Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Effective Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution for Church Leadership Teams and Governing Boards

A Thesis Project Submitted to

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By

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
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Conflict is one of the primary reasons church leaders leave churches, quit vocational ministry, are terminated or are ineffective in their leadership and Christian service. Church leaders become discouraged, less effective, quit their leadership positions, or even leave congregations because of conflict or disagreements over decisions. Ineffective decision-making and conflict within the leadership team harm the ministry organization and the leaders. The problem this action research project addresses is the need for a clearly defined process of group decision-making and conflict resolution among church and ministry leadership boards. The purpose of this project was to evaluate and improve the tools used by the Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution. This project sought to determine the effectiveness with which the ten members of the Southlands Church of Brea, California, elder team used their *Unity Charter* and *Leading through Collaboration* tools to assist their decision-making and conflict resolution. As an action research project, the elder team from Southlands Church participated in an initial round of individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and then follow-up individual interviews to evaluate the focus group experience and changes made to the tools. The thesis of this research project is` if the Southlands church elder team utilizes a tool for decision-making and conflict resolution, then they will be more confident in their leadership and more effective in decision-making and conflict resolution. The thesis proved to be true as participants described their increased sense of well-being and confidence in handling decision-making and conflict resolution. This research will contribute to the body of research regarding church leadership and will provide insight into the value of team participation in creating policies and procedures

Church boards, elder team, decision-making, conflict resolution

Contents

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Abbreviations

CCK   *Church of Christ the King*

YMCA   *Young Men's Christian Association*

STJ   Meyers-Briggs personality type: *Sensing, Thinking, Judging*

Chapter 1

Introduction

"The church is the community of all true believers for all time."[1] This action research

project will look at the important role of leaders of a locally organized and defined church body

when making decisions for that local community of believers. American churches have

structured their leadership according to three common forms of church government, episcopal,

presbyterian, and congregational or some combination of those models. Within each model is

often some structured team of people who practice decision-making together. Some churches

have elected leaders who have more formal roles in the decision-making process, while other

churches attempt to involve the whole community equally in the decision-making process.

Decisions around vision and mission, rules and policies, distribution of resources, promotion into

positions of authority and employment, and how the community should respond to a conflict are

all important decisions that have significant consequences for the community. Christian churches

and organizations also have a unique desire to seek God's will, wisdom, and blessing in and

through their decisions.

Social and spiritual dynamics, interpersonal communication skills, and external pressures

all converge in the decision-making process for churches in church business meetings, late-night

board meetings, and informal political negotiations that have become infamous character traits of

church culture. The interpersonal and corporate conflicts that arise from the decision-making

process have caused church members to leave churches and even church congregations to split.

The book of Acts addresses both the decision-making processes in the early church and the

conflicts that occurred in the first few decades of the church's existence. Scripture shows

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[1] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical* Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 853.

examples of church members effectively making decisions and of conflict creating personal and organizational growth.

Ministry Context

This research project focused on Southlands Church of Brea, California. Southlands is a member of Advance, a network of churches that developed out of Newfrontiers International. Advance developed out of the influence of Newfrontiers International from the United Kingdom and New Covenant Ministries International from South Africa. In 2011, Terry Virgo restructured Newfrontiers International, breaking the organization into multiple smaller movements. Advance is one of those movements.

At the time of this research project, there are 115 churches that are members of the Advance network of churches. Advance partner churches come into the organization in several different ways. Some have been planted out of other Advance churches and begin as Advance partners by virtue of their birth. Other churches join the organization either from a place of complete independence from any other denomination or network. Some churches are members of existing protestant denominations while also choosing to enter a partnership with Advance. Regardless of origin, once committed to the Pauline-type partnership, they unite in doctrine and values, mission, genuine relationship, and recognition of the network leadership have had a type of apostolic leadership over the partner churches. Advance seeks to see its churches live out Christianity and church growth modeled after the early church in the book of Acts. Advance is committed to strengthening the elder teams of each partner church through encouragement and leadership training. Southlands joined Advance in 2014.

Southlands Church in Brea, CA, was founded as the First Christian Church of Montebello in 1967. Alan Frow describes the history of Southlands Church as occurring over six eras, each

with a different philosophy of ministry, which he calls praxis. From 1967 to 1981, the church was influenced by the Jesus People Movement, which included gospel-centered preaching and conversions. The founding pastor committed a moral failing, and the church experienced a split over a disagreement regarding the practice of charismatic spiritual gifts. Jesse Mason, the second pastor, led from 1981 to 1995, and during this time, the church was focused on charismatic worship and the practice of spiritual gifts. During that time there was another church split because of conflict between leaders.

In 1996, Chris Wienand of South Africa became the Senior Pastor and introduced Southlands to New Covenant Ministries International and Newfrontiers International. Wienand also built partnerships with many of the local mega-churches in Orange County, CA. Wienand saw the church as a greenhouse with believers as plants within the greenhouse. His goal was to empty the greenhouse every five years, sending church members to start new churches.[2] In fourteen years, the church started twelve new churches. Southlands continues to add church planting residents and send out teams of members to plant new churches or campuses an average of once every two years. This level of sacrificial sending created emotional trauma for both the congregation and the elder team. Frow says, "Sending your best can feel like you're intentionally trying to kill your church!"[3] Southlands is committed to starting new churches, but that commitment regularly leads to conflict over the cost of the sacrifice required for growth.

Newfrontiers has been written about and researched because of its influence on British Christianity since its beginning in the early 1970s. Brett McCracken of The Gospel Coalition describes Newfrontiers and Advance as Reformed charismatic churches and Terry Virgo the

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[2] Alan Frow, *Broken for Blessing: The Underrated Potential of the Medium-Sized Multiplying Church Kindle Edition* (Brea: Advance Publishing, 2019), 209.

[3] Ibid., 660.

founder as an elder statesman of Calvinist continuationists.[4] McCracken describes the

movements that strive to merge doctrinal teaching and spiritual gifts striving to balance focus on

reformation and revival, the believer's head and heart, the Word and the Spirit, the cross and the

gifts, and rational and supernatural focus.[5]

A. Ewen Robertson conducted an evaluation of the history and work of Newfrontiers

along with two other similar church movements in the United Kingdom, Salt and Light

Ministries, and Global Horizons. Robertson sees a similarity in these church associations focused

on using Ephesians 4:11-13 to promote modern apostolic leaders who focus their ministry on

raising up and training new indigenous pastors who begin new churches.[6] This focus emphasizes

the lead pastor or apostles' role as a charismatically empowered leader. Robertson quotes David

Devenish, who replaced Virgo as leader of Newfrontiers.

> Whether local church or mission agency, we must deal a death blos to the notion
> that a church exists to care for its own members but sends missionaries to join
> mission agencies who can send them to other parts of the world…No, the whole
> church exists for mission, and whether mission agency or church leaders, we
> much orientate churches in that direction…the New Testament view of the church
> is much more that of the mission-minded apostle functioning in and alongside a
> mission-minded church, so that both are involved in mission.[7]

William Kay over his three years of research into Newfrontiers and similar movements in

the United Kingdom sees unique benefits and challenges to their focus on apostolic led networks.

The organizations are flat in their leadership structures, focused on networking around the

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[4] Brett McCracken, "The Rise of Reformed Charismatics: A Global Movement Brings Together Doctrinal Teaching and Spiritual Gifts," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 62, Issue 1, (2018) 52.

[5] Ibid., 52.

[6] A. Ewen Robertson, "The Distinctive Missiology of the New Churches: An Analysis and Evaluation" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 35:2 (2015), 153. DOI:10.1179/1812446115Z.000000000016

[7] David Devenish, *What on Earth is the Church For?: A Blueprint for the future for Church based mission and social action,* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2006), 70-71.

common mission. "Decision-making is rapid and in most cases perceptibly influenced by charismatic gifts operating directly on the leadership team."[8] Kay sees networks like Newfrontiers as particularly effective at growing churches in post-modern society and particularly among younger adults who value the flat leadership structure and social networking and equality messaging. Kay suggested that these churches and networks would be better suited than traditional churches and denominations to face the uncertain challenges of the twenty-first century.

Ross Wignall conducted research into the unique focus on male leadership in the charismatic church setting, looking specifically at the founding congregation of Newfrontiers. Wignall sees a charismatic doctrinal position as leading to a 'great man' leadership model. "At CCK, masculinities are shaped in dialogue with an imaginary outside world that is perceived as having lost its ability to shape young men appropriately. Churchgoers discuss maleness using a range of pre-defined categories, such as breadwinner, shepherd and servant, reflected in differing styles of masculinity and a series of available subject positions often rooted in moral choice."[9] Wignall sees this focus on male Christianity as being a modern continuation of the historical movements of the Boy Scouts of America, YMCA and most recently Acts 29 movement of churches. There is a focus within the movement on tradition male virtues of athleticism, physical strength, moral character in leadership, assertiveness, and social engagement, especially in those in leadership and in the discipleship and training of younger men.

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[8] William K., Kay, "Apostolic Networks in Britain: An analytic Overview" *Transformation,* 25/1 (2008) 39.

[9] Ross Wignall, "'A Man After God's Own Heart': Charisma, Masculinity and Leadership at a Charismatic Church in Brighton and Hove, UK," *Religion,* 46:3 (2016) 397. DOI:10.1080/0048721X.2016.1169452.

Wignall studied the writings of William Kay regarding Newfrontiers and identified two areas where the charismatic culture had particularly impacted leadership styles and focus. Terry Virgo focused on a democratic prayer model where all leaders gathered to fast, pray, and seek God's guidance on organizational decisions. Virgo also focused on including multiple leaders in oversight and rotating those in leadership roles to closely follow the Biblical model of a plurality of elders.[10] Wignall also sees a pattern of reward for assertive leadership and risk-taking. Finally, personal leadership charisma is related to the spiritual gift of leadership, and both are required of those in leadership.

Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Andrew Ryland conducted research into Newfrontiers leadership culture using psychological type theory to look for similarities in the personality types of leaders within the organization to better understand leadership culture. Using the Meyers-Briggs descriptions. The researchers found that 28% of all lead elders had the STJ preference. They drew four conclusions from the research. The first conclusion is that lead elders create teams that have similar psychological types to themselves. The benefit of this strategy is that there is consistency in the philosophy and practice of leadership. The weakness of the approach is that it does not produce enough diversity of personality and style. The second conclusion is that the preference for STJ is that "at points of conflict the overall good of the local church as an organization is likely to take precedence over the good of individual members who may (for whatever reason) be seen to be damaging the overall strategy of the wider leadership team."[11] The third conclusion is "at the level of the local church, the vision for policy change and

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[10] Wignall, "A Man After God's Own Heart", 401.

[11] Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Andrew Ryland, "Called for Leadership: Psychological Type Profile of Leaders Within the Newfrontiers network of Churches in the United Kingdom," *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 40 no. 3 (Fall, 2012). 226-7.

development may rest in the hands of the lead elders, unchallenged by the wider leadership team until the point comes when this wider leadership team rebels against implementing policy inspired by a vision that it fails to grasp."[12] Finally, "While STJ may be essential for keeping established congregations on track, they may be less well suited for shaping new visions and for inspiring new congregations in complex and changing environments."[13]

Southlands experienced significant internal conflict in the early 2000s over a disagreement regarding the sale and purchase of property, which resulted in a lawsuit against the church by a dissenting faction of church members. The lawsuit caused a significant financial loss for the church and relationships between members were damaged. During this time, there was also an ongoing internal conflict regarding whether the church should put more focus on prophecy or theology.

Frow became Senior Pastor in 2010, just after the church moved to Brea. His early ministry was defined by shifting the focus of the church from numeric church growth to healing, reconciliation, and gospel-centered spiritual growth. Frow directly addressed the conflict in congregation by creating the *Unity Charter* and then teaching on the importance of unity within the church. Under Frow's leadership, the church has continued to reproduce new campuses and congregations and to develop leadership training that included a program called Manna, which trains church planters through the region regardless of denominational or network affiliation.

Southlands practices formal membership but without voting rights. Church members are trained over two meetings in the history, beliefs, and practices of the church. Members are given the brochure *Southlands DNA: Who We Are and What We Believe*, which includes detailed

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[12] Leslie J. Francis, "Called for Leadership", 227.

[13] Ibid., 227.

information regarding church governance and leadership roles. The eldership team leads the

church. Members pledge to submit to the leadership of the elders, recognizing that the

responsibility of the elder is to "guard, guide and govern the church, which includes submitting

to their discipline."[14] Members also pledge to maintain peace and unity with one another.

Members are encouraged to "seek wise mediation within this church"[15] and to avoid using social

medial, text, and email to address or attempt to resolve conflict. Conflict will be resolved using

the church discipline process, as described in Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5, and Galatians

1:6.

Southlands has ministries typical of evangelical churches, including age-specific

ministries for children through college age, worship and visual arts ministries, justice and mercy

ministries, community groups (small group ministry), leadership development ministry, and

foreign missions ministry. Southlands averages 640 adults and 125 children in weekly

attendance, 22 community groups, with 40 % of adult attendees participating in life groups.

Southlands has additional campuses with 200 in combined weekly attendance in the nearby cities

of Chino (est. 2017), and Santa Ana (est. 2020). The campus in Fullerton, which started in 2014,

became a fully independent church in 2019 with the new name Mercy Commons.

Southlands describes itself as "Gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered communities on

mission. Our mission is to glorify the Father in the power of the Spirit by proclaiming the gospel

and making disciples of Jesus."[16] Southlands stresses that it is a community that seeks to balance

Word, expositional preaching, and a high value on biblically focused theology, and the Spirit, a

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[14] Alan Frow, *Southlands DNA: Who We Are & What We Believe.* (Unpublished, 2019), 10.

[15] Ibid., 11.

[16] Ibid., 2.

desire to be led by the Holy Spirit through prayer and the use of the gift of prophecy whereby church members experience God communicating directly with them through scripture, images, and words of knowledge.

Southlands describes its church values as kingdom cultures. These cultures include faithful presence, authentic family, biblical devotion, risky faith, bold witness, radical generosity, passionate reverence, and community servants. These values are lived out through five kingdom initiatives: family through community groups, theology through workshops, discipleship through a course called Porterbrook, service through serve teams, and evangelism through Alpha classes.

Community groups meet weekly. Participants will remain with the same group for several years, building deep relationships. Life groups spend time discussing questions related to the sermon from the previous Sunday and praying together for one another. The primary purpose of the life groups is to create a sense of family among the members and to provide pastoral care for the members as they care for one another. Life group leadership is a primary pathway into leadership in the church.

Throughout the year, Southlands has held quarterly trainings for church members, four six-week workshops called DNA classes - Gospel-Centered, Spirit-Empowered, In Community, On Mission. These workshops help attendees grow in their understanding of, and the spiritual practices related to, the core theological distinctives of Southlands.

The Porterbrook Network is a two-year curriculum series of classes designed to train Christian disciples in both thought and action, individually and as a community. It was founded by Steve Timmis and Tim Chester and is administrated by the Wales Evangelical School of Theology. Porterbrook requires six hours of self-directed reading each week and attending a weekly study group and three residential weekends each year.

All church attendees are encouraged to serve Christ and the community by joining a serve team. Serve teams help staff all aspects of the public worship service, children's and youth ministries, and various outreach and community service groups.

Southlands uses the Alpha evangelism class as a special evangelism experience for people who are not yet followers of Jesus who would like to learn more about the teachings of Jesus and the church community.

Southlands practices several rituals to reinforce being gospel-focused and to promote congregational unity. The church began practicing weekly communion when Alan Frow became Senior Pastor. The practice of weekly communion was intentional to bring healing after the conflict in 2009. Southlands also has a quarterly all-church prayer meeting. People from all the campuses attend a monthly prayer meeting one Wednesday night a month. This prayer meeting helps promote the unity of the congregation, despite there being several different campuses for the church. There is a similar monthly men's prayer meeting on one Saturday of the month, which serves the same purpose. Southlands holds baptisms regularly during the weekend public worship services, again to reinforce being gospel-focused and to celebrate recent conversions to Christ.

Southlands is led by an elder team of both paid pastors and unpaid pastors called marketplace elders who serve together as a team of elders, with the Senior Pastor as the first-among-equals. Decisions are made by the elder team, which appoints church members to become elders through a two-year leadership development process. Southlands has both an executive leadership team and individual campus leadership teams for its church campuses, Brea, Chino, and Santa Ana. Both paid staff elders and marketplace elders take turns preaching. Members of the church can share prophetic words of encouragement and exhortation at various times during

the public worship service. Members are empowered and encouraged to be involved in the ministries of teaching, public prophecy, and shepherding through life group leadership and prayer ministry service. Southlands is a church where all members are encouraged to practice spiritual gifts and serve one another through shepherding and exhortation.

Frow leads the team of elders with a "first among equals" style of leadership. Frow introduced a *Unity Charter* for the elder team to use and teach to the church community in order to manage conflict that was present in the church.[17] Southlands has used the *Unity Charter* whenever conflicts arose among the members of the elder team over the last ten years, and Frow credits the ease of a one-page document, the *Unity Charter*, that all church members are given during their membership training with providing an easy and effective means of handling conflict in the church community.

Frow created three symbols that the elder team use in their conversations, especially around decision-making, to help foster a more collaborative dialogue. These are called *Leading through Collaboration.* A lightbulb represents ideas. A heart represents a perception of someone or something. "It is often more intuitive than logical, and it often has to do with a problem that needs addressing."[18] A bullhorn represents conviction, "a mix of biblical truth, prophetic intuition, and strategic thinking. Sometimes it will be a proposal, but generally, it comes after we have discussed a decision at length as a team and have not been able to reach consensus."[19] Members of the leadership team know the terminology and will use the images to communicate

[17] Alan Frow, "From Unity Musings to Unity Charter", accessed August 30,2020, https://alanfrow.blogspot.com/2010/10/from-unity-musings-to-unity-charter.html.

[18] Alan Frow, *Broken for Blessing*, 1350.

[19] Ibid., 1357.

to others how emotionally invested they are in their viewpoint. This shared language helps the group negotiate emotions and conflicts that may arise during the decision-making process.

Southlands Church resides in Brea, California, which is situated in the North-East corner of Orange County, CA. Orange County is home to 3.175 million people.[20] 40% are white, not Hispanic, 34% are Hispanic, and 22% are Asian. 30% were born outside of the United States, and 45% speak a language other than English at home. The median household income is $85,000. 10% of the population is below the poverty level. The median price of a home is $652,000, and the median rent is $1,777 monthly. 40% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or additional advanced degrees. The average commute time to work is 28 minutes. The population of Brea is 43,600 people, and the demographics closely reflect those of Orange County. In the larger Los Angeles metro area, 65% of the population self-identifies as Christian, with 18% as Evangelical Protestant, 12% as Mainline or Historically Black Protestant, and 32% as Catholic.[21]

The research interviews and focus group were conducted from February to April of 2021. During this time there were two significant social events that affect the context of the research process. The presidential election of 2020 and the attack on the United States Capital building on January 6, 2021 both had a social effect on the congregation and resulted in several families leaving the church because they disagreed with the position the church had taken a position on the election that matched their personal beliefs. This open conflict within society, Evangelical

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[20] "Quick Facts: Orange County California", US Census Bureau, Accessed Sept. 6, 2020, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/orangecountycalifornia/RHI125219#RHI125219.

[21] "Religious Landscape Study: Adults in the Los Angeles Metro Area," Pew Research Center, Accessed Sept. 6, 2020, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/los-angeles-metro-area.

Christianity, and the Southlands congregation all caused an additional level of stress for the Southlands elder team.

The congregation and leaders were also experiencing the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The quarantine affected how the research was conducted. There were significant changes in the membership of the Southlands congregation as a result of the pandemic and Southland's decision to continue with public worship service that included singing by purchasing a large tent and holding outdoor services. The church's decisions resulted in some families leaving the congregation, which was stressful for the leadership team.

Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs studied the relationship between the cultural diversity between Christians related to the political focus on Christian nationalism and the Christian response to government regulations regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism as "an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture."[22] The researchers found a clear relationships between the two issues causing an increased polarization within society and organizations.

> Using panel data that allowed us to establish temporal precedence between Christian nationalism and Americans' incautious and precautionary behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that Christian nationalism was the leading predictor that Americans engaged in incautious behavior during the pandemic, and the second leading predictor that Americans avoided taking precautionary measures, just behind religious commitment, which became the strongest positive predictor of precautionary behavior once Christian nationalism was taken into account.[23]

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[22] Samuel L Perry, Andrew L Whitehead, and Joshua B Grubbs. "Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans' Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic." Journal for the scientific study of religion. 59, no. 3 (2020): 406.

[23] Ibid., 414.

Jerry Pillay states, "I would like to contend that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted churches into a somewhat revolutionary way of thinking and being church today." Pillay sees the real crisis for the church as the challenges to the church around performing the regular corporate worship that defines the church experience more than the external circumstances that the church focuses on.

Johnson, Eagle, Headley, and Holleman identify this crisis for the church as an ideal example of Ann Swidler's conceptualization of "unsettled cultural periods."[24] The researchers looked at how pastors re-evaluated themselves and pastoral ministry around the areas of worship, pastoral care, and pastoral identity. They found the first stage of the pandemic created the unsettled and stressful experience where habitual practices and routines were disrupted which led to a second stage of intentional reflection and restructuring of beliefs and practices.

At the completion of this research project, the researcher has attended Southlands for four years and is currently serving as a community group leader and recently completed the leadership training program and was ordained by the church as a pastor and marketplace elder.

Problem Presented

Conflict is one of the primary reasons that pastors leave churches, quit vocational ministry, are terminated and are ineffective in their leadership and Christian service. Twenty-two percent of pastors surveyed by Richard Krejcir in his 2016 research describe criticism and conflict as their most significant challenge in ministry.[25] Dean Hoge, in his research, found 27%

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[24] Erin F. Johnston, David E Eagle, Jennifer Headley, and Anna Holleman. "Pastoral Ministry in Unsettled Times: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Clergy During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Review of religious research 64, no. 2 (2022), 379.

