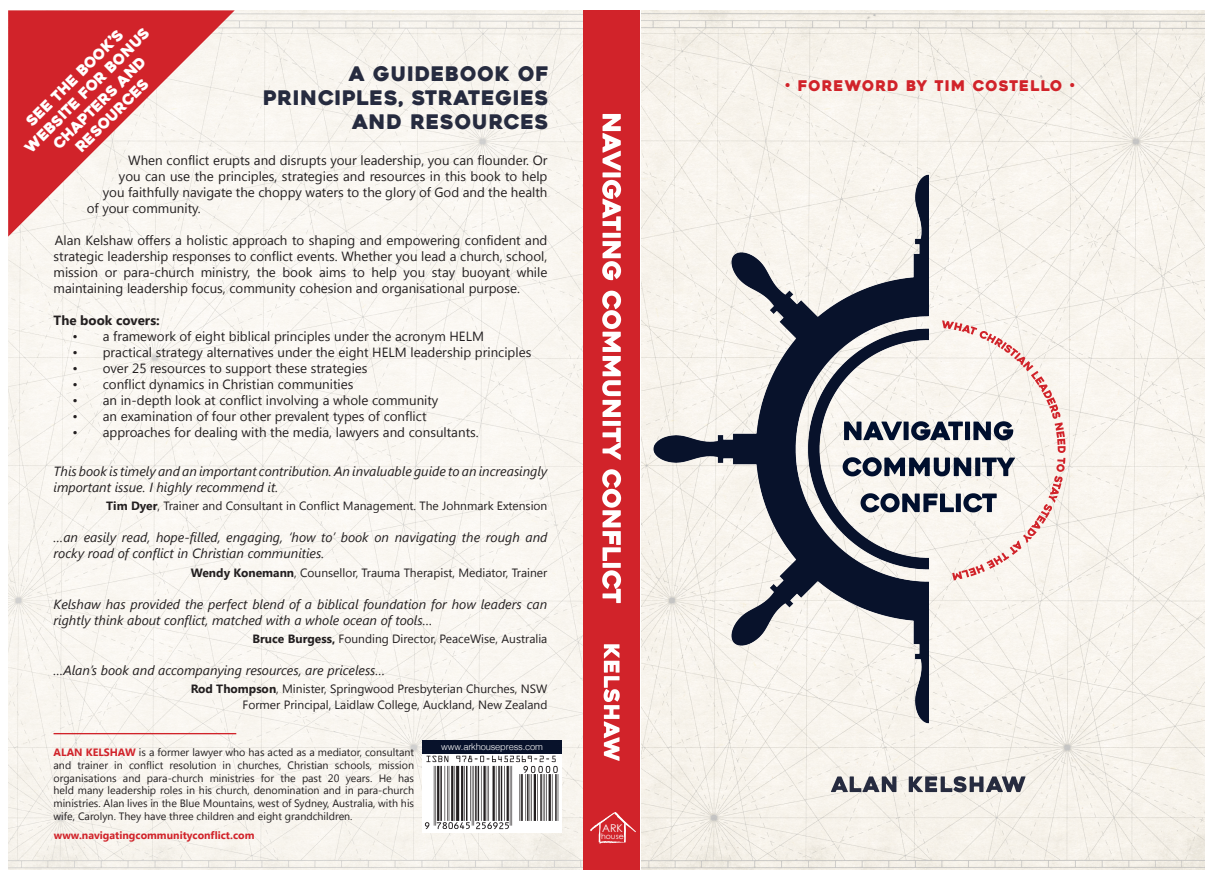
Leading theologian and pastor, the late John Stott, provides a fitting conclusion in this context:

Thank God there are those in the contemporary church who are determined at all costs to defend and uphold God's revealed truth. But sometimes they are conspicuously lacking in love. When they think they smell heresy, their nose begins to twitch, their muscles ripple, and the light of battle enters their eye. They seem to enjoy nothing more than a fight. Others make the opposite mistake. They are determined at all costs to maintain and exhibit brotherly love, but in order to do so are prepared even to sacrifice the central truths of revelation. Both these tendencies are unbalanced and unbiblical. Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth. The apostle calls us to hold the two together, which should not be difficult for spirit-filled believers, since the Holy Spirit is himself "the spirit of truth," and his first fruit is "love." There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity.¹

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¹ John R W Stott, *God's new society: The message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), p.172.

As mentioned above, sections 2 and 3 of this resource are summaries taken from the following book by Alan Kelshaw:



Alan is available to conduct a seminar/workshop on the book for:

- your church community
- your church's leaders, or
- a group of churches in your district.

Contact him for his availability and associated costs.

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