[25] Richard J. Krejcir, "Statistics on Pastors: 2016 Update: Research on the Happenings in Pastors' Personal and Church Lives" Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development, https://files.stablerack.com/webfiles/71795/pastorsstatWP2016.pdf Accessed August 9, 2020.

of pastors who had left congregations had done so because of the conflict they experienced in the church.[26] Conflict is responsible for more than one in four departures of a pastor from their church. These departures affect finances, membership, momentum, and growth in the local church, and repeated transition can affect both clergy and member health.

Conflict affects not only pastors but congregations as well. Thom Rainer looked at 1000 Southern Baptist churches between 2013 and 2016 and found 65% to be declining or plateaued.[27] Conflict is also a primary reason why church members leave churches or abandon regular church attendance altogether. Waters and Bortree found that millennials' departure from church was primarily caused by perceived personal conflict.[28] Incorrectly managing conflict has measurable negative consequences on church growth and the spiritual health of congregants.

Gary McIntosh points out that a lack of training regarding decisions and handling conflict results in 80% of church board members, in a survey conducted by Robert Munger of Fuller Theological Seminary, describing their spiritual lives as declining because of serving on a church board.[29] As the literature review will show, there are comprehensive books and systems available for church governing boards to help with training and the practice for decision-making and conflict resolution. These books, however, are lengthy or complex. Training in some systems is several full days in length. The problem is that interpersonal conflict or disagreements over

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[26] Dean R. Hoge, and Jaqueline E. Wenger. *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy leave Local Church Ministry.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 969. Kindle Edition.

[27] Thom Rainer, "Dispelling the 80 Percent Myth of Declining Churches", June 28, 2017, Accessed August 9, 2020. https://churchanswers.com/blog/dispelling-80-percent-myth-declining-churches.

[28] Richard D. Waters and Denise Sevick Bortree, "'Can We Talk About the Direction of This Church?': The Impact of Responsiveness and Conflict on Millenials' Relationship with Religious Institutions" *Journal of Media and Religion*, 11:4, 200-215, DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2012.730330.

[29] McIntosh, Gary, "Building Board Unity," *The Good Book Blog,* Talbot School of Theology, The Good Book Blog. https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2017/building-board-unity. Accessed August 9, 2020.

decisions cause participants in church leadership teams to be less effective or quit serving. Ineffective decision-making and conflict within the team harm the ministry organization and the leaders.

Larry Osborne says, "A unified and healthy leadership team doesn't just happen. It has to be a priority."[30] Church leadership teams need to make leadership skills, especially related to communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution, clearly defined for the team so that members can grow in their skills and hold one another accountable to agreed-upon communication practices. Creating a tool, a policy, procedure, or some other kind of visual or written aid, ensures that the communication practices can be easily referred to during meetings. Regarding tools, Peter Drucker said, "Although I don't know a single for-profit business that is as well managed as a few for the nonprofits, the great majority of the nonprofits can be graded a 'C' at best. Not for a lack of effort, most of them work very hard. But for lack of focus, and for lack of tool competence."[31]

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project was to evaluate and improve the tools used by the Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution. This project sought to determine the effectiveness with which church leaders used their tools to assist themselves with personal and team development on decision-making and conflict resolution topics. As an action research project, the elder team from Southlands Church was encouraged to evaluate their current

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[30] Larry Osbone, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 24.

[31] Peter F Drucker, Frances Hesselbein, and Joan Snyder Kuhl, *Peter Drucker's Five Most Important Questions: Enduring Wisdom for Today's Leaders* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), 2.

experience with group decision-making and conflict resolution, to evaluate their use of their *Unity Charter* and *Leading through Collaboration* tools, and to modify one or both of those tools.

Basic Assumptions

There was a basic assumption that the lead pastor and leadership team of Southlands Church would give permission for the action research project once it was approved by Liberty University and presented to the elder team. There was also the assumption that individual leaders would willingly, honestly, and completely participate in the action research project through its completion. Finally, there was the assumption that the action research project interviews and questions would reveal the necessary information required to address the problem.

Definitions

Church Leaders: Church leaders refer to those persons responsible for leadership, supervision, and governance of the larger church organization. These can include those identified as bishops, pastors, elders, deacons, or other board members.[32]

Church Leadership Team: The term this paper will use to describe the most executive leadership team in a congregation regardless of the terminology the congregation uses for that group.

Conflict Management: Stewarding a conflict between parties to utilize the conflict for the benefit of both parties, negotiating communications and expectations in order to minimize relational harm and maximize the potential for spiritual development in the parties involved. [33]

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[32] Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders God's Plan for Leading the Church: A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Perspective,* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003) 262-263.

[33] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 29-40.

Conflict Resolution: Bringing the parties involved in a conflict to a place where their material or relational dispute has been settled, restoration has been made, and where there is no longer active antagonism between the parties. [34]

Decision-Making: The choice to act in a particular way or choose one option over others.[35]

Elders: Persons chosen by a congregation and commissioned to serve as shepherds of the members with the intention of providing teaching, member care, and spiritual and organizational oversight.[36]

Governing Board: Persons elected or appointed to hold official responsibility to the State in which the church is registered for the actions of a church.

One-Page Tool: A leadership skill, policy, procedure, or checklist that can be printed onto a single sheet of letter sized paper, either one-sided or two-sided, that is easily accessible to a leadership team for the purpose of ensuring that the desired skill, policy, or procedure is carried out.

Spiritual Discernment: Judging or testing experiences to know if they are aligned with God's desires and plan.[37]

Spiritual Transformation: The process by which the Holy Spirit changes a person's attitude and character to become like the example lived out by Jesus and documented in scripture.[38]

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[34] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 144-145.

[35] Luke Timothy Johnson. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 13-17.

[36] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership.* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 31-32, 36-38.

[37] Johnson. *Scripture & Discernment,* 109.

[38] Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups.* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 240-245.

Limitations

A limitation of the project was the many stressors occurring during the 2020 and 2021 years because of the challenges around state quarantine regulations regarding public church meetings, wearing facemasks, and social unrest regarding racial conflicts and beliefs regarding the legitimacy of the Covid-19 pandemic. Conducting the project while church leadership teams are in a state of unresolved conflict may impact the project.

Another limitation was the tendency of church leadership teams to maintain a high level of privacy regarding their internal debates, negotiations, decision-making, and conflict resolution. Leadership teams may have been less open or willing to express disagreement with an outside researcher, especially regarding published research. Leadership team members may have been less truthful in research interviews and questions if they believe there is the possibility that their answers would reflect negatively on the group's reputation for being competent or spiritual.

Delimitations

The first delimitation was the focus on Southlands Church. The focus on a single church resulted in similar theological beliefs, previous training, and existing relationships with an established pattern of decision-making and conflict resolution.

The second delimitation was the focus on the elder team. There are three different leadership teams within the church, but the action research project was conducted by the elder team. The uniformity of belief among the elder team members is both an asset for shared language, experience, and attitudes and a liability in the tendency toward groupthink or lack of creativity that would be more present because of diversity.

Thesis Statement

If the Southlands church elder team utilizes a tool for decision-making and conflict resolution, then the elder team members will be more confident in their leadership and more effective in decision-making and conflict resolution.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review looked at research and literature on the topics of harmonious team leadership, decision-making in team leadership, discernment in the decision-making process, how conflict creates transformation, and responses to conflict. Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership* is widely quoted in evangelical churches when looking at the role and behaviors of elder and deacon teams. Ignatius of Loyola and the Quakers have influenced most of Christianity with their models of decision-making. Ken Sande's *Peacemaker* is regularly quoted and used as a foundation for many writings on Christian conflict resolution since it was published.

Harmonious Team Leadership

Gary Hoag writes about the roles of groups of elders portrayed in the Old Testament and how the primary focus was on community oversight. New Testament elders continued with that same focus on their role in the new church community. Hoag encourages church governing boards today to follow this pattern.[1] Eguizabal and Lawson look at both Israel's elders and Moses as examples of team leadership.[2] Eguizabal and Lawson stress that decisions were made by groups in both examples by working collectively.

Alexander Strauch focuses on the concept of shared leadership within the roles of elders and deacons.[3] Strauch asserts that God never wants a lone pastor leading a church without the

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[1] Gary G., Hoag, Wesley K Willmer, and Gregory J. Henson. *The Council: A Biblical Perspective on Board Governance*. (Winchester: ECFA Press, 2018). 102. Kindle Edition.

[2] Orbelina Eguizabal and Kevin E. Lawson. "Leading Ministry Teams, Part I: Theological Reflection on Ministry Teams." Christian Education Journal 6, no. 2 (2009) 253-254.

[3] Strauch discusses the use of the plural term elders. (Acts 14:23; Acts 15; Acts 20:17,28; James 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1, 5:1). He also looks at the other examples of shared leadership (Acts 13:1, 15:35, 1 Cor. 16:15,16; 1 Thess. 5:12,13; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

support and accountability of other elders.[4] Gene Getz shares this view but adds that in the context of the New Testament, the elders in scripture most likely referred to multiple congregations within a given city.[5] Aubrey Malphurs disagrees with Strauch. Marphurs sees the plural use of the term 'elders' was the result of multiple small house churches in the cities being addresses rather than multiple elders within one congregation.[6] Malphurs, however, points to Proverbs 11:14, 15:22, 20:18, 24:6 to show that the focus should be on the wisdom of seeking God's will in a group, rather than using a plurality of leaders from an organizational perspective. There is not broad agreement on how to organize group leadership. Church tradition, polity, political opinions, and business strategies have all affected how churches organize themselves and how individual leaders attempt to lead. There is an agreement, however, that there is wisdom in seeking advice and accountability from other leaders.

Most of the writing regarding group leadership focuses on the ecclesiology of organizational management. Topics normally addressed include how a group selects leaders, who qualifies as a leader, and the primary spiritual responsibilities of leadership. There is little written on the topic of how leaders in a group should treat one another and what the process of decision-making and resolving the conflict that arises during that process should be dealt with.

Winslow and Followwill argue for unanimity as to the level of harmony God desires of the church board. They see the command to "shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God;" to intend that the governing board should not settle for less than a unanimity of will that is in alignment with the will of Christ for

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[4] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership,* 43.

[5] Getz, *Elders and Leaders God's Plan for Leading the Church,* 211.

[6] Aubrey Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005) 35.

his church.[7] Osborne disagrees on the issue of unanimity among leadership teams. Osborne makes the point that church boards often confuse unity and uniformity.[8] Osborne stresses the concept that unity is what is shared because of board members' relationships with Christ. He is the Head of the church and of each individual congregation. Osborne defines three "irreducible minimums" for unity, doctrinal unity, respect and friendship, and philosophical unity.[9] He does not see unanimity as a true possibility. Malphurs stresses that healthy boards have four characteristics related to harmony, "They work together as a team; they display courage; they trust and respect one another; they know how to deal with disagreements."[10] God desires church governance boards to fulfill his scriptural direction for unity and harmony in their service. Examples include John 17:20-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 2:2, and 1 Peter 3:8. Hoag encourages boards to use the pattern of scripture, silence, sharing, and supplication to intentionally center the board members on Christ in order to bring harmony and unity to their interactions.[11] Authors and practitioners agree that intentional effort must be made by board members to pursue unity toward and in Christ. Board members should make their primary focus and work to become unified in their submission to Jesus individually and corporately as mentioned in Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 5:21.

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[7] Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill. *Christ in Church Leadership: A Handbook for Elders and Pastors*. (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 123.

[8] Larry. Osborne, *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 139.

[9] Osborne, Larry. *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 28.

[10] Ibid., 55.

[11] Hoag, *The Council: A Biblical Perspective on Board Governance*. 102.

Decision-Making in Team Leadership

Church governing boards make three types of decisions: policy, operational, and accountability. Church boards set the policies and written rules that will regulate their actions and those of the church. One of the primary complaints of those who have served on church governing boards of churches of under 200 members is the conflicts that arise from the multitude of small operational decisions that have traditionally defined board leadership: carpet colors, seating options, the wattage of lightbulbs, shrubbery, and other basic operational decisions related to building maintenance. There has also been a common trend of incorporating the United States political model into elected board positions where the members believe that they are there as the representative of the faction of members that elected them to serve the agenda of their constituents as a state congressperson would do. Endacott, Hartwig, and Yu, in their research of church leadership teams, found that teams who scored as the highest performing focused on critical churchwide decisions and utilized a pre-established step-by-stop process in their decision-making that included intentionally seeking wisdom from God.[12] The third area of decision-making is accountability, which is where the term 'governing' comes from. Governance is the oversight and responsibility of the congregation. Accountability decisions are the most difficult because many boards wait to address issues until they reach a crisis level, like termination of a staff member, church discipline of a member, or a financial crisis.

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[12] Camille G. Endacott, Ryan T. Hartwig, and Chong Ho Yu. "An Exploratory Study of Communication Practices Affecting Church Leadership Team Performance", *Southern Communication Journal*, 82:3, (2017) DOI:10.1080/1041794X.2017.1315450, 135.

Discernment in the Decision-Making Process

Luke Timothy Johnson describes the church decision-making in the four passages in Acts

1:15-26; 4:23-31; 6:1-6; 9:26-30 as following the similar model of prayer, describing their

current narrative, and then interpreting scripture considering their current circumstance.[13]

Decision-making is meant to be a spiritual exercise that draws the participating community into a

deeper relationship with Jesus and each other. Johnson identifies this experience as

discernment.[14] It is in the discernment of decision-making that the leaders and the congregation

experience God as being relevant and present in their lives. It is important for the spiritual health

of the congregation that governing boards wrestle with significant issues using a discernment

process to truly experience God's presence at work within their community.

Morris and Olsen also see discernment as key not only to decision-making but to spiritual

leadership in general. Morris and Olsen define spiritual discernment as "the ability to distinguish

or discriminate between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that

which is not of God and draws us away from God)."[15] Similar to Johnson, Morris and Olsen see

the need for a clear process that involves training leaders to practice discernment and then a

delineated process for practicing discernment while meeting together.

Haley Ruth Barton agrees with Johnson, and Morris and Olsen, and builds upon their

work, suggesting a clear covenant among members of the governing board to commit to actively

practicing discernment as individuals and a community. Barton has created an eighteen-step

process to lead governing boards through each phase of the discernment process in their

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[13] Johnson. *Scripture & Discernment,* 107-108.

[14] Ibid., 109.

[15] Danny E. Morris, and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church.* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 10.

decision-making.[16] Barton addresses the impact that work environments have when board members, cause many to try to incorporate their business culture and experience into church leadership rather than allowing scripture and the Holy Spirit to reveal a new style of leadership and decision-making. Barton's steps are an excellent model for churches with the exception that understanding them requires the reading of the whole book, and eighteen individual steps may discourage some boards from applying the principles because of the number of steps in the process. Barton also addresses the challenge that many boards are unwilling to learn a discernment-based decision-making process because it takes longer and requires more vulnerability and loss of control than many board members are comfortable with.

Governing boards need to better understand the consequences to themselves and their organizations from ineffective decision-making practices. They would also benefit from understanding the improvements to their performance as a board and organization, as well as their improved sense of spiritual well-being, which are all the results of focusing on developing their discernment skill and regularly using them in meetings.

Conflict Creates Transformation

There is substantial evidence that shows the value of a conflict, when it is handled correctly, as a catalyst to bring about positive change for individuals and organizations. Endacott, Hartwig, and Yu's research show that the conflict that comes with decision-making benefits the group with greater team performance, increased innovation, and creativity.[17] Garner summarizes similar benefits in the research he evaluated. He added benefits specifically for churches,

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[16] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together,* 172.

[17] Camille G. Endacott, Ryan T. Hartwig, and Chong Ho Yu. "An Exploratory Study of Communication Practices Affecting Church Leadership Team Performance", 130.

including guarding the organization against the dangers of leadership or institutional blindness and encouraging members to focus on their churches' goals and mission.[18] Jun's research focuses on the conflict between groups within a congregation and highlights that conflict resolution is the only way to uncover and deal with systemic root causes of the conflict, such as injustice, discrimination, and inequality of power.[19]

Sande's work on conflict resolution has been used widely quoted in writings on church conflict resoluion. Sande sees that conflicts caused by the differences in how God has made people are natural and not something that is bad or to is avoided, but rather when handled properly, can result in a benefit to both parties as well as spiritual maturity and growth.[20] Van Yperen adds that spiritual transformation and growth regularly follow submitting to the conflict resolution process.[21] Morris and Olsen point out that the goal of governing boards should not be to avoid conflict but rather to actively seek transformation through the conflict resolution process.[22]

Sande also stresses that conflict management and resolution are one of the ways that Christians live out grace and forgiveness and, in doing so, bear witness to the gospel. Personal and corporate spiritual transformation is usually part of the mission or at least a value in Christian churches, and conflict is one of the ways that God brings people into a place of tension

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[18] Johny T. Garner, "Sunday Democracies: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Members' Perceptions of Church Authority and Organizational Dissent", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 44:4 (2016) 415-433 DOI: 10.1080/00909882.2016.1225162.

[19] Guichun Jun, "Transforming Conflict: A Peacebuilding Approach for an Intergroup Conflict in a Local Congregation" *Transformation* 35:1 (2018), 9. DOI: 10.1177/0265378818767675.

[20] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 29.

[21] Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 38.

[22] Morris, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 104.

and stress where he can transform them. Morris and Olsen encourage governing boards to make the pursuit of transformation through decision-making and conflict resolution a priority for the organization. Congregations whose leadership makes spiritual transformation at the board level a priority see the culture of the larger congregation become one of transformation as well.[23] As go the leaders, so goes the congregation.

Responses to Conflict

Davey describes the unresolved conflict that builds up in relationships and organizations as conflict debt.[24] Personality psychology identifies agreeableness as one of the five primary personality types. People with a high level of agreeableness are uncomfortable with conflict and work hard to avoid it. Some church members over-spiritualize unity to avoid conflict. Spiritual unity is not an absence of conflict but the ability to remain unified while working through the conflict that is a natural part of the decision-making process. Winslow and Followwill advocate for a unanimity standard for governing boards. In this standard, anyone's voice of dissent ends negotiation and the decision-making process.[25] There is an instruction to avoid manipulation, but the threat of disappointing everyone else hinders honest dialogue and would create the kind of conflict debt Davey warns about. This type of unanimity does not align with the examples of dissent and conflict between the Apostles in the New Testament and is a way to avoid the pain of conflict. One of the primary responses to conflict is to avoid it altogether or to fill meetings with busyness and minutia to avoid difficult conversations.

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[23] Morris, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 83.

[24] Liane Davey, *The Good Fight: Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Team and Organization Back on Track*. (Vancouver: Page Two Books, 2019), 10. Kindle Edition.

[25] Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill. *Christ in Church Leadership,* 124-5.

Another ineffective response to conflict that is typically found in churches is the use of politics to build power coalitions and affect decision-making or build allies in a conflict to prove oneself right by numbers of opinions or supporters, which is especially true regarding conflicts that involve finances and terminating employees. Michael Anthony describes politics as the primary source of disillusionment for board members.[26] Discernment is how the leaders and congregation experience God's presence with them. Political manipulation of the decision-making process, then, is how congregant's faith in God becomes damaged or in doubt. Strauch asserts that leaders who manipulate information, control, or block communication, or otherwise exercise human control over the discernment process are rejecting all that Christ and his church stand for.[27]

A failure of the governing board to train itself in the areas of spiritual discernment, decision-making, and conflict-resolution and to not have a policy or standard operating practice for guiding conversations and meetings is an ineffective response. Malphurs points out that most governing boards have not been trained and do not seek out training.[28] Neither the pastoral staff nor the governing board has studied how to function in a governance relationship. Boards rarely admit their lack of skill and seek training to excel at the unique challenges of church leadership. Michael suggests that church boards should allow the Senior Pastor to provide the training.[29] Osborne suggests scheduling an extra monthly meeting for team building, prayer, and training.[30]

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[26] Michael J. Anthony, *The Effective Church Board: A Handbook for Mentoring and Training Servant Leaders.* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 240.

[27] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership,* 28.

[28] Aubrey Malphurs, *Leading Leaders,* 12-15.

[29] Anthony Michael, *The Effective Church Board,* 13.

[30] Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams*, 140.

Before leadership team members begin serving, it would be beneficial for them to receive training that would help them understand their roles, responsibilities, and appropriate behaviors and for this training to include an extended period of learning that includes feedback from a mentor or coach. Often, doctrine has been prioritized with interpersonal skills and standards for communication being ignored or assumed. Barton offers eighteen steps for learning the skill of discernment and applying it to group decision-making. Sande offers a step-by-step process for conflict resolution and tools to assist in training individuals and groups to learn the process. Strauch offers a short handbook to help elders act lovingly toward one another and center their thoughts and conversations on Christ before discussing business or emotional and relational needs of church members.[31] The authors mentioned above are all in agreement that intentional training is essential to develop the skills and processes necessary to lead effective conflict resolution.

Sande's biblical guide for conflict resolution has been utilized by both Van Yperen and Barthel, and Edling in their writings. Sande recommends four basic principles for peacemaking: glorify God, get the log out of your own eye, gently restore, and go and be reconciled. [32] Sande offers recommendations of questions conflicting parties can ask themselves to actively help resolve the conflict. Malphurs similarly suggests boards adopt a model of using questions during conflict resolution and training members in the use of questions.[33] Jesus modeled using questions when dialoguing with people with whom he disagreed. Malphurs recommends using questions when conflict arises.

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[31] Alexander Strauch, *Meetings that Work: A Guide to Effective Elders' Meetings.* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2010).

[32] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 38.

[33] Aubrey Malphurs, *Leading Leaders,* 58-59.

Sande uses the term "stewarding conflict"[34] to emphasize the importance of leaders putting their full focus on conflict resolution and maximizing the redemptive and transforming benefits of conflict for individuals and communities. Afolabi, Son, Dunactz, and Jun agree that church leaders have unique responsibilities and opportunities to lead their congregations by seeking out conflicts within the congregation to resolve. Afolabi recommends that the leaders see themselves as mediators and intentionally look for conflicts in the congregation to mediate.[35] Son recommends training leaders in Bowen Family Systems Theory to look for anxiety-producing systems and problems in the congregation that are responsible for the conflict in the congregation. [36] Dunactz suggests leaders look at how church programs cause conflict because of the competing goals and actively work to manage conflicting goals and address conflicts early when they arise. [37] Jun stresses the importance of leaders addressing social systems and structures that create inequality and conflict.[38]

The literature review examined writing and research on harmonious group leadership within protestant churches, decision-making by governing boards, the inevitability of conflict that comes from decision-making, and the spiritual transformation and development that it brings to both individuals and organizations, and ineffective and effective responses to conflict. Authors and researchers agree on the need for congregations to have governing boards that intentionally

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[34] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 38-39.

[35] Oluwaseun Afolabi, "Alternative Dispute Resolution: A Tool for Managing Leadership Conflict in the Church" *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, 4 (2019). 41-45. doi:10.1002/jls.21607, 42-44.

[36] Angela Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause of Church Conflicts Based on Bowen Family Systems Theory" *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 73:1 (2019) 9-18 DOI: 10.1177/1542305018822959, 16.

[37] David R. Dunaetz, "Constructively Managing Program-related Conflict in Local Churches" *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 16:2 (2019) 259-274 doi:10.1177/0739891319842252, 264.

[38] Guichun Jun, "Transforming Conflict: A Peacebuilding Approach for an Intergroup Conflict in a Local Congregation," 12.

train and equip their members to function in harmony and unity to effectively fulfill their responsibility for decision-making and conflict resolution. The researcher could not find research measuring the effectiveness of any one system of decision-making or conflict resolution nor research comparing the effectiveness of systems. Research measuring the effectiveness of different systems of decision-making and conflict resolution and comparing effectiveness of systems would be beneficial to organizations seeking to find more effective tools for those issues. This research project addresses the models utilized by Southlands Church and attempts to address the effectiveness of those models but does not address the major models used by American Protestant churches.

Theological Foundations

This section will examine how scripture addresses the topics of harmonious team leadership, decision-making in team leadership, the role of discernment in the decision-making process, how conflict creates transformation, and responses to conflict.

Harmonious Team Leadership

The Old and New Testaments both emphasize God gathering his people into communities of faith, using words like body and family to describe the interdependence between the members. God also sets groups of people into leadership over the community as an intermediary between himself and his people. Unity among the members of these leadership teams and their ability to harmoniously make decisions are highlighted in Scripture as well. In the Old Testament, the need for unity is emphasized in Psalm 133:1. This song of ascents, attributed to David, was sung by the nation of Israel as they ascended Zion on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. God refers to the nation of Israel as members

of his family in Exodus 4:22-23. The imagery of unity within a family among the brothers, living together with their father even after marriage and until their own children were born, is a metaphor for God's family living together in unity.[39] God is calling his community of faith, to more than just physical unity at the Temple in Jerusalem, but to a relational and spiritual unity in submission to himself and his leadership and authority.[40]

In the New Testament, unity in the faith community, and especially among the leaders, is commanded. Jesus prays for his followers to live in unity and harmony in John 17:20-23. Jesus prays for his disciples to practice the same submission to unity expressed in the Trinity. "The believers, still distinct, are to be one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received."[41] "It is a oneness so intimate, so vital, so personal that it is patterned after, and based on, the relations which exist between the persons of the Holy trinity: it is a oneness not only of faith, hope, and love but of life itself."[42] Jesus relates the success of the disciples' witness to the unbelieving world to be the result of their unity with each other. He goes on to call for the disciples to be "completely one" in "complete unity." (John 17:23) Beasley-Murray points to Jesus' gift of unity as the Redeemer-Revealer, welcoming Christians to join with one another in unity with Christ within the Trinity.[43]

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[39] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150 (Revised), vol.21, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 279.

[40] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 815.

[41] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press1991), 568.

[42] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. 2*, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 366.

[43] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, *vol. 36, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1999), 302.

The work of achieving complete unity is ultimate the work of Christ, which Paul highlights in Ephesians 2:14-16. Unity does not begin with human efforts and attempts at peaceful coexistence or a lack of conflict. Rather, peace begins in the person of Christ himself and his role as savior and sanctifier of every member of the community of faith. "He himself is our peace, that is, what everything else—whether the law with its ordinances, human merit, law-works of whatever kind, sacrifices, etc.—could not do, he, he alone in his own person, has done, for he is the very embodiment of peace."[44]

Paul continues in Ephesians commanding the church to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." (Eph 4:2-6) The church members are experiencing Jesus as their peace between God and themselves, as well as one another. Believers have a responsibility to put forth their own effort, in cooperation with the redemptive work of Christ, to pursue relational unity in their relationship with other members of their church. "Significantly, relationships within the body of Christ, especially conduct characterized by harmony, are the first issue Paul addresses as an essential element in their living consistently with this calling."[45] Paul further describes the effort required on the part of believers to pursue unity, accepting the internal work of the Holy Spirit as described in Colossians 3:12-15, and Galatians 5:22-23. Hendricksen and Kistemaker highlight the importance of unity for the health of the local church congregation. "The spiritual oneness here indicated is an indispensable prerequisite for promoting the health and happiness of

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[44] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Ephesians*, *vol. 7, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 133.

[45] Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 276.

the church, for advancing the cause of missions, and for winning the victory over Satan and his allies. It does not come of its own accord but is the result of both effort and prayer."[46]

While Moses is credited with leading Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land, there are several examples of the importance of team leadership and God's desire for harmony and unity among the leadership team. In Exodus 3:16, God calls Moses to assemble the elders of Israel as a group, to speak to them on behalf of God, and for the whole group to demand permission from the Pharoah to go into the wilderness to worship God. The elders, as a group, are called to believe God and follow him as he worked out the deliverance of their nation. The elders needed to come to a place of unity around leaving Egypt. The account of the Exodus gives the reader a look into the ongoing tension the elders experienced around following the God through the wilderness. The deliverance would happen after the elders together believed and acted on God's message through Moses.[47]

Eguizabal and Lawson point out, "team leadership among the Israelites is depicted through the functions of their religious, social, and political leaders.[48] In Numbers 11:16-17, God asks for 70 elders to participate in his revelation to Israel. God says to Moses, "They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone." (Num 16:17) In Numbers 13, a team made up of representatives from each tribe go into Canaan to spy out the land. The spies report back to the congregation of the people with their findings, and a discussion

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[46] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Ephesians*, *vol. 7, New Testament Commentary*, 184.

[47] J.K. Bruckner W.W., *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 46.

[48] Orbelina Eguizabal and Kevin E. Lawson. "Leading Ministry Teams, Part I: Theological Reflection on Ministry Teams." Christian Education Journal 6, no. 2 (2009): 250-264 http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F205455879%3Faccountid%3D12085.

commences on the will of God and the willingness of the people to follow him into the promised land. In Numbers 14, the disagreement grows so strong that the majority that does not want to take the risk of entering Canaan attempt to kill Moses and Aaron. The lack of harmony among the leaders and congregation results in serious discipline from God. Numbers 16 is another account of a lack of unity among the leadership that results in the death of the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram because of the disunity. Budd asserts that one of God's primary goals in the Exodus is to stress the safeguard to the community of the pattern of shared leadership and responsibility.[49].

As Israel became established in Canaan, the elders served as judges in criminal and civil trials. Examples include Deuteronomy 16:18-20, 19:12, 21:1-4, 21:19, 22:15, 25:7, and 27:1. Wright sees the elders as the ones God calls to serve as judges over the people.[50] The judges were called to administrate the justice in a way that was fair, without partiality or bribes. Deuteronomy lays out multiple laws and circumstances where judges should ensure that the community lives in harmony and that those who violate the harmony of the community are corrected or removed.

The New Testament also models and teaches God's plan of harmonious team leadership. Jesus begins his ministry by assembling a team, which included calling and commissioning them as individuals and as a team. In Mark 3:13-17, Jesus formalizes his team of disciples. Edwards points to the emphasis in Greek that the disciples were summoned according to his own will, both as individuals and as a team. The team and community did not exist apart from Christ's will

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[49] P.J. Budd, *Numbers* (Dallas: Word, 1984), 131.

[50] C.J.H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 204.

that they do so.[51] In Luke 9:1-10, Jesus gives them special authority to share in his spiritual

power to perform the miracles of casting out demonic spirits, healing sick people, and

proclaiming his message of the arrival of the Kingdom of God.[52] In Acts 6:1-7 the original

disciples follow the model set by Moses and appoint additional leaders to help manage the affairs

of the church. In similar fashion to Moses in Deuteronomy 1:13-15, all the disciples are asked to

choose leaders from among their own number to serve. The apostles then commission them

through prayer with laying on of their hands to formalize their calling and commission and to

spiritually pass on the anointing of the Holy Spirit just as God did with Moses and the Israelite

elders in Numbers 11:16-17.

In Mark 10:35-41 the disciples James and John come to Jesus privately attempting to

seek Jesus' favor to gain special positions of leadership in Christ's kingdom. They are rebuked

by Jesus and the rest of the team is indignant at the revelation of their request. Jesus uses the

experience to teach his disciples, in Mark 10:42-45, the importance of humility in leadership and

desiring the benefit of other members of the team over oneself. Jesus begins by describing the

leadership typically seen in the world in public positions of leadership and power as being

characterized by assertive dominance, much like James and John attempt to do. The similar

passage in Luke 22:25 adds the irony, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them,

and those in authority over them are called benefactors." (Luke 22:25) Jesus is showing the irony

that the worldly model of leadership where leaders seek power for their own benefit, mockingly

referring to themselves as benefactors of the people they exercise lordship over, is the opposite

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[51] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 111.

[52] Orbelina Eguizabal and Kevin E. Lawson. "Leading Ministry Teams, Part I: Theological Reflection on Ministry Teams," 255.

of how God himself humbly gives all of himself for the benefit of those he loves.[53] Jesus

introduces the requirement of servant leadership among his people. Jesus stresses the importance

of humility, following his own example of humility and calling his leadership team to function

with the identity of slaves and servants rather than people of positional leadership.[54] "The

implications of diakonos [servant] and doulos [slave] for the Twelve, as well as for ministers and

leaders in the church of every generation, are inexhaustible. The Christian fellowship does not

exist for their sake, but they for it. Nor is the apostle or Christian leader above the congregation,

but part of it. The congregation does not belong to him; rather, he belongs to it."[55] Leadership in

God's kingdom is intended to be harmonious, both between those on leadership teams, and

between the leaders and those they serve. It is to be based on humble service of one member

toward another and all members toward Christ and the church.

The book of Acts describes the early church regularly leading and making decision

through a harmonious group leadership. Before Jesus ascends to heaven, he commands the

disciples in Acts 1:4 to wait together for the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:14

describes how "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the

women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." (Acts 1:14) Kistemaker highlights that

the use of "one accord" or "with one mind" (Acts 1:14, NASB) describes a unity that is a theme

and characteristic of the early church.[56] Peterson describes the use of "one accord" as unanimity

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[53] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark, vol. 10, New Testament* Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 413.

[54] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark, The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, 326.

[55] Ibid., 326.

[56] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, *vol. 17, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 59.

among all of the different disciple groups present during that time.[57] Acts 2:1 begins that the community was again "all together" in prayer when the Holy Spirit's presence appears and indwells the believers. Acts 2:44 ends with "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." (Acts 2:44) The book of Acts begins by making a special note that the foundation of church leadership and its normative practice should be harmonious.

Acts 4:23-31 describes a time of persecution when the fellowship meets and prays together in unity despite the adverse and challenging circumstances they face. Acts 4:32 adds new emphasis to the commitment to unity. Kistemaker and Hendriksen explain in detail unique purpose in using the expression "one heart and soul."

> The phrase *one in heart and mind* is typically Hebraic. It occurs frequently in Deuteronomy[58] and is part of the summary of the Decalogue: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mark 12:30). The early Christians express this love on a horizontal plane to their brothers and sisters who are in need. Thus they fulfill the second part of this summary, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).[59]

This emphasis on "one heart and soul" does not appear in Greek literature and emphasizes a level of unity unique to God that is in alignment with Jesus' teaching on the primary laws from Deuteronomy.[60] It is good to note that the persecution experienced by the church leaders has resulted in an even more emphatic quality of unity among both the leaders and the congregation.

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[57] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 118.

[58] See Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10.

[59] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 17, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 173.

[60] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 206.

In Acts 6:1-6, the disciples face another challenge, growing inequality within the community. The solution is to create a new a different leadership team with a different function. They allow the larger congregation to choose seven men with certain criteria to assume specific responsibilities. The apostles appoint the men through the laying on of hands and prayer. This story highlights the power of the leadership team's unity, being able to resolve conflict in the larger congregation through leading by an example of unity.

In Acts 9:26-30, Saul comes to Jerusalem to meet the Jerusalem disciples. Paul understood that he needed to work in partnership and unity with the team of leaders in Jerusalem even though he had been called by God to the different task of reaching Gentiles. Saul needed Barnabas to act as his advocate to help the leadership team in Jerusalem discern God's will regarding Saul. In Acts 10 and 15, the issue of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles comes to the point that requires the senior leadership of the Christian faith to meet in Jerusalem and come to a unified decision regarding God's addition of Gentiles to the Church. Acts 15 describes in detail the coming together of the most senior leaders of the larger church, the deliberations of the two factions within church leadership, and the consensus that they reach regarding the addition of the Gentiles and the requirements of the gospel message for salvation and inclusion in the community, which will be looked at in more detail in another section of the paper. Acts 15 highlights the ability of the church leadership to become unified, from a place of disagreement, around a significant social issue related to the racial disunity that the Jews were practicing toward all other races.[61] Acts 15:22 highlights that the apostles, elders, and whole church reach

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[61]David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, 418.

unity in their decision and then appoint some men to go out and call the individual congregations to accept their decision and maintain unity in each congregation.[62]

Luke, Peter, and Paul all describe church leadership as being a team or group of leaders in Acts 11:30; 13:1, 14:23; 15:35; 20:17, 28; 21:18, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; 5:17-20; Titus 1:5-6; 1 Peter 5:1-2; and Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24. Alexander Strauch quotes the writing of Bruce Stabbert[63] how his research found, there is not a single example in the New Testament of a church led by a single elder or pastor.[64]

Hendriksen and Kistemaker describe unity as being more than just agreement, but oneness in multiple aspects of life so that the church leaders, and members, function in unison as if they are a single body.[65] Erickson points to Philippians 2:2 as clear evidence that God calls the church to unity.[66] "Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."(Phil 2:2, NIV) "One in spirit" is a translation of the word souls preceded by the preposition *with*. "The word means 'souls together,' people in harmony with one another, 'harmonious.'"[67] and describes two or more people working together with such harmony and unity that they function as if they are one person. "One mind" means each member of the group is focused on the same goal, committed to the same values, and aligned on how to

[62] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, *vol. 17, New Testament Commentary,* 560.

[63] Paul Stabbert, *The Team Concept: Paul's Church Leadership Patterns or Ours?* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1992), 44-54.

[64] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 38.

[65] W. Hendriksen and S.J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John, Vol.2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 365-366.

[66] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1131.

[67] G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 112.

accomplish that goal. Paul will tell the church in Philippi to unify their minds around the mind of Jesus. "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5)

God repeats through the Old and New Testaments a model of leadership that is a group of people seeking to lead by following Christ in a unified and harmonious way.

Decision-Making in Team Leadership

In the book of Acts, the early church leaders model group decision-making. The first leadership crisis is the replacement of the disciple Judas because of his betrayal of Jesus and consequent death. Acts 1:15-26 describes an orderly process of the community participating in the decision-making on a replacement. The process begins with Peter informing the community that a replacement must be chosen in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecies regarding Judas' betrayal (Ps. 69:25, 109:8). Peterson makes the point that Peter informs the community of the need but does not put the responsibility for the choice on the leadership team or the congregation, but in verse 24 God is the one who makes the choice.[68] In verse 23 the disciples present at the time put forward the names of two of their own who met the qualifications as described by Peter to fulfill the role.[69] Verse 24 records the prayer that they prayed together, asking God to make the choice and reveal his choice. The community then uses the traditional Jewish practice of casting lots[70] as a method for God to reveal his choice. Peterson highlights that this use of casting lots showed that both men were equally qualified and that the use of lots

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[68] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 126.

[69] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 102.

[70] See examples in: Leviticus. 16:8; Numbers 26:55; 1 Samuel 10:20-21; 1 Chronicles 26:13-14; Jonah 1:7-8; Proverbs 16:33; Nehemiah 10:34.

was a traditional method of determining God's will. [71] However, after the coming of the Holy

Spirit at Pentecost there is no other example of this practice being used again.[72]

Acts 6:1-7 is the second example of group decision-making in the early church. It shows

the twelve apostles working together to solve a problem in the congregation by forming a new

team of leaders, seven men selected to lead the distribution of food among other responsibilities.

The twelve involve the whole congregation, "the full number of the disciples" (Acts 6:2) to

participate in the decision-making process. The apostles declare the requirements and

responsibilities of the new office and leadership team but then allow the congregation to

nominate and elect the men to fill those roles.[73] The apostles affirm the decision by anointing the

men through prayer and the laying on of hands to serve in that capacity. Verse 5 describes a

unity among the disciples, "And what they said pleased the whole gathering." (Acts 6:5) "The

word pleased denotes a basic harmony between apostles and the Christian community."[74]

In Acts 15, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem are needed to resolve an issue that has

grown to the point that the church in Antioch decides it is necessary to send a delegation to

Jerusalem to resolve the issue and preserve unity in both the local and larger church.[75]

Kistemaker and Hendricksen stress the importance of the effort of the church to maintain unity

and unanimity through the process. They identify three separate meetings that occur during this

decision-making process. The first is a meeting with the delegation from Antioch where Paul and

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[71] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 128–129.

[72] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, *vol. 17, New Testament Commentary*, 68.

[73] Ibid., 222.

[74] Ibid., 221.

[75] Ibid., 540.

Barnabas give a report, outlining the issue which needs to be discussed and resolved. The second

meeting is with Paul, Barnabas, and the apostles and elders of Jerusalem where debate on the

issue occurred. The third meeting involves "all the assembly" (Acts 15:12) hearing presentations

from Paul, Barnabas, and James where James communicates his final judgement on the issue.[76]

Witherington describes the procedure of decision-making the church followed:

> (1) a process of discernment and recognition of God's activity; (2) the
> interpretation of Scripture in such a way as to make sense of what has happened;
> (3) a view that debate and dispute are a part, necessary part, of the process of
> discernment—"such disagreement serves to reveal the true bases for fellowship,
> and elicit the fundamental principles of community identity" and (4) finally, the
> consent or agreement of the εκκλησια to the ruling offered by the church leader,
> in this case James.[77]

Luke is careful to document how decision-making was a group or team activity in the

early church. In Acts 1, 6 and 15 he describes in detail three examples of group decision-making,

giving churches an example and a model to follow.

Discernment in the Decision-Making Process

Acts 15 provides a good example of the importance of discernment in a group decision-

making process. De Villiers points out that Acts 15 shows the problem of well-intentioned

groups within a church can still discern God's will with opposite results. De Villiers sees each

group acting out of their values. Paul and Barnabas driven by the belief in salvation through

grace while the circumcision party driven by the belief in salvation through obedience to Jewish

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[76] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, *vol. 17, New Testament Commentary*, 543.

[77] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 451.

laws. [78] De Villiers identifies the dynamic of the group in the discernment process as the first key to correctly discerning God's will. In Acts 10 and 11, Peter can correctly discern the will of God regarding the relationship of the gospel to the Gentiles when he interacts with Cornelius and his family.[79] Acts 15 shows that when a significant issue needed to be resolved, the entire church community was engaged in the decision-making process. "The inclusive approach is striking since it further illustrates the spiritual nature of the decision-making. It shows that the meeting was not merely about discussions between groups and individuals but was driven by an awareness of unity and togetherness-even after the bitter debate."[80]

All parties were allowed to participate in dialogue, to express their opinions, and to pray together for God's will to be revealed. De Villiers second point is that the act of all parties participating in debate and the compromise that James leads the two groups to is key to correctly discerning God's will regarding the issue.[81] The third key to discernment was the use of scripture, De Villiers calls it wisdom of the past. The discernment process involved both sides presenting scriptural evidence to support their values. With all participants seeking God first and with an open and questioning attitude, scripture can serve as a guide to bring both parties to a compromise and unity.[82] The fourth key to discernment is the use of feelings, emotions, and intuitions.[83] God sets character standards for those who serve in leadership roles including being

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[78] Pieter G.R. de Villiers, "Communal Discernment in the Early Church." *Acta Theologica* 33 (2013): 132-55,http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2183283606%3Faccountid%3D12085, 136.

[79] Ibid., 134.

[80] Ibid., 138.

[81] Ibid., 143.

[82] Ibid., 145.

[83] Ibid., 145.

humble, temperate, sober-minded, and prudent.[84] When team members have proven themselves

to have these character traits, their emotions during the discernment process, especially after

prayer and reflection on scripture, will be more easily directed by the Holy Spirit toward group

unity around God's will.

Paul describes discernment as a spiritual gift given by the Holy Spirit to help the

Christian community correctly discern between demonic spirits and the Holy Spirit. Also, to

discern between whether prophecies are from the Holy Spirit or not. Kistemaker makes the point

in 1 Corinthians 12:10 that Paul is not using special spiritual terminology but common everyday

words, conveying the point that God grants common wisdom and knowledge to our regular lives.

God grants believers the ability to use discernment to evaluate what others say and, in doing so,

provides the believers with his wisdom for the circumstance.[85]

James tells believers "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously

to all without reproach, and it will be given him." (Jas 1:5). "Wisdom is the means by which the

godly can both discern and carry out the will of God."[86] The wisdom that Christian leaders need

to make decisions as they lead the church should be sought from God. Discernment in decision-

making comes from asking God, which the early church modeled in the Acts 1 passages

examined earlier.

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[84]See qualifications for leadership in Titus 1:5-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and 1 Peter 5:1-4.

[85] Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2001), 92.

[86] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 57.

Conflict Creates Transformation

God describes his desire for his people to experience transformation, a changing of their nature from fallen human to renewed in Christ as a new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ephesians 2:14-17. Paul says to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom 12:2) Morris describes the transformation mentioned in Romans 12:2 as one that is a continuing renewal of the believer's thinking that results in a greater discernment of God's will.[87] Hendriksen and Kistemaker stress that the transformation is passive on the part of the believer, being done by the Holy Spirit. It is also a command, so the believer is responsible for allowing the Holy Spirit to do the work and to cooperate as much as possible in the transformation.[88] Conflict is an opportunity for believers to participate in the Holy Spirit's transforming work in the minds of all parties involved in the conflict. God can use the conflict to transform the minds of all parties involved.

Conflict creates an opportunity for us to deal personally and directly with our own issues of sin. James describes how the cause of conflict is "that your passions are at war within you?" (James 4:1) Moo states, "We do not know what the disputes that James refers to were about. The fact that James does not comment directly on the issues involved suggests that his concern was more with the selfish spirit and bitterness of the quarrels than with the rights and wrongs of the various viewpoints."[89] The issue for God isn't which person is right or most right in a conflict,

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[87] Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1988), 436.

[88] W. Hendriksen and S.J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 406.

[89] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 181.

but rather that the believers have allowed themselves to get into conflict, rather than managing their own humility and relationship in a way that prefers peace and honoring one another.

The Bible goes into detail about the ways that conflict shows the presence of our sinful nature. These root sins include coveting, greed, hatred, being hot-tempered, anger, dishonesty, and gossip.[90] Paul describes two actors contributing to the transformation, the Holy Spirit and the believer. The Holy Spirit helps the believer "put to death the deeds of the body." (Rom. 8:13) The believer must "Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (Eph. 4:22-24) The Holy Spirit also acts, renewing and transforming the believer.[91] The suffering that comes from being in relational conflict is used by God as a catalyst for transformation. Paul describes the importance of embracing suffering in Romans 5:3-5. Paul describes the effect that suffering has on a Christian because of the sanctifying work the Holy Spirit accomplishes because of the believer's obedience. Moo says that believers can build up their hope in God, like building muscle through resistance training, as they allow difficult trials to help them grow in their character, perseverance, and hope.[92] Paul describes some trials he faced in 2 Corinthians 11:20-21 including suffering in relationships like being taken advantage of in addition to more physical suffering.

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[90] See examples in James 4:2, Proverbs 10:12, Proverbs 15:18, Proverbs 16:28, Proverbs 28:25, and Proverbs 29:22.

[91] See Galatians 5:16, 18, 25 and Romans 15:16.

[92] Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 171.

In 1 Corinthians 3:3, Paul describes the church as immature and worldly because they were continuing to experience jealousy and quarreling and had not experienced the transformation in their character, leading to spiritual maturity, that comes from learning to effectively deal with and reduce relational conflict within the church. Kistemaker and Hendriksen make the point that Paul's use of fleshly to describe the Corinthians indicates that they appear the same as unbelievers in how they handle the conflict and divisions within their community, but it is not a permanent state but one that can change if they desire to.[93] There is a transformation that needs to happen, and is possible with the help of the Holy Spirit if the Corinthians were willing to allow the conflict they were experiencing to produce spiritual maturity.

Paul identifies conflicts within the church community in Galatia including "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy…" (Gal 5:19-21) These are all works of the flesh and unacceptable for those who are members of the kingdom of God. Paul highlights the spiritual immaturity and lack of transformation in the Corinthian church when he describes how the congregation has fractured relationally into different factions.[94]

Responses to Conflict

God set a foundational standard for the people of Israel that he did not want them to act out in conflict toward one another, nor harbor lasting grudges. In Leviticus. 19:18 God commands his people not to take vengeance against one another. God states that instead of conflict the members of the community of faith should act in love toward one another.

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[93] Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 102.

[94] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 142.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of love as the foundation of relationships in the New Testament community of faith. This is so serious he calls it a new commandment. "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34). Love is commanded as the appropriate basis for relationships within the faith community. (1 John 4:20-21) Conflict, expressed as hatred, taking vengeance, or bearing grudges is not acceptable in relationships between Christians. The solution to the presence of conflict is to focus on a loving attitude and action toward fellow members of the Christian community.

Paul gives a definition of love between church members in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. In Philippians 2:4, Paul offers a more detailed explanation of what should be happening in a believer's attitude when they are interacting with other Christians, which will work both to prevent conflict and to correctly respond when conflict occurs in order to resolve the fractured relationship. The first step to responding to conflict is to refocus on the command for Christian relationships to be based on love toward each other, both parties need to recommit to their love of God and one another as being more important that their desire or opinion that is the focus of the conflict.

One positive response to conflict is to actively seek to make peace and reconcile. Jesus says, "The peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called sons of God." (Matt. 5:9) Jesus continues, in Matthew 5:23-25, to encourage believers to act as peacemakers with their fellow believers and even those who are adversaries taking them to court. Mounce points out that peace within the fellowship was so serious that the Mishnah taught if offenses with neighbors were not resolved, no ritual sacrifices would be accepted.[95]

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[95] Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 45.

Jesus teaches in the gospels how important forgiveness and conflict resolution are in the faith community. In Matthew 5:24 Jesus stresses that the issue of conflict resolution is so important that a person should not make sacrifices to God if they have unresolved conflict with someone in the faith community.[96] Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 7:4-5 to begin conflict resolution by focusing on oneself before considering the problems to the other part in the conflict. Morris describes the lesson of the plank in the eye, "Jesus is drawing attention to a curious feature of the human race in which a profound ignorance of oneself is so often combined with an arrogant presumption of knowledge about others, especially about their faults."[97] Finally, Jesus gives the faith community a clear set of instructions for moderating conflict between members of the community. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (Matt 18:15-17) Christians should attempt reconciliation directly with the offended or offending party. If they are unsuccessful, then bring along one or two other people. Peter asks a follow-up question in Matthew 18:21-22 to find out how many times a person needs to seek reconciliation. Jesus' answer of seventy times seven indicates the expectation of unlimited forgiveness and reconciliation, rather than a specific number.[98]

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[96] Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 116.

[97] Ibid., 167.

[98] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 704.

Four times in New Testament, Romans 12:18, 2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:13, and Hebrews 12:14, believers are commanded to seek peace with each other. In Hebrews it says, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord." (Heb 12:14) All of Hebrews 12 describes the process of discipleship or spiritual maturity that God works out in the life of the believer, with special emphasis on the role that suffering plays and how God uses suffering to discipline his children. Hughes describes the conflict in the church as one of the main reasons why people do not finish running their race of faith well.[99] Pursuing peace helps not only the individual believer nor the two offended parties, but the entire community benefits from the effort to live at peace in the fellowship.

In conclusion, there is widespread agreement throughout Christianity on which scripture passages address the need for harmonious team leadership, decision-making in team leadership, discernment in the decision-making process, how conflict creates transformation, and responses to conflict. God is clear in his calling on Christians to pursue harmony, actively seek his leading in the decision-making, resolve conflict, and restore peace and relationships when they are broken.

Theoretical Foundations

There are several influential models for harmonious team leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution. This action research project looked at several different models. For harmonious team leadership, the models of Gene Getz, Alexander Strauch, and Larry Osborne. For decision-making, the models of Ruth Haley Barton's Transformation Center, the Quaker *Meeting for Worship in Which Business is Conducted,* the *Culture of Inquiry* created by Nancy Axelrod and promoted by Board Source, Ken Sande's *Pause Principle for Negotiation*, and Alan

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[99] R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 181.

Frow's *Leading through Collaboration* were all evaluated. For conflict resolution, the models of Ken Sande's *Peacemaker*, Jim Van Yperen's Metanoia ministries, and Alan Frow's *Unity Charter* were all evaluated.

Ministry Models for Harmonious Team Leadership

Gene Getz, in *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*, lists scriptural observations and supra cultural principles and practical applications for elders leading the church as a harmonious team. Getz's leadership principles include first official appointments, a unified team, qualification, basic ethics and morality, an initial leader, a primary leader, titles, multiple fathers, important priorities, mutual accountability, expanded accountability, qualified assistants, financial support, and adequate forms.[100] Details for each principle are shown in Appendix A.

Getz presents a concise model for harmonious group leadership for church leaders regardless of their title and the forms their church tradition employs to accomplish the principles. Harmony for a group of leaders comes from having a shared mission or goal and clearly communicated roles, relationships, and responsibilities. Getz also stresses the importance of both a primary leader and a group of leaders working collaboratively.

Getz writes specifically about the relationship between the elder team that holds "elder authority" and other members of the church, such as staff pastors, who may be qualified as elders but don't have to serve on the elder authority team. "Though every staff pastor should be 'qualified' to be an elder, nowhere in Scripture does it say he must have 'elder authority'."[101] Getz stresses the importance of relationship and says, "To facilitate interaction between elders

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[100] Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders God's Plan for Leading the Church: A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Perspective, (*Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 34-36.

[101]Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 310.

and staff, we schedule significant times for fellowship with one another, often including our wives. And when we schedule staff retreats, we invite any elder who can break away from his business obligations to join us."[102]

Alexander Strauch gives lists of biblical ground rules and principles for how to participate in elder team meetings. Strauch reminds elders that participation in the elder team should be founded on the ground rules of conducting oneself with a Christlike attitude of humility as described in Philippians 2:3-5, with Christlike love as described in John 13:34-35, and as a Christlike servant as Jesus describes himself in Luke 22:25-27. Strauch says, "Servant leadership is a selfless, self-sacrificing type of leadership most suitable for those who preach the message of the Cross and the virtues of humility, servanthood, and loving brotherhood."[103]

Strauch lists the following principles of personal participation in meetings:

1. Be an active, responsible participant
2. Be a faithful attender
3. Be a peacemaker and unity builder
4. Be a person of integrity, not a manipulator
5. Be fair; refrain from making judgments without the facts
6. Be trustworthy with confidential information
7. Be self-controlled, not angry[104]

Regularly reminding members of the leadership team of these important ground rules and principles of participation, teaching towards these values, and modeling correction when members violate them will help create a team culture that makes working in harmony the normative focus and experience.

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[102] Getz, *Elders and Leaders,* 310.

[103] Alexander Strauch, *Meetings that Work: A Guide to Effective Elders' Meetings,* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2001.), 23.

[104] Ibid., 24-31.

In Larry Osborne's *Sticky Teams: Keeping your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page*, Osborne writes in depth about how maintain harmony and unity in a leadership team. Osborne stresses, "I don't think it's an accident that Jesus predicted church growth but prayed for unity. If left unattended or taken for granted, unity quickly disappears. Unity is the one thing that can't be left to chance."[105] He continues, "But unity doesn't just happen. You have to work at it day after day, because if you don't, it quickly slips away. And once it doesn't, it won't matter how clear your vision is or how gifted your team is. When the foundation rots, it's not long until the whole house collapses."[106] Osborne describes not meeting enough as one of the five primary roadblocks to unity. He recommends adding "shepherding meetings" above and beyond regular business meetings for the purposes of team building, training, and prayer and that each of those topics should have an entire meeting devoted to it.

The reoccurring themes in these models are intentionality and time. Intentionality in the frequency of meetings. Intentionality in the topics covered during the meetings with focus time devoted to specific tasks like prayer, personal and group development, and fellowship in addition to business. Finally, intentionality in the state of mind members prepare themselves with before meeting as a group and the rules of conduct for how they treat one another during and after the meeting.

Ministry Models for Decision-Making

Ruth Haley Barton's Transformation Center in the Chicago area offers a tested model for group decision-making designed for churches and Christian ministries. Barton describes three phases for the discernment process:

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[105] Osbone, *Sticky Teams*, 24.

[106] Ibid., 25.

1. Get Ready: Preparation
    a. Clarify the question for discernment
    b. Gather the community for discernment
    c. Affirm (or reaffirm) guiding values and principles
2. Get Set: Putting Ourselves in a Position to Be Led
    a. Prayer for indifference
    b. Test for indifference
    c. The prayer for wisdom
    d. The prayer of quiet trust
3. Go: Discerning God's Will Together
    a. Listen to what brought the question for discernment
    b. Listen to each other
    c. Listen to pertinent facts and information
    d. Listen to inner dynamics
    e. Silence-create space for God
    f. Reconvene and listen again
    g. Select and weigh the options
    h. Agree together
    i. Seek inner confirmation
4. Do: The will of God
    a. Communicate with those who need to know
    b. Make plans to do God's will as you have come to understand it. [107]

Barton suggests that this model not be used in all decision-making situations but rather those that involve more significant consequences.

1. Decisions that shape your identity and mission, policies, values, and direction.[108]

2. Allocation of significant resources (money, time, human resources, organizational energy, and focus).[109]

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[107] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together,* 172.

[108] Ibid., 173.

[109] Ibid., 174.

3. Key personnel (staff, board members, and high-level volunteers) who will have a significant influence on direction and decision making or who will represent the church or organization to others.[110]

4. Decisions affecting the pace and quality of life for staff and constituency.[111]

Barton's model is influenced by Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the quaker clearness committee model for decision-making. The model provides several structured prayers, which some participants would find helpful and comforting while others may find restrictive. The benefit of the guided prayers is to lead the participants through actions and language that reinforce the focus of humility before Christ and dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit. Her Transformation Center offers teams or boards training retreats where all members can be trained on the model and practice using the model under the supervision of an expert trainer.

Quakerism has been famous for its decision-making models of the clearness committee for individual members of the community to discern a potential spouse, career change, or a major life decision. Quakers also make community or group decisions through their Quaker Meeting for Worship, in which Business is Conducted. The meeting follows five stages:

1. The opening silence

2. The preliminary discussion

3. The serious discussion

4. The dissent from the proposed minute

5. Unity[112]

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[110] Ibid., 174.

[111] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 175.

[112] C. R Love,., & C. J. P. Niemandt, "Led by the Spirit: Missional Communities and the Quakers on communal vocation discernment." *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 70(1), 1-9. (2014), 5.

Quakers take time at the beginning of the decision-making process for worship and

silence so that participants to be reminded of the unity they have in Christ and to set their attitude

toward humility and dependence on God. The preliminary discussion is led by the clerk, who

presents the problem and knows the options for solutions. Members ask open questions to gain a

better understanding of the problem and tentative alternatives. The clerk is responsible for

seeking a sense of the meeting, meaning an intuition of whether a consensus can be achieved in

the meeting and then a presentation of a summary to the participants. Each participant is

responsible for affirming whether the clerk's summary is correct and whether individual

members agree or dissent with the corporate conclusion presented in the sense of the meeting.

There are three standard responses regarding dissent.

1. I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way.

2. Please minute me (make a permanent record) as opposed.

3. I am unable to unite with this proposal.[113]

The Quaker model has been refined over hundreds of years of church practice and

carefully guards community unity through clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and a

commitment to preserving dignity and unity even during the dissent process.

Board Source, a consulting firm in Washington D.C., recommends developing a culture

of inquiry on boards to facility healthy discussion and disagreement that leaders to effective

decision-making. Nancy Axelrod offers eight composite personality types that each positively

contribute to a culture of inquiry. "When dialogue, candor, and dissent are all part of group

dynamics, board members master the skills of listening, dissecting the issues, and responding

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[113] C. R Love,., & C. J. P. Niemandt, "Led by the Spirit: Missional Communities and the Quakers on communal vocation discernment.", 6.

thoughtfully, truthfully, and in the best interests of the organization." Axelrod's eight personality types are the analyst, healthy skeptic, facilitator, observer, caller, coach, reframer, and synthesizer. [114] More detailed descriptions are shown in Appendix B.

Board Source recommends that board members practice asking questions using each personality type until they become skilled in asking questions and the culture of the board grows into one of inquiry, where respectful dissent for the purpose of the health of the organization is chosen instead of board member's personal interest or comfort.

Ken Sande recommends a model of cooperative negotiation that fulfills the biblical value of seeking mutual benefit.[115] Sande's pause principle contains five stages:

1. Prepare (pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options)
2. Affirm relationships (show genuine concern and respect for others)
3. Understand interests (identify others' concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears)
4. Search for creative solutions (prayerful brainstorming)
5. Evaluate options objectively and reasonably (evaluate, don't argue)[116]

Sande offers a simple formula for cooperative negotiation. Within the leadership team context, members could remind themselves of each step as they work through discussion and deliberation during the decision-making process.

Alan Frow created a model where three icons are used for participants to express their level of conviction while making decisions. These are called the *Leadership Toolbox* and are described as *Leading through Collaboration*.

1. The light bulb indicates that this is just an idea for me, and the team is welcomed to shoot it down, disagree, tweak it or run with it if it strikes a chord with them.

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[114] Nancy R. Axelrod, *Culture of Inquiry: Healthy Debate in the Boardroom. (*Washington DC: BoardSource, 2007) 33.

[115] See Philippians 2:3-4, Matthew. 7:12, Matthew 22:39, and 1 Corinthians 13:5.

[116] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 226.

2. The heart is when I have a perception about something or someone. It is often more intuitive than logical, and it often has to do with a problem that needs solving. I need to hear from the team as to whether I am perceiving correctly or not, and if I am, how do we solve the problem together?

3. The Bullhorn indicates conviction. This is deeper than an idea or perception. It would be a mix of biblical truth, prophetic intuition, and strategic thinking that has led me to this place of conviction. Sometimes it will be a proposal, but generally, it comes after we have discussed a decision at length as a team and have not been able to reach a consensus. The team then releases me to go and hear God and come back with a decision. Obviously, the team still has a responsibility to weigh my convictions with biblical wisdom and to give a different perspective if absolutely necessary, but I am asking the team to be more circumspect in the way they handle this conviction and to receive it with a measure of trust in God's hand on me as a visionary leader of the team. Their level of collaboration is less on whether or not this is from God or not, and more on how we implement it.[117]

Frow's model is impacted by his cultural upbringing in South Africa in a church network led by British leaders. His insights into American church leadership team issues influenced by democratic values provide a different perspective toward relationships between elders. This model accentuates the need for decision making, collaboration, and unity among a group of leaders to be aligned with the cultural values of equality, power, and consensus of the participant's cultural values.

Ministry Models for Conflict Stewardship and Resolution

Ken Sande published his first edition of *The Peace Maker* in 1991. Sande's original work is quoted in many books on peacemaking and church conflict since its writing. Sande describes the importance of stewarding conflict to utilize the benefits that conflict offers in the areas of

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[117] Alan Frow, "Leadership Toolbox: Leading through Collaboration," *Roots & Wings: From the Southland to the Nations, a blog by Alan Frow,* accessed August 30, 2020, https://alanfrow.blogspot.com/2014/08/one-of-areas-in-which-ive-had-to-grow.html.

personal development and holiness, organizational focus, and the glorification of God that comes from intentionally working through the conflict to church unity.[118]

Sande offers a model for working through conflict resolution.

1. Glorify God: Instead of focusing on our own desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will rejoice in the Lord and bring him praise by depending on his forgiveness, wisdom, power, and love as we seek to faithfully obey his commands and maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude.
2. Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye: Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will trust in God's mercy and take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts-confessing our sins to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.
3. Gently Restore: Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will overlook minor offenses that seem too serious to overlook, seeking to restore them rather than condemn them. When a conflict with a Christian brother or sister cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner.
4. Go and Be Reconciled: Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation-forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences. [119]

Sande's model is founded in the scriptural teachings of Jesus that address conflict in the gospels. Sande created a scale of twelve different responses to conflict, summarized as an escape, peacemaking, and attack response. People are encouraged to identify themselves on a slippery slope of their conflict response. Sande's theory is that people will naturally gravitate toward the more extreme ends of either escape or attack in their response and need to be reminded to actively seek to remain in peacemaking responses. Keeping the slope in a place where board members can look at it during emotionally tense times could be helpful to remind

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[118] Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker*, 38-39.

[119] Ibid., 259-260.

team members to support each other emotionally to help all persons involved remain in the peacemaking mindset.

Jim Van Yperen's Metanoia Ministries offers a five-step model for handling church conflict.

1. Call timeout

2. Ask questions and listen to learn

3. Follow the fruit

4. Speak the truth in love

5. Invite reconciliation[120]

Van Yperen was recommending safe place groups which have a culture that fosters accountability, awareness, and action regarding the conflict in the church. Van Yperen credits Dr. David Fitch with helping to create the safe place model.[121] Van Yperen and Fitch recommend nine characteristics of this model, these include prayer, check-in, repentance, work, intervention, submission in trust, accountability, speaking into a person's life, and contributing to the group.

The *Safe Place* model, like the *Culture of Inquiry* from Board Source, focuses on a model that will create a lasting culture in the leadership team. Repetition of the model increases the trust and transparency between team members.

Alan Frow created a *Unity Charter* that could be used by the elder board to help remind church members, of their commitment to guard the unity of the church community. See

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[120] Jim Van Yperen, *Five Things Every Leader Must Do in Conflict.* (Washington: Metanoia Ministries, 2017), 2-7.

[121] Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 261.

Appendix D for the original *Unity Charter.* Frow's *Unity Charter* provides a set of stated values that all church members can use to fix the focus of their commitment. The model would benefit from additional guidance on how to address the emotional pain and anger that often accompanies conflict. If a member is not in a healthy, rational mindset, their participation would potentially be impaired.

This chapter looked at several models for decision-making and conflict resolution. For decision-making, the St. Ignatius inspired model of Ruth Haley Barton's Transformation Center is thorough, including written prayers to help guide participants but is complex and rigid in practice. The Quaker *Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted* has a strong focus on the lordship of Christ and work of the Holy Spirit in the community and has been refined over hundreds of years. The *Culture of Inquiry* created by Nancy Axelrod and promoted by Board Source will help train elder team members to be effective at asking questions. Ken Sande's *Pause Principle for Negotiation* provides a simple formula to help a group stay on track as they work their way through negotiations and debate during the decision-making process. Alan Frow's *Leading through Collaboration* offered simple phrases or images to help in discussion around decision-making. For conflict resolution, the model of Ken Sande's *Peacemaker* includes several thorough tools to help with various phases of the conflict-resolution process but can be complicated to learn and practice, Jim Van Yperen's Metanoia ministries offer a simple five-step model, but his focus on building a safe culture for processing conflict would be valuable as a cultural goal for most Christian organizations. Finally, Alan Frow's *Unity Charter* provides stated values for members of the elder team or church to agree to but does not provide clear steps for how to assist parties through the emotionally charged conflict. Each model has strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology and design of the project. This qualitative phenomenological action research project utilized one-on-one interviews and focus group data collection methods. Phenomenological and thematic analysis were used to identify and interpret participant responses in the interviews and focus groups, looking specifically at the participants' responses to the issues of group decision-making and conflict resolution. Participants included the members of the elder team of Southlands Church, Brea, CA.

Original Intervention Design

The purpose of the project was to evaluate and modify the tools used by the Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution. This project sought to determine the effectiveness with which church leaders use a tool to assist themselves with personal and team development on decision-making and conflict resolution topics. As an action research project, the elder team from Southlands Church was encouraged to evaluate their current experience with decision-making and conflict resolution, to evaluate their use of their *Unity Charter* and *Leading through Collaboration* tools, to modify those tools or create an improved tool, to test those tools in a regularly scheduled meeting on a real-world issue, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of both the tools themselves and their use in the decision-making and conflict resolution process.

The researcher asked questions that encouraged participants to speak about the effectiveness of these tools. During the focus group, the researcher gave the following directions, "The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as

samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to the Southlands' simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution."

The participants for this action research project were taken from the current elders of Southlands Church, Brea. All current members of the elder team were informed during two monthly meetings about the nature of the project and encouraged by the lead pastor to participate. Each elder received a written presentation of the proposed action research project in the form of an email invitation (Appendix G) and were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix H). Elders who did not contact the researcher within four days of receiving the first email were sent a second email. Participants were required to read and sign the consent form before participating in the first interview. The consent form explained that data related to participants' responses would be identified by an assigned participant number rather than name. Participant names were not included in any reporting from the project. The code key for participant names and their corresponding numbers and all audio and video recordings were stored in the researcher's personal computer, which would be password-protected for three years and then would be erased. Only the researcher would have access to this information. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were able to withdraw from the project at any time.

Open-ended questions were utilized to guide the participants in exploring and defining the problems they had experienced and then to consider possible solutions. Participants were also asked questions related to their experience with tools or methods previously utilized to address the problems. All participants then met in a focus group led by the researcher to discuss similar open-ended questions. The focus group was invited to create or modify an existing simple tool to address the problems regarding their group decision-making and conflict resolution problem. The

simple one-page tool with instructions was then to be tested by the elder team in their next regularly scheduled elder meeting.

Participants were then to meet in a focus group after the regularly scheduled meeting, where the tool was tested, to discuss the tool's effectiveness compared to the group's previous experiences with group decision-making and conflict resolution.

Interviews with each participant and during the focus group meeting, when conducted in-person, needed to be recorded. An Apple iPhone 12 Pro Max, with a Shure MV88 microphone, was used to record audio and video of the interviews and the focus group. The researcher's personal Apple MacBook Pro computer with a Zoom Pro account was also used for interviews that were conducted online when this was preferred by the participant. This research occurred during a Covid-19 pandemic and some participants chose to meet using zoom. The same computer was used to store the audio and video recordings of the interviews and to upload them to NVivo for the purpose of transcription, coding and analysis of the data collected.

The researcher recorded audio and video of each interview and focus group and the intended testing of the tool in the regularly scheduled elder meeting. The researcher transcribed the recordings using NVivo and then manual correction of the transcriptions and intended to utilize NVivo to code and cluster the content of the interviews and focus groups.

The data was be analyzed by questions and sensitizing concepts[1] to identify themes, slippages, and silences.[2]

The action research project was intended to be conducted using the following steps:

1. Obtained the permission of participants.

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[1] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach for Doctor of Ministry Projects* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 210.

[2] Ibid., 197-200.

a. Prepared a written explanation of the action research project and process and presented it to the Southlands Church eldership team to receive their permission to conduct the study. Agreed on a schedule of time for the individual interviews, first focus group, regularly scheduled elder team meeting where the tool would be tested, and final focus-group meeting.

b. Prepared a written explanation of the action research project and process with instructions for individual participants and a permission form and present them to each elder team member to have them agree to participate in the action research project.

2. Conducted individual interviews

a. Scheduled appointments for face-to-face interviews with each participant within a four-week window of time before the first focus group meeting.

b. Met with participants either in person or utilizing Zoom. Recorded audio and video of the completed interviews using an iPhone or Zoom recording feature. Interviews were scheduled for one hour each. In-person interviews were scheduled to meet at the church building or in the researcher's or participant's home if they were distraction-free.

c. Presented the written explanation of the action research project and process with instructions and reviewed the instructions for the interview.

d. Open-ended questions for the interview included:

   i. Tell me about why you became an elder at your church.

   ii. What kind of training or personal development did your church provide in preparation for your becoming an elder?

     iii.   What kind of training have you received since becoming an elder?

     iv.   Tell me about your church elder meetings.

     v.   What kind of problems do the elders experience in how they related to each other and congregants?

     vi.   How does your elder team discern God's will and make decisions?

     vii.   Describe an ideal group decision-making process.

     viii.   How is conflict addressed and resolved between elder team members?

     ix.   What is an appropriate level of conflict for elder teams to experience, and what is the best way to deal with that conflict?

     x.   What tools or training would help your elder team make better decisions and resolve conflict in better ways?

e. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo within seven days of being conducted. The results of individual interviews were kept anonymous and confidential and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the action research project.

3. Conducted the focus group.

a. Met with the participants in person. The meeting was recorded using an iPhone. The meeting was scheduled for two hours during a regularly scheduled elder meeting at the church building.

b. Open-ended questions for the focus group.

     i.   What kind of problems do the elders experience in how they relate to each other and congregants?

     ii.   How do you, as an elder team, discern God's will and make decisions?

     iii.   How do you handle conflict?

iv. Give some examples of successful conflict resolution. What made it successful, and why?

v. Describe the relationships between decision-making and conflict.

vi. How can your elder team discern God's will, make decisions, and handle conflict more effectively?

vii. What information should be included in a simple one-page tool to assist you with decision-making and conflict resolution?

viii. The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to the Southlands simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution.

c. Recordings of the focus group were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo within seven days of being conducted. The results of the focus group will be destroyed at the conclusion of the action research project.

4. The researcher originally intended for the revised or modified tool to be used in a regularly scheduled elder team meeting.

a. The researcher intended to have the elders implement the revised tool to help guide them in either a real-life decision-making or conflict-resolution discussion during their next regularly scheduled meeting. The researcher would not be present in order to minimize the effect his presence might have on group relationship dynamics.

b. The part of the meeting where the tool was intended to be used would be recorded with an iPhone so that both audio and video would be recorded. The recording of the meeting would be transcribed and uploaded to NVivo within seven days of being

conducted. Results of the elder meeting would be destroyed at the conclusion of the

action research project.

5. The researcher conducted a second interview with each participant.

    a. The researcher met with the participant either in person or over zoom. The interviews

        were recorded using an iPhone or the recording feature in Zoom.

    b. Open-ended questions for the second interview.

        i. How did you, as an elder team, implement the tool in your meeting?

        ii. How did the use of a tool during the discussion affect group members

             emotionally and spiritually compared to similar discussions without the use of

             a tool?

        iii. What changes could be made to the tool to make it more effective, or is there

              an alternative method or tool to address decision-making and conflict

              resolution better?

        iv. What long-term benefits might there be for elder team members individually

             and the team and congregation as a community, from either utilizing a tool or

             method to aid in decision-making and conflict resolution?

    c. Recordings of each interview were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo within seven

        days of being conducted. The results of the focus group would be destroyed three

        years after the completion of the action research project.

Implementation of Research Design

Revised Research Design

The first change to the research design involved the focus group questions or discussion prompts. The lead pastor agreed that the focus group discussion could take place during a regularly scheduled two-hour elder meeting. After completing the first set of interviews, the researcher decided that the two-hour focus group meeting would not be long enough to allow for adequate dialogue around eight questions and decided to reduce the number of questions to four. Those four questions, or discussion prompts, would best address the core issues of group decision-making and conflict resolution, with the final discussion prompt asking the group to dialogue around making changes to either the *Unity Charter* or *Leading Through Collaboration* tool. The questions for the focus group were:

1. Give some examples of successful discernment of God's will and group decision-making. What made it successful, and why?

2. Give some examples of successful conflict resolution. What made it successful, and why?

3. How can your elder team discern God's will, make decisions, and handle conflict more effectively?

4. The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to the Southlands simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution.

The second change to the research design involved removing the request of the elder team to practice using their newly revised tool either during the focus group or in a subsequent elder meeting. There was not sufficient time during the focus group for the elder team to discuss

and make changes to the tool, although the elders unanimously agreed that they wanted to make changes to the *Unity Charter* as a result of the conversation during the focus group. The elders met several times after the focus group meeting to rewrite the tool. Also, asking for the *Unity Charter*, a tool for conflict resolution to be used in an actual conflict situation, would have required all the participants to use the tool at one time, and the church has not traditionally used the tool in that way. The participants were expressing a desire for the research process to conclude, and there did not appear to be a consensus or willingness to extend the process by several more weeks to practice with the tool at that time.

The final change to the research design was to change the second interview questions to make them better reflect the conversation that had occurred during the focus group and the subsequent alterations to the *Unity Charter*. The intent of the original questions was to measure the participant's opinions regarding their experience in the focus group, the changes made to the tool, their perceived sense of the effectiveness of the tool, and their attitudes regarding future outcomes for the church as the result of those changes. The second interview questions were changed to:

1. What changes did the elders make to the *Unity Charter*?
2. What was the most important change in your opinion and why?
3. What changes could be made to the tool to make it more effective?
4. What long-term benefits might you see from the revision that has happened?

Fieldwork

The participants for this action research project were taken from the current elders of Southlands Church, Brea. All current members of the elder team were informed during two monthly meetings about the nature of the action research project and encouraged by the lead

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pastors to participate. Each elder received a written presentation of the proposed action research project in the form of an email invitation (Appendix G) and was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix H). Elders who did not contact the researcher within four days of receiving the first email were sent a second email.

Open-ended questions were utilized to guide the participants in exploring and defining the problems as they identified them and experienced them and then to consider possible solutions. Participants were asked questions related to their experience with tools or methods previously utilized to address the problems. The questions asked during the interview are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

First Interview Questions

1. Tell me about why you became an elder at your church.

2. What kind of training or personal development did your church provide in preparation for your becoming an elder?

3. What kind of training have you received since becoming an elder?

4. Tell me about your church elder meetings?

5. What kind of problems do the elders experience in how they relate to each other and congregants?

6. How does your elder team discern God's will and make decisions?

7. Describe an ideal group decision-making process?

8. How is conflict addressed and resolved between elder team members?

9. What is an appropriate level of conflict for elder teams to experience, and what is the best way to deal with that conflict?

10. What tools or training would help your elder team make better decisions and resolve conflict in better ways?

All participants then met in a focus group led by the researcher to discuss a series of open-ended questions. During the focus group, the participants answered the open-ended questions in Table 2.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

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1. Give some examples of successful discernment of God's will and group decision-making. What made it successful, and why?

2. Give some examples of successful conflict resolution. What made it successful, and why?

3. How can your elder team discern God's will, make decisions, and handle conflict more effectively?

4. The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to Southlands' simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution.

The focus group decided during their discussion that the current *Unity Charter* was insufficient to prevent and address the current conflicts the church was experiencing. The elders had two additional meetings over two weeks where they modified and then ratified a revised *Unity Charter.* During a two-week period after the completion of their revisions, all participants met with the researcher for a second interview, where they were asked the questions in Table 3.

Table 3

Second Interview Questions

_____

1. What changes did the elders make to the *Unity Charter*?

2. What was the most important change in your opinion and why?

3. What changes could be made to the tool to make it more effective?

4. What long-term benefits might you see from the revision that has happened?

Interviews with each participant and during the focus group meeting, when conducted in-person, needed to be recorded. The researcher's personal Apple iPhone 12 Pro Max, with a Shure MV88 microphone was used to record the audio when interviews were conducted in person. In-person interviews were all conducted privately in the Southlands Church building, either in personal offices or classrooms. The Focus group was recorded both in audio and video using the same iPhone and microphone on a tripod. The researcher's personal Apple MacBook Pro computer with a Zoom Pro account was used for interviews that were conducted online when preferred by the participant. The interviews were also recorded both in audio and video. The same computer was used to store the audio and video recordings of the interviews.

Audio from all interviews and the focus group were then uploaded to the NVivo website, where they were transcribed by NVivo's transcription software. Transcriptions were then manually edited by the researcher for accuracy.

<center>Data Analysis Procedures</center>

The researcher intended to use NVivo 12 to assist with the coding and analyzing the data. After purchasing NVivo 12, uploading the audio files, transcribing them using NVivo's paid

transcription service, and beginning to learn how to conduct coding using NVivo, the researcher decided that the program was too complicated to use for coding and analysis and instead chose to conduct a manual coding and analysis of the printed transcripts.

This action research project used description-focused coding, which allowed the researcher to identify, describe and categorize the specific behaviors and experiences of the participants. The participants' answers to the research question were expected to be easy to engage with without the necessity of a critical and intensive review.[3]

The researcher read through each interview three times. In each reading, the researcher utilized highlighters of different colors to highlight sections of responses that identified a clear response or individual idea. The keyword or a key summary reduced to a few words was then written in the margin of the paper adjacent to the highlighted quotation. When responses repeated the same word or repeated the same idea, the same color of highlighter was used. This use of colored highlighting matched to coding words was repeated across all responses of the first interview, focus group and second interview for each participant.

Interview and focus group questions were then organized into anchor codes. "Anchor codes are labels which are generated to represent the questions you want to address in your study."[4] Anchor codes allowed the researcher to analyze codes across the multiple interviews and focus group that relate to the same desired research topic. Questions were grouped together by the anchor codes of elder training, decision-making, conflict resolution, and tool usage.

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[3] Philip Adu, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding,* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 90.

[4] Ibid., 97.

The researcher then compiled the codes and tallied the code frequencies onto a code compilation sheet.[5] Codes were compiled for each of the individual questions for the first interview, focus group, and second interview for all ten participants. The researcher counted how many participants spoke about each code and the code was then listed with the number of total participants by question. Totals were also compiled for each code and listed by anchor code on the code compilation sheet.

This action research project utilized a phenomenological approach to the research and to the analysis. The researcher followed five steps to analyze the results following Philip Adu's summary of Giorgi's Method as described by Whiting. The five main steps include:

1. Put aside your preconceived ideas.
2. Review the interview transcripts
3. Group the transcripts into units (such as having chunks of relevant information)
4. Create themes based on the relevant units created
5. With the phenomenon of study, the purpose of the study, and research question(s) in mine, present descriptions of the themes. [6]

The researcher also utilized Sensing's recommendation, "Your analysis must account for both the convergence and divergence in the data. One way to organize the data is to discuss the areas of significant overlap as themes or patterns, the areas of disagreement as slippage, and the 'realities' not represented in your findings as silences."[7]

In May 2022 the researcher traveled to the United Kingdom and brought the printed paper transcripts with manually handwritten coding, the handwritten code compilation sheets, and his personal laptop. Those items were all stolen when the backpack they were contained in

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[5] Adu, *A Step-by-Step Guide,* 109.

[6] Ibid. 10.

[7] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses,* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 197.

was stolen from the researcher's vehicle. The researcher had already completed the analysis and written the results in Chapter 4. All handwritten notes were lost, and a digital backup of those handwritten pages did not exist at the time of the loss. No personal information was revealed on the printed transcripts or in the handwritten notes, the results of the individual interviews remained anonymous and confidential, in that no individual person was associated with the recorded responses. The computer was password protected and its contents were backed up in using Apple's password protected iCloud service. The researcher was able to purchase a new personal computer and to download from the backup file the audio files of the interviews and focus-group, transcripts of the interviews and focus-group, and the most recent version of the project paper with the written record of the analysis in Chapter 4. If additional analysis needed to be done, the transcripts are available.

The researcher reported the laptop as stolen to Apple and set the computer to automatically reformat the hard drive, wiping all data from the computer, when it was connected to the internet. This reformatting happened approximately one week later. Participants were informed of the loss of the printed copies of the transcripts and the handwritten coding and code compilation sheet. They were also informed that the laptop was stolen and reformatted. No participants expressed concern regarding their anonymity or confidentiality being in any way in jeopardy during the week that the stolen password-protected laptop was in someone else's possession in England before its hard drive was reformatted.

Chapter 4

Results

When the researcher began the process of research design for an action research project, he was concerned that allowing an intentionally open action research project could result in the participants not engaging in the topic of conflict, especially when the lead pastor and other elders communicated concern for the possibility of the research causing additional conflict in the team. Throughout the interview and focus group process, all participants communicated thankfulness and joy in being able to express their opinions and the resulting changes to the *Unity Charter* that the team made because of the focus group discussion.

At the conclusion of the second interviews, the researcher asked all ten participants if they had any final thoughts or things they would like to say. All ten responded that the entire experience had been enjoyable and provided value to the leadership team. Participants described benefits including increased clarity, more frequent conversations around the topic, and greater confidence in how the team will handle conflict and decision-making in the future. Participant 10 said,

> I've been actually really encouraged by this whole process. I think it's helped me just step back and look at how much I love this team and how much God's grace is upon us. And then, too, I think it's just helped me say, like man, we could always be better and do better and relooking at these things and hearing one another, you know, process through it and seeing things differently and kind of coming together with some form of unity of how we could better love one another and our flock…Obviously, we're doing this because there's in some sense, there's always conflict, there's always disunity, there's always different perspectives. And it's how we continue to fine tune to love, recognize that we should fight for.

This chapter will present the researcher's analysis of the content of the first interviews, focus group, and second interviews. Stringer suggests that a detailed account should provide an "empathetic understanding of how participants experience and interpret the issue investigated. It

also describes the steps taken by participants to resolve the problem studied and the outcomes of those activities and events."[1] Sensing encourages results to include distinguishing important processes, key issues, interview questions, and sensitizing concepts "such as 'leadership' versus 'followership.'"[2]

Initial Interviews

The first interview was intended to gain an understanding from individual participants of how they have experienced onboarding and ongoing training as members of the leadership team, group decision-making and conflict resolution, and the use of purpose-built tools to aid in decision-making and conflict resolution. The first three questions were intended to learn about how elders are selected and trained.

In this section responses of the interviews and focus-group are displayed graphically where the percentage indicates the number of total participants out of ten who expressed a particular response using a particular word or another similar word that intended to communicate the same idea. Some participants offered multiple ideas during their response to a question and therefore percentages do not total to one hundred percent. For instance, a participant could mention four different themes or words in their response to a question and therefore would represent ten percent of the response mentioned for each theme included in the chart.

There were two responses to the question, "Tell me about why you became an elder at your church." Three elders responded that they came to the church having previously served as elders; this included those who are employed as staff pastors who were hired by the church and were identified as elders by virtue of being hired as pastoral staff. Seven elders used the words

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[1] Stringer, Ernest T., *Action Research, 4th Edition,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014), 215.

[2] Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 210.

"conviction, call, called, or calling" to describe the reason they were asked to join the elder team. They included describing the calling as a "passion to lead," "a heart to love and shepherd his (God's) people, and "a burning desire for ministry and for people." Except for those pastors hired by the congregation, most elders experienced a three-to-five-year long process of being called, trained, and tested before joining the elder team.

Table 4.

First Interview, First Question Responses

Tell me about why you became an elder at your church.		
Call, Called, Calling, Conviction		70%
Previously Served	30%	

The second and third questions asked, "What kind of training or personal development did your church provide in preparation for your becoming an elder? What kind of training have you received since becoming an elder?" The goal in these questions was to better understand if any training specific training regarding the topics of decision-making or conflict resolution are provided to the elder team. Also, is there any formal training around the use of the existing tools utilized by the team? Responses to both the question of training before joining the team and after joining the team fell into four main groupings, formal courses or programs, weekly elder meetings, apprenticeship through supervised training, and reading.

Before becoming elders, eight of the participants described the E-Plus training program as the most significant training they received. Participants did not go into detail regarding the content of the training but described the training during the first year and observation that occurred during attending the meeting during the second year of this program as helpful in their training. Four of those participants specifically referenced the impact of attending the board

meetings and learning how to conduct themselves during the multi-year process before they were appointed as elders as helpful training. Two of those participants also mentioned the Porterbrook year-long discipleship program as influential in their preparation to serve as elders. Six of the participants described leading life groups and ministry teams under the supervision and direction of elders or pastoral staff as significant training and preparation to lead. Finally, two participants mentioned reading books together with other elders in training, as recommended in the E-Plus training.

Table 5

First Interview, Second Question Responses

What kind of training or personal development did your church provide in preparation for your becoming an elder?		
Formal Program (E+ and Porterbrook)		80%
Apprenticeship	60%	
Reading	20%	

When asked about training since becoming elders, the participants gave similar responses. Six of the participants mentioned the role weekly meetings play in ongoing training. Participant 4 stated, "We are meeting as elders and it's not all just praying or making decisions, but there is teaching and training going over things." Participant 5 said, "Elder meetings focus on development a lot." Four participants referenced the annual conferences with the Advance network as a regular source of training on leadership. One participant specifically mentioned training the elder team had received in a previous year around the Enneagram to help elders better understand their personality types and how to relate to one another. Finally, the same two

participants that mentioned reading books together before becoming elders also mentioned reading books after being elders.

The comments about calling and training were positive in nature. Four participants stressed the long length of time, three or four years, they spent in training prior to being appointed as elders contributed to a sense of confidence in their preparation.

Table 6

First Interview, Third Question Responses

What kind of training have you received since becoming an elder?	
Weekly Meetings	60%
Extended process	40%
Reading	20%

The fourth question asked participants to describe typical elder meetings, "Tell me about your church elder meetings." The elders meet weekly on Tuesday evenings from 4:30 to 6:30 pm. Each meeting has different groups attending. One meeting is only the elders, one includes elders-in-training in the E+ and Elder Apprentice programs, one week includes elder's wives, one week previously included other pastors and church planters in the Manna Grant program.

The meetings always have an agenda that is followed, although regularly there is not enough time to discuss all business items. The lead pastor creates the agenda and decides what items are put on the agenda and elders can suggest issues to be placed on the agenda if done so in advance. Discussion of each agenda item are led by the lead pastor or another elder who has primary leadership over the issue being discussed.

All participants stressed the importance of prayer, singing, and Bible teaching at the beginning of the weekly meeting which typically takes 40 minutes to 1 hour. Participant 10 described the importance of prayer, "We always seem to run out of time regarding agenda, but we're always celebrating that, like, 'Man, that time in prayer and time in the word is always worth it.'"

Three participants described the importance of time spent socializing. The start of meetings always includes "15 to 30 minutes just to socialize and be a team and to love each other and care for each other," as participant 4 said. Participant 3 described the culture as "brothers in arms."

Table 7

First Interview, Fourth Question Responses

Tell me about your church elder meetings.	
Prayer/Singing/Bible Study 100%	
Socializing	30%

Questions 5 and 6 examined decision-making. Question 5 asked, "What kind of problems do the elders experience in how they related to each other and congregants?" Five responses were consistent among many of the participants: Prayer and scripture, consensus, the tool of the word-pictures of bullhorn, heart and lightbulb, extended time, and prophecy. Eight of the participants spoke about the importance of prayer and scripture in the decision-making process. Participant 6 said, "We are regularly giving ourselves to prayer, fasting, and the word is a testament to the fact that we are not just trying to make decisions through conventional wisdom, but are honestly trying to seek the voice of God." Two participants mentioned fasting with

prayer, one mentioned praying scripture out loud, and one mentioned going to locations to "prayer walk."

Seven participants spoke about the importance of collaboration. Participant 5 described the collaboration process, "There's always a time for everyone to say something on major decisions. So, one person who's closest to the situation and making a decision will kind of lay out the facts from their perspective and maybe one or two people who are also in the details. Someone will suggest, not even the person who's chairing the conversation, but just someone will suggest a pathway forward and we'll kind of talk about and land on that pathway forward." Participant 7 also described team collaboration, "There is a lot of back-and-forth collaboration, a lot of ideas, a lot of viewpoints. I would say different people on the team play different roles, so there are some people that provoke great questions. There are other people that are summarizing after they've heard four of five people speak and say this is actually what it seems to be. Plurality and consensus is one of those things where it's like you're trudging through mud until you get to that clear water." Participant 9 described the unique challenges to collaboration that Southlands experiences because some of the elders are employed as staff and work daily at the church together while others are "marketplace" elders.

> "I think that we really value trying to do that in a team and not to make those decisions in an isolated way. Sometimes it feels like it can get bogged down because we want to keep people in the loop or make sure the guys are all up to speed before we pull the trigger on things. It's not a problem to solve as a tension to manage and trying to be efficient and effective and productive but also wanting to do things at a pace where we're not just with the marketplace elders kind of out in the cold where they don't know what's going on."

Five participants talked about the importance of the tool Southlands uses, the symbols of the lightbulb, the heart, and the bullhorn. Participant 1 described the three symbols, "Lightbulb is an idea that anybody can have. A heart is beginning to say I think God may be in this. The

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bullhorn is one where pretty much Alan comes and says, 'Look, guys, I just really believe that God has spoken to me and he's given me a strategy for carrying out this idea.'" Participant 6 expressed that the use of the symbols is "giving guys permission to say I want your voice, I need your voice, but you need to know how strongly I feel about this." Participant 9 stressed the value of having "common language" with the members of the elder team. He also made the point, "If it's a heart, even if I disagree, I want to be really mindful of something that he's really sat with and that he's holding close." Elders are particularly careful not to offend a person who says they are expressing an idea with the heart symbol because there is a greater likelihood of offense if they aren't taken seriously. Several participants commented that the lead pastor had only used the bullhorn once or twice over the previous four years.

Two participants described the importance to Southlands of prophecy in decision-making. Participant 10 said,

> "We have trusted people within the church that seem to have a prophetic sense around direction and even times and seasons that will never outweigh or have authority over us as a team. There seems to be a consistency around prophetic words around this specific matter or direction and then we pray to that as a team and if there is unity in agreement then we'll make decisions around that. Discerning God's will is mostly done within unity linking with Scripture and allowing the prophetic the way in."

Participant 5 said, "Sometimes we'll even invite various people who have a prophetic gift to pray about it, to weigh in, and sometimes they come to us while we're in the middle of a decision with a prophetic word about the decision we're making in that is really faith building that God is leading and guiding us." The elder team regularly receives of input from three or four trusted members of the church that the elders believe have the spiritual gift of prophecy. The elders rely on these voices from outside of the group to contribute wisdom and insight to their decision-making process.

Table 8

First Interview, Fifth Question Responses

How does the Elder team discern God's will and make decisions?		
Prayer and Scripture		80%
Consensus		70%
Tools (*Unity Charter, Collaboration Tool*)	50%	
Extended Time/Process	50%	
Prophecy	20%	

Question 6 asked participants "How does your elder team discern God's will and make decisions?" The same five answers for question 5 were repeated by participants but with different orders of frequency. Seven participants mentioned consensus making an ideal group decision-making process. Participant 2 said, "Ideally an idea would be presented and discussed, and I think that not everybody needs to talk about it but they should be allowed the opportunity to have an opinion on the idea or the topic. If there are disagreements, I think they should be talked about, weigh pros and cons, and I think ultimately to come to a final decision. Two other participants also spoke about the importance of everyone having the opportunity to fully express their thoughts and opinions. Participant 8 added that is important that all parties humble themselves especially in their speech to one another. Participant 9 added the unique idea that "If everyone's in complete agreement all the time, I think I probably feel like there's not enough perspectives in the room."

Four participants mentioned using a process or tool. Three participants mentioned writing down pros and cons lists in the decision-making process. One participant mentioned using the

Southlands tool of the lightbulb, heart, and bullhorn. Participant 5 said, "Ideally, they have a

principle physical copy of that laid out in two columns, three decisions or four decisions. Each

decision has a column where you say these are the implications both positive and negative."

Three participants mentioned prophecy. Participant 4 mentioned, "Ideally somebody

who's maybe not in the meeting would have a prophetic word about the decision as well, which

we've had multiple times." Participant 6 said, "On large decisions to bring an outside

perspective, so that might be trusted voices outside the church." Southlands believes that the

Holy Spirit speaks to the congregation through prophets both to initiate dialogue on decisions

and to validate decisions already in process.

Two participants stressed the importance of prayer in an ideal decision-making process.

Table 9

First Interview, Sixth Question Response

Describe an ideal group decision-making process.	
Consensus	70%
Tools	40%
Prophecy	30%
Prayer	20%

Questions 7, 8, and 9 address the issue of conflict. Question 7 asked participants to,

"Describe an ideal group decision-making process." Question 8 asked, "How is conflict

addressed and resolved between elder team members?" Question 9 asked, ".What is an

appropriate level of conflict for elder teams to experience, and what is the best way to deal with

that conflict?"

Two responses to question 7 were shared by six participants each. Participants described personality, or personal feelings, interests, dynamics, or approaches as the primary cause of conflict. Participant 1 said, "Personal interest becomes more important than maybe corporate interest and people." Participant 9 described the conflict, "We are a group of pretty passionate and opinionated leaders and so I think part of it is just that we do tend to bring ourselves fully to the table and oftentimes it's really great, but at times it does lead to real disagreement and real tension. Participant 10 described the differences, "I think we all have different gifts and talents and I think at times that can mean that we see things through our own lens of gifting. I think everybody has their own idea of what they want church to look like. I think there could be tension from individuals that want us to highlight their ministry and the other team not feeling like that's the direction maybe that we want to invest in or pour into."

The other cause of conflict that was shared by six participants focused on communication. Four of those who expressed the issue of communication also highlighted the split of the members of the elder board between those who are paid staff, meeting and working together during the workday at the church, and those who are marketplace elders, working in the marketplace and then participating in formal elder meetings, but missing out on the communication that occurs around the church building daily. Participant 4 said, "Communication is always the biggest thing." Two participants described the feeling of the marketplace elders as being left out or falling out of the loop. One participant connected lack of communication to changes in the church organization and this leading to conflict.

Three participants described the differences in demographics, age or generation, and country of origin as a source of problems or conflict. Another three participants described external causes of problems, including life situations, socio-political tensions especially in 2020-

2021 and the Covid pandemic as sources of problems. One participant referred to, "The enemy wanting to sow disunity."

Table 10

First Interview, Seventh Question Responses

What kind of problems do the elder team experience that cause conflict?		
Personality (Feelings, interests, approaches)		60%
Communication		60%
Demographics	30%	
External	30%	

Question 8 asked how conflict is addressed and resolved. The most frequent answer, from seven participants, was the importance of face-to-face communication. Participant 6 said, "We have a value not to try and resolve any conflict via text." The second most frequent answer, from five participants, was the importance of proactive peacemaking. Participant 6 said, "I would say like an overarching value would be it's a person's glory to overlook offense." Participant 9 said, "I'm going to choose to actually perceive them in the best possible way." Participants said that they regularly try to prevent conflict and the causes of conflict, especially gossip. Participants also stressed the importance of actively trying to minimize conflict through assuming best intent from people and choosing not to be offended. Participant 8 said, "Forgiveness is usually quickly offered genuinely because we genuinely do care for each other."

Table 11

First Interview, Eighth Question Responses

How is conflict addressed and resolved between elder team members?		
Face-to-face communication		70%
Proactive peacemaking	50%	

Question 9 asked what an appropriate amount or level of conflict for the leadership team to experience is. All ten participants responded that conflict is normal and to be expected. Participant 5 suggested, "If you have 10 percent or less of your time in an elder meeting arguing or working something out, that might be a metric." Four participants spoke about how some conflict is healthy. Participant 1 defined healthy conflict as disagreement and passion. Participant 7 said, "There's going to be a healthy challenge of ideas. There's going to be consistent like flow of ideas, opinion, thought, and conviction." Participant 8 said, "I think a low-key level of conflict dashed throughout the entire experience is actually healthy and correct." Participant 9 said, "I actually think conflict is in some ways actually even healthy as long as it's resolved and as long as it's dealt with properly and as long as it's healthy conflict." Table 4 lists the various words that participants used to describe conflict as either healthy or unhealthy.

Table 12

Key words describing healthy and unhealthy conflict.

Healthy Conflict	Unhealthy Conflict
Disagreement	
Intensity	

Passions	Personal gain and praise
Emotions	
Working through things	
Fighting for the Kingdom of God	Fighting against one another
Conflict about the issue	Conflict about the other person
Low-key	Low-level resentment
Challenge of ideas	Questioning and judging motive
Flow of ideas, opinions, thoughts, and convictions	

Four participants spoke about how to respond when conflict moves from being healthy to unhealthy. Participant 1 explained that as soon as it becomes apparent that conflict is becoming unhealthy during a meeting, conversation will stop, and the conflict will be addressed. "If we move into the inappropriate then we'd even stop them, stop the meeting and say we need to settle down." Participant 4 described the move from healthy to unhealthy conflict, "But there could be a time that it crosses from healthy to unhealthy. This isn't about fighting for the kingdom of God. This is now one against another. It starts getting personal and if we steer away from the advancement of God's kingdom for personal benefits, or personal gain or praise, I would say that is now an unhealthy area of conflict." Participant 6 said, "We've got to keep conflict about the issue, not the person. It should not extend to motive, questioning and judging motive the moment it's 'I disagree with you and therefore I question your motive.' that is demonic. I honestly believe Satan gets in when people start to judge motive in a team."

Question 10 asked, " What tools or training would help your elder team make better decisions and resolve conflict in better ways?" Four participants mentioned the importance of using the *Unity Charter* and continuing to improve the *Unity Charter*, especially by adding

practical procedural steps for conflict resolution. Two participants mentioned using the decision tool. Nine of the participants made unique recommendations for additional tools or areas of additional training that would be helpful. Those recommendations are listed in Table 5. Participant 3 summarized the need for tools and training in the church.

> I think a lot of the times the reason that people do some conflict so bad within the church is because the church often lags behind in doing just really helpful training and tools. I think teams often don't understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and that kind of stuff, and they don't have the right skill sets of how to navigate conflicting conversations, even though we should be best at it. I think that kind of training and stuff should have some life and regularity in the church.

Table 13

Recommendations for tools or training.

Team member strengths and weaknesses

Navigating conflict conversations

A working word document for major decisions

Communication styles

Conflict profiles for Enneagram personalities

A document with a process for conflict management

Study of the incarnation, life, and emotional experience of Christ

List of best practices for conflict resolution

Breaking the "friendship contract" as an elder

A procedure or formal process for managing interpersonal conflict

Theological training

Focus Group

The focus group involved nine of the ten participants interacting with each other around four questions, one participant was unable to attend. The first question asked, "Give some examples of successful discernment of God's will and group decision-making. What made it successful, and why?" Six of the ten participants made comments during the discussion of question 1. There were two responses that were mentioned four times through the conversation. The importance of an "outside voice," someone not from the elder team giving additional insight or advice. The outside voice is either a member of the congregation who is trusted by the elder team and considered to have the spiritual gift of prophecy or another pastor from the Advance movement of churches whose advice is sought out. The second was a diversity of perspectives within the team. Participant 9 said, "When there's been space and sense of willingness to be open and honest about our opinions and actually fully taking advantage of diverse perspectives in the room."

Other topics that were brought up for question 1 included three participants mentioning the slow process. One participant related the slow process to doing a large amount of research in preparation to decide. Participant 5 said, "The process has been slow enough for most people to weigh in." The use of a subcommittee of elder team members who finalized the decision, the prayer, an attitude of humility among elders toward one another, and the use of the decision-making tool "bullhorn" were all expressed by one or two participants to explain why decision-making was successful.

Table 14

Focus Group, First Question Responses

Give some examples of successful discernment of God's will and group decision-making. What made it successful, and why?		
Outside Voice	30%	
Diversity of Perspective	30%	
Slow Process	20%	

The second discussion prompt was, "Give some examples of successful conflict resolution. What made it successful, and why?" Six different participants responded to the discussion prompt. The most frequent response, from all six participants, was that unity was valued by the team. Each participant described situations in which the team works actively to promote unity. Participant 8 said, "We'll actually stand together shoulder-to-shoulder when there's issues of conflict that is actually attacking the team and trying to divide the team we'll actually come together and stand together and resolve the situation. Even if the discipline ultimately leads to maybe not so pretty or feel-good situation or outcome."

The issue of humility or deference was expressed by all six participants. Deference was mentioned during the decision-making process as well as after the process is over. One participant mentioned the importance of deference to the unity of the team during disagreements or conflicts as well. Participant 6 described the importance of deference to the team after decisions are made, "When we make a decision, everyone is obliged to give their perspective. Once the decision has been made, everyone is obliged to give their support."

Three participants mentioned bringing in another elder to help bring a different perspective. The purpose of the third person was to bring clarity to the one who was seeking out

advice and perspective to challenge their own preconceptions, not for the purpose of gaining an additional supporter to win their argument. Participant 6 mentioned the value of bringing in a third person when the conflict resolution is at an impasse and someone else is needed to help restart resolution. Participant 6 also talked about the danger of triangulation in conflict and the need to resist the third party being brought in to help one side win their argument rather than to challenge a fixed perspective.

Two participants mentioned the importance of keeping short accounts, addressing conflict, and attempting resolution as soon as the conflict become apparent rather than allowing the conflict to linger. Two participants highlighted how major decisions need to be almost unanimous. Participant 3 said, "I think there's a real sense of especially major decision. It's almost got to be unanimous and if it's not, we'll actually step away from it and come back and ask real help, whether there is also a spirit of deference as well." This response highlighted three of the themes, a slow process, almost unanimous decision, and humility or deference between elders.

Two participants talked about the importance of follow-up after conflict. Participant 5 described this as "closing the loop" on conflict to make sure it is resolved and doesn't continue.

One participant talked about the importance of face-to-face or in person communication instead of using texting.

Table 15

Focus Group, Second Question Responses

Give some examples of successful conflict resolution. What made it successful, and why?	
Unity is valued	60%
Humility	60%

Introduce a third person		30%
Short accounts	20%	
Follow up	20%	
Face-to-face	10%	

The third question for the focus group was, "How can your elder team discern God's will, make decisions, and handle conflict more effectively?" Participant 8 expressed that that he disagreed with the word "effective" as it relates to churches. He said, "There is no biblical reference that says, hey, go be super effective with your time, make sure agendas are super tight, and that your plan of action feedback loop is excellent and whatever. And so I don't like your question at all. I just think that I don't know if effective is the right word we're going for, maybe more impactful would be a better word." I then stated to the group "If you want to put in impactful, purposeful, or biblical, you can use any of those words you like. So anything that would improve these things the way you want them improved."

Six participants then brought up the issue of communication and the dynamic of the two types of elders on the team, staff elders who meet daily for conversations through the week and marketplace elders that frequently only participate in conversations with the whole team at the weekly meeting. One of the participants who is a staff elder expressed the problem of decision fatigue. "I think one of the challenges I think I run into is I actually spend my mental and emotional energy in the smaller group and then actually don't feel like the same passion to re-engage the conversation when we bring it to the broader eldership team. It's a kind of like discussion fatigue." Participant 9 said, "The marketplace guy would be like, I don't know enough to engage the conversation. It's already kind of down the track unless I'm really

objecting to it, I'm probably just going to let it go." Participant 6 responded, "I really feel the double tension of wanting to bring marketplace guys in meaningfully for them not to just feel like they're rubber stamping something that's already been decided and genuinely wanting their perspective." Participant 8 said, "I think the staff elders also do try to slow down certain decisions where timeliness is not critical piece so that we can include more voices." Participant 5 offered a potential solution to the communication problem expressed, "I think even just in decisions, having printed out like a one sentence summary, this is the issue on their side, this is what will happen if we make this move. Everyone's looking at the same paper." Participant 8 suggested using electronic tools like Voxer or Zoom to allow for real-time communication as a group to communicate.

Other points expressed by participants included participant 10 saying, "I think we can handle an even bigger conflict because we're laughing together, enjoying one another, it's not just the workplace, but it's very emotional." Two participants described the value of prayer and scripture. Participant 2 said, "There's actually always an initiative to actually bring God into the plan. We're actually here to listen to God and ask him what he wants to accomplish."

Table 16

Focus Group, Third Question Responses

How can your elder team discern God's will, make decisions, and handle conflict more effectively?		
Communication between staff and marketplace elders	60%	
Prayer	20%	
Humor	10%	

The final discussion prompt was, "The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to the Southlands simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution." The lead pastor read through the *Unity Charter*. Three participants spoke about the need to clarify the statement on mediation and that there would be a benefit to engaging in a mediation process earlier in the conflict. There was also the suggestion that the newly created church policy manual section on conflict resolution should be added to the *Unity Charter*.

A second discussion began on the idea of proactively seeking unity. Participant 5 said, "One thing that really stood out to me in our conversation about unity is how much was proactive, how much was spending time together, creating space, spend time there. I think this document is much more reactive, more to the negative thing you should do. So I would like if there are a few positive ones." It was suggested by the lead pastor that the group make alterations to the *Unity Charter* especially around the two points just mentioned.

At this point in time, the meeting was about to conclude, and the lead pastor suggested a short dialogue on the *Leading Through Collaboration* tool. Six participants expressed support for the tool. Participants expressed that the tool supported the collaborative spirit of the team in decision making. Participants expressed that the terms have been used so frequently that the concept has been internalized by the team. All participants expressed support for the tool in its current use.

The focus group concluded with the decision that one of the elders would be responsible for rewriting the *Unity Charter* and that the elder team would continue to dialogue about desired changes at their meeting the following week.

Table 17

Focus Group, Fourth Question Responses

The Southlands Church *Leading Through Collaboration* and *Unity Charter* are included as samples for you to evaluate and modify. Please use the rest of our time to make any agreed-upon changes to the Southlands simple one-page tools for decision-making and conflict resolution.
Change to *Unity Charter* to include proactive peacemaking 100%

Modifications to the Unity Charter

During the focus group discussion, the elders decided to put one person in charge of rewriting the *Unity Charter*. They wanted to make the tool more proactive in promoting unity in the church. During several additional elder meetings changes were discussed further and modifications were made to the document. The revised *Unity Charter* is shown in Appendix E. The resulting changes are marked in italics in the statement as it was approved. Additionally, a *Conflict Resolution Procedure* section from the newly created *Southlands Church Policy Manual* was created to provide a conflict resolution procedure and is now included with the revised *Unity Charter*, shown in Appendix F.

Modifications to the unity charter focused on including a proactive focus and language to guide church members toward actively seeking unity, rather than only addressing conflict after it has occurred. A statement was added to encourage members to view the congregation as a family where members treat one another as brothers and sisters and make a proactive effort to identify one another's needs and act in ways that support each other. Another statement was added that instructs members to intentionally spend time in-person together in order to build unity and create opportunities to practice the "one another" commands in the New Testament. The final additional statement that focused on proactive unity stressed the importance of the respect of

other's differing opinions around topics considered "disputable matters," those beliefs or interpretations of doctrine not given clear definitions in the Southlands Church's official statement of faith.

Follow-Up Interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted two weeks after the focus group session and after the changes to the *Unity Charter* were completed. In the follow-up interview, participants were asked four open-ended questions about their experience during the focus group conversations, additional conversations among the elders after the focus group meeting, and changes that were made to the Southlands *Unity Charter* because of those conversations.

In the first question, participants were asked what changes the eldership team made to the *Unity Charter* because of their conversations. The two most frequently cited changes, mentioned by five participants, was the addition of a specific procedure to follow for resolving conflicts or disputes and the proactive pursuit of unity. Four participants mentioned the procedure by name, and one described the charter as now being more practical. Participant 8 said, "We need a path and a structure for how we actually come back together and how we restore unity and what are the steps we take as a leadership to help a member who is experiencing conflict."

During the focus group, one of the topics that caused widespread agreement and the decision to modify the *Unity Charter* was the suggestion that the original document was mostly reactionary to conflict and that restricting the charter to have a section describing a proactive desire to seek unity would be beneficial. Five participants in the follow-up interviews mentioned this change to identify key concepts related to proactively pursuing unity. Participant 10 described this as "fighting for unity" by "understanding other people's perspectives and listening." Participant 5 said "I feel with the original *Unity Charter*, if you weren't in the middle

of a direct conflict with someone, it could kind of feel like, well, I don't have a responsibility here, but that would be incorrect. We all have a responsibility to pursue unity regardless of if we're experiencing a direct conflict or not. So, I think that distinction is really helpful overall."

Four participants who described changes in the language did so in different ways. One participant described the changes as being "kinder words." Other descriptions by participants were "deeper and more nuanced," "positive," "light," and "treating each other as family." Two participants described the changes as "clarifying" the original *Unity Charter*. One participant described the changes as "modernized to fit current and ongoing challenges."

Table 18

Second Interview, First Question Responses

What changes did the elders make to the *Unity Charter*?	
Add procedure	50%
Change language	40%

The second question asked, "What was the most important change in your opinion and why?" The most frequent answer, shared by four participants, was the description that unity does not equal uniformity and that there is a space in the church for unity despite disagreement on "disputable matters." Participant 2 described this as, "Training our people and leaders to be able to have some flexibility."

The second most frequent response, shared by three participants, was the added language around members seeking to be physically present with each other. Participant 4 said, "How can you maintain unity if you're not actually physically united and communing together and doing

life together?" Participant 5 said, "In order to sustain biblical unity believers must spend time together. You cannot practice the 'one-another's' if you're not in community."

Less common responses included two participants mentioning the resolution procedure, two mentioning proactive unity and one describing clarification.

Table 19

Second Interview, Second Question Responses

What was the most important change in your opinion, and why?	
Differences are good	40%
Physically present	30%
Procedure	20%
Proactive Unity	20%
Clarify	10%

The third question asked, "What changes could be made to the tool to make it more effective?" The most common response, by six participants, was that a plan for frequent communication of the *Unity Charter* was needed. Participant 3 described the need as "rhythms of reminding and refreshing people," to build a culture of unity. Participant 5 said, "How do we use the tool in an ongoing manner to bring about the fruit of the spirit that we desire?"

There were several unique insights by several of the participants. Two participants raised concerns about mediation and arbitration. One participant suggested that additional changes may be needed to further clarify the wording regarding arbitration because the current wording did not clarify that both parties were required to submit to the decision of the arbitrator. Another participant expressed concern that more should be done to help engage mediation or arbitration

earlier in the conflict process. One participant mentioned that reducing the policy to short bullet points would help during times of conflict. One participant expressed concern about the language around more affluent members being obligated to give to the needs of the body and how that would be practiced. One participant suggested adding testimonies or stories of how the *Unity Charter* has worked in people's lives to encourage its use. Finally, one participant expressed concern that too detailed of a document could adversely affect the culture of being a loving family. All the participants engaged with the question, offering thoughtful suggestions or recommendations, but also expressing contentment and support with the changes to the document.

Table 20

Second Interview, Third Question Responses

What changes could be made to the tool to make it more effective?	
Plan to teach the tool	60%

The final question asked, "What long-term benefits might you see from the revision that has happened?" Five participants described the long-term benefit of clarification for the conflict resolution process. Four participants mentioned specifically the grievance procedure being clarified and useful. One mentioned that the improved clarity would lead to the *Unity Charter* being used earlier in the conflict process and that would lead to reduced conflict and less serious consequences from that conflict. One mentioned clarity in general, one described the clarification being focused on being centered on the Bible while the other described clarification coming from circumstances experienced by the Southlands Church community.

Three participants described the long-term benefit as an improvement in relationships. One participant described it as a culture of longsuffering or a culture of no fear of conflict. Another participant described relationships as strong and enjoyable with members excited to work together. The third participant said more relational health would lead to more fruitful ministry and more new churches being planted.

Two participants describe the long-term benefit as being related to the unity in diversity idea mentioned previously where leaders and members have both a "thicker skin" and greater ability to accept "differences of opinion" between church members on doctrinal issues.

Table 21

Second Interview, Fourth Question Responses

What long-term benefits might you see from the revision that has happened?	
Clarify conflict-resolution process	50%
Improve relationships	30%
Accept differences	20%

Summary of Findings

The most frequently mentioned themes or key ideas throughout the interview and focus group conversations were weekly meetings, prayer and scripture, communication, a long time, consensus, proactive, and procedure.

Weekly meetings were frequently mentioned as the primary form of training during the process of training and preparation for eldership as well as for current elders. The weekly meetings are the place where training takes place, and the decision-making process takes place with all members of the eldership team. The weekly meetings are a sacred space and time for the

leaders to build their team and for the team to meet with God. This creates a spirit of unity built around the intimacy of the group that shares private information and dialogues with a vision of responsibility and mission that makes membership on the team and the act of teamwork a sacred act.

The sacredness of the teamwork is emphasized by weekly times of prayer and scripture study, the act of worshiping God together as a team, that always occur before business and usually represent a significant percentage of the total time, up to fifty percent of the total time together. Prayer and scripture help to focus the individual members on the person, personality, and will of God as more important that the individual participants. The result of this focus is humility and deference to one another, in light of the individual and team's subordination to the lordship of Christ.

Communication was emphasized through all the interview questions and focus group. There was a stress on face-to-face communication to promote unity and when resolving conflict. Participants expressed that the primary source of conflict was the team composition of staff elders who work full-time at church and communicate with one another throughout the day and the marketplace elders who often wait until the weekly meeting to have input in the decision-making process. Other communication challenges include the diversity of the team by age, socio-economic, and personality. Participants could identify that because communication is one of the primary sources of conflict, extra care should be taken in communication both to minimize offense and to quickly resolve when persons are offended.

Participants spoke about training for eldership and decision-making taking a long time. The leadership team is not in a hurry. The process to join the elder team often takes four or five years. The priority in decision-making is consensus and the process can regularly take weeks or

months on major decision to make sure everyone has participated, and the team has had time to sit and wait on the decision to allow God to participate. Decisions taking a long time is directly related to the desire for consensus. A lack of consensus usually stops the decision-making process from moving forward and only in rarest cases, once every couple of years, does the lead pastor exercise the "bullhorn" of making an executive decision to force a decision.

Proactive conflict resolution was the most significant theme that came out of the focus group. The evaluation of the last ten years of use of the *Unity Charter* and especially in the most recent years caused several participants to express a need for a more proactive effort to promote unity, rather than wait for disunity and conflict. Being proactive was seen as a key to preventing conflict.

The procedure for conflict resolution was the primary theme in the second interview. The focus was on engaging with the process earlier in the conflict, rather than waiting until the conflict had escalated to the point where someone had already left the church or where significant relationship damage had already occurred. A plan or procedure for training the congregation in the *Unity Charter* tool was also stressed by more than half of the participants in the second set of interviews.

All participants agreed that conflict is a normal part of decision-making and community. Some participants expressed that a low level of conflict should be desired to show that there is a true diversity of opinion and personality among the team members. One of the important insights made by more than one participant is that the moment when conflict becomes unacceptable is when it moves from being respectful and related to values or methods and becomes directed at another person instead of a decision or perspective and there is judgment about the person's

character. That distinction is the mark of when discussion needs to be stopped and refocusing and restoration need to occur.

There were no areas of disagreement, "Slippage" as Sensing calls them, between participants' responses in either the interviews or the focus group. One participant raised a disagreement with the concept of effectiveness as a positive value when it was included in the language of the questions. The participant was concerned that the concept of effectiveness was a business term that should not be used in a church setting.

Sensing calls the realities not represented in the findings as silences. The researcher could not identify any clear silences where there were expectations that concepts should have been mentioned by the participants but were not.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Participant 10 summarized his experience through the research process, "I've been actually really encouraged by this whole process. I think it's helped me just step back and look at how much I love this team and how much God's grace is upon it. And then, too, I think it's just helped me say, we could always be better and do better and relooking at these things and hearing one another process through it and seeing things differently and kind of coming together with some form of unity of how we could better love one another and our flock." All ten participants expressed similar positive feelings regarding their individual and shared experiences with action research.

The purpose of the project was to evaluate and modify the tools used by the Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution. To evaluate the tools used by the Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution, this action research project looked at three key areas of group leadership in the Southlands church congregation, how elders are prepared and trained for their work as part of a leadership group, how the elders make decisions as a group, and how the elders handle conflict, specifically related to their own decisions, but also more broadly in their congregation. Each of the ten elders was interviewed and asked ten questions related to these three general topics. The entire group then participated in a focus group dialogue around four questions. Finally, each elder was then reinterviewed and asked about their focus group experience. The responses of the participants in both the interviews and focus group generally aligned with the researcher's expectations from the literature on the subjects that was reviewed. Participants displayed different levels of difficulty in speaking about conflict. Some participants were bold and happy to talk about examples of

conflict they experienced with other participants, while a few participants were visibly uncomfortable talking about conflict and provided shorter answers compared to the other participants. All participants willingly engaged in the process. The assumption that the research would be approved and that the participants would be willing to be truthful held up to be true. The final assumption was that the interviews and focus group would provide enough information to address the research questions and would result in an evaluation by the participants themselves of their decision-making and conflict resolution processes, which did happen with the results described in the remainder of this chapter.

During the interviews and focus group, the participants were guided by questions to personally evaluate how they experience group decision-making and conflict resolution as team members. Their individual evaluations were offered in their interview answers and as a focus group, they dialogued about their shared experience and the effectiveness of their two tools. Within the focus group, they decided that the *Unity Charter* was insufficient and decided as a group to modify the charter. The purpose of the action research project, to evaluate and modify a Southlands leadership tool, was accomplished.

In the original plan for this action research project, the researcher had hoped that the modified tool could then be used in a real-world situation with further research conducted after the fact to have participants re-evaluate the revised tool. The researcher decided after the focus group that this was not an acceptable plan because there was not in the timeframe of the research project did not allow for an open-ended time to wait for a conflict crisis to arise in order to practice using the tool and the interest of the participants in the research project appeared to begin to fade after the modifications were made to the *Unity Charter*. The plan to test the modified tool in a real-world situation did not occur.

Another aspect of the original action research proposal was to conduct the research among at least three different congregations in the Advance network of churches. This was deemed to exceed the time scope of the project and was abandoned before the research project began. While the research was only conducted at Southlands Church, Southlands is representative of the leadership culture and practices of other Advance network churches and the results of the research and the modified *Unity Charter* could serve as a useful tool for other Advance churches as well as other churches and ministries.

Harmonious Team Leadership

The researcher reviewed literature written on the biblical model of harmonious team leadership. Strauch emphasizes the biblical teaching that God desires groups of people to lead together rather than individuals.[1] Hoag writes that scripture teaches the ideal in church leadership is a group of people who use scripture, silence, sharing, and prayer to focus as a group on Christ and allow him to lead the church through the group's pursuit of harmony and unity around Christ himself.[2] All ten participants described the importance in their weekly meetings of prayer, singing, and Bible teaching at the start of the meeting. This time of group focus on Christ typically would take from 40 to 60 minutes of the two-hour meeting and occurs before business decisions are made. Through the interviews, the participants talked about the importance of being unified in spirit and focusing on Christ before engaging in seeking God's will in the decision-making process. During the focus group, all six participants responding to the question about decision-making said that unity and harmony among the leadership team was the most important attribute to discerning God's will for the church.

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[1] Strauch, *Blibical Eldership,* 43.

[2] Hoag, *The Council: A Biblical Perspective on Board Governance,* 102.

Southlands has a hierarchy among the staff elders where elders working as paid pastoral staff for the church are subordinate to one another in an employee capacity. Similarly, there is an executive leadership committee where a few of the staff elders including the lead pastor have the authority to make legal and operational decisions for the church. All elders see the lead pastor as God's highest human authority in the congregation, using the term first among equals to describe his authority. Despite the positional and spiritual hierarchies that exist, all the elders consider their voices to be equal on the team when it comes to the belief that God prefers that decision-making and leadership occur in a group context.

It is uncertain how the results of the research at Southlands would compare to similar situations. Southlands utilizes a blend of episcopal and presbyterian governance in its leadership structure where the lead pastor chooses to pursue collaboration and unity with a team of elders, and where the consensus of the team is usually regarded as the highest confirmation of God's leading and direction to the church leaders. Southlands is unique in the decision-making tool of the three symbols which includes the bullhorn as an approved method for the lead pastor to override the opinions and decisions of the elder team, but the lead pastor chooses not to use the tool in that way because of his belief that God leads through a plurality of elders who seek him through the process of group worship and decision-making. Research comparing how leadership teams that practice congregational, presbyterian, and episcopal governance value the importance of harmony as a primary attribute of knowing God's will would help reveal if governance systems play a significant role in how intentionally groups pursue harmony and unity.

One question for additional investigation is how the pursuit of harmonious group leadership is influenced by the local culture of the organization. Each culture has a different understanding of individualism compared to collectivism and would value group leadership

differently because of culture. Is the biblical ideal of harmonious group decision-making God's plan for every culture or can more individualistic cultures disregard the group leadership model?

The researcher saw the commitment to creating a collaborative culture as particularly important. With all members committed to unity toward Christ as a primary value, this makes decision-making and conflict resolution easier to manage. Two participants spoke about the importance of everyone expressing individual opinions during the collaborative process and then being unified in the final decision even if they didn't agree with the decision. Each participant expressed commitment to being in harmony and unity with the team. This culture of a safe place for transparent dialogue including conflict, with the promise and commitment to long-term unity allows each participant to know their opinion is valued and their participation in the group is meaningful.

Three participants mentioned the importance of socializing at both the weekly meetings and through planned retreats with all the elders or with elders regularly spending time together outside of church meetings. The pursuit of deep and honest friendships between elders contributes to unity and harmony on the team. More time is spent in regular family and recreation settings than in formal meetings. This "brothers in arms" relationship as one participant described it, contributes to the culture of trust and collaboration. More research into the power of play to build a unified team would be helpful for church leadership teams and staff to discover how much time spent playing and socializing together compared to doing typical business would be necessary to create effective team culture.

Decision-Making

Ignatius of Loyola, the Quakers, Luke Timothy Johnson, Danny Morris, Charles Olsen, and finally Ruth Haley Barton has all influenced the study of decision-making and discernment.

All the writers suggest a structured process to help keep participants focused on seeking God's help in the decision-making process as opposed to becoming distracted in the emotional tensions and conflicts that come from trying to correctly discern God's will and leading on a particular decision. Johnson recommends a combination of prayer and scriptural interpretation considering current circumstances. Barton offers an eighteen-step process. Each of the authors refers to the Quaker process which includes in the process a time where every member to share their opinion on a topic.

The elders at Southlands, in their interviews, described their own process for decision-making during their weekly meeting. The participants described how each meeting begins with a time of socialization and visiting followed by prayer, Bible teaching and sometimes singing. The purpose of the socialization is to focus on the importance of friendship and brotherhood in the relationships. The focus on prayer, Bible teaching, and singing is intended to focus the group on the lordship and leadership of Christ and follows the instructions by many of the authors including Osborne and Beckwith that the primary purpose of the meeting is to worship Christ together, what Beckwith calls a "God meeting" instead of a board meeting.[3] One participant mentioned praying scripture during particularly important decisions. Another participant mentioned going to specific locations to prayer walk about decisions as well. The regular and intentional focus on Christ helps the elders remember that they are seeking God's opinion rather than their own.

Seven participants spoke about the importance of a spirit of collaboration, which was accomplished by taking multiple meetings to discuss major decision and a process whereby everyone is expected to share their opinion or thoughts on the topic. This desire for collaboration

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[3] Beckwith, *God Meetings: An Awakening in the Boardroom,* 96.

and open expression of opinions is suggested in the literature as well. An opportunity for quantitative research would be around the question of how comfortable people are sharing conflicting opinions, especially in churches where staff pastors sit on the leadership team and are a part of the decision-making process while still being subordinates in their employment status with the church. Additional research could measure confidence levels based on what tools, training, or systems of decision-making are implemented in the church.

Three participants described the process of writing down pros and cons lists to help in the decision-making process, a method of decision-making recommended by Ignatius of Loyola. Southlands uses a unique tool to aid in their dialogue. Five of the participants spoke about the images of the lightbulb, heart, and bull-horn help elders to communicate to one another how strongly they believe the opinion they are sharing has been discerned to be in alignment with God's plan for the church. One participant explained that when another elder states that their opinion has a heart quality of passion, the participant will be careful how they respond if they disagree so that they do not cause unnecessary offense with their comments. The researcher did not find any similar tool or suggestion in the literature or other research on the topic of decision-making. This tool has been effective for Southlands and additional research teaching other church leadership teams to use the tool and build it into their decision-making routine would be valuable.

The research strongly supported the focus in the literature on the importance of spending a significant percentage of meeting time on prayer and worship. Moving people toward Christ in a unified way has led to the elders of Southlands to being confident in their culture of collaborative decision-making. The participants expressed a confidence that the time spent in prayer and scripture reading and study helped team members develop a shared identity and focus

on mission. They also expressed the belief that the times of prayer contributed to a care for each other and desire to honor God by treating one another with kindness and respect. The time significant time commitment to the practices of prayer, worship and Bible study was seen by all participants as an important component of the team culture and success in making decisions that were ideally in alignment with God's will. While a fifty percent ratio of time together spent in prayer, worship, and Bible study is not a written tool, the practice has become a practical tool for the team's successful culture of decision-making and conflict resolution.

The interpersonal conflict that they experience is less frequently related to decisions and more frequently caused by personality differences or outside causes, rather than because of the decision-making process. They expressed comfort with conflict as part of the decision-making process as long as it was respectful and based on individual's opinions of the topic being discussed and did not become personally related to others.

Conflict Resolution

Sande stresses in his writings that the conflict that comes from personality differences is normal and that handling those problems can lead to spiritual maturity. All ten participants said conflict is a normal part of group leadership and interpersonal communication. Six participants described personality, personal feelings, dynamics, or approaches as the primary cause of conflict among team members. Six participants also described communication problems between elders as a cause of conflict. Elders described this type of conflict as normal and something that could easily be resolved by face-to-face meetings. Seven participants responded that face-to-face communication, especially when trying to resolve conflict, was the most important way to resolve conflict. Participants identified text and email as an additional cause or amplifier of the conflict when it was caused by communication or personality problems. Sande offers a structured

process for persons involved in the conflict to take responsibility for their own actions and seek reconciliation.

The Southlands leadership team has normalized basic conflict so that meeting face-to-face with someone else after an offense is the expected normal experienced. Some churches would never tolerate this level of conflict, but it is healthy as both the literature and research show. Since meeting for reconciliation is normal, it happens more frequently, and it also allows for more robust and honest conversation during decision-making. It has not led to team members becoming less concerned with offending one another, as some might fear, but has led to a culture where interpersonal offense and conflict are quickly apologized for and reconciled.

There is room for a quantitative study on the frequency of conversations for apologizing or resolving conflict annually as a measure of how healthy a leadership team is. Research to measure the frequency of face-to-face reconciliation conversations compared to emotional well-being and enjoyment of serving on the team would be helpful.

When the researcher learned about action research projects before beginning the research there was concern that the participants would not be willing to engage in the process or that in some way the action research project would fail by allowing the participants such latitude in the research process. The topic of conflict in the church community in general and in leadership teams specifically also presented a challenge. The elder team had concerns that opening themselves up to the scrutiny of published interviews could lead to additional conflict. Interpersonal conflicts, not related to the research, did occur within the church community both before the research and shortly after resulting in members leaving the church. The participants all engaged fully in the interviews and the focus group. Through the interviews, several participants identified shortcomings in their current *Unity Charter* and a need to update the ten-year-old

document to better address current social dynamics as well as provide better direction for conflict resolution. During the focus group, the elders decided that rewriting the *Unity Charter* was necessary. One elder was put in charge of writing and editing the changes. The elders spent two additional meetings continuing to discuss and recommend changes to the document and then voted to accept the updated document. The action research project caused the church leadership team to identify something in the church that needed to be changed and then make the necessary changes. The research process also provided the leadership team with an example of a way to discuss difficult topics and make significant changes in the future.

Several of the participants concluded their second interviews with statements about how much they enjoyed the action research project and the value they found both for themselves and the church. Participant 2 said, "I'm just thankful to be a part of a team that's willing to kind of engage in these things and actually a team that wants to grow in unity." Participant 8 said, "Documents like this can be viewed as cheesy, obvious, and unnecessary. And I think that our history and our team has really humbled us to say, no, this stuff is important and so obvious, we need to actually put it down on paper. I would encourage other churches to do similarly clearly in black and white, referring to scripture as its foundation, a similar type of charter or statement of principles that as a team we will submit to."

Conflict and the conflict that is the result of group decision-making causes stress and emotional distress for many participants in the church community. The researcher himself regularly struggled with memories of his own struggles with church leadership teams from previous pastor roles in churches during the reading, writing, and analysis of the research. The topic of church conflict needs to be addressed in such a way that persons who have suffered emotional and relational harm from the experience are able to process their experience, find

healing and restoration, and a new level of maturity, equipped to fully reengage in group leadership in churches. More research and writing should continue the topic of decision-making and conflict resolution until research shows that there is an improvement in the problem. The researcher hopes that this work will offer a small contribution toward that end.

Benefits of Research

In the *Consent Form* (see Appendix B), participants were told that there were three potential benefits to them as individuals and as a leadership team. The first benefit was a guided opportunity to dialogue with other elder team members regarding their individual and group relationship dynamics. This occurred during the focus group, and in the follow-up interviews, several participants described that they found value in the intentional and transparent discussion around team relationships and communication.

The second benefit that was suggested was structured times to either privately or publicly share one's opinion regarding how the elder team makes decisions and manages conflict. Each participant had access to two interviews, the first one for one hour and the second one for thirty minutes, to share their opinion privately and anonymously, knowing that the results would contribute to the completed research findings. Each participant was also able over the two-hour focus group to share their opinion publicly and respond to others' opinions publicly. The time allowed participants to feel heard and to have a safe and structured setting to raise concerns about the issues without fear of retribution or conflict. This benefit was achieved as well.

The third benefit was the evaluation and development of a more effective tool to assist in group decision-making and conflict resolution for use by the Southlands elder team and potentially in other churches or personal contexts. The participants, both individually in the interviews and in the focus group, expressed that the *Leading Through Collaboration* tool was

effective in its current format and was not in need of modification. The participants did modify the *Unity Charter* as a direct result of the focus group discussion time. The newly evaluated and revised *Unity Charter* is now publicly available to the leadership team and church members so that they can use it and can be made available to other churches, organizations, and individuals. This benefit could be further extended to Advance partner churches and other interested churches if a summary of the process and results was published in a public forum or communicated directly to Advance partner churches.

Both the *Leading Through Collaboration* tool and *Unity Charter* were successfully evaluated through the action research project, and Southlands church should have the confidence to share them with other churches to provide similar benefits and support to other church leadership teams. All ten participants expressed greater confidence in the culture of their leadership team and their ability to make effective decisions and handle conflict. The next few years will test the participants as conflicts arise to see if the process of participating together in evaluating and modifying their tools provides a sufficient level of ownership and confidence in the team to increase their sense of satisfaction and well-being in serving as leaders and their longevity to staying in this role.

There was a particular value in all team members having the experience of participating in evaluating and modifying the tool to give the members ownership and empowerment and confidence to utilize the tools with each other. The extended time of evaluation and rewriting of the tool also provided the team members with the opportunity to discuss previous experiences and challenges in decision making and conflict resolution in what they communicated to feel like a safe and constructive space. Additional research in one to two years to follow up with the participants to measure the lasting effects of this project would be useful to further evaluate the

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process. In a similar way, additional research in the experience of groups of leaders in the congregation evaluating and modifying other tools in other ministries would serve as a useful comparison to the value of the participatory evaluation process.

At the time of writing, this research and the modified *Unity Charter* have not yet been shared with Advance partner churches. Additional research conducted on a larger scale with multiple churches practicing the same process of interviews and focus groups would further test the validity of the idea that participation in an evaluation process provides a benefit to leadership team members in understanding and utilizing the tools that they have to assist their team with decision-making and conflict resolution.

The research process utilized in this action research project of individual evaluation through a series of open-ended questions designed to lead the participant through both a rational and emotional evaluation of their experience with a challenging or difficult topic, followed by a group discussion with the recommendation of making a shared change to a process or procedure, could be utilized by other organization to address organizational improvement. More research or work on this topic could be useful in the future.

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Appendix A

Gene Getz's Leadership Principles

1. First Official Appointments: When local churches are established, the first official appointments should be spiritual leaders who are able to give overall direction to the church; however, they should not be appointed until they are qualified.

2. A Unified Team: The goal of every local church should be to eventually appoint qualified leaders who serve together as a unified team.

3. Qualifications: All spiritual leaders should be appointed based on the maturity profile outlined by Paul in the Pastoral Epistles.

4. Basic Ethics and Morality: When looking for qualified leaders to serve the church, consider first those men and their families who've grown up in an environment where their values have been shaped by Judeo-Christian ethics and morality.

5. An Initial Leader: Every group of spiritual leaders needs a primary leader who both leads and serves, and who is accountable to his fellow spiritual leaders.

6. A Primary Leader: Every group of spiritual leaders needs a primary leader who both leads and serves, and who is accountable to his fellow spiritual leaders.

7. Titles: When determining "titles" for spiritual leaders in the local church, how they function is far more important than what the local body calls them.

8. Multiple Fathers: Spiritual leaders should manage and shepherd the church just as fathers are to care for their families and shepherds are to tend their sheep.

9. Important Priorities: All spiritual leaders should make sure they manage and shepherd the church well by maintaining six important priorities: teaching the Word of God, modeling

Christlike behavior, maintaining doctrinal purity, discipling unruly believers, overseeing the material needs of the church, and praying for the sick.

10. Mutual Accountability: Spiritual leaders in the church should hold each other accountable for their spiritual lives as well as the way they carry out their ministries.

11. Expanded Accountability: To follow the model that unfolds in the New Testament story, each local church body's leaders should have some kind of accountability system that extends beyond themselves-particularly involving the primary leader.

12. Qualified Assistants: In order to maintain their priorities, spiritual leaders should appoint qualified assistants who can help them meet the needs of all believers in the church.

13. Financial Support: Spiritual leaders are to make sure that those who devote significant amounts of time to the ministry, particularly in teaching the Word of God, should be cared for financially.

14. Adequate Forms: Spiritual leaders are responsible to make sure that adequate forms are developed to carry out the functions inherent in the above biblical principles.

Appendix B
Nancy Axelrod's Personality Types

1. The Analyst: Adept at generating conceptual possibilities, sorting through large amounts of information, considering the consequences of proposed actions, and/or analyzing options strategically, objectively, and dispassionately.

2. The Healthy Skeptic: Enjoys questioning the pros and cons, testing new ideas, playing the devil's advocate, and airing "dissensus" for a good argument that will help surface intelligent doubt and illuminate the issues and the stakes.

3. The Facilitator: Highly attuned to the needs and emotions of others by encouraging full participation, ensuring that different views are heard, and supporting everyone to do their best thinking. Helps keep the board on track in serving the interests of the organization and the board. (Ideally, facilitator traits are present in the board chair, committee chairs, and individuals designated to lead board discussions.)

4. The Observer: Good at pointing out to the group insights and observations about board dynamics or other issues that illuminate board performance and get disagreements as well as accomplishments out in the open.

5. The Caller: Courageous, sensitive, and skillful in calling individuals on questionable or inappropriate actions or disrespectful behaviors, the board's desired norms of behavior, or the welfare of the organization.

6. The Coach: A cheerleader who celebrates what's working well, motivates the board to do even better, and reminds the groups of the common vision, core values, and the interests of the organization.

7. The Reframer: Skilled in recasting a complex or divisive issue in a new light, ferreting out and framing the real challenge at hand, and opening up new possibilities to shift attention to fertile new ground for realistic options.

8. The Synthesizer: Quickly distills patterns, core issues, common themes, and long-range perspectives on complex, contentious, or controversial issues that summarize the discussion to help the board advance to the next step and avoid rehashing old ground.

Appendix C

Van Yperen and Fitch's Safe Place Model

1. Prayer. This is the practice of submitting our complete lives to the lordship of Christ and His work in us. Begin and end each gathering with prayer, inviting the Spirit's presence for discernment of truth and to seal the work of God in the believer's life.

2. Check-in. Each person's check-in should be a concise description of where they are emotionally, which influences the dynamics of the group.

3. Repentance. Each person recognizes the role of repentance before the Cross. He comes to the group prepared to recognize when sin is present in his life, own it, accept the forgiveness of the Cross for it, and repent of it.

4. Work. The term work refers to the process of submitting our lives to the work of the Spirit in and through the safe place group.

5. Intervention. Each person grants permission, and invites participation of others in the group, to speak the truth in love into their circumstances, with care and noncoercion.

6. Submission in trust. The unifying goal of the group is to form a community where all are committed to each other's growth and development in Christ.

7. Accountability. There are times in every person's life when he needs to specifically develop new habits with the help of the Holy Spirit and the community in order to overcome sin.

8. Speaking into a person's life. There will come a time in every believer's work when it may be appropriate to speak into a brother's life with a verse of Scripture, an understanding of God, a story for enlightenment, or a clarification of a perspective as seen from the Christian's point of view.

9. Contributing to the group. Each member may contribute and speak freely.

Appendix D

Southlands Church's Unity Charter (Original)

1. Because we believe that Christ reconciled us firstly to God, but secondly to one another in his body the church, we will make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit both between local churches and within our local church. Unity does not mean complete agreement or conformity. Through the cross we can be united in diversity as we attain to the unity of the faith. (Eph. 4:1-16)

2. We maintain unity primarily by speaking the truth in love to our neighbor, rather than speaking about them. We recognize that the tongue has the power of life and death and acknowledge that the sinful nature has a tendency to avoid face to face communication and resort to gossip, malice and slander, which grieve the Spirit. (Eph. 4:16 -32)

3. We acknowledge that whether we take offense or cause offense, the initiative remains with us to go and seek peace. Forgiveness requires that we send our debtor away debt free, because we have been sent away debt free at the cross. (Matt.18:15-35, Matt. 5:23-24)

4. We consider it a person's glory to overlook a minor offense, and that one who covers over an offense promotes love. Christian maturity means at times that we deal with the offense alone with God. Overlooking an offense includes forgiveness, as well as resisting the urge to share the offense with others. (Prov. 19:11, 17:9)

5. We also recognize that the gospel includes both pardon and a quest for reconciliation. While forgiveness may not ensure the restoration of a broken relationship to its original state, we heed the scriptural encouragement to 'be reconciled to your brother' (Matt. 5:24)

6. We intend to eliminate gossip in this community, by neither initiating nor participating in it. We will instead devote ourselves to a culture of encouragement and honor, which is the culture of heaven. (John 3:22)

7. We may hold opinions that are different from what is taught, but we will not be divisive by actively spreading dissension on issues of theology leadership or decision making. We also honor the specific biblical warning not to entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. (1 Tim. 5:19)

8. It is our conviction that initiating a lawsuit against a brother is unbiblical and against the interests of maintaining unity. Instead, we will seek wise mediation within this church. (1 Cor. 6:1-11, Matt. 5:25,26)

9. While we embrace the use of social media in building church community, we will avoid the use of email, text messages, Facebook, or Twitter in resolving conflict, acknowledging that face-to-face communication is best in resolving conflict.

10. We believe that a church united in diversity reflects and glorifies the Triune God and brings his commanded blessing. We also see that a united community is good for the gospel. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another." (Ps. 133, John13:35)

Appendix E
Southlands Church's Unity Charter (Revised)

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:5-7

Proactive Unity

1) We believe that a church united in diversity reflects and glorifies the Triune God and brings his commanded blessing. We also see that a united community is vital for the integrity of the gospel and the effectiveness of our mission to a divided world. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another." (Ps. 133; John 13:35)

2) We believe that Christ reconciled us firstly to God, but secondly to one another in his body the church. This means we will make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit both between local churches and within Southlands and its congregations. (Eph. 4:1-16)

3) *We understand that the church is called to function as a family. Therefore, we make every effort to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Fundamentally, this means we strive to identify with the needs of the body and make them our own. Whatever we have - be it our time, treasure, or talent - we freely offer them to those in the community (Mark 3:31-35; Acts 2:42-47; Rom. 12:13). [NEW]*

4) *We acknowledge that in order to sustain biblical unity, believers must spend time together. We cannot obey the "one anothers" of Scripture while we are apart. Attending the Sunday gathering, participating in midweek community, and building relationships with other members is an essential ingredient for experiencing the peace and joy Christ envisions for His church (Phil. 4:11; Thess. 2:17-20) [NEW]*

5) We maintain unity primarily by speaking the truth in love to our neighbor, rather than speaking about them. We recognize that the tongue has the power of life and death and acknowledge that the sinful nature tends to avoid face to face communication and resort to gossip, malice and slander, which grieve the Spirit. (Eph. 4: 16-32)

6) We intend to eliminate gossip in this community by neither initiating nor participating in it. We will instead devote ourselves to a culture of encouragement and honor, which is the culture of heaven. (John 3:22)

7) We may hold opinions that are different from what is taught by the elders of the church, but we will not be divisive by actively spreading dissension on issues of theology, leadership or decision making. We also honor the specific biblical warning not to entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. (1 Tim. 5:19)

8) We will celebrate one another's biblical freedom to differ around disputable matters, resisting the urge to insist upon conformity where the Scripture does not require us to. By its very definition, harmony means that a song is amplified when singers sing different notes around the same tune. Unity does not mean complete agreement or conformity. Through the cross we can be united in diversity as we attain to the unity of the faith. (Rom. 14:2-3; 15:5-7) [NEW]

Restorative Unity

9) We acknowledge that whether we take offense or cause offense, the initiative remains with us to go and seek peace. Forgiveness requires that we send our debtor away debt free, because we have been sent away debt free at the cross. (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15-35)

10) We also recognize that the gospel includes both pardon and a quest for reconciliation. While forgiveness may not ensure the restoration of a broken relationship to its original state, we heed the scriptural encouragement to "be reconciled to your brother." (Matt. 5:24)

11) We consider it a person's glory to overlook a minor offense, and that one who covers over an offense promotes love. Christian maturity means at times that we bear with one another, dealing with the offense alone with God. Overlooking an offense includes forgiveness, as well as resisting the urge to share the offense with others. (Prov 17:9; 19:11)

12) It is our conviction that initiating a lawsuit against a believer regarding civil matters is unbiblical and against the interests of maintaining unity. Instead, we will seek wise mediation within or beyond this church. (cf. *Church Policy Manual Grievance Procedure*) In cases of criminal accusation, however, we understand that engaging legal services and processes will likely become necessary. (Matt 5:25, 26; 1 Cor. 6:1-11)

13) While we embrace the use of social media in building church community, we will avoid the use of email, text message, Facebook or Twitter to resolve conflict, acknowledging that face to face, or at a minimum, telephone communication is best in resolving conflict. (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 2:11)

Appendix F

Southlands Church's Conflict Resolution Procedure

Southlands is committed to resolving in a biblical manner all disputes that may arise within our body. This commitment is based on God's command that Christians should strive earnestly to live at peace with one another (see Matthew 5:9; John 17:20-23; Romans 12:18; and Ephesians 4:1-3) and that when disputes arise, Christians should resolve them according to the principles set forth in the Bible (see Proverbs 19:11; Matthew 5:23-25; 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8; Galatians 6:1). Southlands believes that these commands and principles are obligatory on all Christians and absolutely essential for the well-being and work of Southlands. Therefore, any and all disputes in Southlands shall be resolved according to biblical principles.

When a Member of Southlands has a conflict with, or is concerned about the behavior of another Member, he or she shall attempt to resolve the matter as follows. (1) The offended or concerned person shall prayerfully examine him- or herself and take responsibility for his or her contribution to a problem (Matthew 7:3-5), and he or she shall prayerfully seek to discern whether the offense is so serious that it cannot be overlooked (Proverbs 19:11; see also Proverbs 12:16; 15:18; 17:14; 20:3; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13; 1 Peter 4:8). (2) If the offense is too serious to overlook, the offended or concerned person shall go, repeatedly if necessary, and talk to the offender in an effort to resolve the matter personally and privately, having first confessed his or her own wrongdoing (Matthew 18:15). (3) If the offender will not listen and if the problem is too serious to overlook, the offended or concerned person shall return with one or two other people who will attempt to help the parties resolve their differences (Matthew 18:16); these other people may be leaders of Southlands, other respected Christians in the community, or trained mediators or arbitrators (conciliators) from a Christian conciliation ministry. At the request of

either party to the dispute, Southlands shall make every effort to assist the parties in resolving their differences and being reconciled.

Conflicts involving doctrine or church discipline shall be resolved according to the procedures set forth in Southlands' disciplinary policy. Employment disputes shall be resolved according to the procedures set forth in any employee handbook of Southlands and in accordance with relevant law.

If a dispute arises within Southlands or between a Member and Southlands and cannot be resolved through the internal procedures described above, it shall be resolved as follows: The dispute shall be submitted to mediation and, if necessary, legally binding arbitration in accordance with the *Rules of Procedure of the Institute for Christian Conciliation*, and judgment upon an arbitration award may be entered in any court otherwise having jurisdiction.

All mediators and arbitrators shall be in agreement with the statement of faith of C and our basic form of government. If a dispute involves an attempted revision of the statement of faith or our form of government, the mediators and arbitrators shall be in agreement with those documents as they existed prior to the attempted revision.

If a dispute submitted to arbitration involves a decision reached by the elders of Southlands, the arbitrators shall uphold the elder's decisions on matters of doctrine and church discipline.

This section covers Southlands as a corporate entity and its agents, including its pastors, officers, staff, and volunteers with regard to any actions they may take in their official capacities. This section covers any and all disputes or claims arising from or related to doctrine, policy, practice, counseling, discipline, decisions, actions, or failures to act, including claims based on civil statute or for personal injury.

By completing the membership process, standing publicly and professing that God has joined them to this local church, all such "Members" agree that these methods shall provide the sole remedy for any dispute arising against Southlands and its agents, and they waive their right to file any legal action against Southlands in a civil court or agency, except to enforce an arbitration decision.

If a dispute or claim involves an alleged injury or damage to which Southlands' insurance applies, and if Southlands' insurer refuses to submit to mediation or arbitration as described in this section, either Southlands or the Member alleging the injury or damage may declare that this section is no longer binding with regard to that part of the dispute or claim to which Southlands' insurance applies.

Appendix G

Recruitment Email

Dear Southlands Elder:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting a project as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The title of my project is "Effective Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution for Church Leadership Teams and Governing Boards," and the purpose of my project is to create (or evaluate and modify) a tool for Advance partner church elder teams' decision-making and conflict resolution. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my project.

Participants must be current or former elders at Southlands Church, Brea. Participants, if willing, will be asked to:

1. Participate in an interview either in person or over zoom, with the project lead (Fred Chambers), lasting up to one hour. During the interview, you will be asked ten open-ended questions about your experience as an elder and your opinions regarding group decision-making and conflict resolution.
2. Participate in a focus group meeting with the other members of the elder team from your congregation, lasting up to two hours. During the focus group, your team will discuss nine open-ended questions regarding group decision-making and conflict resolution. You will evaluate the tools currently used by Southlands Church, Brea, for decision-making and conflict resolution and will create a modified or new tool to use for those purposes.
3. Utilize the tool agreed upon during the focus group meeting in your elder team's regularly scheduled meeting.
4. Participate in the second interview in person or over zoom, with the project lead, lasting up to thirty minutes, to evaluate the experience using the tool and its effectiveness. During the interview, you will be asked four open-ended questions about your experience in the focus group and any additional thoughts you developed from the focus group discussion.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this project, but that information will remain confidential and anonymous in the reports of results. Anonymous means the project lead will not link individual responses to specific participants by name.

In order to participate, please contact me at ███████████ or █████████████████ to schedule an interview. I need to complete all interviews before March 9th.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my project. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,
Fred Chambers
███████████

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Effective Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution for Church Leadership Teams and Governing Boards
Principal Investigator: Fred Chambers, a doctoral candidate in the School of Divinity at Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Project

You are invited to participate in a project. To participate, you must be a current member of the elder team at Southlands Church, Brea. Taking part in this project is voluntary.

Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this project.

What is the project about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the project is to evaluate and modify the tools used by Southlands Church elder team for decision-making and conflict resolution. This project will determine the effectiveness with which church leaders use a tool to assist themselves with personal and team development on decision-making and conflict resolution topics.

What will happen if you take part in this project?

If you agree to be in this project, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an interview either in person or over zoom, with the project lead, lasting up to one hour. During the interview, you will be asked ten open-ended questions about your experience as an elder and your opinions regarding group decision-making and conflict resolution.
2. Participate in a focus group meeting with the other members of the elder team from your congregation, lasting up to two hours. During the focus group, your team will discuss nine open-ended questions regarding group decision-making and conflict resolution. You will evaluate the tools currently used by Southlands Church, Brea, for decision-making and conflict resolution and will create a modified or new tool to use for those purposes.
3. Utilize the tool agreed upon during the focus group meeting in your elder team's regularly scheduled meeting.
4. Participate in a second interview either in person or over zoom, with the project lead, lasting up to one hour, to evaluate the group experience using the tool. During the interview, you will be asked four open-ended questions about your experience in the focus group and any additional thoughts you developed from the focus group discussion.

How could you or others benefit from this project?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this project include:
1. A guided opportunity to dialogue with other elder team members regarding the individual and group relationships dynamics and
2. Structured times to either privately or publicly share your opinion regarding how your elder team makes decisions and manages conflict.

3. Evaluation and development of a more effective tool to assist in group decision-making and conflict resolution for use by your elder team and potentially in other church or personal contexts.

Benefits to society include providing Advance partner churches and other interested churches with a practical, simple tool to aid in their decision-making and conflict resolution.

What risks might you experience from being in this project?

The risks involved in this project are minimal. They include feelings of stress that may arise during the focus group discussions due to openly talking about conflict or opposing opinions.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this project will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify an individual participant. Participants will be coded by number rather than name. Project records will be stored securely, and only the project lead will have access to the records. In the following statements, anonymous means the project lead will not link individual responses to specific participants by name.
- Participant responses to personal interviews will be confidential. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation either in person or over Zoom.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded with both video and audio and will be transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the project lead will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group could possibly share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is project participation voluntary?

Participation in this project is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, your congregation, or the Advance network. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the project?

If you choose to withdraw from the project, please contact the project lead at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this project. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the project if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the project?

The project lead conducting this project is Fred Chambers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ███████████ ████████████████ You may also contact the project lead's faculty sponsor, Dr. David B. Roberts, at ████████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a project participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project and would like to talk to someone other than the project lead, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, ██ ████████████████████████████████████, or email at ████████████.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this project. Make sure you understand what the project is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The project lead will keep a copy with the project records. If you have any questions about the project after you sign this document, you can contact the project team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the project.

☐ The project lead has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this project.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 28, 2021

Fred Chambers
David Roberts

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-395 Effective Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution for Church Leadership Teams and Governing Boards

Dear Fred Chambers and David Roberts,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

(2) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates,

you are not required to do so. If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at █████████

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office